



# Imagining Others: Sex, Race, and Power in Transnational Sex Tourism

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## Abstract

While most research into the sex tourism industry focuses on the often stark inequalities that exist between sex tourists and sex workers, there are a plethora of other subjects that are involved in the complicated web of transnational interactions involving travel and sex. This article focuses on the ways in which other subjects who may not actually be present in sex tourism spaces are constructed and put to use in the context of sex tourism. The aim is to explore the ways in which sex tourists and sex workers imagine and invoke two specific groups, Costa Rican men and North American women, in order to make meaning out of their encounters with one another. The article asks how these imagined others are implicated in sex tourism and how they are made present in ways that enable commercial sex between North American tourists and Latin American sex workers in San José, Costa Rica. I argue that understanding sex tourism necessitates looking at the relationships between various social groups rather than only between sex tourists and sex workers, in order to better understand the intense complexities of the encounters of transnational, transactional sex.



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## Introduction

The men in Costa Rica, they're very macho, and the women just don't like the men here. They like the gringos<sup>2</sup> and so forth. - Jack, seventy year old sex tourist from Florida

The gringos come here because they like Latin American women, because North American women are cold, fat, and ugly. -Susan, thirty year old sex worker from San José

Critiques of the ways in which travelers from the global north move around the world and their impact on the economies and societies of the global south have rightly emphasized the profound inequalities that tourism relies on and exacerbates (Alexander 1998; Apostolopoulos, Sönmez and Timothy 2001; Cabezas 2008; Carrier and Macleod 2005; Crick 1989; Dubinsky 1999; Kincaid 1988; Momsen 1994; Mowforth, Charlton and Munt 2008; Sheller 2003). Though still a relatively new area of research, there is by now a well-established body of literature that explores the specific dynamics of sex tourism in a multitude of contexts around the world (Bishop and Robinson 1998; Brennan 2004a; Cheng 2010; Kempadoo 2004; Kibicho 2009; Law 2000; Lim 1998; Padilla 2007; Piscitelli 2007). Many of the deeply problematic factors that have been fruitfully discussed in relation to sex tourism, including the ways in which historical patterns of racism, misogyny, and colonial power are reproduced and maintained, are also defining aspects of many other kinds of tourism encounters, though in the case of sex tourism, tourists are not just conquering and penetrating exotic landscapes, but the bodies of locals as well.

The embodied nature of transnational sex tourism and the need to consider the 'sticky materiality of practical encounters' (Tsing 2005: 1) are perhaps what have made attention to differences of race, class, gender, and nation between sex tourists and sex workers so prominent in the literature. Yet there are a plethora of other subjects that are involved in the complicated web of transnational interactions involving travel and sex; indeed, at the most obvious level, we must acknowledge the important role of taxi drivers, bar and hotel owners, tourism operators, and airline companies, to give just a few examples, in both facilitating and profiting from sex tourism, directly and indirectly. While these other subjects play a crucial role in sustaining the political economy of sex tourism, in this article I focus on the ways in which imagined others, others who may not be physically present in sex tourism spaces, are constructed and put to use in the context of sex tourism. As the epigraphs that begin this article demonstrate, sex tourists and sex workers imagine and invoke other subjects when making meaning out of their encounters with one another, and the aim of this article is to explore the ways in which two specific imagined others, Costa Rican men and North American women, are implicated in

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<sup>2</sup> Gringo is a commonly used term to refer to U.S. citizens in Latin America, though it is also sometimes used to refer to all white tourists.

sex tourism and how they are made present in ways that make sense of and perhaps indirectly facilitate commercial sex between North American tourists and Latin American sex workers in San José, Costa Rica. I argue that understanding sex tourism necessitates looking at the relationships between various social groups rather than only between sex tourists and sex workers, in order to better understand the intense complexities of the encounters of transnational, transactional sex.

### **Moving Beyond Binaries**

Why is it so important to consider who else is involved in sex tourism encounters, beyond sex tourists and sex workers? The academic literature on heterosexual male sex tourism has had a tendency to focus on the profoundly unequal structural realities that underpin these relationships (Bishop and Robinson 1998; Gregory 2003; Leheny 1995; Mullings 1999; O'Connell Davidson and Sánchez Taylor 2005; Seabrook 1996), often resting on a binary that sets up North American (and European) men as always oppressive and Latin American (as well as Caribbean and Asian) women as therefore necessarily disempowered. Scholars sympathetic to struggles for sex workers' rights are careful to recognize the existence of women who have actively chosen sex work, but usually emphasize the white middle class background and northern location of this demographic (Bernstein 2007; Brewis and Linstead 2000). Much of the research on white middle class sex workers has been criticized precisely from the perspective that prostitution cannot be theorized from their experiences because they are so distinct, with poor women from the global south inevitably standing in as the point of comparison and the evidence that sex workers are oppressed and exploited (Barry 1995; Jeffreys 2009; O'Connell Davidson 1998). The broad argument here is an important one: that the spaces in which commercial sex takes place and the identities of those involved matter and are the basis for huge variations in experiences and practices. The unfortunate implication, however, is that these same Southern sex workers are defined by their structural disadvantages and always therefore exploited by powerful white men, while white women are potentially able to gain pleasure and power from sex work. The binary of power between northern men and southern women is left intact, and reinforced somewhat by the consideration of white middle class sex workers.<sup>3</sup>

While some scholarship on sex tourism does explore the complexities of power relations between sex tourists and sex workers (Bishop and Robinson 1998; Law 2000), my aim in this article is to suggest that one way to move beyond particularly rigid and simplistic accounts of the structural inequalities inherent in male heterosexual sex tourism, and the ongoing debates about empowerment versus exploitation in sex work more broadly, is to explore the subjects that begin

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<sup>3</sup> It is worth noting that this binary plays out differently in different contexts. To cite just one example, a great deal of the now burgeoning critical literature on trafficking has demonstrated the frequent use of a binary between agents and victims that obscures the nuances and complexities of those involved. See for example Chapkis 2005; Constable 2009; Doezema 1998.

to appear when we expand our analysis to include a variety of others who are invoked regularly by participants but who are often left out of academic discussions of sex tourism. This means using empirically grounded data to move beyond the debates about power in the sex industry in order to consider who else is implicated in sex tourism. Specifically, I will look at how Costa Rican men and North American women are made present in ways that enable commercial sex in San José.

### **Situating Gringo Gulch**

The area of San José known to tourists and locals who work in the tourism industry as Gringo Gulch includes the eastern section of the bustling central avenue, as well as the quieter, leafy streets of what were previously elite neighbourhoods in the northeastern edge of the downtown core. The central avenue is a pedestrian corridor that is constantly buzzing with people in transit, street vendors hawking a wide variety of wares, and the municipal police trying in vain to stop them. The newly formed tourism police who patrol the area on bicycles are a recent and visible addition to Gringo Gulch. While Costa Ricans (and of course immigrants from other Latin American countries) make up the bulk of traffic in the area, the presence of tourists from the global north, and especially northern men, is evident from even cursory observations. Moving at a much slower pace than the locals impatient to get to where they are going, or rooted in the bars and restaurants that overlook the commotion of the central avenue, the male tourists that give Gringo Gulch its name are easy to spot. This is due both to the fact that they are primarily white, as well as to their style of dress.<sup>4</sup> The sale and purchase of sexual services is neither criminalized nor regulated in Costa Rica. As a result, the negotiations between tourists and sex workers that go on in the bars, restaurants and casinos of Gringo Gulch do not receive significant attention and do not require any attempt at clandestinity. The sexual-economic transactions that are eventually carried out in the neighbourhood's hotel rooms are noted only to the extent that management is sure to charge tourists extra fees for bringing a guest up to their rooms. The businesses where tourists and sex workers meet, mingle, and haggle over prices were not ostensibly set up for this purpose; they are not brothels and do not take a cut of the money that changes hands. Some of the businesses are almost exclusively populated by tourists and sex workers, and this would be obvious to anyone upon entry; others are spaces that are less conspicuous and sometimes include changing demographics throughout the day, for example catering primarily to local business people during the lunch hour, and then almost entirely to tourists and sex workers in the evening.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> While there are some northern men of colour who travel to Costa Rica for commercial sex, based on my own observations and on interviews with sex workers, this group is in the minority. Here my focus is on whiteness.

<sup>5</sup> For a more detailed account of the spaces of Gringo Gulch and the ways in which the state and private sector are involved in the sex industry, see Rivers-Moore 2010a.

Gringo Gulch is just one area where sex tourism takes place in Costa Rica, and indeed where sex work takes place in San José. Though only a short walk from Gringo Gulch, the city's red light district is worlds away in terms of physical infrastructure and the day-to-day workings of the sex industry. Pooling waste water, missing cables and sewer covers, and crumbling buildings serve as a testament to the lack of interest or investment on the part of the state, in marked juxtaposition to the efforts to keep Gringo Gulch clean and safe. Young women work in brothels, selling quick and straight-forward sexual services to local and Central America working class men. Older women solicit clients outside on the street, taking them to the tiny hotels in the area that rent rooms by the day or by the hour. A kind of intermediate space also exists in the sex industry, in the massage parlours that are dotted around the city. Less expensive and luxurious than the businesses in Gringo Gulch, but considerably better maintained than the brothels and hotels of the red light district, massage parlours cater to working class and middle class locals, as well as the occasional adventurous tourist. Many massage parlours double as bars where clients and workers can socialize while they negotiate, and sex workers can make additional money through pushing the sale of alcohol. Massage parlours and brothels operate on the edge of legality, as living off the earnings of someone else's prostitution and the promotion of prostitution are illegal in Costa Rica. Consequently, these types of businesses are raided from time to time and management is charged with pimping.

Many (young) women have worked in various venues in the industry, depending on personal preference and how business is going (for example, women make less money per client but have many more clients in the red light district and massage parlours than they do in Gringo Gulch). It is the presence of northern men that marks Gringo Gulch as so different from the other spaces of sexual commerce in San José. While the capital city is the destination par excellence for male tourists, sex tourism websites and informal conversations suggest that the pacific coast beach towns of Tamarindo and especially Jacó are also key destinations for heterosexual men. Manuel Antonio, another popular pacific coast tourism town, is the anecdotally preferred choice for gay male tourists, although no research has been done in any of these places. Women tourists involved in sexual relationships with local men have been studied in the highlands of Monteverde (Freidus and Romero-Daza 2009) and on the Caribbean coast in Puerto Viejo (Frohlick 2007). This research suggests that women tourists tend to spend longer periods of time in Costa Rica than male tourists do, and women engage in both casual sex and monogamous relationships that are less overtly commercial. Frohlick (2007) in particular emphasizes the fluidity that characterizes the economic, sexual and intimate encounters between women tourists and local men, highlighting the ambiguity in these relationships. This is a context that is significantly different from the usual pattern of short-term, explicitly commercial sexual relationships in Gringo Gulch. The extent to which male tourists become permanent migrants and develop long-term relationships with local women is a topic that remains to be explored (but see Maksymowicz 2010).

### ***Researching the Sex Industry: Methods***

I spent fourteen months in San José researching the city's sex tourism industry, carrying out in-depth, semi-structured interviews with thirty sex tourists, fifty sex workers, and fifty-six employees in the state, private, and non-governmental sectors. Along with the interviews, I spent considerable time in several different bars observing the day-to-day goings on of sex tourism and engaging in informal conversation with bartenders and waiters, security guards, sex workers, and sex tourists. I also regularly visited the state's HIV/AIDS prevention clinic, open to anyone but used primarily by female sex workers, and the two non-governmental organizations that work with sex workers in San José. I spent a great deal of time on sex tourism websites specifically dedicated to Costa Rica, and I also carried out a small amount of archival research on the role of the state in regulating sex work.

When researching sex tourism, one must always eventually address the question of terminology. There has been much debate about the use of the term 'sex tourism' and it sometimes seems that each writer on the topic comes up with a slightly different definition. For example, questions of intention (does the transactional sex have to be planned ahead of time?), type of payment (does the payment have to be in cash, or does in-kind payment also count?), type of travel (does it have to be for leisure, or do business or voluntourism count?), and distance from home (does an international border have to be crossed?) all come up in discussions of how to define what becomes a murkier concept the more we attempt to pin it down. Furthermore, as with other researchers, I recognize the problematic nature of using labels, especially when they are labels that participants might not in fact choose to use to describe themselves, as is almost always the case with sex tourists (Günther 1998) and often with sex workers (Kempadoo 2004).

Within sex industries across the world, there is a great deal of complexity in terms of what is being bought and sold, how explicitly commercial the exchange is, whether the payment is in cash or in kind, etc. Long term, affective partnerships have and do result from meetings in the sex industry, and more research is needed into these kinds of relationships that push the boundaries of commerce and intimacy. However, in this article, I have chosen to refer to 'sex tourism', 'sex tourists', and 'sex workers' for several reasons. The sex workers I interviewed and those with whom I had innumerable informal conversations used a variety of terms to identify themselves and the work that they do, including 'sex work' and 'sex worker' (*trabajo sexual* and *trabajadora sexual*). More importantly, they consistently and emphatically described what they do as work and themselves as workers.

Sex tourists offered a somewhat more complicated scenario, in that none of them actually referred to themselves as such, though many would say things along the lines of 'I'm not a sex tourist. I'm just a guy from Tennessee who has come to Costa Rica to meet women to have sex with. And I'm willing to pay for it.' What

is important to note here is that the tourists I interviewed are not, for example, men who planned a white water rafting holiday, happened to meet a local woman, and enjoyed a holiday romance in which the boundaries between the sexual and the economic were shifting and blurry. Instead, these are tourists who travelled to Costa Rica with the explicit intent of paying local women for sex, and many did extensive research beforehand. They also tend to visit for short periods that facilitate more straight-forward sexual-economic transactions than do the women tourists in Monteverde and Puerto Viejo, for example, many of whom stay for extended periods of time (Freidus and Romero-Daza 2009; Frohlick 2009). How these men explain their decisions to travel to Costa Rica and their actions while there varies, but in practical terms their interests were the same. I refer to these men as sex tourists because their sexual practices while on holiday are what most define them for my purposes in this article, in that I am exploring their interactions with sex workers and the other subjects that are brought into those interactions.

This is not meant to suggest that these men are not also fathers and sons, middle class teachers and working class postal employees, war veterans and students, angry divorcees and lonely widowers, and a slew of other descriptors. I emphasize this point because there is often a tendency to paint all sex tourists as unpleasant misogynists. At the beginning of this research, I frequently found it difficult to work up to talking to sex tourists:

*I spent the rest of the afternoon wandering around all the sex tourism bars to try to talk to gringos. The Premier Hotel was the only place that I had any luck. The other places were packed but that for some reason made it seem harder rather than easier. I felt really awkward about marching into a place filled with men and interrupting their conversations to announce that I want to talk to them about their sex lives. I just kept peering into different dimly lit bars, but couldn't make myself go in (field notes, 6 December 2006).*

The initial unease that this excerpt from my field notes demonstrates gradually dissipated, but it is revealing of the assumptions about the difficulties of establishing rapport and issues of personal safety that might come up when studying what are assumed to be 'unpopular groups' (Lee 1997). In the context of transactional sex between women tourists and local men in Puerto Viejo, Frohlick (2010) has coined the term 'despicable subjects' to describe the ways in which women tourists who engage in sexual relationship while on holiday are judged. This term is even more fitting in the case of the men interviewed for my research. If there is certainly disdain for women tourists in some circles, there is also the possibility of reading their activities as at least partially transgressive of gender norms. Male tourists, alternately, are the quintessential despicable subjects, at best pathetic embarrassments and at worst racist exploiters (Bishop and Robinson 2002; O'Connell Davidson 2001; Seabrook 1996). In practice, sex tourists are complex,

multifaceted, contradictory subjects like the rest of us.<sup>6</sup> The men I interviewed were a diverse group, making it difficult to provide a portrait of the ‘average’ sex tourist, but all were quite willing to discuss their sex lives with a complete stranger, were interested to hear about my research, and offered opinions and ideas that were challenging as often as they were infuriating.<sup>7</sup>

To sum up then, none of the male tourists in this research accidentally stumbled upon commercial sex in San José; they travel there specifically to seek it out. The men in Gringo Gulch have usually done research ahead of time, particularly on the Internet, and tend to arrive with a general idea of where to go, how much to pay, and what to expect. If in doubt, taxi drivers, bar and hotel employees, and other male tourists can help. Male tourists sometimes travel with friends, sometimes alone. Some coordinate ahead of time to meet up with other men that they have met on sex tourism websites, forming instant friendships on the ground based on a shared interest in purchasing commercial sex. It is already possible, therefore, to see that sex tourists require any number of other subjects in order to physically facilitate their encounters with sex workers in Costa Rica. In what follows, I explore the ways in which two specific sets of subjects, Costa Rican men and North American women, are imagined and made present in ways that enable and make sense of sex tourism.

### Imagining Each Other

Sex tourists spent a great deal of time talking about Costa Rican men in order to make sense of their encounters with sex workers. Costa Rican men were described as *machista*, a trait linked to violence and irresponsibility. For example, Julio, a forty-six year old from Florida, explained that

the ticos [Costa Rican men] make them [Costa Rican women] work, the ticos make them clean and do everything. They beat them, they make them work. So the gringo, as ugly, fat and smelly as he is, still gets the good looking one [Costa Rican woman] because the tico is worse than the smelly gringo’.<sup>8</sup>

Mark, the employee of a betting company in his mid-thirties, confirmed that ‘they [Costa Rican men] really treat the women badly, they hit them a lot. They are really horrible. So many women have told me that I am so much nicer than the ticos they’ve been with’. Several tourists highlighted Costa Rican men’s abandonment of

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<sup>6</sup> While much less research has been done on clients than on sex workers, a few excellent recent studies have shed light on the complexities of men’s participation in the sex industry. See for example Bernstein 2007; Frank 2002; Sanders 2008.

<sup>7</sup> The interviewees ranged in age from early thirties to mid seventies, with most in their fifties. 87% were from the U.S., 13% from Canada (with no particular states, provinces or cities overrepresented). Employment and educational attainment varied significantly, but most could be categorized as working class or lower middle class.

<sup>8</sup> Costa Rican men and women are referred to as ‘ticos’ and ‘ticas’ colloquially. The names and identifying characteristics of all interviewees have been changed.

their children: 'They father the children and then they're gone. And then they go to another woman, father children by her and then they're gone. Suddenly, the woman has three kids and three fathers [of her kids] and no marriage and no security' (John Jones, sixty-three, retired school teacher). The following exchange which took place in an interview in San José's Plaza de la Cultura between Canadians Michael and Don Miguel, provides a good example of how the perception of Costa Rican men's irresponsibility gets used:

Michael: Tico men are kind of *machista*, you know. They're the boss, slapping their wife...and then they [Costa Rican women] meet us, we treat them with respect...I even cook for them, they can't get over that.

Don Miguel: A meal, a massage, nice music, bottle of wine. Most of them, they've never had that. Men down here, they treat the women in such a way that...basically they want it for free.

Michael: And once a girl is pregnant, he's gone.

Don Miguel: And then they go to their friends and they brag about it. They see the woman as bare foot and pregnant. And they're happy about that, because it's a power game. The gender, the man rules the world. While back home, it's just the opposite.

Sex tourists connect Costa Rican men with a particular type of domineering and violent masculinity. But how do they reach these conclusions? Particular highly racialized stereotypes about Latino masculinity as aggressive are common in both the United States and Canada (though the population of Latin America immigrants and their descendents is significantly smaller in the latter than in the former), and popular images in the media frequently serve to underscore rather than challenge these tired images (Gutmann 2007; Melhuus and Stolen 1997). These constructions of Latin American manhood undoubtedly influence the ways in which northern men imagine Costa Rican men to behave. However, when in Costa Rica, the kinds of encounters that tourists might potentially have with local men are in fact quite limited. The primary reason for this is that very few tourists speak any Spanish at all, and those that do have extremely limited vocabularies that would make meaningful communication virtually impossible. The men that Northern tourists are most likely to encounter in Costa Rica are workers in the tourism industry, including bartenders and waiters, hotel staff, and taxi drivers (who profit in important ways from their work in the sex industry). Many of these men speak some English, a virtual necessity for work in tourism, but it is significant that tourists relate to Costa Rican men in contexts in which the relationships are primarily about service (Leidner 1999; McDowell, Batnitzky, and Dyer 2007). In the bars that I frequented, tourists appeared much more comfortable with female staff, joking and flirting with waiters and bartenders. Interactions with male workers were much less engaged, rarely going beyond the absolute minimum necessary and leaving out the attempts at friendly banter that were regularly directed at women workers.

The point here is to emphasize that tourists' imaginings of Costa Rican men as aggressive *machistas* is not in fact based on personal, direct experiences with them. Besides already existing constructions of Latin American men that exist in North America, northern men also receive information about Costa Rican men from the sex workers with whom they interact. As the above quote by Mark demonstrates, sex workers are careful to present a particular image of Costa Rican manhood to their tourist clients, one that provides a reason other than money for why local women seem to prefer foreign men. In interviews, sex workers compared tourists and Costa Rican clients, saying that they tend to favour tourists because they usually have more money: 'ticos are really pigs when it comes to paying. They want everything cheap. They negotiate, they try to lower the price, so it's not really worth it' (Anika, twenty-nine, university student and mother of two). Johana, the twenty-six year old daughter of a police officer and a cook, added 'if there is a tico and a gringo, you always choose the gringo because he has more money.' For most women in this research, the question of *machismo* rarely figures into their choice of clients, with the focus firmly on who is willing to pay more. However, Cindy, thirty-three, was a rare exception when she remarked 'with all due respect, I prefer to go out with ticos. Because they treat me better. The ticos aren't so depraved. The gringos' heads are full of depravity'.<sup>9</sup>

What all of this demonstrates is just how complex these imaginings are, and how imperative they are to facilitating sex tourism encounters. Racializing Costa Rican men and imagining them as backward and *machista* allows tourists to take on the contrasting role of more modern, enlightened men. By exaggerating Costa Rican male dominance, North American men can understand themselves as less conservative and closed minded, while still maintaining rigid notions of gendered power. By focusing on the failings of Costa Rican men, sex tourists are able to ignore the fact that the women they encounter are in fact working when they are with the 'ugly, fat and smelly' gringos that Julio described. The economic aspects of their relationships with Costa Rican women are made invisible while instead they focus on the *machismo* of Costa Rican men and their own enlightened modernity in contrast.

The ways in which sex tourists use their imaginings of Costa Rican men as *machista* in order to claim a less dominating masculinity for themselves is particularly ironic given the ire that some sex tourists reserve for feminism. Several other studies of sex tourism have demonstrated men's anger about feminism and their experiences of changing gender roles in North America (O'Connell Davidson 2001; Ryan 2000). Similarly, Jeff, fifty-five years old and recently separated from his wife, explained that Costa Rican women 'go out of their way to satisfy a man.

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<sup>9</sup> The partners of sex workers are notably absent in my analysis. This is primarily because virtually all the sex workers I spoke with go to great lengths to hide their work from their partners, families and communities (Rivers-Moore 2010b). But see Brennan's (2004b) fascinating work on the ways in which Dominican men 'sponge' off their Dominican girlfriends who work in the sex tourism industry.

To make sure that they are the woman and you are the man.’ He went on to remark that ‘I feel that living in Costa Rica is like going back to the United States of our childhood’, demonstrating a sense that was common amongst sex tourists that travelling to Costa Rica and engaging in relationships with Costa Rican women is like going back in time. In particular, many sex tourists referred to the 1950s to describe how they experience Costa Rica. Woody, a New Yorker in his late 40s, explained that ‘in the 1950s women had their role and men had theirs. In the United States, it’s been so erased.’ The 1950s seems to be the benchmark for many different sex tourists nostalgic for what is imagined to have been an easier time. Many men describe a decade of family life, love and affection, where women and men knew their places.<sup>10</sup> There is a sense amongst sex tourists that Costa Rica is backward, but in the best way possible. They complain about the potholes in the roads, the ‘gringo *precio*,’<sup>11</sup> and the people begging for change in public, but at the same time they laud what they interpret as a return to gendered roles that seem familiar and correct. This is quite a different version of the more typical colonial trope of imperial progress by travelling forward through space but backward in time to an anachronistic, peripheral prehistory (McClintock 1995; Razack 2002). While Razack (2002) has argued persuasively in another context that colonial subjects come to understand themselves as powerful by crossing the boundary between respectability and degeneracy and returning unscathed, in fact, tourists describe Costa Rica as a *more* civilized place, where gender makes sense. The irony, of course, is that for all their complaining about changing gender roles in North America, it is precisely these changes that allow sex tourists to compare themselves favourably to Costa Rican men by adopting the less dominant masculinity described above.

While Costa Rican men are viewed with disdain for their assumed violence and irresponsibility, sex tourists accuse North American women of a range of flaws. In particular, they are described as materialistic. According to Don Miguel

back home, it’s complicated. They [North American women] have been watching Oprah for a while, they have all those hang ups. They’re very, you know, like Madonna, materialistic. They look at you and [say] ‘what kind of job do you have? What kind of business are you in? What kind of property do you own?’ Here, you don’t have to tell them [Costa Rican women] the whole story. You tell them you’re retired. You don’t get into the details.

Woody describes Costa Rican society as ‘slower’ than U.S. society, and complains that ‘[U.S. women] are so materialistic that men feel like they have to keep buying...they’re worn out but keeping working harder and harder and

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<sup>10</sup> It is worth noting that many of these men were either not yet born in the 1950s or were very small children, marking this as a nostalgic narrative that is not rooted in any direct knowledge.

<sup>11</sup> ‘Gringo price.’ This refers to the common practice of charging northern tourists significantly more than locals for goods and services.

harder...but it's happened to women also. Women are basically caught up in the same rat race'. Sex tourists linked changing gender roles and increasing materialism to a sense that Northern women have become impossibly demanding. Craig describes Costa Rican women as 'less work. In North America, you have to take a woman out and get to know her and make her feel good. You know, you women like to be shown a good time. Here, it's straight-forward. Costa Rican women aren't so high maintenance'.

Sex tourists also describe northern women as unattractive and unfeminine, something they frequently blame on feminism. The following exchange between Julio and John that took place in the restaurant of the Premier Hotel while we had lunch together illustrates this position well:

Julio: I can't stand them. They're stuck up, they're spoiled. If you don't have a lot of money and you don't show them the money, you're out.

John: ...a lot of them are just fat. And they don't dress like women...They don't take pride in themselves. They've lost touch with their feminine side. American [sic] women are turning more into guys.

Julio: American [sic] women want to be men.

John: A big difference between the United States and Latin America is that there was no women's lib movement here like there was in the United States. And I'm all for women's rights, don't get me wrong.

Julio: Equal and rights is a different thing.<sup>12</sup>

Woody adds 'American [sic] women have lost their whole sense of fashion and elegance. It's almost like if a woman is feminine, she's not basically sort of liberated. You have to dress like a man to show basically that you could enter into society doing things that men do'. Darryl told me that a 'women's libber' went on national television in the U.S. to say that 'American [sic] women should treat their men better'. For Darryl, this was proof of the decrepit state of gender relations in the U.S., and explains the presence of so many northern men in Costa Rica.

In addition to this generalized anger at northern women, many sex tourists had a lot to say about their ex-wives. Virtually all of the tourists I spoke with were divorced or separated, and the figure of the ex-wife loomed large in our conversations. Darryl described working long hours at two jobs in order to support his wife's material demands, only to have her accuse him of becoming inattentive. Tony, a pipe fitter from Las Vegas, was in Costa Rica for the first time because of his disillusionment with relationships in the U.S. According to Tony, in terms of marriage to women in the U.S.,

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<sup>12</sup> Julio was unable to explain what he meant by his comment about equal and rights, beyond stating that he believes women should be allowed to drive cars and should not be forced to wear burkas.

what's theirs is theirs and what's yours is theirs. And what's left over is theirs. I got divorced and lost everything...The bottom line is it's never enough. In America [sic], you get divorced and you basically lose everything you have as a male'.

Wives, and more commonly ex-wives, stand in as prime examples of demanding, materialistic northern women in these narratives. North American women occupied a central role in our conversations, despite the fact that most sex tourists I interviewed claimed to travel to Costa Rica in part to escape these same women. The ex-wife is deployed to demonstrate very concretely why a man is a sex tourist; what was notable was that in addition to their obvious anger, the ex-wife also seems to evoke a deep sense of injustice and hurt. Northern women were materialistic and demanding feminists in general terms, but it was the specific experience of devastating separations and divorces from very particular women that shaped the ways in which sex tourists made meaning out of their decision to travel to Costa Rica. Sex tourists located northern women firmly within the context of their decisions to travel to Costa Rica and gave them a central role in the dynamics of the transnational sex trade.<sup>13</sup>

One of the consequences of this attention to Costa Rican men's violence and North American women's demands is that it obscures the economic aspects of sex tourists' encounters with Costa Rican women. Northern women are constructed as materialistic and demanding, while the money that a tourists gives to a local sex worker is described as 'trying to help her out' (Woody), rather than payment or the result of exaggerated material interests. The perceived poverty of the women that sex tourists encounter shifts the meaning of the economic exchange, from greed to need. Narratives about violent Costa Rican men and materialistic, feminist northern women also allow sex tourists to make a connection between themselves and Costa Rican women: both have been treated badly and are looking for something different.

Not many sex workers had much to say about northern women (which I suspect had a lot to do with the fact that I am one) and did not necessarily link their apparent flaws to the presence of gringo tourist clients. However, some women did offer opinions that were revealing. For example, Carolina, a thirty-three year old immigrant from Colombia, said 'gringos love Latinas. We have a way of treating them that European women don't have. We're very loving. We don't feel anything for them, but we make them feel like kings'. Susan, thirty, quoted in the epigraph to this article, went beyond the type of interactions to suggest that North American women are unattractive. Valentina, nineteen, agreed: 'gringas are like men. They

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<sup>13</sup> Of course the consequences of men's sex tourism practices are quite different for current wives or girlfriends at home, especially in terms of HIV and STI risk. While impossible in my specific research, Frank's (2002) argument that researchers should attempt to interview the partners of male clients is a compelling one that would undoubtedly shed further light on the various social relationships and subjects implicated in the sex industry.

don't wear high heels or the colour pink. They get very fat after they have kids'. Similar to sex tourists' narratives, sex workers have rarely had extended contact with northern women and seem to base their assessments partly on popular stereotypes in Costa Rica (that northern women are *descuidadas* or neglectful of their appearances) but also on tourist narratives to explain their presence in Costa Rica. Though sex tourists rarely speak Spanish, most sex workers in the tourism sector speak at least some English, and some women are relatively fluent. Both tourists and workers appear to have a vested interest in telling each other stories about Costa Rican men and northern women, in order to both explain and enable their contacts with one another. It should be noted, however, that imagining others is much more important for tourists and indeed, most sex workers in this research stated that gringos travel to Costa Rica to have sex with local women simply because commercial sex is not criminalized there and is cheaper than at home.

It is beyond the scope of this article to determine definitively whether sex tourists and sex workers find what they are looking for in their encounters with one another, but before concluding I would briefly like to problematize my own interactions as a northern woman with the people interviewed for this research. In particular, it was difficult to listen to sex tourists say things about gender roles and the 'backwardness' of Costa Rica and 'stupidity' of Costa Ricans, statements that I found deeply offensive. Directly challenging these views would have undoubtedly ended our interviews, and yet quietly listening to them was a profoundly frustrating experience.<sup>14</sup> I was decidedly uncomfortable being a northern woman and listening to sweeping generalizations about women assumed to be 'like me.' I was even occasionally asked to explain what was wrong with women in North America. My own discomfort with being asked to answer for what sex tourists understood to be the failings of North American women serves as a useful reminder of how research subjects are regularly expected to speak for hugely heterogeneous groups, whether they be Costa Rican sex workers, southern women, or even sex tourists and North American men. When doing research in transnational field sites, we are rarely asked so explicitly to represent other northern people, as our own identities in terms of gender, race, class and nation are usually left unspoken and considered beyond inquiry. Northern womanhood is frequently out of bounds in transcultural research, where 'other', usually southern, cultures are the subject of study. But in this case, the field site involved researching subjects in similar positions to my own, at least in terms of language and culture, but within the broader context of a multitude of transcultural encounters that we were all in the process of negotiating in different ways.

While I sometimes found myself going to great lengths to convince myself how different I was from the northern men I was interviewing, in fact, these dynamics highlight how northern women continue to be fully ensnared in both

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<sup>14</sup> This issue of keeping quiet when unpalatable views are expressed has been discussed by other scholars. See for example Constable 2003; Grenz 2005; Lee 1997; O'Connell Davidson and Layder 1994; Sanders 2008.

colonial history and the imperial present, and belie any calls for a facile global sisterhood. Indeed, one of the ways that I was able to keep listening to sex tourists was by thinking of myself as one of the 'women's libbers' they so deride; I was comfortable and empowered by identifying with independence and feminism, which sometimes seemed to function as a 'secret' identity. However, though men's criticisms of feminism and changing gender roles have been cited by other researchers (Jeffreys 2009, O'Connell Davidson 2001, Ryan 2000), what has not been noted explicitly is the way in which this particular trope contributes to a vision of southern women as the passive and backward victims of sex tourists. In a sense, this is strikingly similar to the ways that sex tourists used Costa Rican men to imagine themselves as enlightened and modern. A civilizing discourse is at work here as well, in that my ability as a researcher to take on an unproblematized notion of North American feminism and independence is only possible if I rely on an equally unproblematized version of Latin American womanhood that is dependant, traditional, non-feminist, and ultimately backward. From this perspective, northern women can potentially become the saviours of Costa Rican women, a deeply neo-colonial notion that points to the problematic connection between white womanhood, feminism, and imperialism (Burton 1994; Grewal 1996). In this particular case, the women to be civilized are Costa Rican sex workers, which is based on a profoundly patronizing, racist, and ultimately colonial understanding of these women as voiceless victims that can be rescued by northern feminists (Agustín 2005; Doezema 2001). Silence about the role of white womanhood simplifies and reduces sex tourism to a static encounter between tourists and sex workers. This silence also fails to implicate northern women, including researchers, fully and necessarily in the global power inequalities that are enacted in the sex industry, and in research, on a daily basis.

## Conclusions

My research in San José's sex tourism industry reveals the importance of both Costa Rican men and northern women in the ways in which sex tourists understand and make meaning from their contacts with local women. Defining themselves as less dominant, kinder men justifies sex workers' interest in them for reasons beyond a straight economic transaction. Complaints about demanding North American feminists and reference to ex-wives in particular justify their connection to Costa Rican women still further. This article has shown the usefulness of putting interviews with sex workers and sex tourists in conversation. Only interviewing sex tourists would centre their accounts of sex tourism encounters, allowing them to represent Costa Rican sex workers in deeply simplistic and problematic terms. Alternately, studying sex tourism only through interviews with sex workers runs the risk of associating prostitution only with women, thereby letting tourists off the hook for the role that they play in structuring and maintaining the sex industry. In addition, sex workers' representations of sex tourists are necessarily partial, while focusing on sex tourists assumes that their presence is the only factor that constitutes commercial sex.

I have demonstrated the importance of considering a wider range of subjects than are usually included in our analysis of sex tourism, including subjects who may not be physically present but who are imagined others that facilitate commercial sexual encounters in important ways. My work thus calls for research into the sex industry that broadens its focus, moves beyond binaries and examinations of empowerment versus exploitation, in a similar vein to some important work that is already moving in this direction (Agustín 2007; Bernstein 2007; Brewis and Linstead 2000; Kempadoo 2004). I have suggested that by limiting our analysis of sex tourism to sex tourists and sex workers, we fail to trouble simplistic, and perhaps comfortable, constructions of Costa Rican men as violent and *machista* and of northern women as liberated and feminist. Questioning the role of northern women in various kinds of transcultural encounters, including in heterosexual male sex tourism, demonstrates the impossibility of presuming that northern women are anything less than completely entangled in global relationships of power and inequality. Emphasizing the other subjects that are invoked by sex tourists (and sex workers) allows us to move beyond the simplistic binary of power generally used to understand their relationships, providing a more complex and detailed view of the subjective ways that power is played out and experienced on the ground. All of this reveals the global positionings of these multiple subjects and how they are intertwined in the process of the sale and purchase of sex.

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