

Gender, Race and Sex: Exoticism in the Caribbean

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Introduction

The over-representation of “Other” women and the hierarchies of race and color within the international sex trade have increasingly become the subject of feminist interrogation in the field of prostitution studies (Shrage 1994, Kempadoo 1996, O’Connell Davidson 1999). Such investigations suggest that there is no straightforward correlation between economic conditions and prostitution, or patriarchy and prostitution - that, quite simply, not all poor women are likely to end up in the sex trade. Rather, it is argued, entrance into prostitution or other forms of sex work, and the conditions in which this work takes place, vary according to local, regional, and international relations of power along gendered, economic, national, and ethnic divides. In this paper I explore this complexity further, arguing that cultural imperialism in the form of an exoticization of “the Other” is firmly embedded in Caribbean history, and today is attached to globalizing economic processes, informing prostitution relations within the tourism industry. I propose that a combination of cultural and economic domination by “the West” produced and continues to produce various arrangements in the Caribbean region in which sexuality is central, and can be read as a form of exoticism. However, unlike the older patterns where the sexuality of mixed race women was of primary importance, I show here that at the dawn of the twenty-first century the Caribbean is witnessing an exoticism that hinges upon complex arrangements of domination and exploitation of a variety of female as well as male racialized sexualities.

A History

Exoticism - the romanticization of the racial, ethnic or cultural Other, yet the simultaneous oppression and exploitation that occurs with it - has been discussed as part of the practice and ideology of earlier colonial and imperialist projects (Said 1979, Alloula 1986, Khabbani 1986, Rousseau and Porter 1990, Hentsch 1991, Lewis 1996, Ye_eno_lu 1998, di Leonardo 1998). It has been most commonly identified in the context of Orientalism - the broader lens through which Europe viewed “the East” during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, although is not contained to the Western European cultural response to “the East” (the Far, South, Central, or Near) or to that historical period only. Eighteenth and nineteenth century exoticism has been defined as an approach to the non-western world and is associated with the legitimation for European conquest, control and domination, as well as for escapist fantasies and vicarious enjoyment of sex and violence by European literary intellectuals and artists. In a contemporary reflection on this particular period in Europe, Rousseau and Porter write:

The invention of the “exotic” evidently satisfied needs amongst a European and, later, an Atlantic, civilization which, as it progressively explored and dominated the entire globe with its guns and sails, increasingly assumed the right to define human values and conduct in their highest expression. Other cultures, other creeds, were not merely different, not even merely lower, but positively - even objectively - strange. It was not merely the remoteness of geographical distance in a world where miles counted for much, but the ineluctable sense that all their mental processes and logical deductions were equally as alien. Labeling the anthropological Other as exotic legitimated treating the peoples of the “third world” as fit to be

despised - destroyed even, or at least doomed, like the Tasmanian aborigines, to extinction - while concurrently also constituting them as projections of Western fantasies.(1990:6-7)

Exoticism valorized peoples and cultures that were different and remote concomitantly imposing a status of inferiority upon them. "The Orient" was captured as the quintessence of the "exotic:" a strange and unfamiliar world, both fascinating and terrifying, inviting to the curious explorer yet threatening to all standards of civilization upheld in Europe, seductive in its paradise-like, unblemished "virgin" state, yet bestial in its perceived barbaric cannibalistic moments. The eroticization of women of these different cultures was an integral part of this movement, whereby their sexuality was defined as highly attractive and fascinating, yet related to the natural primitiveness and lower order of the other cultural group. According to Porter, it was the exotic lands and peoples which provided Europeans with "paradigms of the erotic." Away from the repressive mores of western Europe, these strange cultures and particularly the women in them became sites where sex "was neither penalized, not pathologized nor exclusively procreative"(Porter 1990:118). Womanhood among the colonized thus represented uninhibited, unbridled sensuality and sexual pleasure for the colonizer. Oriental female sexuality represented temptation, eroticism, pleasure and danger: veiled mysteries to be possessed and controlled within western Europe's expansionist project, and theorists of Orientalism have pointed out that it was the harem of Persia, courtesan arrangements in India and Japan, Devadasis (temple girls) of India, Ronggeng (dancing girls) of Indonesia, and polygamous life styles that were seized upon by western travelers, traders, photographers, and crusaders to illustrate and perpetuate myths of the exotic Other (Alloula 1986, Khabbani 1986, Ye_eno_lu 1998). Exoticism in its various expressions brought legitimacy to western rule and is distinguished from other racisms in that it fostered the illusion of admiration for, and attraction to, the Other while enacting murder, rape, violence and enslavement.

Di Leonardo's elaborate study of American exoticism points out that the discourse was not simply tied to direct colonial rule that proceeded from Western Europe, but also to those imperial projects through which the United States began to assert its dominance in world affairs. Exoticism, she notes, appeared most prominently at the end of the eighteenth, turn of the nineteenth centuries, bringing "a sense of psychic healing and therapeutic personal integration" to the elite, at a time also marked by "recurrent crises of masculinity and American state actions against 'primitives' both at home and abroad" (1998:159-160). It was:

A period of the consolidation of capitalist industrialization, of a bloody war against a significantly European immigrant labor force, and of federal abandonment of reconstruction in the South and the establishment there of a white reign of terror against black Americans....It was as well the end of the war of expropriation against Native Americans....the heyday of American imperialist expansion into the Caribbean, Latin America, and the Pacific; and the period of an ongoing Victorian woman movement still twenty-seven years short of the achievement of female voting rights and tinged by racist and classist response to short-lives post-Civil War black male suffrage. (di Leonardo, 1998 P.4).

Caribbean history did not escape exoticization. Colonialism with its attendant systems of slavery and indentured labor also produced ideologies of the "exotic" and few women in the colonies escaped the eroticizing, sexualizing gaze. Two main stereotypes of Black femininity have been identified as specific to the region during slavery. The first drew from general perceptions of Africans by Europeans as "slaves by nature" and defined slave women as passive, downtrodden, subservient, resigned workers. The second centered on Black female sexuality and sexual functions whereby notions of slave women as sexually promiscuous, "cruel and negligent as a mother, fickle as a wife," and immoral, became widespread. In this latter constructions the Black woman was described as naturally "hot constitution'd," and sensuous in an animal-like way, lacking all the qualities that defined "decent" womanhood or women of "purity of blood" (Morrissey 1989, Bush 1990, Kutzinski 1993, Reddock 1994). The sexual imagery, leaning on associations between Black womanhood and natural earthy instincts, licentiousness, immorality, and pathology, was often painted to arouse disgust and abhorrence for purposes of maintaining slavery by the plantocracy or, alternatively, to illustrate the abolitionists' cause by pointing out how slavery degraded the lives of Africans. It did not, however, deter European male pursuit of sexual intercourse with Black women or of their fascination, delight and pleasure with the Black female body. Henriques concludes that the

planters “became adept at attributing their own promiscuity to the inherent licentiousness of the Negro” and to the “debauchery” of slave women (1965:195). The region came to be represented in European imaginations “as a land of sexual opportunity for young European males,” and Black women—enslaved or free— were defined as the sexual property of white men (Morrissey 1989:147).

Perceptions of Black women as sexual and erotic objects were consolidated in various ways. Researchers on slave trade activities in the seventeenth century, for example, have noted the predominance of young girls and boys in the slaveship crews’ “property,” as well as emotional attachments of slave-ship captains and officers to young African women during the middle-passage voyage, leading them to conclude that particular women, girls, and boys were targeted as sexual slaves or servants (Bush 1990, Postma 1990). Thus even before arrival in the colonies, African women were objectified as sexualized beings in the eyes and minds of the traders. Romanticized descriptions of African women as “Ebony Queens” and “Sable Beauties” can also be found in documents of European travelers, traders and plantation owners during slavery that was later echoed in nineteenth century art, poetry and literature²[2]. This specific appreciation of Black femininity, while popular among Europeans, was not paralleled to the same extent in the United States towards Black women yet it had a profound impact on notions of eroticism and beauty in Europe and Europeanized Caribbean colonies³[3]. Nevertheless, throughout the Americas, women of mixed descent were in general perceived more favorably by the European elite than “pure” African women, a view which has barely diminished in contemporary societies. If white womanhood represented the pinnacle of femininity, couched in assumptions of fairness, purity, frailty and domesticity, and Black womanhood the total opposite due to the presumed closeness to nature, dark skin, masculine physique, and unbridled sexuality, the combination of Western Europe and Africa produced notions of the “light-skinned” women who could almost pass for white yet retained a tinge of color as well as a hint of wantonness and uninhibited sexuality of exotic cultures. The “colored” woman was then often described as possessing “a great physical attraction for the European,”(Henriques 1965:110) and observations, such as the following echoed this sentiment:

If I accord the palm of beauty to the ladies of color, I do not at the same time deteriorate the attractions of the fairer (white) Creoles; the stately and graceful demeanor which calls us to admire the one does not forbid us to be fascinated by the modest loveliness of the other; yet I will acknowledge that I prefer the complexion that is tinged, if not too darkly, with the richness of the olive, to the face which, however fair in its paleness, can never look as lovely as when it wore the rose-blush of beauty which has faded away. I know no prettier scene than a group of young and handsome colored girls taking their evening walk (cited in Beckles 1989:146).

Rogers’ three-volume study of race and sex published in the 1940s, in which similar observations are cited also documents in rich detail various perceptions of the colonial elite and European male travelers during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries in the Dutch, Spanish, English and French Caribbean, illustrating the trend of exoticization of “mixed-race” women in the region. Remarkably a surgeon in the Dominican Republic, for example:

When among the populations of the Antilles we first notice these remarkable metis, whose olive skins, elegant and slender figures, fine straight profiles and regular features remind us of the inhabitants of Madras or Pondicherry (India) we ask ourselves in wonder while looking at their long eyes, full of strange and gentle melancholy and at the black rich silky gleaming hair, curling in abundance over the temples and falling in profusion over the neck - to what human race can belong this singular variety(Rogers 1972:146).

Interestingly, a commonality in the perceptions, desires and passions of European men towards women in the East and West is lodged in this particular image. The mixed-race, metis women in the West Indies, is likened to that of women from ‘the East’ - in this instance, India. Women from both parts of the globe, in the eyes of the surgeon, constituted a particular “race”: remarkable and decidedly different/Other/strange, constituted by a brown complexion, silky loose-curling

hair, facial features and physical build which approximated the European ideal. The surgeon's comments reflect not only a fascination with slim, "olive"-skinned women but also elements of an Orientalist ideology through its equation of Indian women with exotica - not simply a racialization of non-western peoples, but again a delight in European male minds with foreign, "exotic" Others. Historical records left by men living in or visiting the colonies confirm descriptions of the women as frequent objects of sexual desires and passions enacted far away from the everyday confines and repressions of European society and the dominant sexual morality (Bush 1990). The "high brown," "mulatto," "morena," "metis" or "light-skinned" Caribbean woman remained highly desirable and attractive to European men.

Much postcolonial theory has designated Orientalism and exoticism as a Western approach or "textual attitude" that includes dreams, images and vocabularies about the "Other." 'Orientalism' writes Ye_eno_lu, "refers to the production of a systematic knowledge and to the site of the unconscious - desires and fantasies"(1998: 23). This discourse is not however without material and embodied dimensions, and is also defined as not only authorizing colonial and imperial domination for economic and political purposes, but as articulations of social relations, institutions, and everyday practices. Exoticism thus is visible not only in ideologies and perceptions, but also in embodied relations, and in the Caribbean under slavery, was most evidently lodged in, and visible through, prostitution and other sexual relations.

Prostitution in the Caribbean is inextricably tied to the power and control exerted by European colonizers over a Black population at a time when Western European nations sought to find new resources for the accumulation of capital and new sites upon which to establish Empire, and the enslavement of Africans was integral to the consolidation of racial power in the Americas. Beckles points out that slavery meant "not only the compulsory extraction of labor from the Blacks but also, in theory at least, slave owners' right to total sexual access to slaves" (1989:141). White slave owners made ample use of this "right": rape and sexual abuse were commonplace, and concubinage and prostitution quickly became an institutional part of Caribbean societies. "In time," writes Henriques, "no European male in the Caribbean, who could afford it, was without his colored mistress, either a freedwoman or slave" (1965: 195). Bush (1990), Morrissey (1989), and Henriques (1965) also point out that this power was not only exerted by the colonial elite and planter class but extended to include white men of lower classes due to the racial hegemony that existed of white over Black. Even the European bond-servant, who stood at the margins of white society in an almost comparable position to that of slave, was seen to have "augmented the process of their masters" through engaging in clandestine sexual affairs with slave women, due to the privilege that their whiteness conferred upon them (Henriques 1965:201).

Racialized dimensions of sexuality under slavery were, however, not uniform, with the category of women "of mixed race,"--the "mulatto," "mustee," or "colored" woman-- being considered particularly exotic and sexually desirable by white men. This social category, which itself arose from the exercise of power over Black slave women, was, however, legally and ideologically placed outside of white society, representing to Europeans racial impurity and moral, racial, and social degradation, constituting an "unnatural transgression of the rules of social propriety"(Kutzinski 1993:75). The mulatto woman (*la mulata*) represented the erotic and sexually desirable yet was outcast and pathologized and emerged during slavery as the symbol of the prostitute--the sexually available, yet socially despised body- the trope of the exotic.

Within the context of slavery, prostitution was lodged at the nexus of at least two areas of women's existence; as an extension of sexual relations (forced or otherwise) with white men and of labor relations for both slave and "free colored" women. Beckles notes about Barbadian society in the early 1800s, that slave women were frequently hired out by white and free colored families as "nannies, nurses, cooks, washerwomen, hucksters, seamstresses" yet "the general expectation of individuals who hired female labor under whatever pretense, was that sexual benefits were included" (1989:143). Concubines often served as both mistresses and housekeepers and were sometimes hired out by their owners to sexually service other men "as a convenient way of obtaining cash" (Beckles 1989:142). Furthermore, in times of economic slumps on plantations (particularly in British colonies), when slaves, both men and women, were expected to provide for themselves or to bring in wages through work outside the plantation, "the number of slave women placed on the urban market as prostitutes by sugar planters would

rapidly increase” and in the towns, “masters and mistresses would frequently send out female slaves as prostitutes for ships’ crew” (Beckles 1989: 142-143). Reddock reports that in Trinidad, “For the most part women were hired out as domestic slaves, field labourers, as concubines, to temporary male European settlers, or were made to work as petty traders or prostitutes handing over most of their earning to their masters” (1994:20). The women’s manual and sexual labor was, in effect, “pimped” by the slaveholders. Geggus (1996) remarks upon the numerous cases mentioned in historical records of slave women in the French Caribbean who, besides marketing activities, were able to profit financially from selling their own or their daughters’ sexual labor. Morrissey (1989) concludes that in the early nineteenth century in the British Caribbean, domestics who worked in taverns and inns in the towns also served as prostitutes. In his study of women’s economic roles in nineteenth-century San Juan in Puerto Rico, Matos-Rodriguez implies that here too women’s sexual labor as prostitutes or mistresses was a part of women’s work as laundresses, nurses, midwives and nannies (1995:189).

Rape, concubinage, and prostitution often produced children, yet in the absence of marriage and formal recognition of the child by the white father, the child followed the condition of the mother and was defined as either part of the slave population or the free colored class. Sex during slavery thus was a way in which the laboring classes and slaves were reproduced. Abraham-van der Marks points out that “concubinage gave them [Jewish men in nineteenth-century Curaçao] the benefits of a category of children which, if necessary, provided labor but could not make any legal demands and were excluded from inheritance.” (1993:46.) Moreover, mulattos were more highly valued in slave markets, thus a child of Black slave women and white slave owners could bring in a higher income than a child of Black slave parents. Beckles argues that in this respect, the “exotic”/the prostitute was particularly valuable to the slave owner for “unlike other female slaves, she could generate three income flows: from labor, prostitution and reproduction” (1989:144).

Ye_eno_lu points out that critics of colonial discourse theory have argued that the earlier work on Orientalism accord a totalizing position to the discourses that “elide the subjectivity of the colonized and the various forms of indigenous resistance against colonialism” whereby the possibility of theorizing resistance and anti-colonial strategies that subvert the colonial discourse are precluded, and the sovereignty and autonomy of the colonized denied (1998: 30-31). While she recognizes the danger in constructing a homogenizing discourse about colonialism and, by extension, homogeneous categories of “the West” and “the Third World,” and a need for postcolonial theory to “bring attention to the complex, variable and ambivalent nature of colonial ideologies” -- to “historicize and pluralize” colonialism-- through paying attention to empirical particularities, she also argues for the retention of the general category of colonialism in order not to fall back into an approach that merely celebrates specificities and counters any attempts to theorize historical patterns. Ye_eno_lu’s arguments are relevant for the discussion of exoticism in the Caribbean. First, while the attention in this paper is on specific expressions of exoticism in the Caribbean, this can only be read as a facet of a broader gendered colonial discourse and practice: that it is within the historical project of colonialism that exoticism was performed. Second, to which we now turn, the experience of exoticism can be viewed in the ways in which the exotic, sexual subject was constituted whose agency and identity were both complicit with hegemonic colonial gendered discourse and in opposition to the dominant regimes of power and privilege.

The sexualized, romanticized, socially marginalized, prostituted, Brown female body, besides being a basis for domination during slavery, also constituted a site for reconfigurations of power. Brown women were known to make strategic use of their exoticized status through a self-conscious employment of their sexuality. Henriques writes,

For the female slave to refuse the advances of her owner or his assistants led either to rape or to banishment to the rigours of work in the fields. There was, on the other hand, everything to be gained by becoming the mistress of a white man. Prestige among her fellows, preferential treatment for herself and the possibility that she might in time obtain freedom for herself and her children, were all possible goals. (1965:193).

That manumission rates for women around the region generally outnumbered that of men, with women of mixed descent outnumbering Black women, has led historians to conclude that sexual relations with white men played a favorable role in the process of acquiring freedom from slavery. "Sexual alliances," writes Beckles, "were one of the few devices that slave women could employ to achieve their freedom" (1989:149). Sex was commonly used as a strategy by women to acquire freedom from oppression, sold for money in order to purchase their own or their children's freedom, or provided to a slave master in exchange for manumission. As Casteneda observes on the situation in Cuba, while many domestic tasks enabled slave women to acquire their freedom, this "could also be obtained though ordinary sexual life with a white man" (1995: 144). Studies of women's lives in towns and cities during slavery also indicate that through sexual relations with white men, some women were able to build up enough capital to purchase their own inns and lodging houses and to establish independent businesses (Kerr 1995). Exoticism, while constituting a form of control and domination over women of color, was thus also strategically transformed through sex work to economically and socially empower women, men, and children. There were, however, other ways in which the exoticized subject was an agent of resistance. Citing a French soldier in Saint Domingue (former Haiti) in the 1790s, Moitt observes that there was a "particular type of prostitution associated with slave girls and women. They entered soldiers' camps shamelessly and exchanged sexual favours for bullets and gunpowder" (1996:245). The weapons were intended to support slave revolts, to break the crushing bonds of slavery for both women and men. Sexual labor in this context had direct political implications for the entire slave community. Bush remarks that "by outwardly conforming to the sexual demands of the white man, [the slave woman] could exploit the situation to the fullest and thus covertly help her own family and kin," (1990:116). By extension, sex work by Black women contributed to the economic, social, and political well-being and survival of their communities. This last aspect of prostitution under slavery in the Caribbean, as part of a strategy for liberation and as a way in which relations of power were subverted and reconstituted, suggests that the exotic subject acted in resistance to oppressive and dehumanizing conditions of slavery, and sex provided, particularly Brown, women with the possibility of obtaining freedom for themselves, children, other family members, and lovers. This specific characteristic of sex work in Caribbean history allows us to ponder the possibility of defining exoticized sexuality as not only a site for the construction of colonial masculine dominance but also as a locus for strategies of resistance to highly exploitative racialized relations of power.

Exoticism was both an attitude and a set of practices visited upon the Caribbean by Europeans during slavery, constituting the "brown-skinned" colonized and enslaved woman, as well as the lands they inhabited as sites for sexual pleasure and fantasy as well as exploitation, enslavement, and violence. It aided in the formation of the prostitute- whose body and labor was hugely profitable to the slave-holder, as well as to exotic, subversive subjectivities and small acts that contested the racist, colonial order. Constructed through the domination of the Caribbean by Western Europe, and consolidated through slavery, it can be argued that this history has had profound implications, and has continued to shape subjectivities and identities, and cultural, national and gendered relations, both within the Caribbean itself, and between the region and the imperial centers of power. In the remaining part of this paper I explore dimensions of the continued legacy of exoticism, in which tourism plays an increasingly important role.

Continuing Legacies

The shift from a discourse that was primarily articulated through the white western European masculine consciousness, to one that is embedded in the imaginations and desires of the colonized man, has been a subject of interrogation and discussion by anti-colonial/Third world intellectuals such as Albert Memmi and Frantz Fanon, have been explored through Black American perspectives (hooks 1993, West 1993), and touched upon in Caribbean gender analyses (Mohammed 1998, Lewis 1998). It is my argument here that besides the profound influence that colonialism had on notions of the superiority of whiteness (including white femininity) among the colonized, it has also imparted a legacy of the exoticization of the cultural

Other. Both were infused into new relations of power and privilege structured through anti-colonial and nationalist struggles for political independence, that appeared on the Caribbean landscape in the twentieth century. One encounters attitudes and ideas that reflect both a racialization of sexual desire as well as an exoticization of cultural difference within the Caribbean itself, much of which revolves around the Brown female body and identity. In Cuba, for example, an exoticization of Cuban *mulatas* was not considered exclusive to relationships between foreign men and Cuban women but rather that male Cuban writers, artists, and poets, had “enshrined the erotic image of Cuba’s *mulatas*” during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries (Schwartz 1997:86. See also Kutzinski 1993). In Curacao, sex with a “light-skinned” women from the Spanish-speaking Caribbean or Latin America has also been considered highly attractive and desirable among local men for paid sexual relations. A popular image in Curacao that dominated the second half of the twentieth century is of women from the Dominican Republic as specially trained and groomed to provide sexual pleasure to men and thus being particularly “suited” to sex work (Kempadoo 1994). Haitian women, however, were perceived by this population as “too” black and “unhygienic” for sexual encounters (Lagro and Plotkin 1990). The exotic “Sandom” image in the minds of Curaçaoan men in this particular instance combined with colonial state policies during the 1930s and 40s to attract large numbers of migrant workers from surrounding countries for work in the oil-refining industry, to provide a base for US and Dutch naval fleets, and simultaneously to “protect” local womanhood from the “base” sexualities of the sailors and migrant workers. “Foreign”, Other women in this scenario were legalized to work on the island as prostitutes and domestics. The national, cultural and ethnic difference of foreign women was coded as both sexually desirable but inferior to notions of “proper” femininity, and those who provided exoticized sexual services were relegated to marginalized, informal, and heavily policed, sectors of society. Similar notions of the exotic Other have been recorded in research on prostitution in Suriname and Guyana, where “light-skinned” Latin American, Brazilian, and Spanish-speaking Caribbean women are positioned as migrant workers in the sex trade, thus highly exploitable and highly vulnerable in relationship to the resident population, yet defined as “hyper-sexual” by local dominant gender ideologies (Antonius-Smits et al, 1999, Red Thread 1999). In Belize “brothels tend to hire exclusively young, 'Spanish,' 'clear-skinned' women ... who come from the neighbouring Central American Republics” (Kane 1993:1971). In Haiti, the male sexual preference for the lighter-skinned, silky-haired Dominicans is cited as part of a “culture of exoticism” which includes beliefs that Spanish is “the language of love,” and that women from the Dominican Republic are more “professional” and attractive in sex work and preferable over Haitian women because “they more closely approximate to Western standards of beauty” (Chanel 1994: 14). For Trinidad, the newspapers report of “fleshy Columbian beauties” as popular with local men (*Sunday Punch* September 11, 1994). Equations of the culturally “Other” Brown woman with notions of “the erotic” can be seen to continue beyond the western male imagination, and to also dominate contemporary Caribbean perceptions and appreciations of sensuality within the sex industry.

This expression of exoticization that runs through Caribbean history to date, constructed under slavery and European colonialism, and pulsing through American constructions of nation, as well as national masculinist ideologies and practices in the postcolonial societies, reasserts itself again through the new forms of western economic and cultural imperialism in the guise of sex tourism. Promoted by the United Nations as a strategy to participate in the global economy since the 1960s, tourism was adopted by Caribbean governments at different times as a way to diversify their economies, to overcome economic crises that threatened to cripple the small nation-states, and to acquire foreign exchange (Crick 1989, Walvin 1992). The largest tourism markets in 1996 were North America, led by 7.2 million visitors from the U.S., and in second place, Europe—with France, the U.K., and Germany taking the lead and Sweden, Spain and Italy becoming more important (Caribbean Tourism Organization, as cited in *Caribbean Week*, February 14-27, 1998). In 1996 the industry accounted for 24.7 percent of all formal employment in the region and was predicted to be one of the fastest growing sectors in the twenty-first century. With the estimate that for every person in formal employment in tourism there is at least one other engaged in informal activities in the industry, it is predicted that tourism in the Caribbean will continue to be an important source of livelihood for its working peoples (*Travel Industry World Yearbook* 1996, Patullo 1996, *Caribbean Week*, February 14-27, 1998). The industry hinges on the exploitation of a number of the regions’ resources, particularly sun, sea and sand, but also on its tropical rainforests and coral reefs as well as its music, such as reggae and calypso, its cuisine, and other cultural symbols such as carnival. It offers a

variety of packages, including golf vacations, weddings and honeymoons, dive trips, and eco-tours, its sole *raison d'être* to provide pleasure to the visitor. Caribbean women and men in this sector work for meager wages in jobs such as barmen, waitresses, cooks, cleaners, maids, gardeners, and entertainers. Male and female labor and energies constitute a part of the package that is paid for and consumed by the tourist during the period in which she or he seeks to relax and enjoy--in the leisure time the tourist has set aside to recuperate and restore the mind and body in order to maintain a healthy and productive working life on return home (Crick 1989, Walvin 1992, Kinnaird and Hall 1994). Caribbean sexuality also constitutes a critical resource within this panorama, and it is in arrangements and representations of this aspect of the tourism industry that new articulations of an exoticism are evident.

In an analysis of eighty-three letters written by sex tourists to the Caribbean posted on a website between November 1994 and July 1999, we found that approximately 35 percent related racial and cultural difference to sexual desirability⁴[4]. For most of the authors of the letters, a hierarchy of beauty/attractiveness associated with race and culture emerged. Comments about Puerto Rican Latinas, Cubanas, Dominican "mulattos", and "light-skinned" Caribbean women tended to prevail and to be highly positive. These images nevertheless combine with prostitution activities in which the women's sexuality is constructed as different to hegemonic notions of "civilized womanhood," their activities criminalized, and their lives subject to intense harassment by police and government authorities, coercion and force by men seeking to make a monetary profit from their exoticized bodies, as well as by exploitation for the satisfaction of tourist's desires. Some of the recurring ideas about the erotic, hypersexual "nature" of the Caribbean and its women are represented as follows:

The girls that are the easiest to find are usually black and from Oriente. I think the girls in the Dominican Republic, which are all mixed race, are more beautiful than these Cuban girls. (Letter 4).

Cuba is the closest thing to paradise I think I'll ever see...a guy with enough hard currency can have the time of his life in what is probably the most romantic city in the world with, in my humble opinion, the most dropdead gorgeous sultry tanned beauties in the hemisphere. (Letter 51)

Aruba is the place where you go to get the knockout of your life. The Ladies are all from Colombia and Venezuela. (Letter 56)

...the DR has wonderful possibilities. Prostitution jives fairly well with the culture, Dominican women are beautiful, prices are excellent, and you have a fair chance of being treated well...I find that watching a fine brown-sugar Dominican teenager take off her clothes and shake her ass like only Dominican chics can does wonders for clearing your mind and getting up your guts (not to mention you [*sic*] cock) for the bargaining process. (Letter 52).

Latinized, Spanish-speaking Caribbean cultures and "brown" femininities are represented in the letters as sexually attractive and available to the men. Promotional materials for tourism to the Caribbean have appropriated this image to seduce and entice potential clients. As Dagenais points out, popular representations of Caribbean women "portray them as sexual objects and publicity drops; the tourist industry presents them as sensual mulattoes with endless free time to enjoy the beaches and, of course, the (male) visitors" (1993:83). There are, however, some exceptions to this generalized pattern, with a few authors on the sex tourist website expressing a specific appreciation for Black women.

By far the best place for sex in Jamaica is Negril. Sex is available and cheap, and for those of us who prefer black women, I can't think of anywhere that comes close (Letter 54).

There are also those comments that denigrate Blackness (sometimes associated with Haitian nationality):

These girls where [sic] all a bit young and dark for my taste (Letter 16, about the Dominican Republic).

I know beauty is in the eye of the beholder, but most of these women are truly not great lookers... This is not to say that there were not some attractive women available -but they are in the minority. In terms of race, most are black- about 70%-while the rest are more Latino looking- There were actually a number of nights that I went back to my hotel room alone because none of the women appealed to me (this would never happen in Brazil or Thailand!) ...these are without a doubt some of the butt ugliest women I have ever come across. Unbelievably ugly. Most are Haitian and are old (at least in hooker years) and heavy. (Letter 19, about the Dominican Republic).

The patterns today do not seem to contradict the earlier - both European-Caribbean and American - notions of the exotic. They are reinforced by a comparison with sexual relations in the North (the US in particular) and sensuality of the white (female) body, where an enthusiasm with "sexy" "mixed-race," "mulata" "sultry tanned" "Latin" "brown-sugar" Caribbean women contrasts with representations of Whiteness as staid or mundane

Let's s start out with a pleasant introduction to Latin sex...Unlike [massage] places in the US of this nature, it is not a rip-off: they aim to please" (Letter 18, about the Dominican Republic).

I went in and noticed that most of the girls were not Puerto Rican. Most looked like rejects out of an American (NY, LA, Dallas) strip bar. The show was pathetic... Immediately some lady from New York came up. She was too ugly...As soon as she left a hot Puerto Rican girl came up with large breasts and a nice body...(Letter 70, about Puerto Rico).

"Is she ever hot though! They just don't come that way back home.. (Letter 1, about Cuba).

I love it here the table's [sic] are turned and the women were chasing me around. New York women are cold as fish, in comparison. (Letter 50, about Cuba).

Be warned: eurochicks will want a real romance from you, with all the related mind trips, they consider intercourse a mere byproduct of that... As usual, you will have to pay for their drinks and stay up late speaking about psychology and their childhood to get some, the day before you leave, once. (Letter 56, about Aruba).

The highly sexualized image of Caribbean women held by sex tourists about Caribbean women, explain O'Connell Davidson and Sanchez Taylor, rests on an assumption "that local girls 'are really hot for it", and the women's "Highest ambition is to be the object of a Western man's desire," that, after all, the women "are doing what just comes naturally" to them (1999: 47). The notion of "unsexy" white woman is undergirded by racist fantasies about the erotic, sexual "nature" of the Other. Cabezas likewise notes that "Dominican women reported that foreigners construct them, both sexually and racially, in opposition to European women...White skin is devalued because it is connected to civility, or feminist discourse, and is thus less sexual" (1999:111). The exotic is "sexier" than femininity constituted in white, postindustrial, "developed" societies, to be found in the still "natural," "backwards," "untamed" world. The contemporary tourist industry enables the men to dabble in their exoticizing sexual fantasies far from the perceived gendered restraints imposed by the civilizing process at home.

Tourism in the Caribbean at the end of the twentieth century appears to confirm exoticizing tendencies present in the region since the sixteenth century. However, new global hegemonies that rest upon an increasing economic gap between postindustrial capitalist centers and peripheral areas that provide cheap labor, natural resources, and playgrounds for the rich, as well as the shifts in gender relations, can be seen to extend its scope. Thus, while in the past, exoticism in the Caribbean was predominantly articulated through western European male imaginations, today it is also mediated through the imperial feminine imagination. The agency of western women has not been much explored in postcolonial studies about exoticism, although Lewis reminds us that it cannot be overlooked in the production of an Orientalist

discourse. In her study of the nineteenth century feminist writings she argues that postcolonial studies need to examine all the contradictory positions inherent in imperialism, to “disentangle” the ways in which representations of an orientalised Other simultaneously undercut and contribute to Orientalist ideas and policies “ (pg. 26). Focusing on British women’s cultural production, she notes, that it “cannot be separated from the economic and social conditions necessary for the emergence of Western women’s cultural agency: conditions which relied, among other things, on the displacement onto the feminised colonial Other of forms of gendered exploitation now unacceptable at home.” (Pg. 27). She continues:

As agents socialized in an age of everyday imperialism it would have been impossible for the subjects of this study to be unaware of, or influenced by, imperial discourse -even if they couched their relationship to it as oppositional. That some of the key writers of the twentieth century-century feminist literary canon, like Brontë and Eliot, couched their demands for female emancipation precisely through the Orientalizing of a structural other requires even more our willingness to include the conditions and discourses of imperial difference in our analysis of the work...Without this we will never be able to understand , or challenge, the structural role of racism in the history and praxis of feminism (Lewis, p,29).

Lewis’ study, although concentrating on how the two writers Henriette Browne and George Eliot represented femininity and female emancipation in “the Orient” opens the door to thinking about how western women participated in the construction of the gendered Other - feminine and masculine - in imperialist projects. It is here where our study intervenes. In the Caribbean setting, a Black man explains:

if one happens to be black, this is the place to go. There are tons of beautiful German (80%), Italian, and French women from 18 to 50 who are willing to pay for sex and affection!!! believe it or not. I saw many 9 and 10 [*i.e. good-looking*] twenty year old girls paying for it!! One had to see it to believe it. There seems to be a fantasy thing with German (both men and women) to find the darkest (and sometimes no [*sic*] so pretty) locals and pay to be with them. There was a German girl next door to me that had about 10 guys in a week. She looks [*sic*] like Demi (Bruce Willis’ wife, but younger). (Letter 30, about the Dominican Republic).

Such observations are not widely found on sex tourist websites that traffic in fantasies and tales by men about the control they exercise over women. Nevertheless, female sex tourism in the Caribbean has been noticed, researched, and commented upon since the 1970s and is a growing spectacle in countries such as Barbados, Jamaica, the Dominican Republic, the Dutch Antilles, and Belize. O’Connell Davidson and Sanchez Taylor note about this trend: “As Others, local men are viewed as beings possessed of a powerful and indiscriminate sexuality that they cannot control, and this explains their eagerness for sex with tourist women... the Other is not *selling* sex, just ‘doing what comes naturally’” (1999: 40). Specific to this trend is not “brown” sensuality and feminine eroticism, but an image that secures the young Caribbean man as the “Black stud” (Phillips 1999). The darker the man is, the more sexually attractive he is considered, with some being explicitly rejected for not being “black enough.” Blackness is equated with “well-defined muscles” dreadlocked hair, and “skin darkened almost blue-black” characteristics that signal to the racist imagination an African ancestry bristling with “an untamed, primitive nature and exotic appeal “(Phillips 1999:187). It is an image that harks back to older notions in both European and US culture of the Black African man as an embodiment of an insatiable sexual appetite and an uncontrollable lust, with a penis size to match. Albuquerque remarks that it is also this image of Black male sexuality and body that stirs the passions of some female tourists to the Caribbean causing them to “literally get off the plane single mindedly embarked on the holy grail (the search for the big bamboo)” (1998:88).

Both male and female bodies in the region then, provide, as I have argued elsewhere, “a stage for First World gendered performances:” for European and North American men to reenact traditional masculine roles and to reassure themselves of their dominance over women (Kempadoo 1999). Many male sex tourists express the view that in their home countries, women enjoy excessive power, through which traditional male authority is undermined (O’Connell Davidson and Sanchez Taylor 1999, Cabezas 1999). In the Caribbean, they are able to fully reaffirm their masculinity through the control they can exert based on their

racialized/cultural economic power. Simultaneously Black Caribbean masculinity becomes the grounds upon which European and North American women experiment with, or expand, their gender repertoires. Among female tourists, an exercise in control over men, while retaining a sexualized femininity, is common place. The Black man is required to be the sexually aggressive and dominant partner, allowing the tourist woman to combine economic power and authority with traditional western notions of femininity as sexually submissive and subordinate. It would appear that in such scenarios, Caribbean masculinity and femininity become the stages upon which a reshaping and redefinition of Western identity and power occurs. O'Connell Davidson and Sanchez Taylor also point out that the sexual encounter enables the tourist to attain a sense of control over her or his sexuality while reassuring his- or herself of racial and/or cultural privilege (1999). Caribbean men and women alike are constructed in tourist imaginations as racialized-sexual subjects/objects—the hypersexual “Black male stud” and the “hot” mulatta or Black woman—whose main roles are to service and please the visitor. The contradictory position that women from postindustrial centers hold in relation to the eroticized, exoticized Other - both female and male - could certainly use much more attention and scrutiny than has been afforded in cultural and global studies to date

Exoticized Subjectivity and Agency

The notion of agency among people who have been victimized (oppressed, colonized, exoticized, prostituted, subject to slavery, rape, etc), is always a difficult subject to broach, since it is often taken as a dismissal of analyses of processes that cripple, hurt, and degrade humanity. As discussed above, this area of human activity and sociality has also been one of the weakest in Orientalist theory, whereby oppositional agency and counter-hegemonic forces that have been present in history, and continue to contest and transform relations of ruling have been all too often elided. Mohanty nevertheless reminds us that “resistance clearly accompanies all forms of domination” visible through not only organized movements, but in “the very gasps, fissures and silences of hegemonic narratives” through which agency is configured in every day practices and struggles (1991: 38). That agency expresses itself in contradictory ways and is not singular emphasizes the need to not simply dismiss this side of the story but a continued effort to disentangle complex relations of power and resistance. In regards to the new forms of exoticism and exploitation of Black and Brown female and male bodies taking place within the tourism industry in the Caribbean, it is highly seductive to position the women and young men as victims of global domination - as the “sex slaves” of the postmodern era. Yet there are signals and signs of agentic subjects within this scenario. I have elaborately documented elsewhere that women who are sexualized, eroticized and exploited as prostitutes in postcolonial societies have neither been silent, passive or completely robbed of their subjectivity and agency, and that besides being able to articulate their own strategies for coping with their everyday situations, are also sometimes engaged in collective struggles to oppose and change oppressive structures and ideologies that circumscribe their lives (Kempadoo 1998). Both individual agency and organized opposition extend into the tourism industry in the Caribbean.

In recent studies on prostitution in the Dominican republic, it has been explained that in the race to migrate from poverty and hardships, prostitution often becomes a viable strategy for many young Brown women (Brennan 1998, Cabezas 1998). Finding a man to marry, for obtaining residency in the US or Western Europe, or to ensure economic security, can be a very calculated move in which sex work with tourists offers a prime opportunity. Assuming an image of the “exotic mulata” is one way of hooking a tourist. Fusco notes, through her interviews and observations with young women in Cuba, that a deliberate effort is sometimes made among the young women to produce this image in order to better compete in the sex tourism market, that “even the white girls are perming their hair to look like mulatas” (1998:158). Likewise, Phillips (1999) observes that young Black male hustlers in Barbados, in their search for financial security, social prestige and validation of counter-hegemonic masculinity, are acutely aware of the white female image of them as “African” - supposedly naturally rhythmic, sexual and black - and cultivate this image to heighten their appeal to female tourists in order to gain access to material benefits otherwise denied to them. All such “manipulations” of self-image can be

viewed as small subversive acts and strategies that Caribbean working women and men have identified and employ in their struggle to find freedom from oppressive and exploitative national and global relations. Where exoticized, sexualized subjects are beginning to organize collectively to challenge and change hegemonic discourses that are premised on stereotypes of Caribbean sexuality- such as through sex workers organizations as MODEMU and the Maxi Linder Association (see Kempadoo 1998) - we are beginning to witness a more politicized consciousness. The exoticized subject is neither silent nor invisible yet stands in precarious, vulnerable position between and within competing, and contradictory discourses and practices.

Conclusion

Exoticism in the Caribbean has in the past, and continues to, romanticize and eroticize the Brown female body and subjectivity in the Caribbean, yet also to reinforce exploitative and oppressive regimes. Prostitution and the sexual exploitation of enslaved and colonized women is a prism through which we can witness the naked performance of exoticism, its lusts and desires as well as violence and oppressions. Tracing exoticism through the history of prostitution in the Caribbean however, also enables a glimpse at the reconfigurations and redefinitions that have taken place - while the Brown female body has been, and continues to be, central to the construction of the exotic, erotic object/subject, it has been joined at the end of the twentieth century by the eroticized Black man. The significance of prostitution for young Black men's lives and futures, as well as for the reshaping of western feminine identities and positions of power has, only recently been identified as a subject for new research and theorizing, forcing an engagement with not only gendered relations of power and dominance, but also with those between and among nations. It signals new forms of exoticism that have hitherto been ignored or dismissed, and which beg for more attention. Also, we cannot simply dismiss the contradictions and complexities that exoticism constructs among colonized subjects, in terms of gender identities and resistances to oppressive regimes: exotic female subjectivity and agency among the enslaved and colonized under slavery in the Caribbean was inserted into anti-slavery and anti-colonial moves and resistances through prostitution, enabling many women to obtain a semblance of freedom from the exacting and violent control by white men. In the contemporary setting, images of the "exotic mulata" and "Black stud" are re-appropriated by young female and male sex workers in order to increase their possibilities of securing a better future. Such complexities, contradictions, hegemonies and counter-hegemonic struggles as I have outlined here, demand our continued attention in order to unpack and reconstruct global social relations in the twenty-first century.

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6[2] Bush 1990:17. Baudelaire's "Black Venus" and poetry inspired by his mistress of color, the bust of "Venus Africaine" sculpted by Cordier in 1851, or Picasso's "Olympia" of 1901 all belong to the tradition of Europe's exoticization of African women (Nederveen Pieterse 1990:182).

7[3] In di Leonardo's account of exoticism, The Chicago World's Columbia Exposition in 1893 exemplifies how nineteenth century "America" viewed and defined "the Other", with certain groups of women marked as particularly exotic. "In the common orientalist parlance, Asian and Middle Eastern women were largely apprehended as embodiments of exotic beauty and sexuality... Black women, however, were frequently portrayed as offensively ugly and frighteningly savage" (p.7) White women on the other hand, though coming "close to slipping into the category of 'otherness' reserved for 'savages' and 'exotics' " in the perceptions of the exposition's male architects, were however, redeemed from this category "through their capacity to serve as mothers of civilization..." (di Leonardo 1999:8).

8[4] These letters described tourist experiences in Caribbean countries of Aruba, Cuba, Curacao, Dominican Republic, Jamaica, Puerto Rico, and Suriname. In most cases the authors did not identify their home countries, but several authors indicated that they lived in Chicago, Los Angeles, Miami, New York, Nevada, Texas, Canada, Germany, England, the Netherlands, or the U.S. in general.
