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## The Political Economy of Desire: Geographies of Female Sex Work in Havana, Cuba<sup>1</sup>

By Cynthia Pope<sup>2</sup>

### Abstract

The global political economy of desire influences the construction of gendered spaces in Cuba. One of the results of increasing global linkages has been the rise in sex tourism throughout the world. This is particularly salient in Havana where girls and women are increasingly being drawn to commercial sex work as a means for economic survival and access to dollars-only places, such as restaurants, hotels, nightclubs, and stores. Despite forty years of gender equity laws and a highly-educated population, sex work in Cuba has come full circle, and the nation is quickly gaining the reputation, “the Thailand of the Caribbean.”

This case study draws on 38 interviews with sex workers, locally known as *jineteras*, in Havana's tourist districts. It examines the physical, social, and moral spaces in which sex work takes place and teases out some of the more salient power relations involved in creating and maintaining these spaces. Using a geographic lens illuminates some of the influences of sex work on Cuban society that otherwise may go unnoticed. Sex work in Havana is not merely a side note to the economic crisis of the 1990s. Rather, sex work affects many sectors of the dollars-only economy in Havana; it highlights race and class issues that many people think have been eradicated by Revolutionary ideology; and it shows how women's bodies, and not just sex workers' bodies, have been commodified for personal, and even national, economic gain.

*Keywords:* Cuba, sex work, global links

Cuba's geopolitical location and contemporary society are rooted in the nation's commercial links to colonial powers. Havana has been an important port of call since the early 1500s and “has always been linked to the outside world by the threads of desire” (Quiroga 134). Tomás Fernández Robaina demonstrates that sexual services were a lucrative part of the informal economy until the 1959 revolution, and it should not be surprising that, with the re-introduction of ties to the West after the fall of the Soviet Union, these services have again become economically important (Strout 7). Scholarly work has focused on sex tourism in Cuba, in part, because of its resurgence in the face of

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the Revolutionary government's policies to eradicate prostitution and promote gender equity (Harris 91; Pope 57-89).

This article results from fieldwork conducted in Havana, Cuba from 1998-2003 examining the geographic, social, and discursive spaces where female sex work takes place. Sex for money, services, or goods is one of the many complex interactions that globalization has created between Westerners and Cubans. Sex work in Havana is a result of national policies, social practices, Revolutionary culture, the spatial organization of society, and increasing interconnectedness among countries. Space is an underlying theme in female sex work on the island; from public spaces of *la calle* and private spaces of *la casa*; to the neighborhoods in which sex workers meet foreigners; to the economic spaces sex workers occupy and/or modify; to the blurred spaces between communism and capitalism; and to global economic processes and outcomes that are modified (and often reified) by local sex work patterns.<sup>3</sup>

In this article I provide the social context of sex work, a conceptual framework, my research methods and findings in order to demonstrate how gendered constructions of space play out in the Cuban sex work "industry."<sup>4</sup> These findings show the utility of a geographic lens to examine physical spaces, such as the neighborhoods and local economies that benefit from female sex work and where sex workers are solicited. Sex worker identity is influenced by "discursive space," or the ways gender, sex, and capitalism are spoken about in Cuba and also globally. Additionally, I highlight the fact that while Cuban women have been commodified by colonial powers, the participants in this study are savvy enough to use these images and stereotypes for personal gain.

### **The Context of Sex Work in Havana: Social Responses to Economic Crisis**

In 1989 the world witnessed the fall of the Berlin Wall and, with it, the nearly global collapse of communism. As a result of the disintegration of the Soviet block, Cuba lost almost 85% of its exports along with the political and economic support from its primary trading partner, wreaking havoc on Cubans' lives and government institutions (LeoGrande 2). To attract hard currency, in 1993 Castro legalized possession of U.S. dollars for Cubans and encouraged the importation of luxury goods (Schwartz 10), mirroring the pre-Revolutionary economy. The dollarization of the economy has resulted in inflated prices while most Cubans are still paid in pesos, at nearly the same rates since 1959--approximately U.S. \$5-15 monthly (Espín 27). The dollarization has also created a double economy, one in dollars and one in Cuban pesos.<sup>5</sup> As real wages shrank by 80 percent on the island between 1989 and 1995 (LeoGrande 2), a class system emerged.

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<sup>3</sup> *La calle* means "the street" in Spanish. *La casa* means "the house." I use these terms as they encompass not only physical spaces, but also conceptual categories; the street as the traditional domain of women, and the street as a traditionally masculine place.

<sup>4</sup> Sex work is an ambiguous term. In Cuba, sex work is not part of an organized industry, nor is it merely an exchange of sex acts for money, which is what "prostitution" implies. Sex work is broader in definition and does not necessarily adhere to temporal boundaries. Sex work for the purpose of this article is the exchange of sexual services for goods, money, services, or visas.

<sup>5</sup> Since the original submission of this article, President Castro has declared that U.S. dollars are not to be accepted in the Cuban economy. Instead, the Euro is the hard currency. This change—from dollars to Euros—does not impact the article's conclusions or the situation of a dual economy.

Indeed, 5% of the population received 10.1% of Cuban income in 1986, and by 1995 that same 5% received 31% of the country's total income (Zimbalist 13).

This situation, coupled with and, in part, caused by the U.S. blockade in place for over 40 years, has caused a diminution in economic opportunities available to the average Cuban, and a shift in the types of jobs desired. Dollars have become a necessity in Cuban life, and in order to obtain them, one must work in some capacity with foreigners. One of the most well-known activities in this dollar sector is sex work, the primary reason that Cuba has earned the reputation, "Thailand of the Caribbean" (Díaz *et al.*1). Thus, the presence of female sex work seems to have come full circle since pre-revolutionary days, particularly in the capital Havana (Cabezas 987; Elizalde 9; Facio 55; and Fusco 151).

Female sex work has increased despite the government's enactment of gender equity laws and re-training of sex workers in the early years of the Revolution (Strout 7; Smith and Padula 168). Indeed, to distinguish the current sex workers from the previous generation, Cuban lexicon does not label these girls and women as "prostitutes," as that connotes victimization and gender subordination. Instead, they are referred to as *jineteras*, which means "jockey" in Castilian Spanish. This connotes sexual control during intercourse (Paternostro), although this article questions whether being a sex worker is truly empowering.

Sex work is one outcome of the Cuban administration's promotion of the nation's women as a natural "asset" to attract international tourism, much like the sun, sand, and sea (Schwartz 10). In fact, the Cuban government invited *Playboy* magazine to photograph a spread in the 1980s, resulting in the worldwide distribution of posters of topless Cuban women on pristine beaches (Cabezas 79). In an (in)famous 1992 speech to the National Assembly, Castro even defended prostitution, "provided it satisfied the needs of tourists" (qtd. in Paternostro). He continued: "We can say that they are highly educated *jineteras* and quite healthy, because we are in a country with the lowest number of AIDS cases...Therefore there is truly no tourism healthier than Cuba's" (qtd. in Paternostro). *Jineteras* may be one of the primary reasons that the number of international tourists to Cuba increased from 300,000 in 1990 to over 1.7 million in 1999 (Aagesen and Paluch 47) and 1.9 million visitors in 2003 (Comellas).<sup>6</sup> It is impossible to quantify the number of sex workers in the country as they operate outside the formal, government-regulated economic sphere. Shortly after his 1992 speech, Castro called for the Special Troops to crack down on prostitution, and "rehabilitation" of *jineteras* followed. *Jineteras* went from officially being the pride of Cuba to unwelcome deviants, albeit naive at heart: "It hurts too much that a country that has done so much to dignify women, that a foreigner can come to trick her, fill her with vices...to corrupt her," he lamented (qtd. in Paternostro).

Tourism exposed Cubans to foreign ideals, particularly consumption of luxury products, which is anathema to the Cuban doctrine of sacrifice and economic equality. The introduction of mass tourism and the concurrent dollarization of the economy marginalize those individuals who do not have dollars. Thus, access to dollars has become the defining factor in the economic class structure on the island.

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<sup>6</sup> Unfortunately, as sex tourism is officially prohibited, no reliable data exist regarding the number of sex tourists traveling to Cuba.

## Conceptual Framework

I contend that female sex work in Havana can be framed within geographical discourses on the geopolitical, cartographical, and symbolic locations of this activity. This spatial perspective is based on literature addressing the global “political economy of desire.” Sex work is one link in a global commodity chain that reinforces traditional sex tourism destinations and makes these destinations more affordable and more accessible than ever before to travelers from industrialized countries (Clancy 75). Cynthia Enloe argues: “Sex tourism requires Third World women to be economically desperate enough to enter prostitution...The other side of the equation requires men from affluent societies to imagine certain women, usually women of color, to be more available and submissive than the women in their own countries” (36-37). To that end, Marta Savigliano (237) labels international sex tourism, and the homogenizing characteristics ascribed to sex workers throughout the world, as elements of the “world economy of passion”:

Paralleling the extraction of material goods and labor from the Third World, the passion-poor core countries of the capitalist world system have been appropriating emotional and affective practices from their colonies for several centuries...The Third World’s emotional and expressive actions and arts have been categorized, homogenized, and transformed into commodities suitable for the First World’s consumption. (qtd. in Altman 40)

The changing organizational structure of global capitalism can, in part, explain the rise in global sex tourism (Carter and Clift 2). Jeremy Seabrook states of Thai sex work: “It is a savage irony that sex tourism should be one symptom of globalization, the ‘integration’ of the whole world into a single economy, when both the workers in the industry and the clients from abroad are themselves the product of disintegration—of local communities, the dissolution of rootedness and belonging, the breaking of old patterns of labour and traditional livelihoods” (169-170). Power relations differentiate sex tourists and workers: “The tourist is enacting a socially sanctioned and economically empowered marginality, while the second, the prostitute, is stigmatized as a whore, a woman of the night, as the scarlet woman” (Ryan and Hall 1). Thus, both economics and fantasy, mediated through the “male gaze,” play parts in creating sexualized tourist spaces (Pritchard and Morgan 115).

A growing body of literature focuses on the causes, patterns, and impacts of sex work in the Caribbean region (Brennan 1: 621-633, 2:119-153; Henshall-Momsen 107-20; Kempadoo 3-33; Mullings 55-80; Pattullo 28-49; Pope 57-89; Sheller 36-70). These causes include inexpensive all-inclusive travel, strong foreign currencies, and access to inexpensive sex and “exotic” locals (O’Connell Davidson 45). These factors suggest Cuba’s increasing popularity as a newer sex tourism destination for North Americans, Western Europeans, Latin Americans, and even Asians. The image of exoticness is created, diffused, and reified through tourist pamphlets, guide books, word of mouth, and one of the most global technologies, the Internet (Pritchard and Morgan 117). Several web sites indicate that women of color are “naturally” sexy and thus possess the essence of femininity. One site claims: “It is unanimous with all who have traveled to Cuba that the stunning ladies there are willing to please their mans every wish and desire. If the

lady of your choice does not speak your language, don't worry, she will find the right way to communicate with you" (*sic*) (Havana Cuba Connection). Another advertises that:

Women from Latin America are noted for their beauty, grace, charm and loyalty. With their sweet nature and shy smiles, Latino's possess an inner beauty that most men find irresistible. Latino's are by their nature family-orientated, resourceful and devoted...The majority of Latino's are *Christian, so cultural compatibility is easier than some countries.* (*sic*) (Latin American Cupid)

Cuban women fall into some of the Latina stereotypes, such as an assumption of Christian identity and practice (which are not the norms in Cuba), and a submissive and loyal disposition, combined with demureness and beauty. These women are often represented in publicity as more "natural" than women in industrialized nations. For example, many sex tourists view these women as a welcome break from the "frigid" women of North America and Western Europe (O'Connell Davidson and Sánchez Taylor 43-47; Pettman 97; Pritchard and Morgan 125). As women's and minority rights movements have developed in industrialized nations, sex tourism in developing countries gives tourists the opportunity to reaffirm their masculinity and uphold (or renew) traditional gender hierarchies (Sánchez Taylor 42-48). In Cuba, these encounters are often couched in terms of feelings of romance and even of male chivalry whereby the sex tourist "saves" his female Cuban companion from economic destitution. These emotional negotiations help to explain why sex tourists are sometimes referred to as "romance tourists" (Davidson and Taylor 48).

Despite the Cuban political system that strives for gender and racial equality, the racial stereotyping of Cuban women is similar to sex workers in other regions (Fernandez 85-89; Fraunhar 219). Global sex tourism and sex work are built upon the creation, the selling, and the consumption of a tropicalized fantasy. This fantasy was created through 18th-century imperialists' fascination with notions of hybridization and miscegenation (Sheller 13). The commodification of the Cuban mulatta body in cultural modes of reproduction, such as art and literature, "served to raise questions of human difference through a discourse of cupidity, immorality, sexual corruption, and tropicalization" (Sheller 116). The sex worker embodies the histories of colonialism, racism, sexism, and exoticism. The Cuban sex work paradigm, then, is a result of many of the colonial paradoxes and fantasies/imaginings of the hypersexual yet romantic, liberated yet loving, educated yet submissive, mulatta woman.

### **Study Methods and Demographics**

This study results come from a subset of a broader project examining gendered vulnerability to Human Immunodeficiency Virus (HIV) in Havana. The fieldwork took place in Havana in the summer of 1998, one year in country from 1999-2000, and continuing research in the summers of 2002 and 2003. Of the 225 total interviews, 38 (37 women and one man) were used for this article, as they dealt directly with issues of sex work. Each of these 37 participants (15-27 years old) had at least a high school education, and all but two worked outside of the home. Each of the participants in this study started selling sex between 14 and 20 years of age, and the amount of money they received per

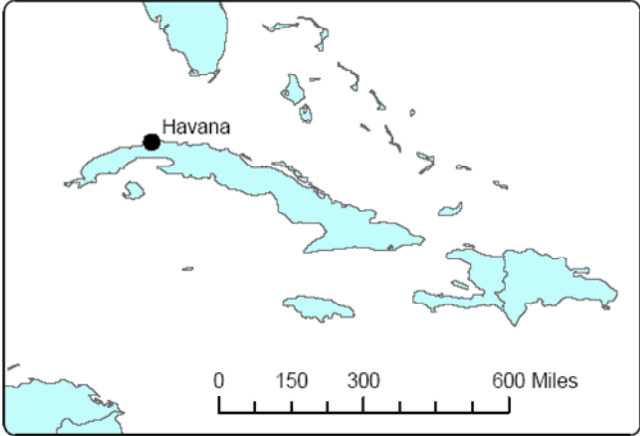
sexual encounter with a foreigner ranged between \$5 USD and \$200 USD. However, sex work is not formally organized in Cuba. Sex with foreigners is not defined as simply a business transaction with money and goods exchanged for a specific sex act, but rather the money received differs by occasion. For example, the lowest amount that study participants received, \$5 USD, may be for one evening with one foreigner, and the highest amount, \$200 USD, may be for one week or longer spent with one tourist. Also, some *jinetas* received goods, such as clothes or appliances, or an evening out in exchange for sex.

The methods used to illicit participant responses for this study were bound by cultural circumstances. The first eight interviews resulted from Cuban researchers using a semi-structured survey approaching individuals on the street, on beaches, at bus stops, and at the University of Havana. Ten interviews were conducted by a research assistant who identified herself as a *jinetas*, implementing the same survey instrument as used in the first group of eight interviews. Another ten interviews were conducted by a research assistant who often acted as a “middleman” or contact (known as a *proxeneta*) between foreign sex tourists and sex workers.<sup>7</sup> I conducted the final ten interviews using an open-ended technique. The snowball method was used for participant recruitment in all but ten interviews. While not scientifically random, these interviews provide an overview of sex work from a geographically diverse sample, and sex workers and *proxenetas* themselves played integral roles both in recruitment and analysis.

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<sup>7</sup> The term “*proxeneta*” is sometimes translated as “pimp.” However, in my experience the term “pimp” indicates a more formal relationship with sex workers than what *proxeneta* implies in Cuba. *Proxenetas* may be anyone, from landlord to parent to friend to romantic partner, who introduces a sex worker to a potential sex tourist. Many times this is done in ambiguous terms where price or services to be exchanged for sex are not discussed between *proxeneta*, sex worker, and tourist. In Cuba, “*chulo*” is an accurate term for “pimp.” *Chulo* implies more of a business negotiation than *proxeneta*.

# Research Sites in Urban Havana



**Legend**

- Neighborhood
- Roads
- Shoreline
- Urban Areas

Prepared by Kate Moran, MindView Consulting, January 2005.

Map for reference purposes only - not to scale.

**Figure 1: Research Sites in Urban Havana**



Interviews were conducted in a variety of neighborhoods, most of which cater to international tourism (see figure 1). 27 interviews were conducted in the Vedado neighborhood (where many of the hotels, cultural areas, and private rental rooms are located); the colonial center of Old Havana; and Miramar, the wealthiest area of Havana. Nine interviews were conducted in Central Havana, a densely populated residential neighborhood linking Vedado and Old Havana; one in the Plaza neighborhood, and one in La Lisa, on the outskirts of Havana.

Race and ethnicity are generally part of the study of demographics. These terms and their descriptors, however, are ambiguous in the Cuban case. The mainly white economic elite fled the island (Lusane 85-90; Proenza 75-84), creating a rainbow of ethnicities and skin colors that developed through interracial relationships on the island. Some studies have reported *jineteras* to be of a certain skin color. Jan Strout (11), for example, highlights work from Cuban organizations claiming that most *jineteras* in Cuba are dark-skinned because they do not have white relatives sending remittances from abroad. Julia O'Connell Davidson (46-47) echoes this view. However, my study did not confirm any racial or ethnic bias to engaging in sex work; nine individuals self-identified as White, seven Black, twelve Mestiza (mixed European and Indigenous), four Mulatta (mixed European and African), and six participants did not identify themselves with racial or ethnic labels.<sup>8</sup>

The only economic commonality among these participants is that they did not receive remittances from family abroad, reflecting Strout's argument above. Foreign remittances are an important source of income in a country where the average salary is \$10 per month (Blue 68-71). Even with government subsidies, this is not enough to support a household. For example, basics such as cooking oil are now scarce, and one pound of pork costs 10% of a monthly income (Stephens 6). This is one instance of the economic and cultural rift developing between those individuals with and those without access to dollars. Skin color can play a role in this, as most workers in the formal tourism sector are white or mestiza, often leaving the informal tourist sector for those of darker skin color (Schwartz 20).

### **Geographic and Economic Spaces of Sex Work**

To understand the place that sex work occupies in Cuban social discourse and international commodity chains, I highlight the physical locations of sex work and then move to its discursive and symbolic locations. Sex work is not confined to pre-Revolutionary red light districts in Old Havana. In the beginning of the recent surge in sex work in the late 1980s and 1990s, women lined Fifth Avenue in the wealthy Miramar neighborhood soliciting foreigners and the occasional Cuban client.<sup>9</sup> The visibility of

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<sup>8</sup> These words for ethnic identification are the words that the participants used, and they change throughout the region. *Mestiza* is a particularly ambiguous term in Latin America as it generally applies someone with both indigenous and European (Spanish) ancestry. However, very few individuals can trace their roots to the Tainos, but often the racial label is used to describe physical appearance, such as someone with Western European features but with darker skin color. It can be used as a way to either distance oneself from those of African heritage, or can sometimes mean one with multiple ethnic backgrounds. Adding to the ambiguity of these terms, individuals interpret this word differently. See Gayle L. McGarrity (193-205) for a more detailed discussion of race and class in Cuba.

*jineterismo* has waxed and waned since then. Sex work has shifted from being publicly solicited to being offered through third parties, at dollars-only nightclubs, and at certain locations where non-sexual tourism runs up against sexual tourism, such as in the busy plazas and streets of Old Havana and the hotel areas of the Vedado neighborhood.

Authorities have attempted to maintain an ideological and physical separation between foreigners and Cubans. In the early 1990s, this policy became known colloquially as “tourist apartheid.” This system, which appears to be softening gradually, intended to create a clear boundary between tourist-only and Cuban-only places. One of the results was that police officers were given orders to check any Cuban’s identification who was accompanying a foreigner. If the relationship appeared suspect, police were given the right to fine or arrest Cubans.

As sex work has shifted locations, new economic spaces have been created. It is not only the *jinetera* who profits from foreign sex tourists, but also other family members, landlords, pimps, hotel workers, and others. These landlords are not permitted to rent rooms to Cubans or let Cubans and foreigners stay in the same room. The government requires them to collect identification from each guest and present this list to the immigration and tax authorities. Three of the sex workers in this article rented illegally from a Cuban landlord. This is considered illegal, since Cubans must acquire a government permit to move from one part of the country to another, and once there, must stay with family members. These dollars-only rental rooms provide a space for sex work to be carried out and a route into the dollar economy of Cuba for the landlords. They also provide a place for the excess flow of women moving to Havana from other provinces without a government permit.

Pimps (*chulos*) are beginning to profit from women’s work. This marks a change in the autonomy of female sex work in Havana. Autonomy has become a contested concept as men have started to infringe on female-controlled spaces of sex tourism by acting as pimps. For example, some sex workers are starting to lose control of their income because of the increasing role of pimps in sexual negotiation. Even the most recent scholarly literature on Cuba notes the absence of an organized sex work industry on the island. However, my fieldwork demonstrated that pimps, or *chulos* in the Cuban vernacular, do indeed exist. They can be mothers, fathers, boyfriends, spouses, neighbors, or landlords. As sex work has moved from a public arena to behind closed doors since the early 1990s (although the initial encounter can often appear as a simple, friendly approach to the tourist on a street), the initial contacts between the *proxeneta* or pimp and client are becoming increasingly important. *Chulos* are being integrated into this relatively new social and economic network, even in sex work catering to Cubans (Garcia).

Even with strict regulation of space, areas of tolerance exist within Havana, both for sex work with tourists and sex work catering to a Cuban clientele (Garcia). These *zonas de tolerancia* include some urban parks and even “La Rampa,” an area near the Habana Libre hotel in the Vedado neighborhood. More common is the existence of zones where any appearance of a sexual transgression, whether real or not, is punished. It seems that the government is quite concerned about repressing any appearance of sex work. The statute of “guilty until proven innocent” is not always enforced in Cuba. Certain beaches, such as those in Playas del Este to the east of Havana, are considered off-limits to

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<sup>9</sup> See the popular 1994 Cuban song, “Night Flowers,” by Silvio Rodriguez.

Cubans, although all beaches are officially public. Instead, officers patrol these beaches, and it is not uncommon to see police asking Cuban women for their national identification cards if they are suspected of solicitation, then fined, and/or arrested even if evidence of solicitation is not forthcoming. According to my fieldwork experience, this process was often racialised, and from an informal survey it seemed as if women with darker skin were more often asked to provide their identification than lighter-skinned women. However, that could not statistically be proven.

White Cubans or *mestiza* Cubans (a nebulous distinction at times) can sometimes “pass” as foreigners. This can lead to a sort of romantic legitimacy in society’s and officials’ viewpoints, making sexual encounters easier on the streets, in hotels and rented rooms for lighter-skinned women. From participant observation, it appears more likely that hotels allow a white-skinned couple into the elevators more easily than an interracial couple, which often acts as a marker of sex work. Thus, sex work is one element of the socio-cultural construction of space in Havana, and it also creates new economic spaces that may clash with traditional socialist ideologies of gender and racial equity.

### **Identity and Discursive Space**

Sex worker identity is bounded by discourse and ideology reflecting Cuban revolutionary ideals, geopolitical location, and women’s roles. Tourism to the Caribbean is based, in part, on the idea of fantasy for both the tourist and sex worker. Mullings (56) writes that tourists often expect to travel to distant, sun-drenched islands with idyllic social conditions and no “Third World” economic conditions in sight. “The modern American tourist now fills this experience with pseudo-events. He has come to expect both more strangeness and more familiarity than the world naturally offers.” (Boorstin 88, qtd. in Ryan and Hall 5). Cuban officials and citizens create this “authenticity” to entice tourists and return visits. Accessible, romantic, submissive *jineteras* are one of those authenticities produced in Cuba.

While the word *jinetera* signifies an amount of empowerment, selling sex is still a stigmatized activity (Rundle). These sex workers’ identity is shaped by the political ideology that female sex work is an extension of pre-Revolutionary U.S. imperialism and colonialism. While many tourists are Western European, the notion of U.S. imperialism pervades Cuban politics, primarily due to the U.S. economic embargo that has hurt the economy. When policymakers speak of “imperialism,” they are referring to the U.S.’s role in shaping Cuba’s pre-Revolutionary social systems. To many in Cuba, the U.S. presence is equated with colonialism and dependency. European colonialism, although historically much longer than U.S. imperialism, is not discussed with the same vigor. European tourism, paradoxically, is not necessarily regarded as neo-imperialism, but rather an outcome of an economic crises intensified by United States policies toward Cuba.

The Cuban female body is literally penetrated by capitalists, a painful reminder of pre-Revolutionary days and of Cuba’s current dependence on foreign aid. In this case study, questions about sex worker identity elicited mixed responses. Some participants separated their acts from the label of sex worker, demonstrating the fluidity of identity formation. Nineteen participants identified themselves as *jineteras* claiming that anyone who sold sex to foreigners could be defined this way. However, to admit this publicly would result in stigmatization from mainstream society. Except for one participant who

said: “prostitution is an art, and I realized that I was born to do this;” the other women all said they entered into *jineterismo* by chance, or even on a dare. Finding foreign clients for sex was something that “happened to them.” This may be a way to assuage any stigma surrounding their identity (either self-perceived or society’s attitudes) as sex workers; they did not seek to engage in these activities, rather many described themselves as nearly passive.

Whether this is considered work or just a way to *resolver* (“make ends meet,” Elizalde 70; Rundle), every participant had similar reasons for selling sex--economic gain and access to dollar-only spaces, such as restaurants, nightclubs, and stores. Two participants specifically mentioned “sacrificing themselves” sexually so that their daughters could live a better life and leave the island. This economic need defies the Federation of Cuban Women’s stance that the only women involved in selling sex or companionship had low moral standards (FMC). As one participant stated: “I’m thinking of continuing until the economy stabilizes and the money that one normally earns has value.” She is referring to the fact that most goods can only be purchased in U.S. dollars and that one must also deal with erratic price fluctuations. For example, in the summer of 2002, the price of cooking oil increased so greatly that a one-month household supply was equivalent to one person’s average monthly salary.

One 23-year-old woman who charges \$60 and more for sex represents another view: “I’ve never hustled in my life. I’ve only had relationships with foreigners because I have liked them and I have taken advantage of my good luck.” Thus, while her actions and economic gain make a compelling case for her being a sex worker, she has separated her identity from this work and does not consider these relationships as work. She views all of her relationships as similar, except that those with foreigners have involved more money and the opportunity to leave Cuba. Challenging her self-identity, an officer arrested her in a nightclub in 1999 for solicitation and sent her to a rehabilitation center for three days.<sup>10</sup>

Fantasy also factors into sex worker identity. Fantasy not only one shapes sex tourists’ perceptions of Cubans, but also influences women’s views about the opportunities that sex work can afford them. For example, Cubans often believe that life abroad, particularly in North America or Western Europe, is much easier and offers more opportunities and freedoms than in Cuba. Sex tourists offer, or reify, this fantasy to Cuban women by flaunting their wealth by wearing designer clothes, eating at expensive restaurants, and staying at high-end hotels. These men participate in the fantasy by often framing their relationship with a Cuban woman as not solely financial in nature but also romantic or even chivalrous. In turn, sex workers often think that not only will sex work yield romantic results, but also that this romance will be maintained despite great distances, leading to marriage and happiness in a foreign country, paid for by the sex tourist/boyfriend/husband. I have not seen this happen. This presents a difficult scenario; on one hand, the women are practical and realize that dollars are necessary to buy goods and that a client could sponsor a foreign visa for her. On the other, they are not ready to discard entirely traditional notions of romance.

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<sup>10</sup> See Oscar Lewis *et al.*, for one story of a rehabilitation school in Havana in the early years of the revolution.

Fantasy is also an element of the essentialist notions of the body that pervade Cuban society. Women in this study, for example, claimed that Cuban men, by nature of their Cuban-ness (or *cubanidad*), were more well-versed in sex than foreigners. One 20-year-old woman stated of Cuban men: "Of course. I'm Cuban and realize they're the best [in bed]." An 18-year-old woman stated that, "Cubans are the best at sex. They do it well, but they pay very little and my goal is make ends meet (*resolver*)." She added: "Latinos are low-class" ("*Los latinos son muy bajos*"). This participant mentally created an ethnic divide between Latinos and Cubans, a distinction that does not necessarily exist in global advertising, such as the Internet sites I referred to previously, sex tourism, or Western discourse more generally. Her thoughts mirror ideas in literature that sex tourists (male and female) impose sexual prowess on the "exotic" Other, a label she is willing to accept and reinforce as a Cuban.

In this case study, women were straightforward about having sex with foreigners for economic gain, but they often used the phrase, "falling in love," to describe a potentially long-term relationship with tourists. In fact, one 20-year-old woman explicitly stated that her goal was to have a foreigner fall in love with her in order to acquire an Italian visa to leave the island. Thus, while the participants were realistic about love not being the primary goal in a sexual encounter, they were also bound by traditional paradigms of sex and romance being intertwined, with marriage as a possible outcome. However, of all *jineteras* I met in Cuba, only one had a proposal for marriage from a foreigner and was waiting for the visa to be processed at the time of the interview. Thus, the traditional expectation of love as an outcome of a sexual encounter is an extension of the structural realities of economic necessity in these women's stories. Skrobanek (viii) asks this question about Thailand that can just as aptly apply to Cuba: "to what extent can such a relationship survive, based as it is on the man's naiveté and the woman's survival strategy?" The naiveté on the sex tourists' part is based on the various assumptions mentioned throughout this article, including that women are having sex with them out of love; that economic, social, and racial equality has been realized on the island; and that Cuban women are also "naturally" submissive yet sexual. The naiveté on the sex workers' part is that sex tourists are seeking a long-term relationship with a Cuban partner; that sex for money connotes romance; and that economic necessities are subsumed to some false sense of romantic ideals.

### **Commoditization and Empowerment**

Another issue that may lead to the commoditization of these participants' bodies is Cuba's progressive gender laws, such as the Family Code (which requires men to contribute equally to household duties), free birth control and abortion, the right to divorce, pay equity, and access to education. It can be argued that these laws have led to a higher social standing of women in Cuba than in other tourist destinations, such as Thailand or the Philippines. This in turn may make sex tourists feel that they are dealing with women who are empowered, thereby assuaging their guilt about taking advantage of another person's economic hardship. The State provides strong health care and social programs that instead of deflecting sex tourists, can actually attract them to the island with the promise of physical and medical safety.

Beyond the social and economic empowerment resulting from the Cuban Revolution, several participants felt their beauty empowered them. Some women in this

study felt that since they were “young and beautiful” it was “their duty” to work, earn money, and thus increase their family’s buying power. Their tone was almost indignant when responding to questions about victimization. One said, for example, “I am not a *jinetera* or prostitute. I am a fighter! (*luchadora*)” Yet, these feelings of empowerment depend on their youthful appearance and feelings of commoditization. Participants insisted they were following the dictates of Cuban communism, even as their bodies were being used to attract foreign capital. They claimed that hard currency can then be used to buy goods in dollars, which bolsters the Cuban economy. Thus, these participants claim, it is through their bodies that the Cuban government continues to exist.

An 18-year-old stated: “Well, my goal is to have everything. I’m pretty and I should exploit my beauty.” Along the same lines, a 20-year-old stated that her goal was to leave the country and help her family, but until then, “I ask for money [for sex]. You have to pay for my beauty.” These answers show, however, how quickly young women have taken to capitalism and comparative advantage, which may be more of a threat to the government’s ideology than the actual act of sex work. For example, the government has feared that if citizens continue to demand foreign goods then this could undermine the socialist stance of the government, thus undermining many of the basic tenets of the Revolution, such as sacrifice, hard work, and equality among all individuals.

### **Risky Places**

This project examined the physical, economic, and ideological spaces that help define, and are defined by, female sex work in Havana. Despite Cuba’s social and political uniqueness, as in other countries of the world where sex work is stigmatized, certain risks accompany these sexual negotiations. Participants articulated these risks as either results of physical violence or structural violence, such as economic marginalization and gender subordination. A 22-year-old woman who has sold sex for six years spoke of the physical risks: “I spent the night with a foreigner, and later he didn’t want to pay me. When I called him on this he hit me in the ear, which left me with a problem in my eardrum.” All participants mentioned ticketing and incarceration as common fears of sex work, and ten participants have been cited by the police. One woman was placed in a holding cell for two hours, one spent one year under house arrest, and one was sent to Villa Delicias, a “rehabilitation” center, for three days. In no case did this deter them from continuing sex work.

Social stigmatization often causes as much fear as physical intimidation. At the heart of this fear of identification as a *jinetera* was not only the threat of incarceration but also being exposed publicly for selling sex. This can be noted by the authorities and placed in the individuals’ permanent work dossier, perhaps leading to restricted job and social opportunities in the future. Speaking about the potential social stigma, a 27-year-old woman tells of one night in a restaurant with a drunken foreigner:

When he went to pay he saw that he had no money and he thought I had stolen it. He started to yell, “thief, prostitute” at me in that place. He grabbed me by the arm and pushed me. I fell on the table. Everyone was looking at me. I didn’t know what to do and I ran away. I could hear his voice behind me, but I only ran. That was the most embarrassing night of my life.

One 19-year-old woman mentioned that risk was not only violence or embarrassment, but disease. Her worst experience was when a foreigner did not want to use condoms, despite her protests. After she gave in to his demands and spent the entire night with him, he refused to pay her. The fear led her to test for HIV, a common risk of sex work (Bancroft 89; Butcher 151). The HIV prevalence rate in Cuba is one of the lowest in the world (0.1%, UNAIDS), and public health authorities fear that the increase in sex work could impact HIV rates on the island (Key and DeNoon 15). This low rate of HIV may encourage sex tourism, as foreigners believe that they can experience both an exotic and a healthy experience, a situation construed as unique in the region. All of the participants understood the link between HIV risk and condom use, revealing the strength of the mass media health campaigns. However, their experiences also reflect the paradoxes of empowerment in contemporary Cuba. On the one hand, education, including sexual and reproductive education, is a right provided to every citizen. On the other, while the majority of clients used condoms, some situations existed whereby a woman needed to make the troubling choice between potentially contracting a deadly disease or losing a foreign client/boyfriend. When we keep in mind that just one such encounter generally yields more than one month's average wages as well as access to dollar-only venues, the decision is not straightforward.

When asked about bad experiences with clients, one 23-year-old university student claims she had only had good experiences with clients, but it was a Cuban who caused her physical and emotional pain: "With my daughter's father, no [he didn't treat me well] because he hit me and many times he sent me to the street even though I was bruised." He acted as her pimp while they were involved in a relationship, but she has since left him and works for herself. This new-found autonomy can cause additional problems; officers threatened detention not only to extort money from her but also to procure sexual favors. She states, "One time an officer stopped me, and since I hadn't given him the money I already promised him, he was going to take me to jail if I didn't sleep with him. Unfortunately, I did it because I would do anything not to go to jail." This reveals that, despite policymakers' speeches about gender equity, structures are in place that constrain sex workers' personal agency and lead to increased physical, social, and psychological risk.

### **Conclusions: Geographies of Sex Work in Havana**

This paper demonstrates the role that geographic, social, and discursive spaces play in the analysis of Cuban sex work. Despite a unique socialist government and centralized economy, is not immune to one of the growing trends in international tourism--sex tourism. Indeed, Cuba's geopolitical position makes it a magnet for those who wish to experience the tropics and want to witness the last bastion of Communism in the Western hemisphere. Globalization and sex tourism highlight class distinctions that may have never been erased by the revolution. The participants in this project are constantly negotiating their location in a global political economy of desire where women's bodies are one of the central commodities.

While earning foreign currency is the primary motivation for most Cuban sex workers, it is clear from this study that this "survival strategy" does not equal a "death strategy" (Schoepf 107), as in poorer nations where sex workers may become infected with HIV due to a lack of education about condom use or extreme economic deprivation.

Each individual in Cuba is provided with education, health care, housing, and subsidized food and clothing. Additionally, education about HIV and STIs (Sexually Transmitted Infections) prevention is nearly universal, and condoms are available and inexpensive. Thus, it is important to note that the political culture means that no person truly needs to sell their body to survive, but this may be changing as the economic crisis deepens in the nation.

This research addresses some of the internal contradictions associated with Cuba's changing economic position in the world and the manifestation of these changes in local contexts. For example, the relationship between women's economic and social independence and their commoditization in Havana is articulated by some participants as a result of global colonial processes that exoticize and eroticize Caribbean women, as well as national discourses that emphasize gender equity and have tried to deter capitalist consumption. It is not clear to what extent women feel empowered by using their bodies to earn money and goods for their families. I contend that while women may feel empowered by their sexual work, they are also commodities that have currency in the global context and are thus subject to the whims of the global sex market. Sex work in Cuba is thus a double-edged sword; while stigmatization is inherent in this type of activity, the work also provides a source of money and, with that, influence in the new capitalist economic spaces.

This article also argues that a geographical lens can be used to frame the increase in female sex work since the early 1990s. Since then, tourist spaces in Havana have become more blatantly gendered than at any time since the 1959 Revolution. Gendered spaces on the island have been created through the economic opportunities that sex work presents, such as the emergence of dollars-only rental properties; thus families and neighborhoods reap profits from women's bodies. As women's opportunity to gain foreign currency has increased, so has the presence of pimps and contacts, who often take the gifts and money given to the female sex worker. The nature of these two groups is such that the pimp or contact person can be a boyfriend, husband, mother, or other family member. It will be necessary to follow up on this work with a study that addresses the changing organizational structure of sex work, and how this affects women's control of both their money and their bodies.

The discursive space--how sex work is spoken about and conceptualized--functions on several levels from governmental to personal commentary. While the participants expressed similar goals for engaging in sex with foreign tourists (money, presents, and perhaps a chance to leave the island), their identities are fluid and depend on the situation. Some believe themselves to be *jinetteras* due to the economic transactions they negotiate. However, the stigma of sex work in Cuban culture caused many not to consider themselves to be sex workers, but rather to be merely taking advantage of an economic situation that presented itself. Government discourse about gender and sex work has clearly affected these study-participants' identities. Sex work still carries a stigma in Cuban society, so even though participants were pragmatic about their motivations, they are hesitant to admit that they are *jinetteras* or prostitutes. The resurgence of sex work is akin to a colonial wound that has not yet healed. For example, sex work was one of the characteristics of Cuba as a port of call during colonial times until the 1959 Revolution. National discourse after the Revolution highlighted the achievement of eradicating prostitution from the island. The reemergence of sex work,



combined with courting foreign capitalist tourists, represents a possible return to pre-revolutionary days. The sex workers' bodies, then, become markers of this fear and threat to socialist ideals. This appears to be one reason for the self-denial expressed in these participants' responses.

I have highlighted in this article how increasing global linkages, and thus increased exposure to foreigners and necessity of foreign currency within Cuba, have influenced the proliferation of female sex work on the island. These participants' stories reveal the complexity of sex work in Havana as a result of global linkages. At the local scale, the participants reflect sex work as a calculated choice; these women are agents in their lives. At the same time, however, their agency is mitigated by the economic, political, and cultural norms of contemporary Cuban society. As the Cuban economy remains weak and wages remain artificially low, sex work will increase and will draw more individuals into the dollar economy. Until the economic situation improves, I predict that this nation will remain a popular destination for sex tourists, and that Cuban sex work will remain a crucial link in the global commodity chain.

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