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SEX AND SENTIMENT IN CUBAN TOURISM

Florence E. Babb

ABSTRACT

Helen Safa has been a leading program builder and pioneer in research that examines the complex intersections of gender, race, class, and nation in Latin America and the Caribbean. Her comparative research culminated in her influential book, *The Myth of the Male Breadwinner: Women and Industrialization in the Caribbean* (1995), which examined gender, family, and employment across three Caribbean societies. Over several decades Safa has inspired scholarship throughout the Caribbean and the Americas and her work is exemplary of engaged anthropology in the region. Here I present work I conducted in Cuba that was guided, like my work in Peru, Nicaragua, and southern Mexico by the writings of Safa and others who saw the critical need to bring gender into meaningful discussion in the field of Latin American and Caribbean studies. In what follows, drawn from my broader research on tourism in four nations, I explore and reflect on the contemporary dynamics of sex and romance tourism in Cuba. I suggest that the allure of this domain of tourism may be enhanced by Cuba's global political identity, and that Cuban women participating in commodified and intimate exchanges reveal an ability to get along in a market economy that generally excludes them.

Keywords: Cuba, tourism, sex work, gender, race, sexuality

RESUMEN

Helen Safa ha sido una pionera en la investigación que examina las complejas intersecciones de género, raza, clase y nación en América Latina y el Caribe. Su investigación comparativa culminó en la publicación de su influyente libro, *The Myth of the Male Breadwinner: Women and Industrialization in the Caribbean* (1995), que examinó género, familia y empleo en tres sociedades caribeñas. Durante varias décadas, Safa ha servido de inspiración a los investigadores en el Caribe y las Américas y su trabajo es ejemplo de antropología comprometida con la región. Aquí presento el trabajo que realicé en Cuba y que tuvo como guía, al igual que en mis trabajos en Perú, Nicaragua y el sur de México, los escritos de Safa y de otros que vieron la necesidad crítica de traer el género a una discusión significativa en el campo de los estudios latinoamericanos y del Caribe. En este artículo, resultado de una amplia investigación del turismo en cuatro países, exploro y reflejo las dinámicas contemporáneas del turismo sexual y romántico en Cuba.

Sugiero que el atractivo de este dominio del turismo aumenta por la identidad política global de Cuba, y que las mujeres cubanas participantes en intercambios íntimos y mercadeables revelan una habilidad para acomodarse a una economía de mercado que generalmente las excluye.

Palabras clave: Cuba, turismo, trabajo sexual, género, raza, sexualidad

RÉSUMÉ

Helen I. Safa est une pionnière des études sur la complexité des intersections de genre, race, de nation en Amérique Latine et dans la Caraïbe. Son investigation comparative conduit à la publication de son éminent ouvrage, *The Myth of the Male Breadwinner: Women and Industrialization in the Caribbean* (1995), dans lequel elle analyse le genre, la famille et l'emploi au niveau de trois sociétés caribéennes. Au cours de multiples décennies, Safa a servi de source d'inspiration à des chercheurs de la Caraïbe et des Amériques; sa recherche est un exemple d'une anthropologie engagée dans la région. Cet article présente une étude que j'ai réalisée à Cuba, au Pérou, au Nicaragua et au sud du Mexique, basé sur les recherches de Safa et d'autres chercheurs qui ont apporté des idées critiques et discuté sur le sujet de genre dans le cadre des études latino-américaines et caribéennes. Dans cet article qui est aussi le résultat d'une vaste investigation réalisée sur le tourisme dans quatre pays, je présente une analyse et une réflexion des dynamiques contemporaines du tourisme sexuel et romantique à Cuba. Certaines données suggèrent que cette constante du tourisme augmente à cause de l'identité politique globale de Cuba; où les femmes prennent part à des échanges intimes et commerciaux représente un élément d'appui de l'économie du marché qui les exclut en général.

Mots-clés: Cuba, tourisme, travail sexuel, genre, race, sexualité

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Intimate Encounters in a Transitional Society

Arriving in Havana's airport in December 2003, just before tighter restrictions were imposed by the United States on travel to Cuba, I was swept along with others going through customs. As our movement slowed and we formed lines, I noticed a large-screen TV showing Cuban women dancing provocatively in skin-tight clothing. The images were distinctly sexualized, but it was unclear to me if they were intended to be a welcoming diversion, cultural heritage on display, or even perhaps an advertisement for beer. In a country that had expressed official concern over rising sex tourism and that strictly controls advertising, this presented a curious contradiction, albeit one

of many encountered on a daily basis by travelers in Cuba. What struck me, however, was that among the many attractions this Caribbean island offers, this one was put on prominent view for visitors entering the country.¹

In my comparative and ethnographic research in Cuba, I have found that the tourism industry often mimics those in other tropical tourist destinations in offering “sand and sea” vacations with optional visits to colonial cities and towns. Yet, while Cuba has much in common with other nations using “branding” techniques to define their appeal and compete for a share of the global tourism market, it differs from the mainstream in attracting a significant category of travelers who seek out travel to destinations formerly considered off-limits (tourism from the United States is still limited and more come from Canada, Europe, and parts of Latin America). The island nation is alluring to those seeking less-frequented sites, and travelers expressed to me their desire to visit Cuba before it loses this quality and becomes an over-developed tourist site like neighboring areas of the Caribbean.

During the 1990s, the Cuban government held to its revolutionary commitment through its most difficult period following the loss of Soviet support, albeit with a number of concessions to a mixed economy (Eckstein 2003). While resources became scarce, Cuba remained a more highly developed nation in the region, thanks in no small part to the role that tourism played in bolstering the economy. In the transition period since Fidel Castro turned over power to his brother Raúl Castro in 2006 and the latter was named head of state in 2008, Cuba’s tourism industry has continued to be a mainstay of national development. The number of foreign visitors to the island rose to 2.42 million in 2009 and the expectation is that if restrictions on U.S. travel are lifted, tourism to Cuba will increase dramatically.²

Cuba has received a growing number of international tourists coming to enjoy a range of travel opportunities in this site of social revolution, ranging from backpacker-, eco- and adventure-tourism to higher-end heritage and leisure tourism. At the same time, other forms of tourism have appeared in the wake of the country’s recent economic difficulties. As in many places where populations coping with inadequate resources find that tourists provide a ready source of income, prostitution, sex work, and romance tourism have flourished in Cuba, as elsewhere in the Caribbean (see Brennan 2004, Cabezas 2009, Padilla 2007). Cuba has additional cachet, however, as a destination that famously shunned tourism following the revolution, and whose formerly forbidden pleasures are now widely available (Schwartz 1997).

Often in the tourist encounter, under conditions that favor the commodification of social relationships, there is no strict line between

intimacy that represents a brief exchange of sex for money (sex tourism) and that which leads to longer term involvement in exchange for gifts including cash or, in some cases, love and marriage (romance tourism).³ Nor is there a very clear way of determining whether desire is performed or staged as an authentic attraction in order to conceal the commodification of love and romance, along the lines conceptualized as “staged authenticity” in MacCannell’s classic work on tourism (1999 [1976]). Notwithstanding these limitations, I consider the forms that sex and romance tourism takes in the postrevolutionary nation, the representation of Cuba and Cubans to tourists who come by and large from Europe and North America, and how Cubans attempt to navigate amid contradictions of official policy and everyday practice.

While the Cuban government has expressed a desire to go a different way from capitalist market-driven economies as it caters to tourism, the emergence of sex and romance tourism is notable. Fidel Castro was effective in curtailing prostitution in the years following the 1959 revolution in Cuba, but made a weaker gesture to do so when tourism was revived in the 1990s (Facio 1998-99). Nonetheless, there appears to be some ambivalence in efforts to curtail the growth of prostitution, doubtless because of the foreign revenue it provides. I do not wish to suggest that the only gendered effect of tourism in Cuba and beyond is the rise of prostitution and sex tourism, and, indeed, women workers are active in other sectors of the global tourism industry (Bolles 1997; Ghodsee 2005). Even so, my research suggests the value of examining the transition from the Cuban revolutionary government’s earlier success in reducing the socioeconomic and gender inequalities that promoted sexual exploitation and prostitution, to the present commodification of sex and intimacy that accompanies dependence on tourism to rescue the nation’s economy.

While sex tourism receives official notice in Cuba, it is often considered too controversial to address publicly and there is little in the way of formal data to draw on in this research. Studies on the subject have generally relied on qualitative rather than quantitative research methods. While the narratives and descriptive material that provide support for such research may appear impressionistic, I would argue that there is a need for more detailed ethnographic studies that examine the nuances of socially and historically situated sex and romance tourism in Cuba. The accounts, or stories, from my field research that follow are intended to illuminate some of the broader processes that are at work. I offer a number of illustrations, as well as findings from existing social research and media reports, in order to contextualize my analysis.

Love for Sale: Sex, Sentiment, and Tourism in Contemporary Cuba

My reflection on the widespread phenomenon of sex and romance tourism in Cuba begins with a short narrative to set the scene. Several years ago in Havana, I found myself unwittingly complicit in what appeared to be solicitation for prostitution or, perhaps, for a longer term romantic interest. As a middle-aged man from the United States struck up an acquaintance with a young Cuban woman, he sought my help in translating between Spanish and English and I became both an observer and a broker for a brief and unconsummated encounter.

Late one evening in December 2003, I went out walking from my hotel in Old Havana, the *Ambos Mundos*, famous for having played host to Ernest Hemingway during the 1930s. My companion, whom I will call James, and I were part of the same group sponsored by the San Francisco-based organization Global Exchange, and we had agreed to go out for a drink and to enjoy one of our last nights in Cuba before returning to the United States. We walked along well-known Obispo street heading in the direction of Havana's Central Park. As usual, we were approached by a number of *jineteros*, or hustlers, selling cigars "straight from the factory" at unbeatable prices, and James was momentarily distracted by a man who insisted on showing us to his place along the way, near the *Floridita*, one of the bars celebrated as a former Hemingway hangout.

We walked past the upscale Hotel Sevilla and farther along the promenade known as the Prado to an unpretentious outdoor bar in the direction of the Malecón, Havana's oceanside drive. As we chose a table, we noticed a young woman—pretty and looking a bit self-conscious—alone at the next table. I was a bit startled when James asked her if she wanted to join us and she came over to sit down as we ordered drinks. The young woman, whom I will call Marta, made a point of asking if we were married or together and we explained that we were just friends. We began talking and I translated quite a bit for James, who had only elementary Spanish and wanted to ask a number of personal questions. Where was she from, what was she doing, how old was she, did she have a husband or boyfriend? She told us she was from the provinces, from Camagüey, and had come to Havana to help her sister with her newborn baby, before she would return home at the end of the month. She was 23 and studying at the university in Camagüey. She might take up computer courses or economics, or something else. Marta said she lived with her mother and two brothers and did not have a boyfriend. Her father lived in the same city and was remarried with a young child. She did not have to work, she said, since she lived at home and the university was free. When we asked if she liked Havana or Camagüey better, she quickly said

Camagüey because Havana is *muy agitada* (very busy). James wanted to know if life was harder in Havana or Camagüey and she said Camagüey, because there are not as many resources and things cost more.

James asked if Marta liked to cook and she said yes, and wash and iron too. She asked him (through me) whether he was married and I explained to her that his wife had died recently. He asked if she liked to dance and she asked him the same. The conversation continued and he commented that she had pretty hair and her perfume reminded him of his wife. I found the situation disconcerting and I was sure that Marta must have the impression that James was quite interested in her. She seemed to be getting this message as she looked demurely downward frequently (perhaps because I was there), sipping the *piña coladas* that replaced the can of cola she had when we arrived. When he asked if any of her family members lived outside Cuba, she said no and that, except for her sister, all were in Camagüey. At one point Marta asked him to take off his glasses and commented that his eyes were very blue. She asked his age (51) and said he looked 45 or 46, politely adding that I too looked younger than my age. She addressed me since I spoke Spanish and he spoke little, but otherwise she focused on him.

At one point, James asked the waiter for an ashtray, a *cenicero*, for his cigar. That somehow turned the conversation in the direction of *La Cenicienta*, Spanish for Cinderella. When I related a bit of the story line to Marta, she said she knew of it and added that she was very romantic. I commented that often in life there isn't a Prince Charming, but she did not let on if she agreed with me. I wondered if she might really be hoping for her Prince Charming to come and take her away.

After we had each had two drinks, James suggested that it was time to leave and Marta seemed surprised. She said to me rather reproachfully, "*Va a dormir solo?*" (Is he going to sleep alone?). I had been thinking for a while that I might appear to be complicit in setting something up between them, even though I had tried to signal to her that he didn't mean anything by his questions. Before we stood up, James paid the bill of about ten dollars and passed her a five-dollar bill. She looked disappointed at the outcome, but we parted in a friendly way, with the customary embraces. As James and I left, I told him of my discomfort with the situation, and he disclosed that he was aware of the expectations he had raised in Marta.

The Romance of Cuba in the Popular Imagination

Tourism in Cuba takes a number of forms, from holidays on world-famous Varadero Beach, to architectural tours of Old Havana, to health tourism, to cultural and educational tourism. Although the Cuban

government announced a campaign several years ago to eliminate sex tourism, it never got off the ground and today sex is on the market in Cuba (Berg 2004b). In addition to the brief encounters of clients and *jineteras/os* (sex workers and, more generally, hustlers) in Havana and elsewhere in Cuba, some travelers, most often middle-aged men, seek longer commitments with Cubanas who enjoy the men's attention and access to their dollars (or, now, convertible pesos). In some cases, women travelers seek sexual and romantic involvement with Cuban men who, like Cuban women, enjoy the flirtation and the relative luxuries that tourist dollars provide. Gay tourism is likewise in evidence, as male travelers find Cuban partners for a quick encounter or a more lasting affair.⁴ While I have observed these forms of tourism, for the most part they are beyond the scope of this work and I will focus on the more widespread presence of Cuban women who are sought out by foreign men.

During five visits between 1993 and 2009, I observed the sexual, affective, and monetary exchanges that occur with great frequency in the city of Havana. I argue that in postrevolutionary Cuba, particularly since the Special Period (the economic crisis of the 1990s), sex and love have provided not only a diversion and relief from economic problems but also a bit of hope for many Cubans seeking both sensual and sentimental encounters. While the desires of travelers to Cuba may be fueled by media-enhanced longing for youth, beauty, and the "exotic,"⁵ the Cubans involved in these entanglements are also motivated by yearnings to be swept away by romance to new places and new lives.

Tourism, including sex tourism, is hardly a new phenomenon in Cuba. Tourist travel to Cuba dates back well over a century and reached a high point in the 1950s during the Batista dictatorship. When the revolution triumphed in 1959, tourism fell off and sex workers were considered to be in need of rehabilitation, and so prostitutes were given training as seamstresses and in other professions. The loss of Soviet support produced severe economic need in the 1990s and a new strategy was ushered in to make tourism the leading industry in the island nation (Schwartz 1997, Scarpaci et al. 2002). Today, even if many sex workers engage in one-time arrangements with foreigners, many aspire to have longer-lasting relationships that could lead to a week-long holiday, future remittances, or even marriage and a visa to leave Cuba.

A 1991 *Playboy* article by Jeff Cohen may well have inspired men in the United States and elsewhere to dream of travel to Cuba. With the Cuban government's blessing, the author was pleased to find willing models for the pictorial in a country in which "ninety-two percent of [women] belong to the *Federación de Mujeres de Cuba*, the Cuban Women's Federation," which he described as an alliance of feminists working to end macho attitudes. He and his French photographer,

Patrick Magoud, turned to the forbidden paradise to discover the beautiful women who were making tourism “the best hope for the island’s economic future” (1991:73). Notably, while Magoud photographed seductive “top models” in Cuba, he fell in love with one of them and took her back to Paris with him.

Nearly a decade later, *Playboy* published another article on Cuba, this one, interestingly, by Cuban-American feminist writer Achy Obejas, and instead of photos there were evocative drawings by LeRoy Neiman (Obejas 2000). While this piece proclaimed that “Cuba is hot, Cuba is ready,” in reference to the “fabled island of pleasure and eroticism,” it nonetheless went further in showing how the nation was getting ready for rising tourism. The nation was optimistically preparing English-language menus and road signs, anticipating the end of the U.S. blockade, which was expected to open the floodgates of travel from Cuba’s near neighbor. Obejas observed that ordinary Cubans were rarely the beneficiaries of all that was offered up to tourists in the form of luxury and leisure; for example, the opening up of the economy to private enterprise, home restaurants, and independent shops only favored those Cubans with access to the hard currency of the tourism sector. Those who could tap into the tourist economy were doing so, often leaving poorly paid professional jobs for the better earnings found in tourism’s service sector. Her article comments on the widespread prostitution and black market that have thrived since the early 1990s.

This side of tourism should be understood in historical context, as it has emerged in large part from conditions that were not of Cuba’s making, the dismantling of the Soviet Union as well as the U.S. embargo on trade and travel to Cuba. While the nation experienced the consequences of the Special Period and of the rapid development of tourism, the hardships have been felt differentially, with women, Afro-Cubans, and those of more marginal socioeconomic status bearing the heaviest burdens (Holgado 2000, Safa 1995:166). The resulting *jineterismo* has been regarded with some embarrassment by the Cuban government as “a visible symptom of a moral crisis of the nation” (Berg 2004b:49). The view that tourism, along with private enterprise and creeping inequalities, is a *mal necesario* (necessary evil)—first expressed by Fidel Castro—was repeated to me by Cuban citizens. Elena Díaz, a feminist scholar at the University of Havana, used the term “mal necesario” to describe the significant, and gendered, downside to this development strategy, which is bringing not only economic relief but cultural commodification and *jineterismo*, including sex tourism (Díaz, personal communication, 12/18/03).

Cuban artists and writers have played a significant part in cultural critique, and this extends to critique of race and gender relations. A new

Afro-Cuban cultural movement includes rap and other musical artists whose work engages in current debates over the stalled redistributive economy and its unequal effects on the Cuban population (de la Fuente 2008). Earlier, the noted Cuban singer and songwriter Silvio Rodríguez began writing songs of the Special Period, including several that evoke sad disillusionment over the growing appearance of sex tourism. His song “Flowers” is a lament for the “disposable flowers” that wither when they pass through forbidden doors, and his “Fifties Club” looks back on a time when anything could be bought for a price and “even desire becomes an object of consumption” (Rodríguez 2003:599-603).⁶

The same metaphor was used by writer Andrei Codrescu, whose *New York Times Magazine* article “Picking the Flowers of the Revolution” asserts, “In the waning days of socialism, Cuba is succumbing to an erotic imperialism, as men from the United States and other countries buy up its youngest, most beautiful women at bargain-basement rates” (1998:32).⁷ The piece relates the case of “Jack,” a 52-year-old man from the United States who began going to Cuba in 1993; that year, many men traveled to Cuba “for the women,” and it was likely not just coincidental that this was during the worst time of the economic crisis. Like a lot of foreign men, Jack found a young Cuban woman, just 14 when he met her, with whom he fell in love. Although Cubans are generally not allowed in the tourist hotels, Jack and his girlfriend found ways to be together and, with her parents’ blessing, he continued seeing her; when he was back in the United States, he sent her \$100 each month through a Canadian bank. They waited to see if he would move to Cuba and join her—if the embargo lifted. This sort of romance between foreign men and Cuban women has become commonplace in the last decade, and matchmaking services are on the rise. As Codrescu notes, “The romantic range spreads from lust and money to love and marriage” (1998:32).

Gender, Race, and Cuban Tourism

Several scholars have described the desires of foreign men and Cuban women, clients and *jineteras*, for something more enduring than the usual fleeting encounter. Julia O’Connell Davidson (1996) discusses the emergence of sex tourism, particularly since 1993. Although the Cuban government initially tried to keep tourism and the Cuban people separate, the desire for dollars resulted in many Cubans besides those employed in the tourist sector trying to sell goods or services to the increasing number of foreign travelers who came to visit. An informal economy that was directed to meeting tourists’ needs and desires was tolerated during this time. Davidson notes that among the growing number of European men coming to Cuba for the women, many prefer “to spend

several days or even weeks with the same woman and are keen to conceal the economic basis of the relationship from themselves" (1996:43). The men derive considerable benefits from the arrangement, including not only sex, but also cooking and cleaning services and the assistance of a guide and interpreter. The sense of mutual attraction may mask the fact that the man pays for all expenses and more, helping his girlfriend to meet her economic needs. The relatively low cost to the men helps maintain the illusion that she must feel genuine attraction and affection for him. Thus a holiday romance may be desired by both, even if the exchange has very different meanings for each of them.

While supporters of the Cuban revolution have lamented the advance of sex and romance tourism, the development holds special interest for those eager to see the demise of socialism in the country (Cabezas 1998). There is for some a wish to discover the market economy taking over production and consumption and even extending to personal relations. Whether the men and women who appear to be smitten are in fact so or whether the women are performing their desire for men who are often older than their fathers and the men are falling for it, are not easy questions to answer, but there are clearly sexual "scripts" at play (Marrero 2003).⁸ In spite of the difficulties faced by the Cuban economy since the fall of the Soviet Union, not all Cubans are eager to find romance with foreigners and leave their country, benefiting as they do from higher levels of health care and education than elsewhere in Latin America and the Caribbean. Nonetheless, both parties can stand to benefit from these relationships, whether they are of short or long duration.

Racial differences often enter in, increasing the potential for exotizing. Anthropologist Nadine Fernández (1999) describes the connection between the racialized and sexualized identity of *jineteras* on the one hand and the infusion of international capital in Cuba on the other. She draws attention to the growing socioeconomic separation between Cubans and tourists to the country, and the problems this produces (1999:83). Moreover, she finds that while Afro-Cuban women are more often identified with sex tourism, white Cuban women more often are perceived to be involved in "romance tourism" (1999:88)—a perception no doubt conditioned by images of *mulatas* (mixed race) and Afro-Cuban women as Other, both racially and sexually different.

Writer and artist Coco Fusco (1998) traveled to Cuba to learn more about the place of women of color in sex tourism. As a Cuban American, she gained access to Afro-Cuban and *mulata jineteras* and found that many were seeking a source of longer-term support, since the state was no longer providing the safety net that they needed. *Mulatas*, considered particularly desirable by many tourists looking for sexual liaisons, may capitalize on their racialized sexuality as they offer themselves "as

temporary partners or potential wives to foreigners" (1998:154). Fusco notes that some mixed-race women are themselves the "love children" of Cuban women and white foreign men.⁹ She found that the tourists who approach women tell them it's for love and the women themselves are "sophisticated traffickers in fantasy as much as sex" (1998:157-158). *Jineteras* she met knew of women who had left with men for Europe, some happy with the outcome and others finding themselves in difficult situations, including continued prostitution.

Another Cuban-American, Alysia Vilar, wrote a four-part series on the Salon.com web site (5/20-23/03), a somewhat florid account of her personal experiences joining Cuban *jineteras* and earning some money while she tried to locate her Cuban father. She came to understand the perspective of women who sleep with foreign men for payment, often in the form of clothes, perfume, or money, and who do not regard this as prostitution. She writes that the women are "seeking out a rich boyfriend, either for marriage or regular remittances." Those who do so "are the hopeful light of their supportive families. For to jockey [be a *jinetera*] is to dream of a successful future, to dream in a country that feels so bereft of hope, of promising careers, of stable relationships. It's also the only way for many to make dollars, in a country where lawyers earn \$18 a month and a meal in a restaurant costs twice as much." And according to her Cuban friend, "These men here aren't looking for a one-night stand, they want a Cuban girlfriend while on holiday."

For Money or Love

In Cuba, I have found ample evidence of both sex tourism and romance tourism. The presence of young Cuban women approaching men, particularly in the Old Havana area, often saying quite simply "Llévame (take me away)," was unmistakable. Women travelers also appeared eager to link up with Cuban men; frequently, the men were Afro-Cuban and the foreign women were white. Among the women I met who were staying in Cuba for several weeks or longer, many went out night after night, to bars and clubs, to listen to music and to dance. One went to matinee dance clubs where she enjoyed treating Cuban men to drinks and flirtation; several found boyfriends with whom to go out for a few weeks; another was making a return visit to Cuba to see the musician she had fallen for six months earlier; and still another, a young, white Canadian woman, had married an Afro-Cuban and was trying to arrange for him to leave Cuba with her. The practice of women tourists seeking romance during their travels and local men enjoying the benefits is fairly common in Cuba and elsewhere in the Caribbean, as Joan Phillips (1999) has discussed in relation to the Beach Boys of Barbados.

My interest in the more common practices of male tourists and Cuban women seeking one another was a hot-button issue for many Havana residents. In summer 2005, a Cuban woman employed as a tour agent expressed to me the common view that *jineteras* are involved in sex work *por gusto* (for their own pleasure) to support their superficial desires and needs. This reflects the official party line in Cuba, that real poverty does not exist in the country and that young people engage in hustling activities to support artificial yearnings for consumer goods (Facio 1998-99). Yet the diverse women I encountered who were involved in sex and romance tourism (or, who were presumed to be) pose a challenge to that view.

I was outside the Floridita bar in Central Havana one afternoon when I saw a rather professorial white-haired *gringo* in conversation with a younger *mulata* Cuban woman. As the two stood on the sidewalk about fifteen feet away from me, she touched his arm as they spoke and then turned to walk in my direction. As she approached me she began asking for my help, and rather than offering or refusing a handout, I told her I would be interested in talking with her. I commented that I knew that a lot of Cubans have a hard time getting by and head for the streets to make a living. The woman, whom I will call Sandra, quickly told me that she was not a prostitute, but yes, she has to get by. She said that it was dangerous for her to be seen talking with me, and we should go somewhere else.¹⁰ I offered to buy her a cup of coffee and she accepted, though she proceeded to take me to a bar on Obispo street—"La Escabeche" would become a familiar place to me in the weeks ahead. I agreed when she suggested that we order *mojitos*, the well-known Cuban rum drink. Having established that I was a researcher and interested in her story, I took out my notebook to record notes, and she unselfconsciously told me about herself.

Sandra was 31, with two children, aged four and six; the children's father had left and her parents were retired. There were ten siblings in her family and she left school after sixth grade in order to look after the younger ones. She told me that she gets by through the sale of used clothing given to her by tourists and Cubans who bring back clothing from other countries. Her earnings are better than before, when she worked as a chambermaid. She emphasized that she did not deal in drugs or prostitution. When I asked what she thought of girls and women who go into prostitution, she said that she does not pass judgment since life is hard, but she made it clear it was not for her (or at least she wanted to give me that impression). She told me that some women earn about US\$100 per night with one or more men, and that some tourists also bring drugs and sell them through Cubans. She had friends who were enticed to leave Cuba with men as a result of sex and romance tourism,

and who were then used for prostitution in Italy, Spain, Russia, Canada, and Holland. She described these as cases of sex trafficking, saying that she had five friends who left with men and suffered for it; at least one had returned to Cuba.

Sandra went on to tell me that she had been sent to prison for four years, but was released early for good behavior. She told me that she was sent there on a trumped up charge of prostitution after she refused to have sex with a police officer.¹¹ While she was in prison, her mother cared for her young children. She related this story in a straightforward way and I wondered if she was attempting to impress me with her difficult life conditions, even as I admired her ability to narrate a painful past. She soon changed the topic to point out to me that this bar was known to attract Cubans and tourists who want to hook up together. I saw that there were indeed several examples of this: a tourist who might be in her thirties warming up to an Afro-Cuban man, and a young Cuban woman hanging around a European man and a couple of young European women. I commented that I knew of women tourists who were just looking to have fun with Cuban men, to go out dancing and flirt a little. Yes, she said, and “para pagarle la pinga” (a crude reference to the women paying for “the penis”). I persisted, saying that it was interesting that in Europe and North America women would rarely pay for going out or having sex with men, and she quickly responded that if women pay expenses or offer gifts it is because “el Cubano es caliente (Cuban men are hot).” There was no doubt in her mind that tourists were after sex with Cubans.

Sitting nearby was a young man with bongo drums, who told me his father was Jamaican and his mother came from the United States to support the revolution. He wanted to know what I thought of the country where he had grown up, and then he proceeded to tell me that nothing was right in Cuba. He said that this was where he likes to hang out, and concurred when I said I had heard about Cubans and tourists linking up at the bar, saying “This is the place.” Back in my hotel later that evening, I met with a Cuban sociologist and described that day’s encounter with Sandra, asking if her story seemed plausible—which she said it did. This underscored for me the difficult and ambivalent mix of tourism with sex, romance, and politics in Cuba.¹²

Over the weeks that followed, I would pass this bar and glance inside as I walked through Old Havana. Then, after I began working on an occasional basis with an Afro-Cuban woman I had met on an earlier visit to Cuba, whom I will call Claudia, I suggested we go in to learn something more about the workings of sex and romance tourism. There were musicians playing with a female vocalist and the mood was easy-going. Within minutes, we met Ana, who would become a key interlocutor

on questions of Cuban flirtation and romance. In this small establishment on a busy corner of the old city, with its five tables in addition to the bar itself, Ana stood out as she sat alone at the table next to ours. A tall and slender mulata with long blond-colored *trenzas* (braids), she was strikingly beautiful and self-possessed. She wore stylish jeans and a close-fitting black top, strappy pink sandals, painted nails, and held a silver purse. When Claudia engaged her in conversation and told her of my research, Ana joined our table. She introduced herself as a Cuban dancer living in France, just back for a visit. Her mother was Cuban and her father Syrian, which explained her good looks, she said with a wink. She had a 16-year-old son, who seemed to be mainly in the care of her mother. She told us that she gave classes in salsa and danced in Havana at the Tropicana nightclub, the famous venue for extravagant shows.

By this time I noticed that there were aspects of Ana's story that did not add up. I commented that I had been to a show at the Tropicana Club a couple of nights before and asked if she would be dancing there that night, but she avoided the question. Her account of living in France (referring to the city of Nancy) seemed vague, without many points of reference. Yet she was more than willing to talk and adopted the role of intimate friend from that first meeting, giving me her address and phone number and insisting that I must call and visit. The relationship we formed over my remaining time in Havana that year never went further than spending time together in several bars along Obispo street, but she introduced me to the culture of foreigners and Cubans hanging out, hooking up, and building connections that might endure for a night or for years.

That first time in the bar, Ana attracted the attention of a man who soon joined us. He explained that he was from France and had a Cuban girlfriend he had returned to see after a year apart. That did not stop Ana from playfully but persistently flirting with him, as best she could, given his limited Spanish and her apparently nonexistent French. While he and I had a conversation in English about how he met his girlfriend and how the long distance relationship was going, she periodically tried to steal his attention with provocative queries, like "Francia (Frenchie), would you like to have a massage?" She motioned with her hands to be sure her meaning came across. He responded in English that his girlfriend had spies out everywhere and would kill him, which I translated into Spanish for Ana. She admonished him that she was asking an innocent question, but then her words were belied when she stood up to dance in place to the music, shimmying in a precise and subtly seductive way. He commented to me that 99 percent of men would go with Ana in spite of having a girlfriend, but he was different. He announced that he would be going to another bar on the circuit, the Café Paris—and, soon

afterward, Ana proclaimed that we women (Ana, Claudia, and myself) should go to that bar, too.

We soon headed off to the next bar, just a few blocks away. The place was crowded and we found a table in the back. Across the way from us was a solitary man and Ana invited him to join us. He had a sad look and somewhat reluctantly came over with his beer to sit down. He told us he had just arrived from Finland, spoke English but little Spanish, and would stay in Cuba for a month. As he finished what turned out to be his fourth beer, he pulled out a photograph of a woman he had tucked in his copy of the *Lonely Planet* guide to Cuba and confessed that a difficult breakup with his girlfriend back home had prompted him to travel. He told me that he needed to be alone for awhile, which I dutifully translated for the others. Nonetheless, Ana insisted that he needed our company and proceeded to mimic his long face, trying to make eye contact and coax him out of his low mood. Claudia and I finally left the two at the bar, talking about our interesting evening and speculating as to whether the two could possibly be linking up.

After several visits to *La Escabeche*, where I would often see Ana, I felt like a regular there. Over time, I watched Ana attract the attention of a number of men and engage their interest during the course of an afternoon or evening. Even with limited ability to converse in the same language, she would let men know she liked their eyes or their smile, inquire as to whether they had girlfriends or liked massages (a repeated ploy), though I never observed her going off with anyone, if only because I did not stay out as late as she did. In our early conversations, Ana showed off her new jewelry and boasted of how expensive it was. She never told me exactly where her money came from, though Claudia was quite certain that she was indeed a *jinetera*; she guessed that Ana earned well at times but spent her money heedlessly, then had an urgent need for more. By the end of my visit, she had become an affectionate friend, saying we should always remain in touch—though I never doubted the opportunism of our relationship. She also spoke about being low on money and asked if I would send her gifts after I left Cuba. On our last evening together, she persuaded an Italian living in Havana to go with us to a restaurant and told him up front that she needed some money in order to eat; he quickly complied by handing her some cash, demonstrating to me how adept she was in getting by in an economy driven by tourism and need.

Certainly, not all Cubans get along as well as Ana, and she herself, at age 35, would not command the higher earnings of much younger Cuban women on the tourist market. There is much diversity among women I encountered in the tourism scene. One time in the *Escabeche* bar I noticed a most unlikely Cuban woman come in, wearing loose-fitting

and conservative shirt and pants, looking more like a missionary than a woman on the make. Yet she sat at the bar and soon struck up a conversation with a burly American man (who very likely traveled illegally through Mexico to get to Cuba), somewhat nervously asking the usual getting-acquainted questions: where do you live, where are you staying, and so on. I left before I could learn more about where this was heading, but it reminded me that all manner of Cubans are struggling to improve their livelihoods, support their families, and get ahead, even if it means entering into precipitous intimacies.

With the sudden arrival of Hurricane Dennis, my departure from Havana was delayed for two days and I was relocated from where I was staying to the Ambos Mundos Hotel. During that time I remained in the hotel, as it was one of the few places in the city with power. I passed some hours in the crowded lobby, where tourists were stranded and a number of Cubans had gathered with them. Normally, Cubans are not allowed past the lobby, but I observed some Cuban women accompanying tourists in elevators—perhaps having offered a tip to the staff or just finding that the rules were relaxed due to the extreme circumstances. Among those passing time in the lobby, I saw the same heavy-set and amiable American man mentioned above, engaged in rapt conversation with several Cuban women.

Research on sex and romance tourism in Cuba has advanced in productive ways, though to date only a few Cuban researchers have published works on sex work or prostitution in their own country.¹³ The international “Cuba boom” (Behar 2002) has Cuba aspiring to host over 2.5 million tourists annually.¹⁴ Further research on the intimate encounters of tourists and those toured may tell us more about the paradoxes of travel to Cuba. My broader project on the cultural politics of tourism on the island focuses on the coexisting cultural-historical tourism that continues to reference the revolution and the nostalgic tourism that is typified by longings for the prerevolutionary days of Hemingway, old American cars, and extravagant shows—and sometimes for the imagined sexual licentiousness of the past.¹⁵ Contemporary tourism reveals the frequent tension between these two sides of Cuban experience. Even an “enlightened” tourist like James—who carried around with him a biography of Che Guevara—in seeking my help translating with Marta at the bar, revealed his desire (only somewhat suppressed) for the other, romantic Cuba of his imagination.

Staging Sex and Love in Postrevolutionary Cuba

Tourism in postrevolutionary nations often reveals the highly ambivalent ways in which gender, sexuality, and race figure in these

countries' efforts to develop their economies by refashioning themselves for international visitors (Babb 2005, 2011a). Sex and romance tourism is just a part of what I have observed in Cuba, but it gets at some of the most vexing problems that often accompany tourism, particularly in the neoliberal era in the global South: the encounters of foreigners who are seeking "exotic" and even intimate experiences with locals, who for their part may desire the financial, and sometimes emotional, support that travelers seem willing to offer. Cuba is far from alone in attracting this kind of tourism experience—we see it in many developing countries that play host to tourism—but the Cuban case is striking insofar as revolutionary ideology seems to be both part of the allure and at the same time compromised as a result of sex and romance tourism. My comparative research on the phenomenon has considered the particular dilemmas faced by postrevolutionary nations when tourism looms large as a principal industry. The ethnographic material presented here sheds light on the deeply gendered and racial consequences of Cuban tourism, and the active responses of women, in this period of transition to a more market-driven economy. Further research is needed on the contradictory state-level responses to the commodification of intimate social relations stemming from tourism.

Those I spoke with in the state tourism sector expressed the desire, or ideological commitment, to offer "wholesome" and mainstream tourism experiences, even as the market pushed the nation toward a tolerance of commodified sex and intimacy. The phenomenon of sex and romance tourism is pronounced in Cuba, but it is arguable that Cuban sex workers tend to have greater control over these practices than their counterparts elsewhere, who are often targeted as highly vulnerable due to their youth, poverty, and lack of social support. Cubans, even if they face social and political restrictions and shortages of needed or desired consumer goods, continue to benefit from state guarantees of education, health care, and other basic rights and resources, making them less desperate to sell sexual and other intimate services.

In the last half century, the Cuban revolution drew wide international attention as a result of its broad programs for social transformation. Cuba's sustained revolutionary process has been recognized for its legacy of concern for its citizens' social and economic well-being. Without a doubt, its triumphant social revolution put the nation on the map, in the Latin American region and in the world. Now, regardless of political orientation, many Cubans hope that tourism will do for the future what social revolution sought to accomplish in the past.

However, in an era of neoliberalism and globalization when social inequalities are in great evidence in Cuba, we should be less sanguine about the distribution of benefits from tourism. We must be chastened

by the words of the Cuban feminist and others who repeated to me that tourism is a “necessary evil.” Cuba has been featured in such publications as *Fantasy Islands, a Man’s Guide to Exotic Women and International Travel* (Wilson 1998:147-149). Along with Vietnam, Cuba is described as a “communist” nation where the government seeks to prohibit tourists from taking local women to hotels, but the author assures readers that it is one of the best places to find women with whom to become sexually or romantically involved. He writes, “In Havana, beautiful young women stroll around looking for a man like you.” Moreover, “the asking price is likely to be shockingly low.” He goes on to offer the best venues for meeting women who dream of having European or American husbands. Will the unofficial branding of Cuba as a haven for sex and romance tourism long endure? The political and economic vicissitudes in the country and the sexualizing of a previously off-limits destination suggest that this is possible. On the other hand, Cuba has a history of women’s active social and political participation, and we could see other currents of change in the future.

The opening up to tourism in Cuba paved the way for the sort of “staged authenticity” theorized by MacCannell (1999[1976]) and discussed in relation to sex and romance tourism by Brennan (2004). Men and women perform their desire and stage intimacy, offering at least the illusion of authentic experience, insofar as there are mutual benefits in doing so. When the state no longer provides the safety net of the past and economic livelihood is no longer a certainty, sex and love appear to be the means by which to grasp opportunities that are otherwise unattainable. The trafficking in question is not only in sex, but in fantasy and in hope. Tourists as well as local women and men collaborate in this exchange of intimacy, whether staged or not, with money and other gifts. The Cuban case I have considered here reveals the profoundly unequal terms of tourism’s encounter with gender and power, race and nation, as realities fall short of expectations. More often than not, sex is fleeting, promises are broken, and romance remains elusive—just as elusive as the dream of economic advancement and well-being promised long ago in this postrevolutionary nation.

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research methods included participant observation, interviewing, and questionnaires given to tourists (for further discussion, see Babb 2011a and 2011b). I am indebted to anonymous reviewers and to individuals too numerous to mention for their suggestions based on earlier versions of the work presented here. Some material in this essay is included in a chapter of my book, *The Tourism Encounter: Fashioning Latin American Nations and Histories* (Stanford University Press 2011). I thank Kevin Yelvington and Lynn Bolles for inviting me to contribute this piece to *Caribbean Studies*, and Helen Safa for her friendship and inspiration.

Notes

- ¹ Cuban sociologist Marta Núñez Sarmiento (2000) discusses the sexism in tourism promotion in the country and the use of images of women that suggest their sexual availability to foreign men.
- ² Figure for 2009 from the U.S. Department of State, <<http://www.state.gov/r/pa/ei/bgn/2886.htm>>, accessed 4/3/11. The trope of waiting for the U.S. floodgates to open for travel to Cuba is longstanding, and was captured in a *New York Times* travel article that predicts that the island may once again become a magnet for travelers from the United States (López Torregrosa 2005).
- ³ This distinction between sex and romance tourism is made particularly clear in the work of Cabezas 2004, 2009, in her writing on Cuba and the Dominican Republic.
- ⁴ On women tourists seeking local men for sex and romance tourism elsewhere in the Caribbean, see Joan L. Phillips 1999. On gay male sex tourism in Cuba, see Hodge 2001, Fosado 2005, and Allen 2007. Hodge makes the salient point which is echoed here, that sex workers express in their very bodies “the contradiction of the Cuban revolutionary regime inviting capitalism to do its work on the bodies and souls of its people” (2001:21). Until now, there has been little work on gay romance tourism in Cuba; for useful discussion of tourism and longer-term gay relationships in the Dominican Republic, see Mark Padilla 2007.
- ⁵ The Associated Press recently reported that the Spanish airline Iberia withdrew a cartoon advertisement “that depicts a baby boy frolicking on a beach with buxom black Cuban ladies after consumer groups complained it is insulting to women and encourages sex tourism.” After the ad was removed from Iberia’s Web site, it appeared on YouTube. (The Alligator, Gainesville, FL, 5/24/07:8).

- ⁶ See also Campuzano 2004 for essays offering a feminist perspective on Cuban literature and culture, including the phenomenon of *jineterismo* that emerged during the Special Period.
- ⁷ A year later, Codrescu (a commentator on National Public Radio) published his travel memoir, *Ay, Cuba! A Socio-Erotic Journey* (1999).
- ⁸ See Brennan 2004 for discussion of this question in the case of sex tourism in the Dominican Republic.
- ⁹ This should not be read as characterizing race-mixture on the island, which has a much deeper social history. See Mena (2005) for discussion of black and mulato women emerging from a large African slave population brought to Cuba in the early nineteenth century to provide labor in the sugar economy.
- ¹⁰ Given the recent terms of tourism in Cuba, in which there has been a strict separation between ordinary Cubans (those not in the tourism industry) and international visitors, any interaction may be regarded as suspect. For example, my relationship with Claudia, who was a friend and research collaborator, often drew unwanted attention, particularly because she was racially marked as Afro-Cuban.
- ¹¹ See Cabezas 2004 for discussion of moral panics and the imprisonment of women sex workers (and even women who are simply unaccompanied in public) in Cuba and the Dominican Republic. She very usefully addresses the implications for sexual citizenship rights.
- ¹² Berg 2004a discusses the police repression of Cubans, particularly Afro-Cubans, suspected of being involved with *jineterismo*. I observed this myself in working with Claudia, who was approached by police and asked for documentation simply because she was talking with me in a place generally reserved for tourists.
- ¹³ See, notably, Tomás Fernández Robaina 1998. See also Rosa Miriam Elizalde 2002 in a series published by Cuba's National Center for Sex Education (CENESEX).
- ¹⁴ See the *Digital Granma Internacional*, the Internet version of Cuba's official newspaper, which carries frequent updates on tourism in the country, at <<http://www.granmai.cubasi.cu>>.
- ¹⁵ See Babb 2011b and Sánchez and Adams 2007 for further discussion of the contradictions of tourism in Cuba that nonetheless allow for a rapidly growing industry.

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