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The Unsexy Truth: Neoliberalism and Sex Tourism in the Caribbean

The history of the Caribbean from the Colonial era on is one inextricably linked to the rise of globalization. The Caribbean's economies, cultures — from food to demographic makeup — and political structures are products of colonialism, neo-colonialism, and the amalgamation of cultures. In a post-colonial context, this Caribbean globalization has taken the shape of integrating the world into a single capitalist system under neoliberal economics (Wonders and Michalowski 2001, 545).

This paper aims to connect the failure of neoliberal goals to the rise of the informal sector, specifically relating to sex tourism, as a means for women to make ends meet. Although a lucrative source of supplemental income, sex tourism's profitability (relating to women) relies on the reinforcement of colonial narratives of power dynamics and the hypersexuality of black and brown 'exotic' bodies.

As summarized by Julia O'Connell Davidson and Jacqueline Sanchez Taylor: "this desire, and the Western sex tourist's power to satiate it, can only be explained through reference to power relations and popular discourses that are simultaneously gendered, racialized, and economic" (1999, 37).

Neoliberalism describes the late 20th-century push to liberalize emergent economies in order to promote rapid development. The international enforcement of these policies resulted from the 1970 global oil debt crisis. This debt decimated vulnerable young economies, like those

in the Caribbean, who had been taking out loans at very low interest rates throughout the 1960s in an attempt to develop on their own terms and leave behind colonial-era dependency. Unable to receive loans from private banks to continue building necessary social and physical infrastructure, developing economies were forced to turn to the International Monetary Fund (IMF), an organization controlled by the world's most successful — Western — economies. IMF loans were given with set economically liberal requirements and Structural Adjustment Programs (SAPs) that were in the best interest of the powers controlling the IMF, most notably the United States. These conditions, which lead to the rapid globalization of Caribbean economies, also led to their continued dependence on past colonial governments. Conditions included industry privatization, trade liberalization, devaluing of domestic currency, and cutting funding to social services like health and education that are vital to social reproduction (Black, 2001). This resulted in the destruction of domestic industry, loss of employment, decrease in standards of living, and the continued growth of Caribbean countries' debt (Khalideen and Khalideen 2002, 108). Put simply, the development goals of neoliberal policies have not been reached. In contrast, they have worsened the human development conditions of the region at large (Khalideen and Khalideen 2002, 110).

The rapid growth of the informal sector demonstrates the failure of neoliberal SAPs to generate jobs that provide livable wages. The wages from these informal jobs often supplement formal sector income and pay for social services like children's education and healthcare that governments of Caribbean countries fail to provide under SAPs (Kempadoo 2001, 33). Because the burden of social reproduction largely falls on women, informal sector jobs are disproportionately held by women in the global south (Khalideen and Khalideen, 2002). Throughout the Caribbean and Latin America, women make up 54% of the informal sector (UN

Women 2015-2016, 71). Women's earnings from these odd jobs go directly towards essential consumption and social reproduction. In contrast, men often reserve some of their earnings for non-essential consumption. This creates a culture of familial dependence on women through the expectation of women to make ends meet (Khalideen and Khalideen 2002, 109). Many of the most lucrative informal sector jobs lie within the tourism industry, for women, particularly in sex tourism (Khalideen and Khalideen 2002, 112).

Beverly Mullings expresses the impact of this phenomenon at the micro scale relating to the Jamaicans.

“Twenty years of structural adjustment have seen the liberalization, privatization, and devaluation of the Jamaican economy ... As tourism has become the number one foreign exchange earner, an increasing number of women, men, and children have entered this industry in search of opportunities to generate incomes at wages that more realistically reflect the current cost of living more than the existing minimum wage” (1999, 57).

The sex tourism industry capitalizes on the Caribbean's tourism dependence as a remaining profitable export. In contrast to most failing domestic industries, the predominantly foreign owned tourist sector has grown under SAPs (Kempadoo 2001, 32-33). Between 1980 and 1994 tourism became the largest contributor to GDP in the Caribbean economy (Mullings 1999, 55). Tourism's growth can be attributed to the growth of the Western middle class after the Second World War and the development of aircraft technology coming out of the war (Mullings 1999, 57). Additionally, in the 1960s the United Nations promoted tourism as a means for development and integration of lower income countries into a globalized economy (Kempadoo 2001, 32). Later developments of the cruise ship industry in the 1980s, all-inclusive resorts, and the growth of the internet have made tourism increasingly more accessible to the Global North

(Morancy 2020, 2). Caribbean countries' success as tourist destinations can be attributed to their marketing as unique and 'exotic' places for tourist consumption, effectively turning local people and places into commodities of tourists' fantasies (Mullings 1999, 58). These commodities are summed up in what Jennifer Lynn Donahue dubbed as the "Four S's:" sea, sun, sand, and sex (Donahue 2019, 62).

Women are drawn to the sex tourism industry because it can ensure the economic survival their households. In an Export Processing Zone job workers make \$1 an hour in comparison to the \$40 to \$150 (1999 dollars) they can make during one sexual encounter (Mullings 1999, 71). Sex tourism provides women with a viable career to support or supplement their family's income in comparison to blue collar jobs. However, as noted above, it plays into this commodification of bodies through reinforcing harmful stereotypes of Caribbean women as 'exotic' and 'hypersexual beings' at the disposal of white men's fantasies (Morancy 2020, 2).

These stereotypes emerged with the initial colonization of the Caribbean. The first European historians traveling to the Caribbean saw the Indigenous Arawak people as sexually promiscuous cannibals who needed to be tamed (Morancy 2020, 3). After the genocide of the Arawak people, this hypersexualized view of indigenous bodies was transferred onto Black and brown bodies through African Slave Trade. During this time, the rape of Black women by slave masters was seen as permissible because they were viewed as lustful (Morancy 2020, 3). Over time, "as elements of desire, power, sexism and racism combine," (Mullings 1999, 72), this othering has developed into the sexual fantasy of white men with the 'authentic' Caribbean or 'exotic' woman. As Kempadoo notes, this is demonstrated by the history of members of Western armed forces as the original sex tourists (2001, 31). The historic weight of these stereotypes has been projected into the modern Caribbean sex tourism industry. "Territories that once served as

sex havens for the colonial elite are today frequented by sex tourists, and several of the island economies now depend upon the region's racialized [and] sexualized image" (Kempadoo 2004, 1). Women's economic dependence on "fulfilling tourist's fantasies" (Donahue 2019, 60), reinforces pre-existing structures of dependency on the global north and white male supremacy within tourism (Mullings 1999, 72).

The romantic ideal of an economically vibrant borderless world prophesied by neoliberalism has not come to fruition. The failure of economic liberalization in the Caribbean context has resulted in the devaluing of currency, divestment from social services vital for social reproduction, collapse of domestic export industries, and the overall decline in standard of living. As a result of these factors, workers, particularly women, have become increasingly dependent on the informal sector to supplement their income. Sex tourism has risen as a well-paid industry for women in the informal sector. However, through enforcing colonial narratives of women of color as lascivious beings, the industry reinforces gender and racial stereotypes, and thus, with the end of colonization has come the rise of globalization and the continuation of the cycle of dependency.

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