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TOURISM'S INTIMATE ECONOMIES

What's Love Got To Do with It? Transnational Desires and Sex Tourism in the Dominican Republic. DENISE BRENNAN. Durham NC: Duke University Press, 2004. ix + 280 pp. (Paper US\$ 21.95)

Behind the Smile: The Working Lives of Caribbean Tourism. GEORGE GMELCH. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2003. x + 212 pp. (Paper US\$ 19.95)

New research on Caribbean tourism solidly locates it within the regional shift from “incentive-induced exports” like bananas to “service-based exports” like data processing, offshore finance, and novel forms of mass tourism (Mullings 2004:294; Duval 2004). Earlier studies may have made mention of the similarities between plantation economies and tourism development, but new models like the all-inclusive resort demonstrate a near identity of form and structure with plantation systems: foreign dominance over ownership and profit leaves little multiplier effect for the Caribbean islands playing host to enclaved resorts. Agricultural exports have been in free fall since the end of preferential trade protocols, and export manufacturing after the North American Free Trade Agreement is in steep decline. If new service economies seemed to offer a solution to economic and social disorder, the reaction to the events of September 11, 2001 demonstrated the fragility of service-based exports and, in particular, of new kinds of tourism. It took four years for international tourism to rebound to pre-9/11 levels;¹ with the perceived threat of SARS and avian flu, as well as the Iraq war and the weak U.S. dollar, official projections of the industry's near future are “cautiously optimistic.”²

1. World Tourism Organization, World's Top Tourism Destinations, 2004. *World Tourism Barometer* 3(2). Also available at <http://www.world-tourism.org/facts/menu.html>.

2. Arley Sobers, 2005, CTO Release: Caribbean Tourism Performance in 2004, on the website of the Caribbean Tourism Organization: <http://www.onecaribbean.org/information/documentview.php?rowid=3052> (last accessed July 29, 2005).

Fortunately, there are reasons to be cautiously optimistic about the state of Caribbean tourism research as well. The pages of the two books under review here spring to life with characters that readers will not soon forget. Denise Brennan and George Gmelch provide compelling accounts of the hidden worlds and innermost thoughts of people involved in Caribbean tourism, bringing to light the diverse desires, disappointments, strategies, and failures offered by the region's dominant industry. While Brennan focuses exclusively on the sex trade and Gmelch does so only partially, the commonalities across the range of experiences described in these books – between the Dominican sex worker performing love in the hope of securing a relationship that will lead to a visa and the Barbadian bank teller who trucks in congeniality as much as currency exchange – give pause to the distinctions one might commonly draw between different kinds of emotional labor without effacing the specificities of laboring in any kind of tourism. These two works thus complicate negative assessments of tourism's impact on the Caribbean (e.g., Patullo 1996) while adding to a growing body of literature on Caribbean tourism that illuminates the intimate side of neoliberal economic restructuring (e.g., Kempadoo 1999, Cabezas 2004, Kingsbury 2005).

That said, these are very different books. Brennan's is an ethnographic monograph buttressed by theoretical arguments about gender, work, and globalization and illustrated with richly described third-person narratives of the lives of individual sex workers in the city of Sosua in the Dominican Republic. Hers is the work of a sole researcher who was affiliated with an HIV/AIDS-prevention NGO and who conducted outreach among sex workers while undertaking classic ethnographic fieldwork. Gmelch's book takes the form of a series of first-person narratives recounting twenty individuals' histories and experiences in the tourism sector in Barbados. The research is rooted in his long record of study on Barbados, and took the form of collecting oral histories and editing them so that they would be "topically coherent and interesting for readers" (Gmelch, p. 38). Interview subjects were then asked to review the edited histories and suggest changes. Brennan develops a number of important theoretical arguments along the way; Gmelch seemingly sidesteps them, although his reflections pack a solid analytical punch. Perhaps because of these stylistic and formal differences, the books complement one another extremely well, and would work nicely together in classes on tourism and Caribbean studies.

Gmelch opens his book with one of the most succinct and engaging overviews of the history of tourism I have ever read, beginning with Thomas Cook's 1841 chartering of a train to carry passengers to a temperance rally. He traces the development of Cook's enterprise and the rise of the travel agency, and shows how the Caribbean emerged as an important tourist destination for European elites. He also discusses the cultural history of the beach – first shunned, later embraced as a cure-all, and, by the 1920s, as a site for

tanning and seaside holidays. The advent of jet air travel permitted the rise of mass tourism as distances shrank and costs dropped. Gmelch describes the decline in export agriculture, the effect of free-trade agreements and structural adjustment, the rise of the all-inclusive resort and the debates over tourism's economic impact on local economies. There is a brief account of the history of Barbados, and a chapter about the relationships between hosts and guests on which tourism is founded, interactions in which one party "is at leisure while the other is at work" (p. 25).

The bulk of the book consists of individual personal accounts of tourism. These are grouped into five chapters based on the location of the encounter with the tourist: the airport, the hotel, the beach, the attractions (bus tours and the like), and government offices. Each chapter generally contains a number of narratives from representatives of different occupations within each site (the bartender, the chef, the head housekeeper, the head of security, the manager, and so on). Many of the narratives are followed by a short epilogue in Gmelch's voice, a sort of "where are they now" account of the person's life after the initial interview. Each chapter is also preceded by a short introduction by Gmelch. A concluding chapter draws out some of the main themes that emerge from these narratives.

Reading the book from start to finish is very much like arriving in Barbados as a tourist: we encounter the people we would meet and interact with in pretty much the same order as if we were to step off a plane, go through immigration, find a porter for our luggage, and then exchange some money. I took a guilty pleasure in reading some of the narratives, for they afford a behind-the-scenes look at aspects of the hospitality industry with which we are all familiar yet which those of us who have never worked in it routinely take for granted. Reading a housekeeper's assessment of the class position or slovenliness of guests she may never meet face to face is a humbling reminder of the privileges conferred upon travelers when they become guests, for example. It is humbling, too, to learn that many of the people Gmelch interviewed take from their experience in tourism a sense of the wideness of the world as well as wonder at it, a desire to learn more and perhaps travel more themselves, and an appreciation of the mixture of blessing and curse that tourism has become for many Caribbean people.

Brennan's book, consisting of an introduction, six chapters, and a conclusion, is organized in four sections. In the introduction we meet Elena, recently released from two days in jail and reconnecting with her German boyfriend/client Jurgen, whose promises of love eventually translate into cohabitation and something approximating heterosexual marriage. Despite the economic advancement Elena gains from the relationship, things rapidly go sour as the extent of Jurgen's alcoholism is revealed and as he comes to resent Elena's repeated requests for money. In the end, Jurgen leaves, and Elena is left just as destitute as she began. The introduction thus tracks the

continuum from sex work to consensual marriage and back again, a pattern that permeates the lives and hopes of the women involved in sex tourism in Sosua who pin their fortunes on the promise of transnational ties and the wealth that can flow from them.

Indeed, one distinction between sex tourism in Sosua and elsewhere is the importance of transnational connections involving wire transfers of money from abroad, clients' return visits, faxes (but not yet email), and the hopes of women – sometimes realized – of following their clients-cum-husbands to Germany and other northern countries (Brennan, p. 22). Another important distinction, which in many ways facilitated Brennan's research and helped ensure her own safety while in the field, is the absence of pimps or direct coercion into the sex trade. Perhaps more significant in comparison with other sites of transnational sex tourism like Thailand is the fascinating, already-globalized history of Sosua itself. The first section of the book describes Sosua's "transformation from a quiet farming community into a commercialized, tourist hot spot" (p. 52). Sosua has a long history as an expatriate enclave, first when the United Fruit Company set up a banana plantation there and later, during World War II, when it became a resettlement site for Jewish refugees fleeing Nazi Germany. The latter gave the town lasting ties to Germany, including locally produced German-language newspapers, which later sparked the complicated relationships of fantasy, desire, and money that connect this town on the north coast of the Dominican Republic with Germany. A postcard announces, "Welcome to the DDR: the Deutschen Dominikanischen Republik" (p. 54). The settlement of German Jews also led to a spatial segregation that structures tourism and the sex trade, dividing Dominicans who live in poverty-level conditions on one side of town from expatriates and descendants of the Jewish settlers who live in a modern enclave, across a small bay to the east.

The bifurcation of the town, its pull for internal migrants and international sex tourists, and the booming businesses on both sides of Sosua led to its being perceived as a source of both wealth and moral depravity, fueling any number of contradictory dreams of prosperity or penury for the Dominicans, expatriates, and tourists who end up there. Sosua is a place to make money but also, for Dominicans, a place of danger. Random police arrests and the threat of AIDS and other diseases complicate Dominicans' assessments of the benefits of tourism, sex or otherwise. Expatriates bemoan the loss of a simpler way of life and the tropical serenity that they say brought them to Sosua in the first place. For many, Sosua has become a "paradise lost" (p. 73) and everyone blames others for this decline, even as Sosua maintains its mystique and attraction. Brennan does an excellent job discussing the racialized hierarchy of labor, belonging, and attachment to Sosua, and the manner in which Dominicans have become *de facto* criminalized by the politics of racial insecurity that many expatriates and corrupt police officers promote.

The pithiest part of the book is the second section, on what Brennan calls transnational courting practices and the “performance” of love. Here she documents how sex workers seeking more lasting transnational connections and the monetary gain that comes with them enact love, devotion, and desire in the hope of turning their clients into more lasting boyfriends or even husbands. The relationships and emotions here are complicated, she shows, not simply crass or calculating. Communication technologies, in particular the fax machine, stand out as central to women’s strategies. The distinction between relationships *por amor* and *por residencia* or a visa becomes quite blurry at times, and the continuum between tourism, sex tourism, marriage migration, and migration (p. 17) animates a continuum from performed love to real love and back again that characterizes “marriage in a sexscape” (p. 94), and creates “headaches” (p. 100) for Dominican women migrating abroad, who are all presumed to be gold-diggers. The section includes a brief discussion of the history of Dominican migration abroad, as well as the book’s main material on male sex workers.

The third section consists of two ethnographically dense chapters on the everyday lives and advancement strategies of Sosua’s sex workers. There is an important distinction between what Brennan terms “dependents” (women who work with Dominican men) and “independents” (those who work with foreigners) (p. 132). Dependents work in groups under the authority of bar owners while independents essentially freelance. Dependents are often housed in cramped dormitory-style rooms behind a bar, while independents maintain rooms in boarding houses. Dependents and independents dress and do their make-up differently, partly because of their class background and/or aspirations and partly because of what the market – that is, Dominican versus foreign men’s tastes – demand of them. Brennan characterizes the dependents’ strategies for working and advancing as less risk-taking than those of the independents, who, as lone agents, sometimes must actively pursue their clients and often have little social support to fall back on should they encounter violence or other difficulties. It is striking that a woman’s ability to save money is more determinant for her success than whether her clients are Dominican or foreign (p. 162). Brennan pays brief but competent and convincing attention to the connections between sex work and the feminization of poverty brought about by structural adjustment and the changing political economy of the Dominican Republic. Interestingly, one of the many transactions that constitute sex work includes the education, of sorts, of the foreign tourist in the ways of global poverty. For some men, this surely adds to the mystique, but for others it seems genuinely to spark concern or a desire to aid that the men and maybe the women sometimes experience as love.

Despite the affective ties that sometimes develop between women and their clients, the independents who secure transnational ties and even visas or marriage abroad generally find that disappointments and a return to poverty

in the Dominican Republic lie in store for them. There is interesting material in the fourth section on “transnational disappointments” on the increase in German internet attention to Dominican sex tourism and the stereotypes that have accreted onto the transnational imagination of *Dominicanidad* in comparison to other sites of sex tourism like Brazil or Thailand. What emerges here is that sex tourism is a market; and it is an international, competitive market where various sites, in effect, vie to demonstrate their comparative advantage. Clients learn, too, that women perform love for visas; and so clients, sharing tips over the internet, learn to perform, too – hoping that their own performance of love will garner them free sex (p. 200).

Brennan began conducting fieldwork in 1993, and the conclusion of the book discusses changes that have occurred in Sosua since then, including a general decline in tourism along with the development of all-inclusive resorts, which have hurt the small-scale tourist sector. The police forced bar closures after her main period of fieldwork, and the sex tourism business has taken on a less visible public presence. What becomes apparent in her discussion is the extent to which sex tourism is like any other internationally driven tourism market, subject to the same whims, shocks, and shifting styles as any other product.

Despite Brennan’s emphasis on women’s agency, she presents an overall narrative of returning to the same place one started from: some women may get ahead in the end, but most of the ones we hear from end up back in the Dominican Republic, often less secure than they were when we first encountered them. Brennan is critical of research on globalization that emphasizes “the crossing and recrossing of things” to the neglect of “social and economic facts” (p. 46). She seeks to provide an account of “real people’s experiences in a real place,” not “free floating people in an imaginary third space” (p. 15). But what experiences are not “on the ground?” I agree that we need to discuss transnational processes in places and histories but this does not “ground” the discussion any more or less than attention to imagination. This is a recurring issue in Caribbean studies, women’s studies, and anthropology – the mythology of the material – and it paradoxically reinstates the equivalence between the categories woman, sexuality, and materiality that feminist theorizing has long sought to displace.

The overall narrative in Gmelch’s book is somewhat different: it is more a movement along a trajectory, transforming the tourist worker along the way, and destabilizing any assessment of the multiplier effect of the industry and leaving open the question of whether real people in real places do not simultaneously traverse the figments and fantasies that tourist encounters generate in both hosts and guests. Taken together, the two books provide rigorous and sensitive analyses of the biggest business on the planet on small islands that loom large indeed in the touristic imagination.

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