Gender, Women and Sexual Experiences of Tourism

Nacima Ourahmoune, Reims Management School, France

Men’s and women’s experiences of tourism have been understood differently, especially their experiences of sex tourism. However, discussions around women who engage in sexual activities during their vacation have been strikingly absent from our field. An ethnography in the Caribbean aims at contributing to a conceptualization of gender sexual subjectivities.

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Gender and Sexual Experiences of Tourism
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ABSTRACT
“Although prostitution may involve an immoral exploitation of human beings (Hirschman 1991; Truong 1990), and sex slavery certainly does so (Aisbett and Malan 1993; Hornblower 1993; Sherrill 1993), the patronage of prostitutes is plausibly the oldest form of consumer behavior. Nevertheless, prostitution has been studied to a very limited degree by consumer researchers (Ostergaard 1993)” (Belk, 1994).

The growth of sex work reflects the power of increasingly globalization flows of capital, policy, directives and information to draw places that were once “off the map” into very closer networks of commodified trade and exchange. Men’s and women’s experiences of tourism have been understood very differently, especially their experiences of sex tourism. This is partly due to a rather commonly held assumption about sex tourism that suggests western men travel to foreign countries to engage in sexual relations with (younger, Other) local women (Cohen, 1982; 1986; Enloe, 1989; Cohen, 1993; Seabrook, 1997; Phillip and Dann, 1998; Jeffrey, 2003). There has been some acknowledgement that western women can also engage in sexual relationships with foreign men as part of their holiday experience. However, discussions around women who engage in similar sexual activities have been much more debated within the social sciences and strikingly absent from our field -although research on gender in consumer research is established and its dissemination widespread through ACR and ACR gender conferences.

Why do foreign women go “crazy” about local men? This is a question much heard among tourists and local townspeople during my long ethnography in the Dominican Republic. This question in itself contains a set of assumptions about the incongruence of situations where female sexuality might be seen as unusual and even problematic. In this research, I try to map the plural female consumer representations and lived experiences of heterosexual desires outside their cultural group and mediated by the global tourism industry, especially in the context of a third world country where local men are definitely seen as questionable sexual partners for foreign women. This is to move from the biological deterministic explanation of female sexuality to material and social conceptualization of sexuality - a construct much lacking investigation in consumer research.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK
Travel and gender
Travel has been historically constructed as a masculine activity (Kaplan, 1996; Mills, 1991, Smith, 2001). Masculinity has been seen as a necessity to be socially allowed to travel, while femininity was connected to domesticity and home (Enloe, 2000). Discourses of masculinity have been the basis of the cultural logic of travel (Smith, 2001). Then the “male” gendering of travel had important implications for women, impeding them to travel and making it difficult for the ones who do travel (Wolf, 1993). Since the 19th Century, travel echoed modernity and the “freeing of women”, bourgeois women who traveled eschewed romance and sexually explicit behaviors to uphold social respectability (Smith, 2001). During the 21st century, representations of men traveling far from home without family became a masculine gender ideology. But since, the number of females equals or even surpasses the male travelers (Harris and Wilson, 2007), it is claimed in particular within global feminist discourses, that women’s travel is therefore an inherent form of empowerment (Kaplan, 1995).

Sex tourism and gender
Sanchez Taylor argues that “The stereotypical image of the “sex tourist” is that of the Western man who travels to Thailand or the Philippines in order to pay for sex with Go Go bar/brothel prostitutes” (2001, p749). This stereotypical masculine traveler, this male sex tourist, is seen in much of the literature on sex tourism practices, academic and journalistic accounts of sex tourism. It tends to focus on the western men who travels to sun-drenched foreign locales to engage in sexual relations with Other women. While there has been some debate in the literature about issues such as intentionality and the nature of sexual relationships with regards to male sex tourism (Ryan and Kinder, 1996; Oppermann, 1999) and some important contributions on issues related to power and privilege (Crick, 1989; O’Connell Davidson, 1996; Pettman, 1997; Kempadoo, 1998; Cabezazs, 2004), by and large sex tourism is often seen as an extension of prostitution, where men are configured as ‘users’ of prostitutes.

Elsrud (2001) suggests that female tourists are empowered by their risky encounters in developing countries, and the understanding of the ‘third world’ and the subalterns that occupy these risky spaces as ‘pristine’ or ‘poor’ (2001, p598). Indeed, understanding of Others in tourism is often a problematic area within tourism studies (Sanchez Taylor, 2000; Gibson, 2001; Wilson, 2004). Sanchez Taylor (2000) argues that consuming difference is a critical component of the tourist experience, and that exotic Others are positioned as markers of cultural authenticity. Consuming difference means that local people are often positioned as authentic tourist objects, and their bodies become a way for tourists to consume the difference that is such an important part of the tourist experience.

The consumer element of the sex tourism experience is also a point of intersection with wider tourism processes, as the exotic Other becomes the object of the tourist gaze (Desmond, 1997; Bishop and Robinson, 1998; Edmondson, 2001; Urry, 2002). The desire for the exotic Other is a common tourist trope, and the importance of consuming difference enters into tourism discourses. The bodies of young Caribbeans men in particular have become situated as the suitable objects of the tourist gaze and Ryan and Hall argue that “…it is of little surprise that because of the marginality of location, peoples and the exoticism ascribed to those people, sex tourism has become a sustainable force at the commencement of the twenty-first century’ (Ryan and Hall, 2001, p13).

The Gendered Sex Tourist Gaze
The ways in which (gendered) tourists consume particular spaces/places through particular modes reveals something about the nature of host/guest interactions. Tourism literature acknowledges that travelers (both male and female) are often situated as visual consumers, as powerful watchers of the different/exotic Other (Urry, 2002; Shellhorn and Perkins, 2004; Mazo, 2005). Chi (1997) suggests that tourism is the scopophilia of modern consciousness, with the ‘eye’/ seeing taking precedence over other forms of touristic understanding. When people are on holiday they often ‘look at the environment with interest and curiosity…we gaze at what we encounter’; the gaze is both socially organized and systematized (Urry, 2002, p1). Indeed, part of being a modern day tourist means that one gazes upon a variety of scenes, people, and places that are ‘out of the ordinary’ (Urry, 2002: 1).

The gaze focuses on local features that are marked off as unusual, or different to everyday, quotidian encounters and revolves
around the collection of signs and symbols. Tourists often search for the authentic or the real as part of their travels and they (visually) consume these authentic scenes with the tourist gaze (Urry, 2002). Men and women do not have equal access to space as some spaces are ‘off-limits’ to women, particularly sexualized spaces (Hubbard et al, 2008; Hubbard and Whowell, 2008). Women and men often use and consume space differently as part of their tourism practices, and their use of space may well impact upon the types of activities they engage in, the types of spaces they visit, and the types of Others they come across. Wearing et al (2010) suggest that tourists and hosts co-create tourist spaces and imbue particular sites/sights with meaning, and that within these tourist spaces women are able to create their own meanings and interpretations of tourist sites as they engage in feminized tourism practices.

Women’s experiences of travel have been reconceptualized within this gendered framework, and the tourism practices of women (particularly solo female travelers) have been seen as journeys of liberation and independence from traditional feminine roles (Kinnaird and Hall, 2000; Elsrud, 2001; Gibson, 2001; Wearing et al, 2010). Western women seem to be empowered by their travel experiences, and their journeys in some ways allow them to redefine their gender identity for themselves (Gibson, 2001; Elsrud, 2001).

**METHOD**

Understandings of sex tourism (for both men and women) often focus on the physical nature of the sexual interactions between a ‘couple’, i.e. a sex tourist and a local sex worker. However, defining sex tourism as the consummation of ‘commercial sexual relations’ is problematic and further ‘...is an overt simplification and arguably excludes many other cases and settings’ (Oppermann, 1999, p252).

This paper engages in a wider conversation in consumer research which excludes many other cases and settings’ (Oppermann, 1999, p252). This paper engages in a wider conversation in consumer research about how sexuality and gender are constructed, produced, perceived and embodied by particular consumers and social actors in specific contexts of tourism.

In thinking about sexual subjectivity, the author is concerned about how consumption processes, in this case tourism and related desires are lived through the body and thus are enacted through emotions, affect, senses, and bodies marked by gender, race, class and nationality.

More specifically, this research focuses on how people’s intimate relations and subjectivities are shaped by global, local, and transnational processes. I am interested in the lived experiences and “negotiation” of gender, sexuality, and intimacy, bound up with race and class, in the context of human movement across borders, modernity, late capitalism and multiculturalism. How do people decipher and grapple with different and often competing cultural gender and sexuality norms? How does human sociality and subjectivity change through travel? In what ways are local sexual cultures affected by global tourism?

This research is part of a larger fieldwork- A total of 6 months ethnography in the Dominican Republic (Punta Cana and Sosua) over 5 years (2006-2011), involving participant observation in tourist places (hotels, discos, tours) with western tourists, western residents and with locals and immigrants (Haitians). In-depth interview following McCracken (1988) recommendations were also carried out with all the set of actors involved in the field (Dominicans, Haitians, Tourists, Foreign residents, Male and female in each case with a wide range of backgrounds and ages), they lasted 1 to 3 hours were recorded, transcribed. The 21 long interviews with western female tourists and a few residents inform more specifically this paper (see Table 1). The author stayed in contact with informants over phone and social media allowing for presenting the preliminary results to those women and updating their situation to date regarding the Dominican Republic and their intimate relationships therefore to increase the validity of the research.

**FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION**

**Relationships lived as Transgression**

My informants’ stories convey how transnational sex was made meaningful through cultural assumptions and tacit rules about sexual propriety and intimate sociality. Sexual relationships between foreign women and local men were played out in diverse arrangements, from one-night or weekend affairs and casual vacation flings to long-term transnational back-and-forth relationships together with some, but not many, marriages, as well as other configurations. What characterizes most of the stories is a feeling of instant intimacy that women interpret romantically while local men interpret it more pragmatically - although most of the informants report that they are romantic: “Here it is all different from home, because very quickly you share all the domestic aspects and problems with your man, from the very start of the relationship, the dating process does not really exist...I like it because you feel close to your partner rapidly and you feel important in your partner’s life but you get confused about what stage of the relationship you are in” (Natalie, 34, France, Police Officer).

“There are many tensions and contradictions in women’s narratives since, for the women, sharing intimacy with Dominicans was a cultural transgression in terms of social position, skin color... For instance, the level of the men’s formal education (often they had not finished high school) was a problem for some women with university backgrounds. Although the relationship was going very well in many aspects, suddenly realizing that reading a book or writing for-

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<th>Table 1: Female tourists interviewed</th>
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<td><strong>Name</strong></td>
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<td>Nathalie</td>
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<td>Lara</td>
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<td>Carolina</td>
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<td>Helen</td>
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<td>Patricia</td>
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<td>Meline</td>
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<td>Irina</td>
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<td>Natalia</td>
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<td>Pat’</td>
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<td>Marie</td>
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<td>Chiara</td>
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<td>Nadia</td>
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<td>Joy</td>
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<td>Carolyn</td>
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<td>Stephanie</td>
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<td>Erika</td>
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<td>Serena</td>
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mal documents was a problem for the partner, was quoted as raising tension and doubts in women about the viability of their romance: 

“I remember when…So looked like a young child trying to decipher my car rental contract, I realized how far apart we were… I mean so far I was admiring his ability to manage everything so smartly and…and I assumed reading was not an issue…you know, it is not easy…” (Chiara, 23, Italy, Museum Guide)

Such disparities created boundaries, which were exciting to cross but also created conflicting feelings in terms of Western heteronormative discourses about hierarchies of preferred intimate partners. Another major transgression that emerged from the field is racial or ethnic. From my earliest conversations, I gathered that many people viewed these relationships as completely unrestrained, attributing ‘Caribbean culture’ and ‘black male sexual prowess’ as the impetus that ‘drove’ foreign women to behave in ‘unusually licentious’ ways. There is a prevalent binary construction of black Afro-Caribbean men as lascivious, and white North American and European women as sexually predatory. Many informants stated how the skin color of their partner was a problem for their family and friends in their home country, who immediately considered the relationships in terms of stereotypes, considering them merely in terms of the “sexual nature of the local men.”

Therefore, even in Sosúa or Punta Cana, sexual relations between tourist women and local men appear as both ‘rampant’ and ‘escondido’ (hidden). A palpable local discourse frames sexual relations between local men and tourist women as overabundant, unchecked, uncontrollable, ‘wild,’ mutual erotic desire. At the same time, this discourse is muffled, in order to downplay the presence of such relationships, in part because women's sexuality is more generally hidden in Latino nations, (Arroba, 2001) and because the relationships are viewed by many as scandalous. For complicated reasons, tourist women are also protective of local men's sexual infidelities. Many also remain discreet to circumvent the reaction of a jealous boyfriend. Foreign women as sexual subjects are scrutinized perhaps even more closely than Dominican women, and stereotyped as ‘promiscuous’ by local surveillance mediated through religious beliefs and cultural moral discourses about femininity, masculinity, and sexuality. For these intricate reasons, sexual secrecy pervades the social-sexual contours of the island.

However, believe systems about gendered expressions of desire and intimacy are never fixed and the cosmopolitan and global context offers opportunities for defining new types of relationships:

“Before I came here, I was really different, for me there were some criteria for choosing my partners that were way too strict, I don’t know, he has to behave like and like that, but now it is different, I have gained more experience and I have learned that here people live things differently, what matters is being happy together no matter the standards, if my partner is a bit younger, is it such a problem as long as we are happy together? Today is today and tomorrow is another day but at last I am happy!”

Women refer to those experiences as times when their identity changed, especially those who got involved in long-term interaction with Dominicans who speak about “identity transformation”. Some women choose to have casual sex with locals on a regular basis; it is often after being extremely disappointed in a previous relationship. Although, a number of women choose to have casual sex with locals without too much commitment, playing secrecy games and covering men’s infidelity, they often deny they use strategies regarding their intimate relationships on the island. For instance, most of the women will confess that their relationship with local men “just happened” that they did not plan to have sexual relationships during their stay on the island.

Women strategizing about their sexual encounters…

However digging deeper into their narratives, some signs like systematically bringing condoms when visiting the Dominican Republic or confiding that they had felt intuitively that if they stayed longer on the island “they knew they would be sexually active” contradict their initial statement of being “surprised” by the relationships. It is the standard female sexuality, built on an absolute necessity of connecting sex with feelings that prompts them to justify these relationships as totally surprising and unplanned. According to my informants they always start very romantically – so as to conform to social expectations. So it is very rare for women to voice, as men do, the fact that they also come to the Dominican Republic to have sexual encounters with locals, knowing that as westerners their economic capital will lead them to obtain sex easily. However, one of my informants crossed the line after the third interview, when I met her again unexpectedly during one of my stays in Sosúa. She admitted that after several stays on the island, in this place she knew exactly how to attract the right sexual partner when she went to the disco. Knowing that Dominicans are unfaithful, and that “they use white girls to obtain sex and money, why should I not play their game? So I use them as well but I give just enough, for example two or three drinks at the disco, for them to think I am like all the European girls and then they are adorable as they know how to be very sweet at the start of the relationship…and once I have what I want I am the who stops the relationship before it turns into the nightmare of cheating and money issues…” And my informant adds “you know Dominican girls, they do the same, so No I don’t feel bad, is it sex tourism? I don’t know, it’s just adult relationships, I don’t force anyone”. In this discourse, I hear a sort of acculturation in terms of Dominican relationships starting at the disco, pretending or feeling love, expecting one of the partners to take care of the other and pay for them as a sign of interest…and also, a clear conscience of the use of economic and skin capital as mediators of sexual pleasure just like male sex travelers…However, it is quite controversial to depict women as potential exploiters of under-classed populations in third world countries for their own pleasure.

This controversy is due to a number of factors: firstly there are arguments within feminism about the extent to which women are victims vs. agentic/capable of exploiting, which can also be seen in broader debates around prostitution (Segal and MacIntosh, 1993; Raymond, 1995; Barry, 1996; Chapkis, 1997; Jeffreys, 1997; Nagle, 1997; Campbell and O’Neill, 2006; O’Connell Davidson, 2006). Secondly because sex tourism is often defined in such a narrow way - as directly related to prostitute use and commercial sexual relationships, this has made it much more difficult to talk about female sex tourism as a phenomenon because women are not generally associated with using prostitutes, nor are they generally connected to commercial sexual exchanges (Ryan and Hall, 2001). Research into female sex tourism is still a disputed area; situating women’s position within the sex tourist spectrum is not straightforward, and problems arise within academic discourses around sex tourism on how to define what exactly constitutes sex tourist behavior, and further what defines sex tourism practices.

In contrast to male sex tourists who are often understood to be exploiting local women, the actions of female sex tourists have sometimes been presented in a more benevolent, but also a more contradictory way. They are sometimes seen as rather innocent ‘romance tourists’ (Meisch, 1995; Pruitt and LaFont, 1995; Dahles and Bras, 1999), or even understood as romantic dupes being exploited by local men (Jeffreys, 2003). Although those narratives appear clearly in the data, the research supports some critique of this rather essentialist understanding of western female tourists’ sexual behav-
Table 2: Summary of the findings

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Themes</th>
<th>Sub-themes</th>
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<tr>
<td>Types of sexual arrangements - sex tourism is not restricted to prostitution</td>
<td>• One night&lt;br&gt;• weekend affairs&lt;br&gt;• casual vacation flings&lt;br&gt;• long-term transnational back-and-forth relationships&lt;br&gt;• not many, marriages (although limited they encourage tourists and locals to step into a relationship).</td>
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<tr>
<td>Tourists feelings of transgression when starting intimate relationships with locals</td>
<td>• A disrupted capital game (economic, cultural, social and skin capital) as unfixed re-creating exciting to cross boundaries yet conflicting feelings in terms of Western heteronormative discourses about hierarchies of preferred intimate partners.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Identity transformation</td>
<td>• Self concept: empowerment, expressing true self&lt;br&gt;• Learning new things about one self and others&lt;br&gt;• Changing its own perspective regarding intimate relationships and the meanings of happiness</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Perceptions of sexual relationships between western women and local men</td>
<td>• There is a prevalent binary construction of black Afro-Caribbean men as lascivious, and white North American and European women as sexually predatory</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sexual strategies and vivid contradiction due to incorporated social norms regarding women’s sexual subjectivities</td>
<td>• The romantic start: women need to justify Sex did not start without a minimum of romanticism as a manifestation of social expectations in women’s discourse&lt;br&gt;• The discourse about surprise: ‘It’s just happened’, ‘Not Expected relationships’, while in fact some women maintain this statement although they did bring with them condoms every time they visited the Dominican Republic for instance&lt;br&gt;• Western tourist under Locals surveillance&lt;br&gt;• Western women covering local men’s infidelity…</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Women’s sexual agency</td>
<td>• Women-usually after a love deception in the DR- decide not to commit and have casual sex with locals&lt;br&gt;• Who is using who? “I know how to get Local men, I play their game”&lt;br&gt;• Acculturation to locals customs in terms of intimate relationships&lt;br&gt;• Parallels between male tourist and female tourists sex behavior while traveling</td>
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CONCLUSION

This analysis of sex tourism— a thematic much missing in consumer research— takes gendered relations into account, but also provides a critical reflection about other types of power— economic, social, racial, and class— that are often obscured by focusing so exclusively on the power/gender dyad. Analyses of tourism often look at issues relating to racial and global inequalities, and there has been some evidence to suggest that the processes that govern tourism and sex tourism are intrinsically related (Bishop and Robinson, 1998; Ryan and Hall, 2001). However much of the analysis of sex tourism practices still relies on gendered understandings of sex and sexual relationships, rather than exploring the other inequalities that might exist between hosts and guests of any gender.

A more nuanced picture begins to emerge around the set of issues that underlies women’s sexual engagement with local men if we begin to understand women tourists also: ‘as being motivated by racist sexual stereotypes and using sex tourism to bolster their privileged race and class status’ (Jeffreys, 2003, p25). By employing this understanding it is possible to analyze female sex tourism without focusing exclusively on gender injustices, and instead other crucial structural inequalities such as race and class can also be included.

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