



MEANS OF DESIRE'S PRODUCTION: MALE SEX LABOR IN CUBA

Jafari Sinclair Allen

To cite this article: Jafari Sinclair Allen (2007) MEANS OF DESIRE'S PRODUCTION: MALE SEX LABOR IN CUBA , Identities: Global Studies in Culture and Power, 14:1-2, 183-202, DOI: [10.1080/10702890601102647](https://doi.org/10.1080/10702890601102647)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/10702890601102647>



Published online: 07 Feb 2007.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



Article views: 760



Citing articles: 43 View citing articles [↗](#)

Means of Desire's Production: Male Sex Labor in Cuba¹

Jafari Sinclair Allen

Department of Anthropology, The University of Texas-Austin, Austin,
Texas, USA

Tourism has provided myriad spaces in which black Cuban subjects participate in self-making, yet within a field still constrained by historical structures of sexual and racial interpellation. This essay focuses on the local social cultural context of male sex labor in Havana, Cuba, from 1998 to 2003. It explores the subjective intentions of young Cuban men during the Special Period in Times of Peace and current Transition on the island, relative to the gaze of tourists and social cultural and economic change in Cuba.

Key Words: Cuba, sex work, sexualities, tourism, race

I met Esteban in a town in the Oriente Province of Cuba in 1999, when he was eighteen years old. He has reddish light-brown skin, dark brown eyes and looked, to me, every bit the naïve eighteen-year-old. When I told him I was a researcher studying sexuality among Cuban men, he was among the first of many to say "... with me, you will experience everything you need to know." We both laughed, then I shifted the conversation to his life at home. He was considering dropping out of a vocational program in auto mechanics, seeing little prospects for well-paying jobs in Oriente. He continued, saying that he had a girlfriend, but would go to Havana soon to make some money. Softly, he confided, "I have male friends who I see also. They help me." A year later, in the winter of 2000, Esteban made it to Havana, and I happened to run into him on La Rampa, the area near Hotel Habana Libre well-known for cruising among men who have sex with men. I was surprised, and a little concerned for the emotional safety of this boyish young man who had arrived only hours ago from the Provinces, with no bag and no money. He explained then that although his family had a room for him at home, he preferred to come to Havana to ply his new trade as a *pinguero* (sex laborer). Esteban had completed half of his training program but preferred "*luchando* (struggling) in the street ... anything but getting fucked." Later that evening, before he had a

chance to meet a willing *Yuma* (foreigner) and test the boundaries he had set, he was taken to jail where he says he spent the evening in a cell with fifteen other young men from the Provinces. Like him, these men—according to Esteban, “strong looking black men”—had left home to (be) *trade* and were picked up by the National Police (many of them also from Cuba’s densely Black-populated eastern province of Oriente) for loitering and having no legitimate business in Havana. Although there is certainly tourism and other forms of sex labor in various places on the island, it is most prominent in Havana, where there are not only many foreigners but a larger population, supporting a degree of anonymity impossible in places with closer family scrutiny. To Esteban, and many young men and women like him, Havana is the main place to encounter not only foreign people and ideas but also their currency and commodities.

This essay focuses on the local social cultural context of male sex labor in Havana, Cuba, from 1998 to 2003. It is excerpted from a larger critical ethnographic project² that investigates gendered and sexualized self-making projects among black men and women during Cuba’s re-entry into global currency. Tourism-related sex labor is one of a growing number of spaces in which common sense understandings of racial and sexual identity are re-presented and exploited toward related aims of material “survival,” commodity acquisition and consumption, and *becoming* a cosmopolitan subject.

The space economy of capitalism that exploits natural resources of poorer nations to maintain and enhance rich ones is not new (Mintz 1985; Williams 1977; Wolf 1982) but has certainly “exploded” in recent years, in a process that has come to be called globalization (Appadurai 1996; Gupta and Ferguson 1992; Hall 1991; Harvey 1989; Lavie and Swedenburg 1996). This process—itself one condition of postmodernity—has morphed categories that we thought we knew well, like capitalism, socialism, agency, and exploitation, requiring us to consider these categories anew. Witness the re-globalization of Cuba during the Special Period in Times of Peace, which has rendered Black (and) Caribbean bodies and persons at once *consumers* of the commodities and ideas of Late Capitalism, but also *consumed* by them in some ways through tourism. Tourism provides myriad spaces in which Black Cuban subjects participate in self-making, yet within a field still constrained by historical structures of sexual and racial interpellation that find them subaltern.

As scholars such as Kamala Kempadoo (2001) and others have shown, sex work is taking place throughout the Caribbean and other sites around the globe. Nowhere is this more remarkable than the *ambiente* (environment or scene) of sex labor in Cuba. Owing to the

obvious irony involved in the “reappearance³” of streetwalking sex work, long after the revolutionary government had stamped out “prostitution” in the wake of their 1959 triumph, Cuban sex work gained international attention in scholarly work and in the popular imagination (O’Connell Davidson 1996; Fernandez 1999; Fusco 1999; Hodge 2001; Cabezas 1998). In some ways, the return/shift to tourism in Cuba is a reminder of the limits of the success of the Revolution. Although the essential difference of local sovereignty and socialist distribution remains intact despite the Special Period in Times of Peace, Revolutionary Cuba is now seriously impaired. President Fidel Castro has lamented that he wishes Cuba could export its beaches. He held that to embark on tourism as a development strategy was, in fact, like making a pact with the devil. Nevertheless, the pact has been made.

Although ‘the Devil’ for President Castro may be the specter of capitalist excesses ‘returning’ to the island, for black⁴ and other dark-skinned Cubans, the re-emergence of tourism and related sex work harkens back to pre-revolutionary structures of feeling. This includes contending with a tourist gaze that casts people of the South, especially blacks, as objects of their pleasure. In the words of Coco Fusco’s respondent, “no one comes to Cuba for ecotourism. What sells this place is right on the dance floor—rum, cigars and *la mulata*” (1999: 20). *La mulata*, certainly, but increasingly observers cannot ignore the *renting* of the time and talents of men. The re-globalization of Cuba since the mid-1990s has reintroduced a so-called “free market,” where commodities of race, sexuality, modernity, and personhood circulate wildly but also in a predictably hegemonic array. Everything old is new again but with particularly vexed twists.

Cabezas, in her review of literature on race and female “prostitution” in Cuba, argues that much of this betrays notions of female propriety and sexuality that fail to historically and politically contextualize the issue. “What informs these studies,” she writes, “is the continuing construction of prostitutes as pathological, deviant subjects” (Cabezas 1998: 48). Scholar and sex work activist Gail Pheterson points out that prostitution for women is a heavily stigmatized social status, which in most societies remains fixed regardless of change in behavior (1997) and not merely regarded as a temporary activity as it is for overwhelmingly male clients and heterosexual identified male sex laborers, thought to play roles as “gigolos” or “studs.” I argue here against the stigmatization of adult sex labor, pointing out that it is indeed a “serious game” (Ortner 1998: 123) played by individuals with disparate relationships to institutional power and social, political, and economic capital. In the cases of both men and women, framing the “problem” of sex work in Cuba as moral

turpitude, counterrevolutionary, or false consciousness, or simplistically posing these subjects as victims of global capital—to name a few impulses⁵—elides the dynamic relationship between sex laborers, their foreign clients (or *friends*), and a four-century long racial-sexual ideology in which black bodies are interpellated as always accessible sites of pleasure and danger to be *exploited* (Kempadoo 2001). Here, I follow Caribbean and Black feminist critique (Gilliam 1991; Mohammed 2003; Alexander 1997), which insists that history and political-economy of the Caribbean and the raced, gendered, sexed, and classed subjectivities of each of the actors be interrogated. In this essay I seek to push these foundations significantly farther, however, through the ethnographic study of men, who until recently served only as the empty signifier against which the “problem” of gender was constructed (as “woman”). This essay attempts to reorient (male) sex labor by presenting an historically informed ethnographic moment that focuses on the desires and intentions of these men to become cosmopolitan subjects. Aware of the complex position of my research subjects, vis-à-vis representation in scholarship and popular media, I have chosen to focus here on what they presented to me as their own realities. Far from personally exploited, they claim—and seem to me—to be exploiting or mining the fissures, stony ground, and conjunctures of the current moment.

Objects of consumption

In Cuba, male sex laborers may be students, professionals, workers, or un(der)employed. For the purposes of this discussion, romantic excursions and the cultivation of relationships with the implicit or explicit promise of sexual contact, for a foreigner’s implicit or explicit promise to give monetary or other material support, or a promise of emigration can be termed tourist sex labor. By widening the definition in this manner, I hope to expose exoticizing and pathologizing tendencies that pose all sex work or “prostitution” as always already dehumanized—quick *a la carte* sex acts—and detached exchanges for money, often termed “selling” one’s body. It forces us to think through entrenched gender biases and moral judgments against “prostitutes” that assume and perpetuate for heterosexual⁶ men an unmarked status as consumer.⁷

Male sex laborers (*pingueros*) are sometimes erroneously called *jineteros*,⁸ or “hustlers.” Although there is overlap in these admittedly imprecise categories, in my experience, *pingueros* often insist on a distinction, but the common sense of most Cubans may not always make this distinction. A twenty-two-year-old sex laborer, Marcos, who identifies as a *pinguero*, explains the important difference this way:

"*Jineteros* rip tourists off ... *Pingueros* work hard offering sex in return for clothes, a good night out ... or dollars." *Jineteros*, however, are more precisely unofficial market procurers who most often do not offer direct services. In the economy of *maquinando* (machinating or "running game") they are the "middlemen." *Jineteros* may sell counterfeit or stolen cigars, suggest *paladares* (restaurants) and accommodations, often accompanying the foreign client. Sexual contact may occur, but only as incidental to other sorts of services. The title *pinguero* denotes a specific distinction. *Pinguero* comes from the word *pinga* (cock) with the suffix *ero* denoting that this is what the individual offers, services, or specializes in—quite like a *zapatero* specializes in shoes or a *rumbero* is expert at playing or dancing the rumba. Quite apart from the accent on the hustle, emphasis is placed on masculine sexual prowess and pleasure. This points to an inescapable gender arithmetic—most of these men, at least initially, present themselves, or *perform*, in the most "masculine" fashion they can muster—as "normal" men, therefore as penetrator.

Still, according to Alejandro, a twenty-seven-year-old *pinguero* I have known for four years, a sex laborer can be "heterosexual, bisexual or homosexual ... macho or (effeminate)." He may perform heterosexual, or homosexual—as a penetrator or penetrated—depending on his own boundaries and desires and those of his partners, very much like the other young men in my larger study who do not participate in this ambiente. The experiences of my research respondents certainly corroborate the fact that masculine sexual imaginations and practices in Latin America include sex with multiple partners, and not infrequently of both genders, which Lancaster (1992), Parker (1991, 1999), Lumsden (1996), Carrillo (2002), and others have already demonstrated in their work in Nicaragua, Brazil, Cuba, and Mexico, respectively. Predictably, these preferences run along particular hierarchies in which masculine performance (oral "passive" and/or anal "active") is valued more than its inverse, which is read as effeminate. Among Cuban men, foreigners are already read as less masculine than Cuban men. Europeans and white men from the United States "are known to be pasivos" ("passive" anal partners, or 'bottoms') according to twenty-six-year-old José, who reported that he enjoyed having sex with foreign men because he can realize his "sexual fantasies" with them. He claimed that he found it difficult to find bottoms among Cuban men his age. Reportedly, his foreign "friends" are always the passive partner: To pose these young men as innocents whose "natural" course of gender or sexual formation has been impinged upon does not reflect complex contemporary realities. It would be erroneous and particularly heterosexist to presume that because some young men trade

companionship and sex, they have been interrupted on a particular trajectory of (hetero)sexuality.

I met twenty-year-old George, a handsome athletically-built boxer, at La Pampa in 1999. This putatively exclusively heterosexual hip-hop club was located just steps around the corner from Fiat cafeteria, which at the time was a late night haunt of men who have sex with men. Both were located on the famous malecón in Havana. Some weekends, I witnessed more than a hundred men of various color descriptions gathered there, enjoying the cool and scenic malecón while cruising, talking, and laughing. George, who described himself to me as bisexual, seemed at ease with the mix of men and a few transsexual women. At La Pampa, across the street directly diagonal to where we stood, the crowd had more teenage and twenty-something partygoers and was almost exclusively Black, save a few foreign students and tourists. George seemed unconcerned to move between La Pampa, El Fiat, and the crowds of men on the malecón sea wall, although young men like him who are (or rumored to be) members of various national sports teams are rarely seen hanging out at places like Fiat, known—at least to those in the know—as “gay” space. He told me, perhaps naively, or merely counting on the power of denial, “people do not know what these guys are doing here.” The next week, I met George at a rap concert. When I asked him about his foreign friend from the previous week, with whom he had spent the rest of the evening after our short conversation, he explained that Michel was an executive at a French corporation that could invite him to France to work.⁹ George explained to me that although he was not sexually attracted to Michel, he “did not mind being sucked” and reported that he drew the line after being fellated and masturbated by him. When I asked whether he thought there is a difference in *orientación sexual* between those who suck, and those who get sucked, George explained, that “it is a simply a matter of what you like, and with who(m) ... with Michel, I might only do that ... I might do more, maybe suck you, and fuck too. The *machista* attitude is an old idea. We are all men.... I might get fucked one day too.” Later, on the same score he averred that “... this ... is not a matter of shame, but a matter of what I like.”

Although not denying that they have sex for some form of remuneration, male sex laborers in Cuba hold that it is “the way (they) do it ... friendship ... showing the island ... not just sex” that sets them apart from “prostitutes,” who they think of as full-time (female) professionals who trade only sex for a set amount of money. With much of the irony that I have come to expect, many Cubans also say “there are no prostitutes in Cuba, only *jineteras* (jockeys) who ride men for their money.” Like the distinction between *jineteros* and *pingueros*, this is

differentiated from the way *pingueros* pose their own practices as mutual and non-exploitative—thereby preserving for themselves one of the important axes of masculine respectability. *Pingueros* insist that theirs is an interpersonal *exchange* that includes the mutual pursuit of leisure *en la calle* (“in the street,” or in public).

I have borrowed Robin D. G. Kelley's notion of play-labor to capture more clearly this sense my respondents conveyed that their activities are income generating but not onerous “work.” He writes: “... play undeniably requires labor, but it is usually thought to be creative and fulfilling to those involved; it is autonomous from the world of work ... [suggesting that] the pursuit of leisure, pleasure, and creative expression is *labor*” (1997: 90). The notion of play is also advanced by Cuban-American artist and critic Coco Fusco. Fusco writes:

Still ... what really bothers some people now is that *el pueblo* [the regular people] is having a ball, and that these white foreigners prefer mulatas and negras ... Few among them seem willing to admit that most artists, musicians, and professionals with exportable skills are also looking for opportunities to socialize—and occasionally have sex—with foreigners to secure invitations abroad and even foreign jobs, not to mention to enjoy the best of Havana's nightlife (Fusco 1999: 25).

Her notion of the streets of Havana as a sort of theatre for performance complements another connotation of theatre—a space for war or conflict, which is captured in the phrase “*luchando* (fighting or struggling) *en la calle*.” If, according to Fusco, black and brown Cubans are “having a ball,” there remain incommensurable differences in male and female sex (and play) labor.¹⁰ Women and girls have less access to life *en la calle*, which is where money is made in the unofficial tourist economy. *La calle*, more productively thought of as the public sphere rather than the literal “street,”¹¹ is where men are expected to provide for the family. Owing to principles of labor and leisure in the socialist context, underemployment, and culturally structured asymmetrical gender responsibilities in which all housework is “women's work,”¹² men's lives *en la calle* in Cuba are characterized by play-labor, at least as much as work. For men, this constitutes space for various ways to *find solutions* for or *resolve* pressing household material crises, or to experience what there is to offer *en la calle*. Men effectively excluded from the center of dollar-producing activities may choose various hustles other than the sex trade, whereas women are left few choices for play-labor. This certainly impacts the differentiation in stigma against an economy of women's sex labor, relative to that of the men described here.

Thirty-year-old Camilo seemed perplexed when I asked him what he was “exchanging” with Erica, his Canadian girlfriend of six months. After a long pause, then an explanation of his situation of great material need and inability therefore to provide for a Cuban family in the way he would be expected to or would like, Camilo said that Erica had much *cariño* (caring and affection) for him and that “there might be a future for [them] ... which is impossible with a Cuban woman at this moment [because of the financial situation].”

Unlike Jamaica and Barbados, Cuba does not receive large numbers of women who come for the express purpose of sex tourism. And as one heterosexual-identified long-term respondent remarked, “women do not *pay* for sex,” although many readily *help* lovers and romantic friends with everyday finances and other resources. Cuban men that seek out women for sex play-labor seem to be older and more educated than those who hang out on the Eastern beaches and the streets of La Rampa or those who attend private fiestas with foreign men. They may meet their foreign friends at cultural events, parties, or through friends, as well as tourist sites, as opposed to street venues frequented by younger sex laborers, who along with any other young Black Cubans, face tremendous scrutiny and profiling as *jineteros* and *pingueros*. Foreign women (mostly young, as opposed to male “clients” who are usually between thirty-five and sixty) who come to Cuba as tourists, to study, or perhaps with a Socialist or humanitarian solidarity brigade, meet Cuban men who share their interest in Cuban music, culture, or politics, for example. In rare cases this may lead to emigration or long-term sexual relationships. In others, it can be a transitory sex-for-money or commodity exchange, depending on the circumstances and intentions of both individuals. Thus, sex play-labor with women takes on very particular dimensions of “romance,” enabled by heterosexist policies and structures of feeling in which these relationships, unlike those described previously, can be sanctioned officially in marriage.

At the jazz club and bar overlooking the malecón, a *tall, dark and handsome*¹³ black Cuban man in his late thirties regaled me with stories of his “adventures” with foreign women, talking slowly, and listening to my questions intently. At about the same time that we both finished our second drinks, he announced that we had made the European women who had been staring at us from across the room wait long enough and invited me to join him as he went to *play*. My new debonair friend held the French Canadian women in his thrall, alternating between (good) French and (serviceable) English for the non-Spanish speakers who told us about their love of Afro-Cuban music and culture, the heat in Cuba, and “the beauty of the people.”

When they realized I was from the United States and had Anglophone Caribbean ancestry, they complemented me on my Spanish and began telling me how much they had enjoyed (the handsome men of) Barbados on their last Caribbean excursion, and how they really loved hip-hop music's "cool" "urban masculinity." I excused myself. Weeks later, my debonair friend scoffed when I guessed that he would not *have to* have sex with these women (that he said were below his usual standard). He had sex with one several times during their weekend in Havana and referred a friend to be a "guide" for the other woman, who had taken a side trip to Varadero beach. In exchange, he received "a lot of money ... and made a friend in Quebec" who promised to send for him, as soon as she could get the documents and fees for a fiancé visa.

Cubans are very aware of their play and performances, in a market full of images of Cuba as the land of "women, rum, and Cuban cigars" (Orishas 2000). This market seems regarded and consumed as simulacra, as if in a "time warp" of socialist politics, old cars, and dark virile "macho" men. Sex laborers, the government's Ministry of Tourism, and various other Cubans who have contact with foreigners, have become quite adept at reproducing attractive representations-as-commodity for those whose hard currency helps them stay financially afloat, and which invites them to enter the mode of subject formation now entrenched in late capitalist countries: *I consume, therefore I am.*

Luchando in the Special Period: Racialized genealogies

The Special Period reached its height in 1993 as the island's economic crisis broadened to a one-third drop in gross domestic product (GDP) (Pérez-López 2001). Cubans began to show signs of malnourishment. The government sought a way to prevent the economy from collapsing by attracting hard currency. Moreover, to flourish in a "global special period of the capitalist model of development throughout the Caribbean and elsewhere" (Klak 1997: 42), while maintaining the gains of the Revolution, the state would have to nurture industry, reeducate laborers through technological transfer, repair worn infrastructure in the capital, and tackle its inefficient administrative practices and top-down leadership style. This would have to be achieved in the face of an intensification of the United States blockade that not only embargoed trade with Cuba but also isolated Cuba from the international community and global economy.

The Special Period and current Transition(s) bring into relief articulations among race/color, gender, and class, like other crises in the region (Bolles 1983; Safa 1995). The majority of those who left the country and are now able to remit funds to their families on the

island are (structurally) white and middle class.¹⁴ United States dollars coming to Cuba this way are therefore *raced* at entry. In the past, dollar remittances sent from the United States to family members in Cuba were the largest infusion of capital. Its decision to legalize the United States dollar in 1993 had extensive unintended consequences for black and brown Cubans. Mario and Mercedes' household finances, compared to their neighbors is one typical example. The neighbors, unemployed laborers, racialized as white, receive remittances and other gifts from emigrant family members that find them in a higher economic class than the young black couple, although Mario and Mercedes are professionals. The neighbors across the hallway from the couple raise suspicious eyebrows. They regard his nightly forays into the streets as evidence of the criminal and licentious "nature" of black Cubans. Mercedes, the mother of Mario's child, does not ask what he does to get some of the things he provides for the family.

Until 8 November 2004, the Cuban peso was used to buy fresh food items in local markets, the most basic provisions, and (non-tourist) transportation. A much greater variety of processed food, clothing, and other commodities could be purchased using the convertible peso, minted and accepted for United States dollar value only in Cuba, or the United States dollar. Tourism also intensifies class and racial inequality. Although tropical clichés of the exotic and erotic serve as the engine of the tourist industry in Cuba, the engine remains in the back, not in the "front of the house" in hotels, driving tourist taxis or giving tours. Thus, *luchando en la calle* is the only viable option for obtaining still-coveted foreign dollars for most individuals. For the majority of Cubans, the Special Period necessitated many forms of creative home economics. Many of these have come to be known as *luchando* (fighting or struggling) in the street (*la calle*) or *maquinando* (machinations). It has many facets; for example, it can involve helping tourists find cheap taxis, selling stolen or counterfeited cigars, or engendering short- or long-term (sexual) relationships for money or goods. Not only and not all black and brown Cubans are engaged in this. Nadine Fernandez observed that "most Cubans [who have been exposed to foreigners] have engaged in some form of *jineteando*, or hustling, if what we mean by this is the extraction of dollars from foreigners" (1999). Pushed to the margins of the new formal *capitalist* tourist economy, however, means that the practices of the poor are more public—*en la calle*—and therefore noticeable and endlessly commented upon.

It remains to be seen what long-term effect the Cuban government's recent suspension of the use of the United States dollar will have. The tightening of the United States blockade in 2004 put strict limits on

remittances and travel to the island. In my last two short research trips to Cuba, in summer 2004 and summer 2005, I witnessed increased economic disparity from what I had seen in the previous four years. This was most dramatic during the last trip after the United States dollar had been delegalized and levied with a surcharge for exchange. Cuban friends reported that although there were fewer shortages of items that were rare a few years ago (e.g., cooking oil and auto petrol) there was "less money in the street." One family that had been slowly and steadily collecting building materials like cinder blocks, tiles, and fixtures, for an addition to the family apartment, was forced to stop the project and sell much of the material for whatever they could get. The new United States restrictions on how much families may remit from the United States, and, reportedly, a moderate downturn in tourism, has put in crisis those who make their livings from the informal tourist market and ad hoc trade in sundries such as costume jewelry, accessories, and clothing.

Still, if "survival" in the Special Period were the sole reason for sex labor, we should have observed a steady decrease in the practice in an inverse relationship to improvements in the Cuban GDP and food distribution since the mid-1990s. This has not been the case. Thus, we turn to a brief genealogical exploration of the subjective desires of racialized and sexed agents on the ground. This is precisely not to say that desire and consumption are divorced from social forces such as race, gender, and class. These are complexly interwoven. Social and cultural obligations, norms and expectations are differently experienced based on color/racial and sexual hierarchies. Therefore, individuals tactically position themselves in particular ways to fulfill goals, or merely, in the moment, to feel good, meet a quick objective, or experience a moment's respite from the constraints in which they are embedded.

Blacks in Cuba had built their culture against a backdrop of putative *unrespectability* or *disreputability* and had to therefore find ways of recognizing and valuing their own styles and oppositional practices and rhetorics. From the position of the larger culture, or Creole European (structurally white) hegemony, to be respectable was to eschew African and 'traditional' Afro-Cuban cultural markers, and those stereotypes of open sexuality, religious fervor, and living on the margins of legality.

'Flossin,' a United States hip-hop neologism defined by a young black Cuban man as *to show that you have ... good clothes and shoes ... that you* "live a good life ... share with your friends" — corresponds seamlessly with local understandings on appropriate masculine behavior, in which the manliest among men is not only sexually prolific but

also well-groomed (not fussy, but always well put-together) convivial and magnanimous. I had seen this young man before; short in stature, but with a solid frame, he wore a red oversized *Mecca* brand jersey that looked even more oversized on him, with a red bandana, white jeans, which were in fashion in New York City at the time, and sparkling clean white tennis shoes with fat red laces. As if to exemplify popular takes on the style of the most well-paid entertainers, “diamond” earrings glimmered from his ears, and a gold tooth shone from his winning smile. Folks told me that this young man had friends in the Bahamas who traffic bootleg items from Miami to Nassau to Havana. He was a sort of walking billboard for the things he sold to other Cubans. This young entrepreneur’s appearance, ability to pay for beers for himself and his friends, and his knowledge of the latest United States adolescent lingo made him an attractive figure to his peers. My respondent’s impressions that he always seemed to be with the most attractive women seemed to be true on the occasions that I observed him. He could not claim the knowledge and skill of the rappers who were about to take the stage, but rather displayed another sort of “authenticity,” which likewise has quite a bit of purchase among young people forging new subjectivities as black cosmopolitan young adults. Flossin’ is an example of black masculine practices, and thus, an important value and *weapon of the weaker* (Scott 1985) in its inversion of “public transcripts” that interpellate certain groups as less worthy or appropriate to use *things* and style for their own pleasure.

One night during my first research trip to Cuba, Hermán, who was especially agitated after learning that his brother had been denied entry into England after leaving Spain—where he was supposed to be visiting his fiancée—began talking about leaving the island for the United States as a *balseiro* (in an inner tube). I asked why he would risk his life, when he had benefits in Cuba that poor people around the world envy—education, housing, national belonging. After a long pause, during which he seemed to be gazing in the horizon for the answer, he disabused me of the “innocence” my privilege afforded. Hermán said simply, “you have good tennis shoes. I want good tennis shoes too.” His longing for good tennis shoes must not be read as frivolous or as false consciousness. It is a personal-political expression, indexing more profound desires and consciousness. Young Cubans, who have been educated/indoctrinated to believe in their own value and agency, even “within the revolution,” are understandably very frustrated by the lack of what appears, from their observation of foreigners, to be basic: nice clothing, some jewelry, and the opportunity to travel to other countries “freely.” Sex play-laborers tend to be very aware, through international media, of a spectacular array of increasingly

homogenized commodities and styles that, without the aid of foreigners with United States dollars, would be impossible to consume. Sex laborers find themselves pulled in by the web of consumerism, and thus bound, help to create an even tighter spool of desires and intentions wrapped up in consumption.

Northern Gay(ze) and the twenty-peso party

I visited the home of friends in Cerro, after my first unaccompanied visit to the twenty-peso fiesta¹⁵—the weekend pay parties attended by foreign and Cuban men who have sex with men. When asked about my impressions of the party, my full report followed. Unlike other gatherings that I had attended in Havana with them or other acquaintances, no one approached me to talk, dance, or even held a glance very long when I attempted to initiate a dance invitation or a conversation. I had been a wallflower content to observe more than I had participated that evening. Laughing, my friend's lover asked me two questions: first, *what did you wear*; then, *did you speak English*? I proudly explained that I spoke only (my best Habanero) Spanish and that I had worn the *guayabera* and plain sandals I had traded a week before, with a pair of long lightweight cotton shorts. They both laughed and then gave his advice: *Next time, speak English — very loudly, and go first to the bar to buy a bottle of rum.* “You will have many friends before you even open the bottle.” They explained that the partygoers thought that I was Cuban, and a *guajiro* (county boy) *at that — wearing a guayabera like an old man who just came in from the provinces!* As a foreigner, I had been misplaced in the economy of the twenty-peso party.

For young men in Havana, these parties, which range in style from small gatherings in non-tourist and largely black areas like Cerro or Cayo Hueso, attended mostly by Cubans and a few foreigners, to more grand affairs in lush gardens, dominated by foreigners and more well heeled (and whiter) Cubans, are important weekend diversions, and a center of the constitution of the emerging *gay* public in Havana. I limit my comments to the latter style of fiestas, which constitute a key element of male/male sex play-labor and thus are more germane to the topic. This is one example of the interplay of the desires of Cubans and foreigners who attend these parties and other spaces in which they gaze upon “objects” of their desire. On one hand, the parties provide some cultural legibility for these North American and European travelers, who experience the often disorienting singularity of Cuba in other realms during their visits. The signs and significations within the “gay club” are similar the world over—one indication of the

globalization's attempt at homogenization, even at the margins. On the other hand, the status of the foreigner at the fiesta—even unattractive, over “a certain age,” or otherwise undesirable—is privileged in ways that most men could not experience at home.

The best way to find out about the twenty-peso party used to be to hang out on La Rampa (the main drag in Vedado close to Habana Libre Hotel) in front of Yara cinema on a weekend evening. None of these parties are advertised openly. Although I have attended many parties where the National Police have pointed out the site of the party on a dark road, gatherings like these are extralegal. From the moment a *Yuma* (foreigner, potential *Pepe*, or sex-play consumer) arrives at any of the places where men who have sex with men are known to gather, like La Rampa, he is surveilled, then approached—often boyishly aggressive—by one or more of the young men present. This aggressiveness is not to be perceived as threatening but as *masculine*. It seems also, from conversations with Pepes, that this aggressive “macho” attitude is titillating to them. The young men decide, given who is available, which Yumas they will approach and ultimately engage. Echoing the majority of those I talked to, one *pinguero* told me “For me to go with him, he must be attractive and clean, and look like a good person.” In any event, regardless of what he looks like, a Yuma will eventually be approached by a Cuban who will ask “Where are you from....” On weekends, if the young Cuban man wants to attend the twenty-peso party, he will mention it if the Yuma does not. After he agrees to go, often the young men, now the host for the evening, will invite his friends to join their party. They may share a *colectivo* (group taxis for non-tourist use) if the Yuma is passable as Cuban and the young man is budget conscious. More often, they will use a tourist taxi or privately hired car. The foreigner will pay. Once at the fiesta, the foreigner will pay for entry of the Cubans—twenty pesos (one United States dollar) each—and himself, two or three dollars, but always more than the dollar for Cuban entry. This “double-standard” is a common practice all over Cuba, where foreigners must pay more for entrance fees and cover charges than Cubans at state-run events, to gesture toward equalizing the tremendous gulf and providing access to cultural events to Cubans, for example. Once they have arrived, the Cuban host, following local rules of masculine etiquette, will make sure that everything is okay, that the rum is flowing (from the pocket of the Yuma), and that he enjoys himself dancing, drinking, and being attended to by his host(s).

The twenty-peso parties are often spectacular affairs including loud Latin American Top 40 and electronic music, *espectáculos de transformistas* (drag shows), and a cash bar well stocked with bottles of

rum, mixers, and beer. The *free* and friendly structure of feeling does not seem dampened by the fact that it is "hidden" (in plain sight, just farther away). It allows for the Northern gay Yuma to be comfortable in the familiar scene of young and attractive men dancing, drinking, and flirting. One of the central differences is that those that would be seen as surplus to this in the United States, for various reasons, may in fact become central to the scene in Cuba. For gay men tourism provides an uncanny inversion of surveillance and suspicion they may face at home, as well as relaxation of competition for attractive partners and barriers to affection, sex, and romance. One Yuma from Canada explained to me that "it's not 'just sex,'" while another pointed out how "comfortable" and "safe" he feels with his Cuban *friend* at the party and on the streets of Havana in comparison to being alone in Dallas. Vacationers get to invert their everyday experiences while they consume experiences and bodies, the likes of which they would normally have restricted, or have no access at all. Jerard, from New York, confided, "they are as fine as the Dominican and Puerto Rican *trade* back home, but you don't have to worry about getting bashed in the head ... and they are so sweet!" Trade (i.e., an impeccably masculine "top" partner or, as in this case, sex play-laborer) that not only satisfies sexual desires but seems to care and is economical to boot! This is not just my attempt at humor at Jerard's expense. The combination of the experience of care, sexual proficiency and security is central to why these tourists' experiences are different from a gay man visiting Miami, for example. These Yumas feel safe, not only because the national police were patrolling the street and harassing young men by asking for their carnets, moving them out of tourist areas, for their protection and comfort, but more profoundly because the men (appear to them to be) arrayed there for their pleasure and consumption and, in the Canadian's words repeated by many others, because "these are real men."

Agents of not only their own pleasure, but the global hegemony of the North from which most come, visitors who see Cuba as a "playground" or a simulacrum of socialism and machismo, for example, contribute their dollars to the local economies.¹⁶ The demands and perceived preferences of these visitors drive supplies of old Cuban music, old Cuban costumes, old Cuban racial hierarchies, and old macho structures of feeling and gender/sex roles—this is in no way to say that these are "false" or obsolete, but certainly unreconstructed, if not emotionally and sexually satisfying for the partners. Sex laborers exploit this, mostly in a very self-conscious way. The market for male sex laborers is driven by strongly held notions of hyperactive Cuban masculinity (machismo), romance, and sexual organs of legendary proportions. Furthermore, Cuban achievements in music and art have

been exported to a global market primed for images of dancing, singing and hospitable “natives.”

The effect of sexual/racial ideology in which black and brown people are mythologized as indolent and at once savage and desirable still obtains today. It can be seen in the reasoning given for romantic object choice, which I observed innumerable times as deeply embedded in Cuban common sense. In Fernandez’s (1998: 63) exploration of young heterosexual couples, one of her white identified respondents said that “... he preferred women of color because they are fiery (*fogososa*) as the Cubans say vulgarly, hotter (*calientes*).” Likewise, in a gay context, Lumsden (1996: 96) contends “Cubans expect blacks to be ‘symbols of virility’ and many blacks feel obliged to fit this super-virile mold.” He quotes an “old homosexual” respondent, “The lower classes [understood as overwhelmingly black and brown] had much more *sabor* [flavor]. Decent people had no *sabor*, no spice ... did we often pay for sex? Of course we did ...” (Lumsden 1996: 96; paren. mine).

By the end of the evening, the young Cuban man will have discerned a few important details about the foreigner, including “whether he is generous or stingy” and therefore whether he should continue being attached to him or should find another Yuma, or a Cuban friend with reliable transportation. This is risky because taxi fare is often prohibitive. If all is well, they may have enough rapport to plan to go to a *posada* (unofficial hostel for short stays) or to the Yuma’s *casa particular* (private rented home) for sex or an extended stay as host and companion because tourist hotels do not allow Cuban guests, except under special circumstances. The more or less typical scene described here can have various endings, and not all Yumas are interested in the fiestas. Similar in spirit are trips to parts of Havana’s Eastern beaches. There are also other scenes in private homes and among well-heeled travelers in which the *pinguero*, usually athletes and entertainers, may not have to work as hard to entertain and are remunerated better for their time. In other cases, of course, “some prefer to just stay in their rooms and get fucked” as one *pinguero* told me. If like Alejandro, one happens upon a foreigner who has a large amount of leisure time, a *pinguero* might have the opportunity to travel to various places around the island. One twenty-one-year-old told me that a forty-five-year-old Swiss man took him to “... Varadero, Matanzas ... Trinidad ... I have family there, but had never been before ... I just had to massage him and hold him ... be nice and get sucked ... fuck him once or twice ... my friend gave me a lot of money ... still sends me money sometimes, and gave me this (an Italian horn pendant on a gold chain, and a Swiss watch) ... Maybe I can get a work visa invitation to go to the Alps to see how life is there.”

Conclusion

Currently the Cuban state is attempting to reenter global currency on its own terms as *mixed* Cuban socialism. At the same time, increasingly influenced by the exigencies of the global market, new (and old) ways of coping with these exigencies are (re) emerging among Cubans who already have access to a wide repertoire of cultural idioms of identity. Similar processes are taking place throughout the Caribbean, and other sites around the globe where Black and brown bodies are required for the sex market, and where Black and brown *persons* use their bodies to meet their own needs. Although, as I have pointed out, these choices are conditioned by current material realities and historical interpellations, these men are exploiting a willing market for the performance and play of mythologized Caribbean masculinity. One should not ignore the fact that these respondents were clear about what they themselves perceive as conscious choices of an exciting and sometimes lucrative lifestyle.

Notes

Received 20 January 2005; accepted 1 August 2006.

Address correspondence to Jafari Sinclair Allen, Department of Anthropology, University of Texas, 1 University Station C3200, Austin, TX 78712. E-mail: jsallen@mail.utexas.edu

1. I thank the coeditors of this special edition, Karla Slocum and Deborah Thomas, as well as *Identities* editors and readers, for their helpful comments on this essay and their collegiality.
2. *¡Venceremos?: Erotics and Politics of Black Self-Making in Cuba's Special Period*. Currently under revision.
3. The "world's oldest profession" did not disappear but had been limited to small sex-for-commodity exchanges with Soviet and Eastern European functionaries visiting the island (Fernandez 1999) prior to the Special Period. By 2001, when I completed my formal ethnographic research, intermittent crackdowns and harassment, especially of Black men and young women, had dramatically reduced the obviousness of the sex trade in Havana streets.
4. I use the nomenclature Black to refer to those on the island who identify racially and culturally as Black and/or Afro-Cuban. The latter term, with its ties to the folklorization and commoditization of African descended culture and persons, sans a sense of conscious racial politics that the use of black underscores, is currently contentious.
5. G. Derrick Hodge's NACLA article is the first academic article to appear in English exclusively on male sex laborers in Cuba. Although Hodge's intentions are understandable—to expose what he problematically calls the "colonization of the Cuban male body" by the ever-expanding capitalist market—his contribution is weakened by what seems to be a particular brand of North American Left ardor that ultimately must be tempered by immersion into the complex social milieux of local subjects.
6. I use these terms as shorthand to reduce clumsiness. Please read structurally (homosexual, bisexual, heterosexual) ... behaviorally (homosexual, bisexual, heterosexual)

... because I do not want to reify any of these terms as solid or permanent. In some cases I have indicated homosex or heterosex.

7. Articulating presumed heterosexual men's putative "romancing" of heterosexual women, to "hustling" of gay men by men, to female "prostitution," constitutes a critique not only of heterosexist and misogynist foundations of discourses on sex work and "prostitution" but also of the presumptive impulse that seek to sanitize the messiness of individual action at the interstices of structure and personal agency and desire.
8. Literally, this means "jockey." *Jinetera* is the common name for female sex workers who are seen to "ride" their Yumas.
9. In my larger project, I discuss some of the differences between male and female sex labor. One of the dimensions is the ways that offers of emigration are made or expected. Emigration is neither the primary goal nor is it expected by most *pingueros*.
10. Although I would argue for more consideration of the personal agency of female sex laborers, I have not systematically studied female sex laborers. My observations and analyses are limited to men.
11. The street is, after all, "outside," to point to a popular English-speaking Caribbean term for the practice of men having dalliances or families outside of their marriages or primary relationship.
12. The fact that this Socialist principal is enfeebled by women's double and triple duty is currently being tackled by the FMC (Cuban Women's Federation).
13. My emphasis on this clichéd phrase is meant to underscore the fact that he so well reflected notions of masculine attractiveness—squared jaw, full features, wide shoulders and 6'2".
14. This group of Cuban "exiles" is politically and demographically distinct from newer immigrants, including Marielitos from the boatlifts of the 1980s who are more diverse in color and race and come from working classes.
15. My first visit, weeks earlier, was to a smaller fiesta in Cerro accompanied by the godson of this friend, during which I was treated as a family friend rather than a Yuma.
16. In other sites in the region, they stimulate global and Northern business interests, which often control and/or supply the local tourist industry or Ministry. In Cuba, some hotels are state controlled and others are "mixed enterprises," with, for example, Spanish hoteliers.

References

- Alexander, M. Jacqui 1997. Erotic autonomy as a politics of decolonization: An anatomy of feminist and state practices in the Bahamas tourist economy. In *Feminist Genealogies, Colonial Legacies, Democratic Futures*. M. Jacqui Alexander and Chandra Talpade Mohanty, eds. London: Routledge.
- Appadurai, Arjun 1996. *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization*. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press.
- Bolles, A. Lynne 1983. Kitchens hit by priorities: Working class women confront the IMF. In *Women and Men and the International Division of Labor*. Nash Kelly and Fernandez Kelly, eds. Albany, NY: State University of New York.
- Cabezas, A. 1998. Discourses of prostitution: the case of Cuba. In *Global Sex Workers: Rights, Resistance, and Redefinition*. Kamala Kempadoo and Jo Doezema, eds. New York: Routledge.
- Carrillo, Hector 2002. *The Night Is Young: Sexuality in Mexico in the Time of AIDS*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.

- Fernandez, Nadine T. 1998. The color of love: young interracial couples in Cuba. *Latin American Perspectives* 23(1): 99–117.
- Fernandez, Nadine T. 1999. Back to the future? Women, race, and tourism in Cuba. In *Global Sex Workers: Rights, Resistance, and Redefinition*. Kamala Kempadoo and Jo Doezema, eds. New York: Routledge.
- Fusco, Coco 1999. Hustling for dollars: Jineterismo in Cuba. In *Global Sex Workers: Rights, Resistance, and Redefinition*. Kamala Kempadoo and Jo Doezema, eds. New York: Routledge.
- Gilliam, Angela 1991. Women's equality and national liberation. In *Third World Women and the Politics of International Feminism*. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press.
- Gupta, Akhil and James Ferguson 1992. Beyond 'culture': Space, identity and the politics of difference. *Cultural Anthropology* 7(1): 6–23.
- Hall, Stuart 1991. The local and the global: Globalization and ethnicity. In *Culture, Globalization, and the World-System: Contemporary Conditions for the Representation of Identity*. Anthony D. King, ed. Binghamton, NY: Department of Art and Art History, State University of New York at Binghamton.
- Harvey, David 1989. *The Condition of Postmodernity: An Enquiry into the Origins of Cultural Change*. Blackwell: New York.
- Hodge, G. Derrick 2001. Colonization of the Cuban body: The growth of male sex work in Havana. *NACLA Report on the Americas* 34(5): 20–28.
- Kempadoo, Kamala 2001. Women of color and the global sex trade: Transnational feminist perspectives. *Meridians* 1: 28–51.
- Kelley, Robin D. G. 1997. *Yo Mama's Dysfunctional: Fighting the Culture Wars in Urban America*. Boston, MA: Beacon.
- Klak, T. 1997. Havana and Kingston: Mass media images and empirical observations of two Caribbean cities in crisis. *Urban Geography* 15: 4.
- Lancaster, Roger 1992. *Life is Hard: Machismo, Danger and the Intimacy of Power in Nicaragua*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.
- Lavie, Smadar and Ted Swedenburg, eds. 1996. *Displacement, Diaspora and Geographies of Identity*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Lumsden, Ian 1996. *Machos, Maricones, and Gays: Cuba and Homosexuality*. Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press.
- Mintz, Sidney 1985. *Sweetness and Power: The Place of Sugar in Modern History*. New York: Viking Press.
- Mohammed, Patricia 2003. A symbiotic visiting relationship: Caribbean feminist historiography and Caribbean feminist theory. In *Confronting Power, Theorizing Gender: Interdisciplinary Perspectives in the Caribbean*. Eudine Barriteau, ed. Cave Hill: University of the West Indies Press.
- O'Connell Davidson, Julia 1996. Sex tourism in Cuba. *Race and Class* 38(1): 39–48.
- Orishas 2000. [Musical Recording] "A Lo Cubano" Universal Latino Records.
- Ortner, Sherry B. 1998. *Making Gender: The Politics and Erotics of Culture*. Boston, MA: Beacon Press.
- Parker, Richard 1999. *Beneath the Equator: Cultures of Desire, Male Homosexuality and Emerging Gay Identities in Brazil*. New York: Routledge.
- Parker, Richard 1991. *Bodies, Pleasure and Passions: Sexual Culture in Contemporary Brazil*. New York: Beacon.
- Pérez-López, Jorge F. 2001. *The Cuban Economy in 2002–2003*. <http://lanic.utexas.edu/project/asce/pdfs/volume13/perezlopez.pdf#search=%22P%C3%A9rez-L%C3%B3pez%202001%20cuba%22>
- Pheterson, Gail 1997. *Vindication of the Rights of Whores*. Seattle, CA: Seal Press.

- Safa, Helen Icken 1995. *The Myth of the Male Breadwinner: Women and Industrialization in the Caribbean*. Boulder, CO: Westview Press.
- Scott, James C 1985. *Weapons of the Weak: Everyday Forms of Peasant Resistance*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.
- Williams, Raymond 1977. *Marxism and Literature*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Wolf, Eric 1982. *Europe and the People Without History*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.