Exposing Caribbean Tourism

Paula Aymer


The black body in its varied shades of blackness is a major site of contestation in Kempadoo’s Sun, Sex, and Gold. This collected volume defines Caribbean broadly, to include the people of the Caribbean islands and the Caribbean “rimlands” of Central and South America. Kempadoo connects the entire region and its people to a common history of exploitation by European and North American colonizers. The book examines the costs of economic development for the poor countries of the region, countries that have grown increasingly dependent on tourism. Contributors to this work use their research to show how multinational companies, local governments, and law enforcement personnel collude to place the resources and people of the region at the disposal of foreign investors. Women’s bodies, in particular, have become major commodities in the economic development agenda.

This important work opens up a much needed discussion on racism and sexism in the Caribbean. Several authors suggest that Caribbean forms of tourism support powerful racist ideologies and stereotypes created in predominantly white societies about the innate sensuousness of black bodies. However, other articles disclose that male clients in the sex trade, whether local and black or foreign and white, have developed varied sexual tastes and aesthetics for particular shades of black female bodies. The race discussion is
further complicated by data revealing that white female tourists arriving from Europe and North America comb Caribbean beaches and bars in search of young black men who fit their preconceived “return-to-nature” racial images.

Philosophical arguments engage the reader throughout the work. Kempadoo allows contributing researchers to challenge the very definition of prostitution. In several of the studies, women present themselves as workers worthy of wages, legitimate laborers who demand and expect respect from clients and the police. These women argue that sex work should be viewed as a private business enterprise. Also, many women view sex work as a way to meet potential husbands; thus, the work can serve as a path toward a raised social status.

Sun, Sex, and Gold examines reasons why Caribbean men and women continue to work in the sex industry. For low-income women, the predictable wages ensure their own survival and that of their families. But contributors reveal that throughout the region, even fairly well-off Caribbean women engage in sex work. In addition, the glitz and glamour that surround Caribbean tourist enclaves lure young, middle-class, local women into becoming sexual companions to foreign men. The extra cash allows these women to indulge more fully in the trappings of materialism.

At the core of Kempadoo’s analytical framework are issues of global inequities. She has included articles that highlight the significance of geopolitics and labor exploitation. It is not by chance that a particular style of tourism and its accompanying myths have been developed and fostered in poor former colonies located south of the equator. Ideologies of power and privilege ensure that Northern tourists arrive in the Caribbean with exaggerated expectation that people there with limited resources could provide visitors with unheard-of pleasures. A secondary theme emerges throughout the book: the tourism economy’s fragile infrastructure. Directly underneath the surface of the idealized Caribbean is a society fraught with a paucity of health-care institutions, with Caribbean cultural values of masculinity that encourage intimate partner violence in men, and with values of femininity that pressure poor women to bear children and take full responsibility for their upbringing.

The pathbreaking research found in this volume uncovers the sordid secrets about how Caribbean societies work. The innate weakness of Caribbean states, evident in their inability to provide for and protect the majority of their citizens, rings clear. Readers follow Caribbean women in continuous regional migration patterns as they go in search of sex work and other service labor. From the Dominican Republic and Haiti to the Dutch Antilles, from Brazil and Guyana to the interior of Suriname, from Guatemala and El Salvador to Belize, women travel and form what used to be Caribbean-male
migration patterns, as their relatives await remittances. This female rural-to-urban migration also takes place in Jamaica and Cuba. The regular participation of children and teens in sex work with local men in the Caribbean coastal towns of Columbia and in Belize, for example, will draw surprise, and readers should expect the discomfort that will follow from the detailed accounts of feminine hygiene practices that precede and follow sexual exchanges; of the strictly female hazards encountered in this kind of labor; and of the private male and female fantasies that seek fulfillment within the Caribbean Basin.

This commendable effort by Kempadoo succeeds in pulling together research data from scholars who share similar interests but have disparate agendas. It must have taken some doing. The result is a readable, interesting account of the Caribbean region as it struggles to find a path to economic development. The work spotlights the black body and especially the female black body as it is used to attract tourists to the region. Caribbeanists and social scientists with an interest in globalization, women’s studies scholars who research women’s health and community health issues, researchers in tourism and leisure studies, and all those who have been too insular in their definition of the Caribbean will do well to read *Sun, Sex, and Gold*. I recommend it highly for use in undergraduate and graduate programs.
CONTRIBUTORS

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