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Introduction to the Cultural Study of Commercial Sex

Guest Editor

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The articles in this collection explore how the meaning of buying and selling sex changes according to the social, cultural and historical processes in which transactions are situated. In an earlier article published in this journal, I proposed a theoretical framework for the cultural study of commercial sex that would liberate researchers from the restrictions of a debate intensely meaningful to some but highly repressive to many others, centring on whether prostitution can ever be work or must be considered violence against women (Agustín 2005a). My call for papers using a cultural framework read.

Given the proliferation of forms of commercial sex, the scarcity of research – except on ‘prostitution’ – is remarkable. The focus is usually on personal motivations, the morality of the buying-and-selling relationship, stigma, violence and disease prevention. Questions of desire and love are usually sidelined; relationships are rarely contextualized culturally or conceived as complex; concrete sexual issues are hardly dealt with. Commercial sex is usually disqualified from cultural research and treated only as a moral issue. A new field of the cultural study of commercial sex would refer to all commercial goods and services with an erotic or sexual element – a rich field of human activities, all of them operating in complex socio-cultural contexts where the meaning of buying and selling sex is not always the same.

Sites of the sex industry: Bars, restaurants, cabarets, clubs, brothels, discotheques, saunas, massage parlours, sex shops, peep shows, hotel rooms, flats, bookshops, striptease and lapdance venues, dungeons, internet sites, beauty parlours, clubhouses, cinemas, public toilets, phonelines and occasional sites such as stag and hen events, shipboard festivities and ‘modelling’, swinging and fetish parties.

Participants in the sex industry: Business owners, bartenders, waiters, maids, cashiers, guards, drivers, cooks, cleaners, accountants, lawyers, doctors, travel agents, tourist guides, estate agents, media editors and entrepreneurs, outreach

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personnel, researchers – as well as those who sell sex or its illusions and those who buy it. (Agustín, 2005b)

My list of people involved in commercial sex expanded significantly on the usual focus on a single commercial moment when two individuals exchange sex for money, and I suggested that welcome submissions would

- question the discursive division between commercial and non-commercial sex;
- examine the belief that sex-with-love or sex-with-partners is superior to paid sex;
- consider concepts of consumption, entertainment and ‘having a good time’;
- explore different notions of desire;
- take into account ethnicity and class, as well as gender. (Agustín, 2005b)

The usefulness of the traditional prostitution concept had been questioned previously by students of tourism and sexuality in non-western environments (for example, Cohen, 1987; Nelson, 1987; Tabet, 1987; Crick, 1992; Wardlow, 2004). Those studying the first-world’s working classes, in history and the present, had also warned against imposing present-day and middle-class values on ‘other’ cultures (for example, Walkowitz, 1977; Stansell, 1982; Peiss, 1983; Walkerdine, 1997). Campaigners against prostitution and sexual exploitation condemn this questioning of a universal (negative) meaning for exchanging sex for money, to which I reply that campaigning has its place but sits badly with the search for knowledge. Most academics, seeking to understand small pieces of the universe, know they must at least try to suspend prior judgments on the way.

Despite the cultural framing of the call for papers, I received many articles focusing narrowly on the prostitution concept, albeit in a non-moralizing style, describing and accepting the sale of sex as an economic activity. I heard numerous stories of the difficulty of publishing work that does not fall obviously into customary categories, whether epidemiological (which views sex workers as ‘high-risk’ individuals whose practices must be enumerated, analysed and surveilled) or feminist (which examines why women sell sex and men buy it, with commentaries on exploitation and agency).

By calling for culturally situated work, I opened the door to a review process in which I spent many hours locating people around the world and from many disciplines to comment on particular aspects of articles, because few reviewers could claim expertise on all of the topics addressed in any one article. And when reviews came in, they often disagreed, necessitating

finding yet more referees to help arbitrate final calls on what could go into the edition and what had to be let go (my own submission, handled by a *Sexualities* editor, was one of these). Disciplinary toes were being stepped on, and ideas of what constitutes the canon to which authors ought to refer. Some reviewers worried about the sprawl of subject matter, as writers attempted to situate sex in culture. In some original article drafts, authors defensively attempted to forestall anti-prostitution critiques by admitting that injustice and exploitation exist, even when their own research did not uncover any. These sections fell on the cutting-room floor so that authors could use the space for making other points; information was prioritized over moralizing or continuing the conventional debate.

In the final collection, some themes emerge repeatedly. All articles address activities of the middle class: their leisure, tourism, mobility, consumption, search for identity, use of cyberspace and social work (paid and voluntary). Characters studied include brothel, bar and website managers and businessmen, academic researchers, strippers, outreach educators and prostitute entrepreneurs fed up with low-paying service work. There are lots of tourists – gay, straight and senior citizens, but predominately here they are men, and local residents can make dramatically good money by catering to them. Personal and class identities are constructed through demonstrating taste and style: how you spend your time and money and with whom, and who sees you doing it. Leisure spaces predominate: the beach, dance clubs, casinos, brothels, bars, webpages.

We are in cities where easy travel provides endless opportunities for meeting ‘others’, creating hybrid products, looks, situations. Locations range from first world (Spain, the USA, the Czech Republic) to third world (Pakistan, Brazil) and the world of cyberspace. Some of these are associated with the ‘lower’ end of entertainment: a decaying red-light district, a city park filled with migrant sex workers, hardcore porn. Formerly stigmatized settings blend with the mainstream; the boundaries between sex tourism and non-sex tourism, and business and pleasure, and love and self-interest, become impossible to maintain. Stigmas associated with selling and buying sex are finessed, sometimes through the blurring of public and private. But everywhere, commercial sex emerges as an activity engaged in at least quasi-openly, a form of consumption and community, with the ‘acts’ in sex acts less important than the socializing, the friendships and the public spending of money.

An interest in what motivates people to sell and buy sex remains, and money is still important, but globalization and the transformations of present-day capitalism make a difference. The expansion of service employment is reflected in stories of local wage-earners adapting their performances to meet consumers’ changing tastes in music, bar ambiance and clothing. Some sex workers strive to professionalize, while others

cultivate (and sell) an amateur persona. But modelling for pornographic pictures, stripping and lapdancing, escorting tourists, doing prostitution and sex work also emerge as occupations considered to be rewarding, to open doors and to facilitate self-realization, community and social mobility.

The articles here collected, which were written in 2006, do not represent power as clearly held or relationships as hierarchical. Instead, the poor and less poor and the white and less white interact; their desires are complementary; the differences between them are obscured. It is not possible to state definitively that tourism is *here* whilst 'real life' is *there*, and certainly not that good sex with love is *here* whilst bad sex with money is *there*. All the articles treat encounters where sex and money are exchanged as complex, embedded in social, cultural, economic and historical contexts, and all authors eschew making definitive judgements about exploitation.

Together the collection constitutes not totally 'new' material but rather suggests a point of departure for future study that reflects the contemporary concerns of many scholars. Authors identify with different academic disciplines (medical anthropology, sociology, gender studies, media studies, cultural anthropology), and they use different methods for conveying their ideas: ethnographic description, case studies, quotations from interviewees. Authors were requested to be reflexive, to include some information about how they experienced their own research. Commercial sex is a popular subject with today's students, whose questions arise from their own lives – the complicated cultures they see around them and create. For those who want to deal exclusively with patriarchy and power, the traditional prostitution framework will endure; for those who have other kinds of questions, here is another way.

I wish to thank all those who sent in their work and agreed to review colleagues' articles. *Sexualities* is the right place for this special edition because of its remit to publish work that 'aims to describe, analyse, theorise and critique the changing nature of the social organization of human sexual experience in the late modern world' and to inform about 'lived life'. I am indebted to Ken Plummer for believing in this project and offering this forum and to Agnes Skamballis for her support throughout the editorial process.

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Biographical Note

Laura María Agustín studies cultural and postcolonial issues linking commercial sex, migration, informal economies and feminist theory. She publishes in both Spanish and English and is currently Award Holder and Principal Investigator of 'Migrant Workers in the UK Sex Industry', sponsored by the UK's Economic and Social Research Council. Her *Sex at the Margins: Migration, Labour Markets and the Rescue Industry* was published by Zed Books in 2007. Address: ISET, London Metropolitan University, 166 Holloway Road, London N7 8DB, UK. [email: laura@nodo50.org] website: www.nodo50.org/conexiones/Laura_Agustin