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## **Seduction as Power?**

# Searching for Empowerment and Emancipation in Sex Work

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### **ABSTRACT**

A longstanding debate within feminism has been whether sex work is empowering or ultimately disempowering for those who engage in it. This essay seeks to contextualize discourses about seduction, prostitution, and sexual tourism as they relate to Brazil and to make a preliminary assessment as to the ways in which the act of seduction might be empowering for Brazil's sex workers. Based on ethnographic research and borrowing from literary theory, tourism theory, and interdisciplinary theories of power and agency, I argue that seduction has the potential to be empowering for Brazilian prostitutes who can capitalize on the racial and ethnic stereotypes of Brazilian women. Nevertheless, I maintain that although seduction may be empowering for those who utilize it, it cannot hope to be emancipatory for woman-kind. I also make a secondary argument that this debate can be interpreted as a conceptual dichotomy of prostitutes as seductresses and prostitutes as fatally seduced.

**Keywords:** agency / Brazil / power / prostitution / seduction / sex work / tourism

## Introduction

Of the many debates within feminist thought, sex work and prostitution are among the most contentious. A resurgence of this debate made headlines in 2015 when, after conducting two years of consulting and research, Amnesty International voted to draft a policy in support of the complete decriminalization of prostitution, which was completed the following year. The organization voted to support this measure after deciding that the best way to ensure the rights and respect the agency of prostitutes and other sex workers while preventing abuses against them was to decriminalize sex work (Amnesty International, 2015; Amnesty International, 2016). Reacting to the initial vote in 2015, Women's Aid UK (a coalition of women's aid organizations in the United Kingdom) published their own statement lamenting Amnesty International's decision. For them, prostitution is innately violent and nonconsensual, given that the "so-called 'free' or 'consensual' choices in prostitution are actually decisions made in conditions of already existing inequality and discrimination" (Women's Aid, 2015).<sup>1</sup>

This ideological disagreement between Amnesty International and Women's Aid UK typifies a hotly debated yet unresolved issue in feminist thought as to whether sex work performed by women is an occasion of women's sexual freedom and an example of women being in control of their own labor. Or, on the other hand, whether prostitution is instead symptomatic of oppressive patriarchal systems. As a woman and ardent feminist, I am persuaded by both arguments and support Amnesty International's decision yet sympathize with Women's Aid UK. The underlying issue in this debate is whether sex work engenders agency and power for women—power being by one account when people "have sufficient resources to get their own way and to do what they want despite.... the resistance of others" (Inglis, 1997, p. 11). I contend that the principle form of

power that prostitutes make use of is the power to seduce; that is, the power to entice potential consumers of sex into exchanging money for sexual labor. Here, I re-consider the debate on prostitution and its relationship to women's power by looking beyond the power of sex to the power of female seduction. While it is true that sex is a medium for power, so too is the act of seduction, which arguably precedes any consensual sexual act.

Therefore, in this essay I seek to determine the potential ways in which seduction functions as a source of power for female sex workers, employing Brazil's sexual tourism industry as a case study. Brazil has a fascinating relationship, legally and socio-culturally, to prostitution. Moreover, its longstanding reputation as a tropical destination populated with (so-called) exotically beautiful women has cemented its place as one of the most popular countries for sexual tourism. Essentially, what makes the Brazilian woman exotic and seductive in the eyes of Western sex tourists is her racial difference. Therefore, the case of Brazilian sex workers in the tourism industry offers an opportunity to analyze the effects of gender, race, and class on expressions of power.<sup>2</sup>

Through observations from fieldwork as well as a theoretical analysis of sexual tourism theory in which I attend to seduction as it is used in literary theory with inspiration from previous research on the male gaze (Mulvey, 1972), the tourist gaze (Urry and Larsen, 2011) and patriarchal bargaining (Kandiyoti, 1988), I argue that women's use of seduction has the potential to be empowering.<sup>3</sup> However, I contend that seduction cannot ultimately be emancipatory for individual women or for womankind, as it can only afford power within patriarchal structures. A secondary task for this paper is to show that the debate within feminist thought over prostitutes as victims or empowered agents can be understood as another dichotomy of the seduced, vulnerable woman and the seductress—both tropes found in Western literature.

## Seduction in Literature

Western ideas of women's seductiveness can trace their roots to European literature. Seduction as a literary device tends to regard women as victims of seduction or producers of seduction itself. In the case of eighteenth-century British literature, when the heroine is wealthy and chaste she is inevitably seduced by the sexual charisma of a conniving man. However, female characters from modest means tend to become entranced by rich lovers who eventually abandon them to a life of forced prostitution (Binhammer, 2009, p. 1-2). In these stories, authors portray the accidental prostitute as a victim of seduction and therefore morally innocent. Nevertheless, these women are "sexually guilty" for having sex outside of marriage and so are doomed to a life as a prostitute, which typically leads to their deaths (Binhammer, 2009, p. 40-1).

In addition to the dangers of female sexual exploitation, Western literature has also focused on women as sexual objects. In this sense, the male gaze constructs views of women that paradoxically essentialize them as inherently chaste while also expecting women to acquiesce to sexual advances from men. This male gaze also constructs a norm of femininity in which truly feminine women are those who delight in male domination (Hunter, 1989, p. 1-2). One challenge to this restrictive idea of the feminine comes in the form of the prostitute, who disrupts the male gaze by offering herself and thereby shatters the fantasy of male control over the female body (Bernheimer, 1989, p. 15).

Those who seduce a more powerful person are exercising power from a place of alterity. That is, the act of seduction in literature is "a means of achieving mastery in the absence of such means of control. It is the instrument available to the situationally weak against the situationally strong... it is a way to transform '(historical) weakness' into (discursive) strength [and is] a weapon against alienation,

an instrument of self-assertion” (Chambers, 1984, p. 212). Chambers appears to be influenced by Foucauldian notions of power as a constant flow of discourses. In this Foucauldian sense, seduction, as with other forms of power, is not “static” nor unidirectional (Foucault, 1980, p. 98; Inglis, 1997, p. 1). The discussion of seduction as power in literature is a useful theoretical point of departure to consider to what extent the seductive power of sex workers represents a form of women’s empowerment and/or emancipation.

### Sexual Tourism Theory and Stances on Prostitution

Sexual tourism exists in every country (Oppermann, 1999, p. 251). It consists of sex tourists who travel abroad with the specific intent to have sexual relations with one or several people residing in that country. The more ambiguous group of tourists who travel to foreign countries with other goals besides having sex but engage in sex anyway are also sometimes considered sexual tourists (Oppermann, 1999, p. 252, 257). There is ambivalence about the term “sexual tourist” itself, since some argue that the term simplifies relations between the prostitute and the client, moralizes sexual encounters, and demonizes non-normative ones (Blanchette and da Silva, 2010b, p. 160).

The Brazilian NGO CHAME (the Humanitarian Center for the Support of Women), an organization that opposes sexual tourism, narrates sexual tourism as it is experienced by a Brazilian woman unknowingly contracted into prostitution in Europe:

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*Há muitas que vivem no mais completo isolamento e forte pressão dos patrões. A ingenuidade de acreditar que todo europeu procura nas brasileiras a beleza exótica e tropical de peles morenas e bronzeadas ou a sensualidade dos movimentos rítmicos do samba é, muitas vezes, um grave engano. Este tipo de pensamento ignora um componente*

*sem o qual é impossível ter uma visão real do comportamento do europeu em relação às estrangeiras: o racismo.*

There are many [prostitutes] that live in complete isolation and under tight control from their bosses. Their naivete in believing that all Europeans look for exotic beauty, brown and bronzed skin indicative of the tropics, or the sensuality of the rhythmic movements of samba in Brazilian women is often a grave mistake. This type of thought ignores a factor without which it is impossible to ascertain the true nature of Europeans' behavior in relation to foreign women: racism.] (Projeto CHAME/NEIM, 2000, p. 16)

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CHAME conflates sexual tourism with the trafficking of women and considers sexual tourism to be an act that, by its nature, exploits the most underprivileged and vulnerable factions of the female community: poor women and women of color (Blanchette, da Silva, and Bento, 2013, p. 203). For them, sexual tourism is defined by the sexual exploitation of Brazilian women by European men. They do not believe that Europeans who avail themselves of the sexual labor of Brazilian women are innocently seduced by the tourist images of Brazil. Instead, CHAME argues that European men, whether they travel to Brazil for sex or benefit from the trafficking of Brazilian women to Europe, take advantage of racial inequalities stemming from a colonial past (Blanchette, da Silva, and Bento, 2013, p. 203).

Sexual tourism involves the exchange of sex for money and other goods, which would make it similar to, if not the same thing as, prostitution. However, some intellectuals make the distinction between prostitution and sexual tourism. For Oppermann, sexual tourism is unlike prostitution because the end goals are different. In sexual tourism, the tourist usually has several goals for the trip—one of which may be to engage in sex. However, in prostitution, the objective is usually sex (Oppermann, 1999, p. 252). Oppermann

mentions that prostitution is a “survival strategy” for disenfranchised women from developing countries who cannot find a better way to support themselves and their families financially (Oppermann, 1999, p. 254). However, he complicates the idea of the victimized prostitute by asserting that in prostitute-client relationships, it is not always clear who exploits and who is being exploited, or who is seduced or the seducer. He maintains that those who purchase the services of prostitutes are often looking for affection as well as sex and may feel used if a prostitute is not willing or able to perform love (Oppermann, 1999, p. 255).

Campbell further complicates rigid notions about sexual tourism and prostitution. He defines cultural seduction as “cross-border erotic attraction” and the “ethnic representations and gender performances associated with it” (2007, p. 261). Cultural seduction, then, is an integral part of the sexual tourism experience. For example, in Cuba, foreign female tourists are attracted to the supposed sensuality of Cuban men, while these men provide sex, romance, and care in the hope that relationships with these women will lead to marriage and a better life abroad (Simoni, 2018). Moreover, although many American men travel to Mexico to have sex with Mexican women, whom they consider to be exotic “cultural other[s]” who uphold conventional feminine values (Campbell 2007, p. 268), Mexican women also participate in a sexual and idealized gaze of American men, whom they imagine to be wealthier and more affectionate than Mexican men (2007, p. 277).

Through revealing that Mexican women also participate in the construction of gazes, Campbell challenges their subordination as objects of a dominant American male gaze. However, he acknowledges that Mexican women still occupy a more vulnerable position in relation to American men because of the power that these men have due to their male and American privileges (Campbell, 2007, p.



268). Using the term “cross-border sex” instead of sexual tourism, Campbell argues that those who are disparaging of people who engage in sex across borders are actually reacting against the social norms about sex that sexual tourism disrupts (Campbell, 2007, p. 262). In an effort to rethink sexual tourism, he maintains that transnational sex may be “a new form of gift and commodity, work and pleasure, and coercion and empowerment in the modern era of neoliberalism and globalization” (Campbell, 2007, p. 263).

The positions of Oppermann and Campbell correspond to the theoretical standpoints on prostitution elucidated by Brown (1999). One position, which most closely matches the positions of Oppermann and Campbell is that of prostitution as work. Those who operate from this perspective maintain that prostitution is not intrinsically exploitative and to assume so would be to deny the individual agency of women. Activists who work towards rights for prostitutes tend to prefer the term “sex worker” instead of prostitute as a way to unite these people around a political identity (Brown, 1999, 165). In Brazil, the *puta-feminismo* (slut feminism) movement works to “*afirmar o poder feminino frente às visões conservadoras* [affirm feminine power in the face of conservatism] by re-envisioning sex work as women’s empowerment and therefore, activists argue, is quintessentially feminist (Piscitelli, 2016, 84).

Activists are also eager to distance themselves from the stigma surrounding prostitution by repositioning themselves as workers in the global economy.<sup>5</sup> For example Monique Prado, a Brazilian sex worker and activist within the *puta-feminismo* movement, uses her platform on the Brazilian alternative media platform Mídia NINJA to call for the empowerment of sex workers. Monique told the audience at a debate over whether prostitution should be regulated that she is not ashamed of her sexual labor and instead views sex work as a way to problematize the ways in which women’s labor often goes

unremunerated (fieldnotes, September 15, 2018). Nevertheless, in the following excerpt from the debate Monique speaks to how the stigma of sex work makes her life more difficult:

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*Eu não faço o debate “uau, eu tenho orgulho de ser puta”. Não penso que nenhum trabalho exercido no sistema capitalista seja motivo de orgulho. A gente faz o que pode. Algumas mulheres têm mais escolhas, outras têm menos escolhas. Eu sou da parte de mulheres que tiveram menos escolhas e foram para a prostituição. Eu tenho uma série de privilégios como mulher, e não considero que, como prostituta, eu tenha, porque, a partir do momento que você se declara uma prostituta, você perde a parte mais essencial de você, que é a sua humanidade, e as pessoas se sentem à vontade pra te agredir de qualquer modo, sem saber quem você é – não é relevante –, sem saber o que você passa.*

I don't make the argument, “wow, I'm proud to be a slut”. I don't think that any job within a capitalist system is a source of pride. People do what they can. Some women have more choices, others have fewer choices. I'm one of those women that had fewer choices and decided to start prostituting. I have a series of privileges as a woman, but I don't think I have any as a prostitute. Because from the moment that you say you're a prostitute, you lose the most essential part of yourself, that is your humanity. And people feel that they can attack you in any way, without knowing who you are—it's not relevant—without knowing what you go through. (Casa Pública, 2018)

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Monique realizes that she speaks from a place of relative privilege as a white Brazilian in comparison with her fellow debater Cleone Santos, an Afro-Brazilian activist who left prostitution after twenty-two years. Like Monique, Cleone has also made media ap-

pearances, though in the more traditional news outlets of the BBC and Brazilian newspaper O Globo (Machado, 2018; Reis, 2018) that are perhaps less receptive to puta-feminismo. Nevertheless, although Monique self-identifies as a woman without many options, for Cleone, choosing to prostitute was a decision that empowered her despite the severe social ramifications.

Another position of Brown's is that prostitution is an example of female subjugation by men by means of commodifying and exploiting their bodies. This stance is most often associated with radical feminists who, like other feminists, are concerned with identifying and deconstructing dominant social structures and norms that oppress women (Brown, 1999, p. 165-7). Proponents of this viewpoint, like Women's Aid, believe that prostitution represents the "sexual objectification of female sexuality for male consumption" and that this objectification usually leads to violence against women. Therefore, the very act of buying a prostitute for a night of sex is an act of violence in societies where women are treated like commodities and whose labor is barely valued above what women can purchase with their bodies (Brown, 1999, p. 165). This position views prostitutes as victims: unfortunate women who were compelled to participate in an oppressive system due to a lack of options.

To illustrate, Cleone Santos speaks about her experiences in prostitution, noting that she became markedly happier after leaving sex work. Cleone finds it difficult to understand how some women who prostitute find empowerment in their work and doubts that prostitution is ever truly a choice:

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*Eu acho que seria muito bom que as mulheres não precisassem se prostituir, sabe? Que não precisassem prostituir, que a gente tivesse uma sociedade justa, onde as mulheres tivessem salários iguais aos dos homens, [em que] as mulheres pretas tivessem um salário pelo menos igual aos de*

*nossas amigas não pretas, porque, quando algumas pessoas falam que estão na prostituição por escolha, eu não sei se é isso. Eu não sei se é isso porque a pessoa chega lá, até fala: “Eu estou por escolha”. Mas ela precisa daquele dinheiro, e quando a gente precisa do dinheiro não está ali por escolha. A gente está ali porque foi imposto por um sistema perverso, sabe? Então, eu queria muito que as mulheres não precisassem se prostituir e, se quisessem se prostituir, que fosse por uma escolha delas, mas uma escolha real, não aquela escolha só que eu preciso sobreviver, comprar meu sapato, comprar minha roupa... Aí não é escolha. Aí é imposto por uma sociedade injusta.*

I think that it would be very good if women didn't need to prostitute themselves, you know? That they wouldn't need to prostitute, that we had a just society, where women had salaries equal to men, [in which] black women had had salaries at least equal to our non-black friends. Because, when some people say that they prostitute by choice, I don't know if that's true. I don't know if that's true because they get there and even say, “I'm here by choice”. But she needs the money and when someone needs money, they're not there by choice. These women are there because they were imposed upon by a perverse system, you know? So, I would love it if women didn't need to prostitute themselves and, if they wanted to prostitute, that it was their choice but a real choice. Not a choice they made because they needed to survive, to buy shoes, to buy clothes. These things aren't a choice; it's an imposition made by an unjust society. (Casa Pública)

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Cleone ultimately views prostitution as an option of last resort and not a choice that a truly free agent would make if given better opportunities for income. Her testimony also underscores the underlying racial aspects of prostitution as empowerment—that what might be empowering for white women like Monique is oppressive

for black women like herself, given that poor black women are more at risk of needing to prostitute due to fewer alternatives for gainful employment.

## Sexual Tourism in Brazil

While sex and sex work require some level of seduction, sexual tourism might represent the epitome of sexual seduction, as the sex tourist is not only entranced by the possibility of sex, but also by tourist gazes of paradise that inspire travel to faraway lands (Urry and Larsen, 2011). One such exotic locale is Brazil. In Brazil, adult prostitution is legal, unregulated, and has professional status with rights to social security (ProCon.org, 2018; Kerrigan et al., 2012, p. 294) although a federal bill was introduced in 2012 to regulate sex work.<sup>4</sup> However, there are laws against child prostitution and human trafficking for the purpose of sex (Blanchette, da Silva, and Bento 215). Additionally, there are laws that prohibit *rufianismo*, or pimping, and the operation of brothels (Romero and Barnes 2013). Pimping carries the penalty of one to four years in jail while those who are caught operating a brothel will face anywhere between two and five years of incarceration (*O Dia* 2012). The idea is that prostitution can only be permissible if the prostitute has control over her or his own dealings and that the use of a third party would naturally entail exploitation. While some women are forced into sex work by abusive pimps, relationships between sex workers and pimps are also complex, with “love attachment” to pimps being a common or even necessary aspect of becoming a sex worker (Katona, 2017, p. 51).

The Brazilian government is trying to contain the rising tide of sexual tourism in Brazil, which is the third most popular destination for sexual tourism in Latin America after Cuba and Mexico (Associated Press 2006; RENAS 2012). This suppression means that although sexual tourism ought to be legal according to Brazilian law,

the Brazilian government does not treat it as a legal enterprise. Brazilian law does not define sexual tourism (Blanchette and da Silva 2010b, 144) and yet there seems to be a crusade against the industry from the State and anti-sex tourism NGOs. On the eve of the 2014 World Cup and 2016 Olympic Games, concern abounded in Brazil that these mega-events would bring unprecedented numbers of sexual tourists to the country.

In anticipation of the games, the Brazilian state underwent “hygenization”, which resulted in targeting and shutting down suspected sites of sexual tourism (Romero and Barnes), including suspected brothels and censoring more than two-thousand websites that promote sexual tourism to Brazil (Associated Press 2012). A presiding fear was that the arrival of many foreign sexual tourists would lead to increased numbers of prostitutes trafficked for sex abroad.<sup>6</sup> Another perhaps more prevailing fear, still relevant after the 2016 Olympics, is that if the world’s tourists continue to see Brazil as a bastion of sex tourism, the nation will never achieve its desired standing as a developed nation. This belief is an aspect of the widespread notion that sexual tourism only occurs in developing countries (Oppermann 1999, p. 251; Blanchette, da Silva, and Bento, 2013, p. 221). It may be possible to contextualize both the demonization of sexual tourism and acceptance of domestic prostitution in Brazil by examining the myth of Maria.

In the 1990s, academics and NGOs like CHAME located in Northeastern Brazil began circulating and discussing the image of a sexually exploited woman named Maria to mobilize people against sexual tourism and forms of sex trafficking such as forced marriage. In the propaganda, Maria is a prostitute who, being unaware of the dangers of her vocation, falls for the seductive deceptions of a trafficker and becomes a sex slave in a foreign country (Blanchette, da Silva, and Bento, 2013, p. 200-1).

In a close analysis of the Maria myth, Blanchette, da Silva, and Bento interpret the myth as saying that “Maria’s false consciousness as a sex worker has rendered her completely unable to recognize that she is being victimized. Thus, it is up to the State ... to determine for women whether they are being trafficked and to teach them to internalize their victimhood” (Blanchette, da Silva, and Bento, 2013, p. 215). Like others with a prostitution-as-work viewpoint, these authors believe that the attempts of the Brazilian government to dissuade sexual tourism are paternalistic and patronizing actions that perpetuate stigma regarding prostitutes in Brazilian society. At worst, the Brazilian government could be accused of “sexual humanitarianism”: controlling migration flows of purported sex trafficking victims in such a way that ends up “exacerb[at]ing the underlying socioeconomic insecurities and inequalities it enforces” (Mai, 2018, p. 3). Despite the government’s misgivings about sex tourism, Brazil remains committed to upholding the legality of prostitution in the nation—so much so that they declined US\$40 million from the United States Agency of International Development (USAID) because the funding came with a stipulation that Brazil had to condemn all forms of prostitution (Blanchette, da Silva, and Bento, 2013, p. 221).

Several theories abound why Brazil is an attractive country for foreign tourists—most of whom hail from the United States, Italy, Portugal, and the Netherlands (RENAS). Common wisdom in Brazil holds that the country is appealing because white foreign tourists, looking to take advantage of inexpensive prostitutes, are eager to save money while consuming sex from racially mixed, exotic Brazilian women (Blanchette and da Silva, 2010a, p. 224). Interestingly, this outlook ignores the growing number of African-American sex tourists who arrive in Brazil “pursuing traces of blackness in the diaspora” (Mitchell, 2006, p. 15), which may complicate the paradigm of privileged foreign oppressor and underprivileged native op-

pressed in discussions about sexual tourism (Blanchette and da Silva, 2010a, p. 236). Sex tourists are also attracted to the idealized image of the Brazilian woman—much like American sex tourists are attracted to the idealized notion of the Mexican women along the border. The image of Brazilian women is that of a “sexually active and available [woman], but ‘traditionally feminine’ in her values” (Blanchette and da Silva, 2010a, p. 234).

This idealized notion of Brazilian women corresponds to the myth of the sexy *mulata*, which has become akin to an origin myth of the Brazilian people. In this myth, a racially mixed woman, or *mulata*, uses her seductive powers (apparently originating from her African blood) to entrance and seduce wealthy white men. Activists who fight against sex tourism and sex trafficking argue that this myth, which brings thousands of tourists to Brazil, embodies a desire of privileged white sex tourists to consume *mulatas* as a sexual Other (Blanchette and da Silva, 2010a, p. 235).

Sex tourists themselves explain various rationales for why Brazilian women are sexually enticing for them. In the case of Ponta Negra, a beach neighborhood in the Brazilian city of Natal, Italian male tourists flock to the neighborhood with the expectation of finding “socially and sexually docile” women who have no qualms about men being the dominant gender in the social order (Sacramento, 2018 p. 214). Furthermore, some tourists believe that racial mixing with indigenous Brazilians and Africans has created a “hypersexual” population of Brazilian people, but Blanchette and da Silva note that not all Brazilians are equally exotic. For example, lighter-skinned *mulatas* or *morenas* tend to be considered the most exotic and sexual (Blanchette and da Silva, 2010a, p. 236). Conversely, some African-American sexual tourists claim that the European ancestry of racially mixed women heightens their sexuality and compels them to carry out sexual acts that Af-



rican-American women without European heritage supposedly refuse to perform (Blanchette and da Silva, 2010a, p. 237).

Aside from the attraction of racial difference, sexual tourists also believe that Brazilian prostitutes are more affectionate than are prostitutes from developed countries. Since many sex tourists believe that Brazilian women are family oriented with traditional values, they assume that prostitutes will also exhibit a more traditional femininity, which involves deference to and care of men. Some prostitutes who are aware of this stereotype will exploit it in order to earn more money. Known as the “girlfriend experience”, some sexual tourists will hire the services of a prostitute for an extended period and during this time, the prostitute will behave as the client’s romantic companion. These relationships can be merely utilitarian but at rare times can lead to marriage. Marriage to a foreign sex tourist is a goal for many prostitutes who hope to use these relationships as a way to achieve a higher social standing. (Blanchette and da Silva, 2010b, p. 175-9).

## Seduction as Power?

Given the contested morality of sexual tourism, it is a difficult task to assess whether sex workers in the industry are powerless victims, laborers with agency, or something in between. An easier task may be to ascertain in what ways one crucial aspect of sex work in relation to sexual tourism, seduction, is a source of power for sex workers in Brazil. It is true that prostitutes in Brazil are not powerless because they have the ability to choose the profession and are able to select their clients without the intrusion of a pimp or other intermediary. It is also possible that by being able to seduce by taking advantage of racial stereotypes, they hold an additional power that could undermine power dynamics between prostitutes and their wealthier (white) male clients. Many prostitutes use what

would normally be considered disadvantages (racial difference and women's prescribed gender roles) to their monetary gain and—at times—social gain if these women are successful in acquiring relationships with higher-status men. This inversion implies agency, which would necessarily originate from successful seduction.

In this sense, Brazilian prostitutes and other sex workers could be considered empowered. The idea of seduction as individual empowerment is best understood within the context of patriarchal bargaining. Patriarchal bargaining describes the virtually universal process that women engage in to extract power from within a patriarchal system: “women strategize within a set of concrete constraints that reveal and define the blueprint of what I will term the patriarchal bargain of any given society, which may exhibit variations according to class, caste, and ethnicity” (Kandiyoti, 1988, p. 275). For example, the act of offering the “girlfriend experience” to foreign sex tourists who are looking for traditional yet sexually available women constitutes a form of patriarchal bargain on the part of the sex worker. Additionally, Monique's insistence on charging for her undervalued sexual labor could also be considered patriarchal bargaining.<sup>7</sup>

Kandiyoti goes on to state that patriarchal bargains “influence both the potential for and specific forms of women's active or passive resistance in the face of their oppression” (1998, p. 275). The “girlfriend experience” and more generally a Brazilian sex worker's strategic use of the imagery of sex tourism in Brazil that is based on stereotypes of hyperactive racially exotic Brazilian women could be considered patriarchal bargaining. A Brazilian sex worker's ability to capitalize on male sex tourist gazes, redirecting the flow of power from the historical oppressor to the perennially oppressed, is surely an indicator of the empowering potential of sex work. However, there are limits to this empowerment—or truer still—empowerment is not enough.

As Giddens famously observed, “The realm of human agency is bounded. Individuals produce society, but they do so as historically located actors, and not under conditions of their own choosing” (1993, p. 167). Ultimately, what makes Brazilian sex workers and Brazilian women at large seductive—those images of the sexy *mulata* and related images reproduced through male and tourist gazes—was decided in a patriarchal environment and not under conditions of women’s choosing. Women sex workers evince their power and agency when they use seduction to achieve their goals, yet they and all women remain bounded and reproduce patriarchal systems or at least fail to challenge them when we use seduction as a tool for personal empowerment. Indeed, any temporary power gleaned from patriarchal bargaining cannot hope to bring about the radical systemic change needed to dismantle patriarchal systems.

Inglis alludes to the limitations of empowerment, writing within the context of pedagogy: “...empowerment involves people developing capacities to act successfully within the existing system and structures of power, while emancipation concerns critically analyzing, resisting, and challenging structures of power” (1997, p. 4). Although Kandiyoti discusses the capacity of patriarchal bargaining to serve as a way to resist male hegemonic power in certain societies, I would argue that seduction and the infinite guises of patriarchal bargaining are more empowering than emancipatory. This is because seduction can only give power within the dominant structures of women’s oppression. Seduction has the potential to be and is oftentimes empowering, especially if we consider seduction in relation to sex work as an example of patriarchal bargaining.

However, the lack of true agency when members of an oppressed group attempt to wrangle power for themselves within an oppressive system belies the non-emancipatory nature of seduction. Women’s sexuality and seductiveness are examples of power but are

also “the linchpin[s] of gender inequality” (Mackinnon, 1982, p. 533), precisely because of the ways in which women’s sexuality has been constructed and regulated by men. The boundedness of women’s agency when it comes to using seduction strategically is caused by the absence of women’s control over the seduction process—meaning that the signs and symbols of women’s sexuality and seductiveness (Baudrillard, 1990) were not created by us. Instead, we only have the ability to manipulate these to our own ends.

For example, Brazilian sex workers are seductive, and therefore empowered, primarily because they are Brazilian, but they have played no part in the creation of this seductive image, which is relic of the colonial male gaze of the Portuguese. Brazilian women engaged in sex work, like the women featured in Carrier-Moisan, have been able to exploit the concept of the sexy morena and make use of the fact that foreign tourists believe that Brazilian women are hypersexual and always available for sex. These relationships with sex tourists also contribute to a greater sense of respectability that would be more difficult to find as a prostitute with a clientele of largely domestic men (Carrier-Moisan, 2015). Nevertheless, Brazilian women cannot control how the forces of the sexual tourism industry commodify them nor how it markets their bodies to a foreign audience.

It may be obvious but nevertheless necessary to state that the dichotomy of sex worker as seductress and sex worker as seduced describes the experiences of different sex workers at different times. In the case of Brazil, some Brazilian prostitutes are victims of unfavorable circumstances while others insist that their ability to choose sex work as a form of labor proves their agency. However, it is my stance that this paradox is why seduction can be empowering but never emancipatory (at least in the foreseeable future) since a force that oppresses sometimes but empowers in others is fundamentally oppressive.

Can women ever use the powers of sex and seduction beyond individual empowerment towards emancipation for all? I take a cynical yet realist approach in doubting that seductive power can ever be emancipatory, given the inextricable link between seduction and patriarchy. Nevertheless, a hypothetical post-patriarchal society could see women's sexuality as no longer under the purview of men. It may be too much to hope that women could ever be in charge of the signs, symbols, and imagery of our own sexuality and seductiveness, but it seems possible to imagine a world in which sex work could be devoid of stigma that harms sex workers and devoid of the power differentials that separate prostitute from client.

The goal of this essay is to establish a dialogue between an array of sources related to sexual tourism and Brazil presented through the framework of narrative seduction theory in order to assess whether seduction is an empowering or emancipatory force for the country's prostitutes and sex workers. Of course, the issue of seduction as power extends beyond Brazilian sex workers and is in essence truly about women's sexual power and agency in general. As such, seductive power relates not only to sex workers' rights and the ethics of sexual tourism but also to women's rights.

Undoubtedly, female agency exists and so it is imperative not to patronize sex workers as naïve or suffering from a false consciousness (Blanchette, da Silva, and Bento, 2013, p. 215) and to make sure that the debates surrounding sex tourism and prostitution do not stem from antiquated ideas about female sexual purity and sexual norms. Moreover, as Cleone emphasized, sex workers exhibit power every time they face the street and the men who purchase their services (fieldnotes, September 15, 2018). At the same time, it is important to recognize the limits of seduction as a meaningful way to challenge the social order that continues to subjugate women.

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## ENDNOTES

- <sup>1</sup> Women’s Aid supports the so-called Nordic model, which only penalizes the purchasing of sex and not the act of selling sex (Women’s Aid, 2015).
- <sup>2</sup> By “women” I include trans women, who make up a significant number of sex workers in Brazil. For more on trans women sex workers in Brazil, see Kulick (2009).
- <sup>3</sup> I conducted fourteen months of ethnographic fieldwork for my doctoral project, “*Não são tijolos; são histórias*”: The Favela Housing Rights Movement of Rio de Janeiro”. The fieldnotes cited here were taken dur-

ing the event, “Prostituição: Regulamentar é o melhor para as mulheres?” held in Casa Pública in Rio de Janeiro on September 15, 2018.

<sup>4</sup> PL 4.211/12 – Projeto de Lei Gabriela Leite.

<sup>5</sup> While acknowledging that prostitution is a form of sex work, I use both terms interchangeably in an effort to acknowledge both sides in the debate as well as to lessen the stigma of the word “prostitute”.

<sup>6</sup> Despite this fear, the average victims of sex trafficking in Brazil are male workers from the countryside (Blanchette, da Silva, and Bento, 2013, p. 216).

<sup>7</sup> “*Então, você usar o feminismo pra se empoderar dentro do trabalho que você faz é essencial* [So, using feminism in order to empower yourself within the job you have is essential]” (Casa Pública, 2018).

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## RESUME

Jennifer Chisholm is originally from Cleveland, Ohio and recently graduated from the PhD program in Sociology at the University of Cambridge. She earned her B.A. from American University in 2012 where she majored in International Studies with concentrations in Latin America and Comparative Race Relations. In 2013, she embarked on her MPhil degree in Latin American Studies at the University of Cambridge. Her MPhil dissertation fieldwork in Rio de Janeiro on black and indigenous land rights set the foundation for her PhD project. This project is an ethnographic study of how residents of informal settlements called favelas mobilize against eviction in Rio de Janeiro. During fieldwork, she was a visiting researcher at the Pontifical Catholic University of Rio de Janeiro and wrote essays for the North American Congress on Latin America (NACLA), LSE Latin America blog, and the Latin American Bureau based on her fieldwork.