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Catherine Benoît

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Study of sexual tourism in Saint Martin/Sint Maarten, where prostitution is a widespread reality.

Author argues that on this island where rapid economic development is based on the tourist industry and on offshore financial services, sexual relationships are determined by geopolitical and financial (neoliberal) interests that go beyond sexuality per se. She focuses on the precarious situation of the foreign prostitutes who have no working papers.

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CATHERINE BENOÎT

SEX, AIDS, MIGRATION, AND PROSTITUTION:
HUMAN TRAFFICKING IN THE CARIBBEAN

In every society, sexuality is set in the service of several realities – economic, political, etc. – which have nothing to do directly with sexuality or with the sexes (Godelier 1995:117).

“Sea, Sun, and Sex.” These three words aptly summarize the expectations of tourists coming to the Caribbean as sexual tourism has become an important element in the economic development of certain countries. Indeed, Europeans have bypassed Southeast Asia because of the AIDS epidemic, and sexual tourism has increased in the Caribbean, making the Dominican Republic one of the world’s centers. While we know that sexual tourism creates a demand for the prostitution of women, children, and for homosexual men, we are less familiar with the form of prostitution set in the service of a country’s internal demands. This article examines sexual tourism in Saint-Martin/Sint Maarten, where prostitution is a widespread reality.¹ Most studies on this topic emphasize the psychological frailties of the women who devote themselves to the “commerce of sex.”² This article, however, seeks to demonstrate that on this island where rapid economic development is based on the tourist industry and on tax havens (offshore

1. Saint-Martin/Sint Maarten is a binational Caribbean island. Saint-Martin is a *commune* of Guadeloupe, a French Département d’Outre-Mer. Sint-Maarten is part of the Netherlands Antilles.

2. The use of terms such as sexual “commerce” and “work” can be confusing since they could imply that prostitution is an economic activity like any other (see Louis 1997). I do use these terms, but consider the human body as unalienable and not to be considered an object for commerce.

services), sexual relationships are determined by geopolitical and financial interests that go beyond sexuality per se.

THE FIELD, THE OBSERVATIONS, THE POSSIBLE QUESTIONS

My research project on the therapeutic itineraries of AIDS victims reveals the extent to which different forms of prostitution are present in Saint-Martin/Sint Maarten. In an epidemiological context where AIDS is transmitted primarily through heterosexual contact,³ some of the men whose health strategies I was examining said that they believed they had been contaminated after unprotected sexual relations with prostitutes.⁴ After several interviews, however, it became clear that although they knew that they were HIV positive, some of these men nonetheless continued to seek out prostitutes without using condoms.

I decided to visit the brothels to investigate the use of condoms, accompanied by men who both knew the brothels and who were Spanish speakers. Since I do not speak Spanish and since most of the prostitutes are Spanish speakers, this was a necessity. By day, we visited bars, telling the managers or barmen that we wanted to inform the prostitutes about an AIDS detection center on the French side of the island which was free and where their anonymity would be respected. By night, we went to bars to have a drink and to talk with the prostitutes known to the men who were accompanying me. These encounters allowed me to gauge the difficulty of working with an interpreter: it was hard to carry out interviews without taking into consideration the interpreter's imagination and fantasies. Often, impassioned by my study, the men overstepped their roles, and tried to lead the interviews themselves. I observed that this study of prostitution let some of them, momentarily at least, drop their defense mechanisms with regard to sexuality, prostitution, and sexual stereotypes associated with ethnic stereotypes. On his first visit to a brothel, one of these men – who had been

3. In August 1995 on Saint-Martin, according to files in the French hospital that could be consulted, of the 203 HIV positive cases and 68 adult AIDS cases that had been counted, only one patient, a young Frenchman who had been contaminated in France, had contracted AIDS intravenously. Homosexual transmission, at that date, was attributed to bisexual men.

4. The ACSAG (Analysis of sexual behavior in the Antilles and in Guyana) study, an extension of the ACSF (Analysis of sexual behavior in France) study in French overseas departments in the American Hemisphere established the importance of prostitution in French Guiana and Guadeloupe. In the latter, men older than forty-five go to prostitutes three to four times more often than men in metropolitan France. In French Guiana, overall, men go to prostitutes seven times more often than in metropolitan France (Giraud 1995).

asked when he was seen with me, why he had come with his wife or whether I was an immigration inspector – took it into his head to “return there to help those women get themselves out of those places.”⁵ Another quickly refused to see me again and asked his family not to see me. I learned much later that ever since our trips to the bars, he was getting preferential treatment – free tricks! Another turned out to be the owner of a brothel in the Dominican Republic where “he tried out all the girls before hiring them.”

In the Caribbean, brothels are areas of male socialization. Men can meet simply to have a drink, or to watch a show without necessarily looking for a woman. On a small island like Saint-Martin/Sint Maarten it is impossible to remain anonymous. The men with whom I was working were first-time visitors to these brothels and attempted to remain anonymous, yet at the same time they wanted to know which island notables were regulars in these houses. When, in the evening, we went to these places, my male companions were careful about changing their car or asked me to take mine in order not to be recognized. When we parked in the brothel parking lots, they inevitably recognized the cars of certain island notables and insisted on staying in the bar in order to see them come out of their rooms! Occasionally, we were even hassled by their employees at the entrance, but once they understood who I was, they were delighted to answer my questions. Only the men accompanying me were naïve enough to ask how the employees, who spoke only Creole or French, could converse with the Spanish-speaking women.

What kind of discourse should be established between a female anthropologist, prostitutes, and clients? What kinds of observations can be made? Michel Bozon (1995) has explicitly demonstrated the difficulties of “observing the unobservable” concerning sexual practices. It is difficult to speak about personal sexual activity, whereas closed questionnaires lend themselves better to these issues. George Devereux, in his *De l'angoisse à la méthode*, says quite clearly that an interview about sexuality, even if it is scientific, is, in and of itself, a form of sexual interaction.⁶ While doing my field work, I received phone calls, offers of trips, and invitations to nightclubs from men who were already contaminated, and whom I had spoken about their sexual activity. This had not occurred during the interviews that were more oriented towards treatment strategies, as if addressing the issue elicited a new desire for life.

Getting a sense of “reality” when it comes to sexuality, more than for any other area, requires analyzing the interaction between interviewer and interviewee, and the transference and counter-transference that occurs during the interviews. The information that I gathered, even though on as tech-

5. The quotations refer to my interlocutors' remarks.

6. See Spira, Bajos & ACSF 1993.

nical an issue as the use of condoms, seemed to me to require careful interpretation if anything is really to be known about what goes on. When barmen and prostitutes say that condoms are used, aren't they doing so in order to take blame away from the brothels for transmitting the HIV virus? When Europeans claim that they use condoms, isn't it to show that they are aware of the information campaign on the AIDS epidemic? When I interview men from the Antilles and they tell me that they do not use condoms in brothels, shouldn't we ask ourselves if, in this macho context, this is the only possible discourse they can have toward a European woman? Therefore, the following analysis is the fruit of interviews with men infected with the HIV virus who have had recourse to the commerce of sex, of interviews with prostitutes, and of observations in brothels – it cannot be an analysis of sexual practices, but rather of the geopolitical context in which they occur.

Overlooking one of the island's most beautiful marinas, the brothels are prison houses for women who are often in precarious legal situations, or have a three-month contract that they most often overstay. They spend their days and nights in cells aligned along a corridor behind the bar, vulnerable to the brutality of their clients⁷ and to the financial demands of their employers. Depending on the house, women pay their rent, their food, and a percentage of their tricks. These houses are where politics, capital, drug money laundering, tax free investments, and corporal reification – of the bodies of single migrant men or of men from Saint-Martin/Sint Maarten in search of a bit of pleasure, and of women who migrate from island to island and even, occasionally, to Europe in search of revenue – collude. I did not view the prostitutes regarding this aspect so as to be able to continue my research unobstructed.

Where anthropological research in the Caribbean free zones cannot ignore the geopolitical conditions of their development, it is far more difficult to gather and analyze the data: the law of silence makes itself felt in a number of ways. Responses about the legal or illegal nature of the brothels are often imprecise and contradictory; meetings on the Dutch side require a letter of introduction from the lieutenant governor; meetings with barmen whom I was supposed to have met outside their workplaces were cancelled; I received friendly advice designed to stop my research; public documents simply disappeared. The law of silence is so strong that many North American sociologists and political scientists working on the island's social organization avoid discussing this situation.

The same law of silence holds for migrants. Generally speaking, migrants are uncomplaining about their living conditions. Those who confided in me publicly about their working conditions and about the corruption to which

7. Local newspapers regularly report on the violence which I observed on occasion.

certain administrations subject them were immediately called to order by their compatriots. "You don't speak that way to a white woman." Those who spoke to me about the different forms of exploitation to which they were subjected – no respect of the right to sojourn, of working rights, of social protection (health insurance) – did so either before leaving the island definitively or when I found them in Haiti after they had been expelled. Women prostitutes never complained in my presence about their living conditions or about the absence of the most basic human rights, for example, the right to medical confidentiality. A Saint-Martin resident told me, for example, that he had seen a man bring about twenty women from the Dominican Republic to a pharmaceutical laboratory for HIV testing. He knew the pharmacist, who had told him that this happened every time women arrived and that the exam results were handed directly to the brothel owner. This is illegal according to French law which requires that test results be given to the doctor who is responsible for telling the patient whether she is HIV positive or not.

SEXUAL COMMERCE: WHEN DOES PROSTITUTION BEGIN?

Caribbean anthropology focuses on studies of the family more than on any other topic, but sexuality and prostitution are not often examined. Yet the tremendous amount of ethnographic literature on families allows us to observe that in this context where heterosexuals often have several partners, sexual relationships often have a commercial dimension to them. For many women, living with a man or spending some hours with him weekly means guaranteed income and some gifts that improve life or more simply make daily life possible (Senior 1991; Wekker 1992; Kempadoo 1996). In Saint-Martin/Sint Maarten, the same is true for many migrant women. Some agree to share a man's hut in order to have a roof over their heads while others negotiate a sexual relationship in exchange for gifts of food and clothing. In a context where money is an important dimension of relationships between the sexes, I adopt the definition of prostitution given in Daniel Welzer-Lang's study (1994:191) of prostitution in Lyon as "a market where offer and demand meet with the intention of exchanging sexual services for money."⁸ This article is concerned exclusively with the prostitution of women.

8. For my interlocutors, this was what distinguished street prostitutes from women who simply wanted to flirt.

"How do you call them, the girls you meet in the street?"

- Well I don't call them prostitutes to their face, but they are prostitutes, because if you just meet a woman and you go with her for money, they are prostitutes. My girl friend

Given the binational status of Saint-Martin/Sint Maarten, sexual commerce takes different forms. First, the legal prostitution on the Dutch side, then that of dance halls, contact bars, and snack bars.⁹ This diversity of pleasure zones is specific to the Dutch islands, including Curaçao (Kempadoo 1994). On Saint-Martin, several brothels are considered legal. The Director of the Sint Maarten Health Department considers only the Seaman's club legal – other island officials argue that no place is legal, and that the *Mirage* on Curaçao is the only legal brothel in the Dutch Antilles. Other places, like the dance bars, are tolerated to keep them from becoming clandestine. These brothels are referred to either by their proper name or are called bars, clubs, and more rarely whorehouses, bordellos, or closed houses. They are buildings of different sizes, some of which are seriously deteriorated, and appear sordid and murky. All of them have a large hall where shows are staged either on a dance floor or on the bar counter, and where men can play pool or watch films. Women can ignore the men by staying in groups and playing table football in a corner of the room, or they can try to seduce men by inviting them to drink as much as possible. The rooms are all small and similarly furnished and resemble prison cells. They are set to the back of the bar or in the basement. Sint Maarten's brothels are in no way luxurious; more selective sexual commerce goes on at private parties in sumptuous villas or on cruise ships. Some men rush to get to the island's newest lot of prostitutes whose rates are twice or three times the going rate because they are *new* and *unused*.

Clients call the Seaman's club "the chapotting," the "Made in," and the "Made in Japan," because of its large Japanese clientele, which is in fact Korean. The Made in, the island's first site for sexual commerce, was created after World War II on the model of Campo Alegre, the ancestor of the *Mirage* in Curaçao, in order to satisfy the sailors from Korean fishing boats crossing the Caribbean. Today's clients at the Made in are mostly sailors, tourists, and residents of neighboring Saint-Barthelemy. This legal brothel is socially, politically, and financially integrated into Saint-Martin society. The migrant women who work there are recruited from their own country via a network linking the club's owner and certain of the "happy girls." The

I had to talk to her days, and days before I could get a kiss. When we met I had to talk and talk and she start to say: 'you save your money?' And I start to show myself and what not, then ... But I just don't make up my mind yet. Some of them women ... I just don't know, they got their children, they leave them in the house and they go with you. They don't know what happened to them, they gone sleep with another man, that's bad, all that's bad."

9. I will not address prostitution for tourists that goes on in hotels, or street prostitution, which I did not observe. This is the prostitution to make ends meet at the end of the month, or which occurs in private parties to which women from all over the Caribbean are brought, particularly from Guadeloupe, and the prostitution of young girls.

women are granted a three-month work permit by the immigration services after presenting a lung x-ray, the results of an HIV test, a test for syphilis, and a health certificate. After their stay on Sint Maarten, the women are supposed to leave for at least two months. According to the Public Health Department nurse who runs weekly medical checks in the club, the women usually return after two months whereas some years ago, they came back only after a year. Some women return this way on a regular basis for nearly four years. For the most part, they are recruited in Latin America. Sixteen prostitutes were working at the club when I visited it in September 1996: fifteen of them came from Colombia and one from the Dominican Republic. They paid \$50 rent per day for their rooms and meals. The weekly medical exam cost \$15, which they had to pay along with the \$40 HIV test which they had to undergo when they came back to the island, along with a syphilis exam. Each fifteen-minute trick brought in \$30 and a night with a *beautiful girl* cost \$400.

According to the Sint Maarten administration, dance clubs have an alcohol license and a license to have shows. Women working in bars have no work permits and generally stay longer than three months. Today, there are at least three dance clubs on the Dutch side; two of which are near the border. Border's bar also known as The White House or the Senate, is an imposing white, two-story building. On the ground floor, there is a large hall with a bar, a pool table, a stage for shows, and a television showing pornographic films. About thirty rooms are located in the basement and another building with bedrooms is being constructed. In October 1996, two women from Guyana, three from Colombia, and eight from the Dominican Republic worked here. A trick cost between \$50-\$100, depending on how much time it took, and a night, meaning from 9 p.m. to 7 a.m., cost \$200. Prostitutes from the White House were required to weekly see a doctor in the Dutch zone who handed examination results directly to the brothel's manager. Fewer than five hundred meters away, there is a second dance club, the Yellow House, also known as the Stairway because you have to go up some stairs to get in. Prostitutes there are from the English-speaking Caribbean, particularly from Guyana, and are dark-skinned, which is what customers coming to this club seek out. The last of the three dance clubs, the *Last Stop*, employs about a dozen prostitutes. In December 1996, seven of them were from the Dominican Republic and five from Jamaica. Five also worked on the club's stage, with hourly rotations of dancing to English- or Spanish-style music, until the last client left. The dancers earned \$350 a month, in addition to tricks which brought in about \$30, along with the single or five-dollar bills that men slipped into their g-strings when they came close enough during their striptease. Two of the women refused any trick for less than \$150.

Contact bars have no bedrooms. Prostitutes are come-ons who pick men up in the bar and then take them elsewhere to turn tricks. At the bar entrances, the women try to earn their living by selling condoms for \$1 apiece. One of the clubs, *Le Petit Château*, named for what some consider a famous Dominican show spot and which others consider a brothel,¹⁰ is a relatively new establishment that faces the university, built in the middle of the public dump created on one of the island's old salt mines.

Snack bars on the road, with one, two or three rooms, are also used to turn tricks. The prostitutes come from the Dominican Republic and have worked in Saint-Martin for several years; they meet their clients in the bar's bedrooms but live elsewhere.

Since the introduction of the Marthe Richard Law on April 13, 1946, brothels are illegal under French law. Since March 1, 1994, the law has come down more heavily on brothel-goers. In Saint-Martin, where French law is far from respected, three houses were tolerated until quite recently, and have only very recently closed their doors.

ETHNIC STEREOTYPES AND THE LABOR MARKET

Caribbean societies are highly stratified and social stratification corresponds to ethnic stratification. Perceptions of ethnic difference are based on a phenotypic perception of difference. An extraordinarily rich and discriminating vocabulary classifies every individual along a scale of phenotypes based on skin color, hair, nasal flatness, and lip thickness. The scale of values varies as a function of the most current ideology and of the island in question.

Male appreciation of Saint-Martin/Sint Maarten's prostitutes is linked to the prostitute's phenotype and nationality and is rather close to Saint-Martin's stereotypes of foreigners. The history of prostitution on the island reflects the evolution of the social perception of migrants and the ethnic stereotypes accompanying it. In the early 1960s, the island was populated almost exclusively by natives who particularly appreciated Haitian women who had come to the island as porters. In the 1970s, a wave of predominantly female Dominican immigration began.¹¹ Men from Saint-Martin/Sint Maarten preferred these women whom they perceived as com-

10. For a description of parties at *Le Petit Château* on the Malecon in Santo Domingo, see Forestier 1995.

11. The sex ratio of the migrant population is slightly skewed as men form 52 percent of the population, but displays clear differences depending on the population: 59 percent of the metropolitan French are men, 63 percent of the Haitians are men, whereas 73 percent of people from the Dominican Republic are women (Cazenave 1987).

ing to the island in the hope of marrying them, or a man from the European metropolises, in order to become a French or Dutch citizen. Not only their light skin was appreciated, but they also “make you feel like you are a god.” Saint-Martin women then acquired the reputation of being cold, distant, and not interested in sex, whereas in the 1960s, for the young men from Guadeloupe vacationing on the island, Saint-Martin “was the island where everything was possible, where women were free and easy.” Depending on where they came from, different men perceived women’s sexuality very differently. This was the period during which two of the most tenacious and widespread ethnic stereotypes about Haitians and Dominicans were established. The Haitian population was considered “underdeveloped, close to barbarous,” as evidenced by its dark skin color, gestures that were considered crude, and a certain physical corpulence. Haitian women were considered “too fast, too black, too insensitive.” Dominicans were considered for the most part venal,¹² as demonstrated by their ostensibly provocative way of dressing – tight clothes, usually stretch shorts or leggings, and tight, sleeveless tee shirts – and way of walking. In a reversal of ethnic stereotypes about prostitutes, one of the prostitutes was getting ready to return to the Dominican Republic because she found that “there were too many black men here and (I) prefer white clients in the Casinos.”

In the mid 1990s, Dominican prostitutes became less popular and brothel and bar clients wanted South American women from Costa Rica, Venezuela, Colombia, and Brazil. Beginning in 1996, Asian women were in demand and were described as “new arrivals” or “sisters” from this or that geographical area. Although these stereotypes dominated, they nonetheless left some room for other desires, like those for black-skinned women from Jamaica or Guyana. Regular brothel-goers do not ask for European women;

12. The remarks of a man used to going to brothels and dealing with street prostitutes. “I try a lot of them, but carry a woman home ain’t good to do. You understand? Because sometime, you could carry a woman home, but not a Spanish woman. Everything they see, they want, you understand, everything they see they want, so it’s just you go by them, and they deal with you, but you don’t harbor by your house. The day the sick ‘tis you they coming to. Because one day, one a them come by me. So I went French Quarter, and me carry one a them, and a next fellow fighting. So I stop the fight and the fellow sent me for the gendarmes. I tell her: ‘let’s go, let’s go Marigot,’ ‘cause I bring her home there by me, and me and she talk. That time I was good, man, and she gave me sex and everything. This time I ain’t got no money home you know, so when she ready to go home, I see her looking all over the place. So I tell her, ‘I going down the road, stay there, wait for me,’ and I take a next road and gone, you understand? So I don’t know how she get home, my boy, me and she never see to talk, when we bot up to talk, she say, ‘You do me that, hum!’ I said: ‘I ain’t do you that, I was broke.’ And at the time I had money I shove my hand in my pocket, gave her money. You understand? So some women, Spanish women, you stay good with them, but some they just like for what you got and they home you too.”

one hotel on the French side of the island, now closed, was reserved for French civil servants and reputed to offer European women. Visitors of brothels insist that European prostitutes are drug addicts who prostitute themselves in the shipwrecked cargoes washed up on the beaches by hurricane Luis which devastated the island in September 1995. Whether from the Antilles or from Europe, the men who frequent the brothels consider American, Canadian, and French women to be "cold" and "distant," although they "would like to buy them for one night, just to see what they are like, but you need a lot of money for that."

The imagination, fantasies, and sexual reality of clients from the Antilles and from Europe, concern, above all, women of color and the stereotypes associated with them because of a history that has valorized or sought out certain phenotypes.¹³ There is another, plausible interpretation of this attraction to a particular phenotype of darker skinned-ness in the early 1960s, or towards lightness, or even to a phenotype of Asian women, altogether unknown until recently.

NEOLIBERALISM IN THE CARIBBEAN: CORPORAL REIFICATION

In 1990, eleven million tourists visited the Caribbean, the most popular tourist destination in the tropics. Saint-Martin/Sint Maarten is the most favored destination for the Lesser Antilles, drawing 23.6 percent of the tourists visiting this part of the archipelago. The tourist industry provides jobs for approximately 70 percent of the island's inhabitants and accounts for a major share of GNP. As of 1970, several tens of thousands of tourists started visiting the island. In the early 1980s, the tourist trade exploded. Between 1981 and 1990, the number of tourists tripled, going from 190,000 in 1981 to 565,000 in 1990. Saint-Martin/Sint Maarten is the fourth port for cruise ships in the Caribbean, after the Bahamas, the U.S. Virgin Islands, and Puerto Rico. Hotels and cruises drew one million visitors in 1990 (Taglioni 1995).

Until the 1960s, the island's population, made up largely of women, children, and elderly people, was less than two thousand people for an area of 86 km². The island was largely a place of emigration (Badejo 1990:22; Rummens 1993:216), where today it is a place of immigration. The island's demography is directly tied to its economic development thanks to the development of tourism and related development projects, and offshore services. The entire island is a free port; no border post separates Saint-Martin from Sint Maarten, and traffic moves freely between the two parts of the island. The common currency is dollars, although French francs and

13. See Bonniol 1992 on the ideology of color in Guadeloupe.

Dutch guilders are also used, albeit less often. On the Dutch side, foreign (mainly U.S.) investment in tourism since the early 1960s is responsible for this development. The first hotel was built in 1955; in 1990, there were twenty-five hotels, nine casinos, and several time-share apartments. Development on the French side began in the 1980s, based largely on fiscal advantages, including the 1986 defiscalisation law known as the Pons Law for the French territories, which allowed tourism to flourish just as it had on the Dutch side.

The island could enjoy this economic development because of clandestine labor recruited from all over the Caribbean. An INSEE census shows that the population on the French side of the island rose from 8,072 in 1982 to 28,854 in 1990. The Statistics Office of the Netherlands Antilles reports a population of 32,221 in Sint Maarten in 1992 (Central Bureau of Statistics 1993). Although the population on the Dutch side is somewhat larger, the percentage of nationals is virtually identical on both sides: 45 percent in the French part and 48 percent in the Dutch part. Haitians and Dominicans constitute the two largest groups of migrants. Haitians represent 26 percent of the population in Saint-Martin and 14 percent in Sint Maarten; Dominicans represent 10 percent of the population on the French side and 11 percent on the Dutch side. In the French part of the island the number of illegals, an estimated 42 percent of the foreign population, or 75 percent of all foreigners, is larger than in the Dutch part, where illegal migrants represent 33 percent of the population, or 60 percent of all foreigners.

This demographic shift reflects the ethnic appreciation that affects prostitutes, and which corresponds to the waves of migration first of Haitian women and later of Dominican women. The movement of clandestinely employed men has its counterpart in the clandestine movement of women who prostitute themselves wherever they can earn money. During the first congress on the condition of Dominican sexual workers, held in the Dominican Republic in May 1995, it was shown that the country has become one of the chief sources of women for the international sexual trade during the last few years. The cash coming from the "sexual labor" of Dominican women living abroad that was transferred to the island has made it possible to balance the budget. Finally, it was established that these women are driven to prostitution primarily because of poverty.¹⁴ Out of a population of approximately six million people, an estimated forty thousand women on the island earn their living by prostitution and approximately another fifty thousand Dominican women make their living in the same way in other countries (Harranz 1994:74).

14. In *Le Monde* of May 25, 1995, Jean-Michel Caroit said: "La République dominicaine devient un des 'paradis' du tourisme sexuel. Poussées par la misère, de nombreuses femmes sont contraintes de se prostituer."

Not only is the Caribbean “the laboratory for the meeting place of culture,” but it is also the laboratory for perfecting neoliberal policy. This region is one of the places where international capitalism reigns, insofar as it is translated by intra- and external regional migrations, labor flexibility, and the commerce of sex. Some Caribbean islands and certain Latin American countries are loci for the reproduction of prostitution. This was true in Cuba, nicknamed “America’s brothel” before Castro’s revolution which outlawed brothels that had served for U.S. Marines and tourists.¹⁵ Since then, the Dominican Republic took the lead, followed by El Salvador, Panama, and Colombia. The islands housing European or American navy bases, not to mention the islands that practice sexual tourism, all have an organized network of prostitution. Since the period of European colonization, the demographic and settlement history of the region is based on a tradition of bringing women to serve the population and to satisfy the needs of male workers. This was the case for European prostitutes brought in the seventeenth century to the Francophone and Anglophone islands,¹⁶ and during certain periods of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, when there was a demand for African women or the forced coupling of slaves (Beckles 1989; Bush 1990; Kempadoo 1996). Today, Saint-Martin/Sint Maarten is like a contemporary expression of this process where we observe the general exchange of money, men, and women. Regional poverty is growing at the same time as fiscal havens increase in number and the women brought to the island as prostitutes are getting younger and younger. While we have no figures for Sint Maarten, the medical professionals whom prostitutes consult say that the women are getting younger, either because older women no longer wish to risk being contaminated by the AIDS virus, or because the older women are already infected. Many of the young prostitutes appeared to me to be sixteen or seventeen years old, at most. I was unable to verify the claim of a midwife, who knew certain prostitutes, that one of the brothels specializes in young pregnant prostitutes. A COIN (Centro de Orientación e Investigación Integral) report has ascertained that between

15. Heller 1997. *Prostitution has flourished once again since the late 1980s. Cuba is exemplary in the links between liberalism, tourism, and the development of prostitution in the Caribbean. Prostitution had virtually disappeared from the island between 1960-65 with the effort of social re-adaptation and re-education carried out by the Federation of Cuban Women and the Council for Social Defense (Rousse-Lacordaire 1997). In 1988, when tourism was decreed an engine for economic development, sexual tourism and child prostitution were developed on a large scale (Jarry 1994; O’Connell Davidson & Sanchez Taylor, 1996). Since 1998 and the laws making prostitution illegal in Cuba, prostitution has become less visible, but it would be difficult to claim that there is really less prostitution.*

16. For seventeenth-century Barbados, Jamaica, and the English Windward Islands, see Bush 1981:247; for Guadeloupe and Martinique, see Gautier 1985.

1992-93, in the Dominican Republic, young women between fifteen and nineteen years old accounted for 20 percent of the forty thousand prostitutes and that women between twenty and twenty-four accounted for 35 percent of the prostitute population (Harrantz 1994:74). In 1984 in Haiti, 30 percent of the prostitutes from Haiti or from the Dominican Republic were between fifteen and twenty years old; 40 percent were between twenty and twenty-five years old (Chanel 1994:15).

CONCLUSION

Legal and economic precarity underpin the social organization of Saint-Martin/Sint Maarten. The absence of protection against sexual exchange certainly points to cultural representations of sexuality that would be worth studying, as well as to social practices linked to poverty. Research has shown that in the United States, the poorest Afro-American women cannot force their partners to use condoms, even though they know that they have several partners (Sobo 1993). Prostitutes have the same problem because of their financial and legal precariousness.

According to the barmen and the women I met, condoms were not used in brothels before the 1990s. Today, prostitutes in brothels and in the dance bars are said to insist that their clients use condoms yet, given the skepticism raised earlier about remarks concerning the use of condoms, these affirmations would seem to belong to the brothel's official discourse of guaranteed safe sex. Clients say that if they pay slightly more, or insist strenuously enough, prostitutes stop insisting that they use condoms for fear of losing a client. Condoms are not used with one's "preferred" prostitute, a rather common relationship between regular clients and their favorite prostitutes. In these cases, a man comes several times a week to trick with his prostitute of choice whom he pays on a weekly basis rather than on a per trick basis. The woman, known as the "preferred" one or "my special" devotes herself to him as soon as he crosses the brothel threshold.¹⁷

Prostitution, one of the common forms of sexual relations, should be seen in the context of the region's neoliberalism. That prostitutes on Saint-Martin/Sint Maarten are foreign, as they are in many other regions of the Caribbean, reinforces their precariousness. Like most of their male compatriots, these women have no working papers and are therefore vulnerable – their contracts are never longer than three months and they stay on at their own risk, or they are forced to continue moving to other islands. The precarious situation and the flexibility of laborers who can be easily replaced,

17. The same is true in Haiti (Chanel 1994:12).

as translated by expulsions that are often illegal,¹⁸ holds true for immigrant men and women, whatever the labor being sold.

The Caribbean: male traffic, female slavery? I retain the terms traffic and slavery, even though some authors, such as Kamala Kempadoo, consider it inappropriate to speak about traffic since female prostitutes from the Caribbean, unlike those from Southeast Asia, can freely chose to augment their income by prostituting themselves. Can we really radically differentiate the prostitution that depends on organized networks into which young women are sold by their families or are abducted without any idea of what awaits them, from the barely less scandalous prostitution for which women chose to migrate? Is there any way to soften the fact that revenue from the prostitution of migrant women is put in the service of a liberal economy and of flexible labor? Kempadoo (1996) considers that exchanging sexual relations for wages, whether it occurs in a couple or in a context of "sexual commerce" is a survival strategy for women who do not have Western notions of love, affection, or couples. Do the empowerment strategies spoken about by women who chose the commerce of sex really target taking power? Isn't it more appropriate to speak about corporal reification in the service of a liberal economy? In a context of such extreme poverty, does the right to use one's body still exist? While this paper focuses on prostitution, thievery, the sale of organs, and the purchase of blood from individuals living in total misery should also be examined in the same way. Under the guise of cultural differences, we risk bypassing a geopolitical analysis, just as the psychological analysis of the mental frailty of females misses the same point.

In 1985, in Puerto Rico, a container from Saint Thomas bound for Saint-Martin/Sint Maarten was opened. In it, the bodies of twenty-eight suffocated Dominican women were discovered.

18. Asosyasion Solidante Karaib 1996; Bardinete & De Caunes 1997; Benoît, 1998.

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CATHERINE BENOÎT
Centre d'Etudes Africaines
L'École des Hautes Etudes en Sciences Sociales
54, Boulevard Raspail
75006 Paris, France
<catherine.benoit@ehess.fr>