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Risky Business: How Gender, Race, and Culture Influence the Culture of Risk-Taking among Sex Tourists

Yasmina Katsulis

The San Diego trolley runs from the border entry gate to Mexico throughout San Diego County. Next to cars, this is arguably the most popular way to travel to and from the border. Often, this venue attracts young, loud, drunk and bragging males on their way home from the Tijuana red-light district (la Zona Norte) area, especially on the weekends. One particular day, I sat behind two older men who were quietly laughing and sharing their experiences of the day. I interrupted their conversation to discuss my research, and they proceeded to show me a few pictures of their novias (‘girlfriends’) – sex workers with whom they had established regular rapport.

Responding positively to my project, the customers proceeded to tell me about an online forum they participated in – one completely devoted to Tijuana sex tourists. Customers participate in order to share information, advice and personal experiences, to socialise with one another and to organise offline social activities, where they share ‘war stories’, beer, and sometimes, women. In an introduction to the Club Hombre (2003) website, a newcomer (or ‘newbie’) is greeted with the following:

So you want to go to Tijuana, TJ. The weekend party town [for] San Diego teens, supreme gringo tourist trap, and most importantly, a paradise for the American single adult traveler. You’ve heard the stories of gorgeous women who can be had for the price of a couple lap dances at your local strip club. But you’ve also heard tales of scams & rip-offs, muggings and she-males. You want to know the truth about the risks and how to avoid becoming a victim. You also need information on where to find the hottest ‘chicas’ ['girls'] in TJ, which chicas provide
the best service, and how to get the best possible deal. Well you’ve come to the right place.

With the Internet, what was once a relatively small network of sex tourists from Southern California has been transformed into several burgeoning online communities. Data for this paper was drawn from the most frequently visited site during 1999–2003.

Sex tourism, and the discourse that surrounds this set of activities, can be conceptualised as a form of conspicuous consumption, allowing sex tourists to display and derive pleasure from wealth, power and social status relative to others. Chow-White (2006: 884) suggests that the Internet ‘enables sex tourists to build deeper connections between the racialisation, sexualisation and commodification of sex workers’ bodies and Western masculinity’. Further, Williams and Lyons (2008: 79) argue that this online identity work enables participants ‘to better articulate both normative and potentially idealised notions of masculinity and heterosexuality, regardless of whether or not they are materially practiced and thus representative of the “truth” of men’s experiences’. And, as I have argued, sex tourism involves ‘the cultivation, and experience, of a particular form of masculine subjectivity that relies upon (and exploits) historical differences in power and privilege. In imagining, and making meaning of these differences through conversations online, customers are able to create a complex, gendered subjectivity that is continually reimagined and reinscribed’ (Katsulis, 2010: 211). Thus, for consumers, the parameters of the purchase extend far beyond the physical encounter and into the discursive.

Like sex tourism itself, the virtual world provides opportunities for men to inhabit a largely hegemonic form of masculine subjectivity that might not be readily available to them in other venues (Katsulis, 2010). Sex tourists increasingly interact with one another both on and offline (Bishop and Robinson, 1998; Davidson, 2001; Soothill and Sanders 2007; Sanders, 2008a, 2008b; Hobbs et al., 2011), and online encounters provide a welcome opportunity for research into the social complexities of the identity work that shapes their activities. The emerging literature on gender identity work online provides a framework for this analysis (Kendall, 2002; Katsulis, 2010).

**Setting**

Located ten miles from San Diego, California, the city of Tijuana, Mexico has been an international sex tourist destination for several decades