

***Review of Economies of desire: Sex and tourism in Cuba and the Dominican Republic by Amalia Cabezas, Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2009.***

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Drawing upon over a decade of ethnographic research in the Caribbean, Amalia Cabezas' groundbreaking book, *Economies of desire: Sex and tourism in Cuba and the Dominican Republic*, explores the "erotic underpinnings of transnational tourism" (p. 3). This ethnographically rich and well-written book challenges fundamental assumptions about the relationships among sex, money, and affect in the context of transnational tourism. Cabezas builds upon classic work by Cynthia Enloe (1989) in conceptualizing "sexual affective relations" as merely another "part of the product being sold" in the tourism industry (p.13).

The first two chapters describe historical and political economic shifts within the broader cultural contexts of the two countries. This enables a better understanding of how two nations that may seem strikingly different have come to resemble one another in recent decades, particularly in terms of tourism development and neoliberal reforms. The remaining three chapters of the book offer unique interventions in scholarship on the sexual economies of tourism. In Chapter Three, "Eroticizing labor in all-inclusive resorts," Cabezas highlights an often-overlooked aspect of tourism: relationships between tourists and resort workers. She emphasizes emotional labor, worker agency, and the sexualization and racial stratification within the hospitality industry. Cabezas goes against the grain with her compelling argument that resort workers resist hotel management's exploitation of their labor by establishing sexual-affective relations with foreign tourists that could lead to friendship, remittances, visas, and marriage.

Chapter 4, "Daughters of Yemaya and other *luchadoras*," is perhaps the richest chapter of the book in terms of ethnographic

description and theoretical rigor. Here, she theorizes gifts, tactical sex, and sex work, and also draws upon Afro-Cuban religious cosmologies to understand how women conceptualize their relationships with foreign tourists. Cabezas understands gifts as an “important feature of exchange and solidarity” (p. 122) that can “solidify and strengthen” affective connections and “alleviate the gulf of disparities” between people (p. 123). She argues that gifts can represent “solidarity, care, and concern” for someone, as well as the transformation of a relationship into one of courtship and love (p.124). Commodification and affect are not mutually exclusive, Cabezas argues, and one cannot assume that all relationships that involve monetary exchange are “immoral, oppressive, and exploitative” (p. 22).

This engaging ethnography skillfully challenges the concept of sex work as the only viable analytical tool for understanding interactions between tourists and locals (p.117). Are young, single mothers in the Caribbean engaging in “sex work” when they pursue relationships with foreign men as a strategy to reap some of the benefits of transnational capitalism and tourism development? Cabezas perceptively critiques studies of sex work for failing to pay sufficient attention to the affective realm (p. 11). Accordingly, the scholarship on emotional labor and care work greatly influences her theoretical approach. Cabezas points out that the category of “sex work” cannot be applied to all “erotic cross-cultural encounters” (p. 11), particularly those that involve “elusive travel romances” and “intimate encounters” (p. 8) instead of straightforward commercial sexual transactions. Finally, she notes that the term “sex worker” has been applied to women in racist and classist ways. For example, the term *jinetera* has been racialized to refer almost exclusively to black women in Cuba. The term, “sex worker”, also presupposes a fixed identity (p. 21), which was incongruent with the narratives of her research participants.

Cabezas introduces the concept of “tactical sex” as an alternative to the notion of the entrenched identity of the term “sex worker”.

She defines tactical sex as “part of a complex circulation of sex and affect to cultivate social relations with foreigners” (p. 120). Tactical sex is a flexible, sporadic, and contingent activity that women may employ temporarily to alleviate financial burdens and seek friendship, permanent romantic attachments, and possibly international migration (p.120). For example, Yvet, a thirty-two year old black lawyer who earned US \$12 per month, decided to use tactical sex as a strategy to meet a foreigner who could help her migrate to work in her profession abroad (p. 135).

Finally, Chapter 4 highlights how Cuban women understand their sexual-affective relations with foreigners as “a form of spiritual deliverance” (p. 116), or a gift from Yemaya, the *orisha* of the ocean and protector of mothers. This is a unique and insightful argument that responds to M. Jacqui Alexander’s (2005) shrewd call for feminist scholars to pay attention to the role of religion and spirituality in women’s lives. The book would have been better served if this contribution had been further elaborated. In the final chapter, Cabezas describes state violence against sex workers in the Dominican Republic, as well as the exclusionary and liberatory discourses surrounding human rights and violence against women. She presents an ethnographic description of MODEMU, a Dominican sex worker organization that appropriates human rights language and the term “sex worker” in order to reposition sex workers “from fallen women” to “subjects worthy of protection” (p. 159).

Ultimately, *Economies of Desire* is an important book that will be useful for both scholarly and general audiences. It makes significant contributions to the fields of feminist anthropology, the anthropology of globalization, and tourism studies. Her self-reflexive, engaging writing style and generous depiction of her informants’ life stories and experiences will appeal to anyone interested in understanding the disparate effects of transnational capitalism and tourism development upon women in the Caribbean. In the final analysis, Cabezas hopes that the women’s

narratives demonstrate “how transnational capital plays on and through women’s bodies” (p.137). She certainly succeeds in this. Notably, Cabezas makes it a point to emphasize women’s agency, rather than their victimization. She highlights their courageous attempts to subvert systems of class, racial, and national inequalities through their intimate exchanges with foreign tourists (p. 12). These are stories that need to be shared with the world.

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