

GSF 352S Paper 3

Prompt 1: We read a series of texts that explore the meaning of the purchase of different forms of sexual labor, focusing on the question of what exactly is being purchased and consumed and why. These sources include: 1) Bernstein's discussion of client narratives and motives in chapter 5; 2) Rivers-Moore's chapter on male sex tourism in Costa Rica; 3) Sanchez Taylor and the film clip from *Cowboys in Paradise* on female sex tourism; 4) McKeever on whether sex work is inherently gendered; 5) Van Meir and Anise on findom; 6) and Salim on strip club work.

You are asked to write a paper that analyzes one or two of the most interesting similarities among at least three of these different accounts of what is being purchased.

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When evaluating whether prostitution qualifies as legitimate, a key question—rooted in the nature of the exchange—asks what exactly money buys in such transactions, and what customers hope to gain in return for their payment. This essay will explore two primary things customers seek from sex services beyond basic sexual gratification: first, a “Girl Friend Experience” that mirrors the authenticity of a genuine intimate relationship; second, the elevation of customers’ masculine or feminine status.

The first shared demand in prostitution service, as discussed in Rivers-Moore and Taylor’s piece, is customers’ validation of their masculine or feminine status. In other words, clients purchase a sense of control over their gender and sexuality. For men in Costa Rica, purchasing women’s bodies is considered a masculine practice (Rivers-Moore 61). They describe feeling powerful when choosing which women to have sex with (Rivers-Moore 57), as it consolidates their dominance and authority. Similarly, for women clients, prostitution allows them to gain the feminine ideals they’ve been conditioned to pursue by having sex with “real masculine men” (Taylor 49). Moreover, since they are the ones paying, they can fully embody their identity as women without the risk of rejection, shame, or social and political inferiority (Taylor 49).

On the one hand, it’s interesting to see that such elevation of masculine and feminine status is a demand across genders, and this is because of the existence of patriarchal gender norms that define men as sexually dominant and women as submissive (Taylor 12). As Dworkin and Pateman argue, sexuality is a key site of male power, where women submit to men and men affirm their masculinity through penetrating women’s bodies (Taylor 47). Focusing on male sex tourists in Costa Rica,

they enjoy prostitution because it evokes the 1950s—an era when gender roles were clearer and male dominance felt more secure. They describe that time as when “women and men knew their places,” and gender roles “were as they should be” (Rivers-Moore 59). In an age where their explicit power over women has waned, traveling to Costa Rica and paying for sex allows them to temporarily reassert masculine strength. For women clients, though the mechanism is more complex, the underlying influence is still patriarchal: some pay for sex to confirm their femininity as they find joy in pleasing men sexually, and others find satisfaction in fulfilling the societal expectation of “becoming a woman through sexual intimacy with someone imagined as their opposite” (Taylor 48).

Besides, in the context of sex tourism, the demand to confirm gender and sexuality is especially prevalent, and this is because gender and sexuality confirmation is often achieved through the exploitation of racial stereotypes and national privilege. For White male clients in Costa Rica, Costa Rican women are stereotypically seen as hypersexualized (Rivers-Moore 59). Because these women are assumed to naturally enjoy sexual submission, they become ideal subjects for masculine power confirmation (Rivers-Moore 58). Similarly, female clients in the Caribbean often view Black men as embodying exaggerated masculinity—more connected to nature, more instinctive, less rational, and more emotionally expressive. Through this racist lens, Caribbean men are romanticized as the “natural” opposite of women, enabling female clients to feel a heightened sense of femininity (Taylor 49). Thus, the perceptions of both male and female clients reveal deep-seated ethnic biases that not only drive the sex tourism

industry but are also continually reinforced as customers seek affirmation of their gendered and sexual identities.

To go further, in the abuse of national privilege in sex tourism in the process of elevating a sense of masculinity, the term “boyfriend” functions to neutralize the inequality between white male clients in Costa Rica and local prostituted women. One male client describes his ideal arrangement for a Costa Rican girl: he would “contract” her to “love him for nine years,” in exchange for which he “will get her English, get her citizenship—she just gotta love me like I’m it” (Rivers-Moore 61). Here, the white client seeks long-term sexual control by exploiting his privilege in language and citizenship, markers of power associated with a colonizing nation over a formerly colonized one. Yet this condescending dynamic is legitimized through the seemingly intimate label of “boyfriend and girlfriend.” Thus, in validating clients’ masculine dominance, the profound inequalities between nations are obscured but utilized.

Next, the second and more critical desire driving customers to engage with sex services is the so-called “Girlfriend Experience,” as mentioned by both Bernstein and Rivers-Moore. Also known as “GFE,” this need is a fantasy of a mutually desired, special, or even romantic sexual encounter between clients and prostitutes (Bernstein 125). Specifically, it is characterized by the concept of “bounded authenticity,” meaning that this erotic connection is mutually emotionally intimate and profound, yet achieved through monetary exchange (Bernstein 69). For instance, quoting the study done by Harold Holzman and Sharon Pines in investigating the phenomenology of being a John, Bernstein suggests that contemporary clients emphasize the warmth and friendliness of

the sex worker as characteristics at least as important as their physical traits; in other words, it is the “sincerity” that matters for the clients (Bernstein 126). Similarly, Rivers-Moore mentions that for male clients who seek out sex workers in Costa Rica and pay them, what they want is more than rapid sexual release; most crucial is the expression of interest and affection (55–57).

The idea of “bounded authenticity” in the GFE has two criteria: 1) the emotional bond needs to be—or at least seem to be—real, and 2) it is commercial, meaning that monetary exchange is preferably involved. Regarding these two features, this similarity in consumers’ desire for GFE is intriguing, as both criteria arise from historical changes in society and individuals’ lifestyles. First, the need for sexual service with an authentic emotional bond originates from the historical context of late capitalism. During the late capitalist era in the late 19th century, growing isolation among individuals and emotional loneliness created a stronger demand for authentic emotional connections and redefined the modernist paradigm of romantic love. For instance, epitomizing these lifestyle trends, one client interviewed by Bernstein sought romantic relationships with prostitutes because he was too busy studying and working and consequently had few opportunities to meet women (Bernstein 130). In this way, the hours clients spend with prostitutes become a brief oasis of genuine intimacy, sandwiched between a week’s impersonal and exhausting professional routines (Bernstein 125). Hence, these lifestyle trends in late capitalist society define a corresponding sexual paradigm that intermingles the “relational” with the “recreational” mode of eroticism (Bernstein 130), reflecting changes in customers’ modes of life and attitudes toward intimacy. Moreover,

beyond the individual level, the emphasis on emotional involvement in prostitution also represents a broader development in the late capitalist economy: the service sector expands in both depth and breadth (Bernstein 139). Therefore, as a sub-sector of the service industry, the core competitiveness of sexual services has gradually shifted from mere sexual satisfaction to deeper emotional value.

Shifting the focus onto the second criterion in defining a good GFE—the preferable involvement of money to ensure the relationship is transactional—it is also intriguing to examine this feature from the perspective of the evolution of intimate relationships. Seen in this light, the GFE within the prostitution industry arises as a need unique to certain social classes, functioning as a service that embodies class advancement, with sex tourism serving as a notable example. One trend in contemporary intimate relationships, as noted by male customers in Rivers-Moore's essay, is that they are becoming increasingly political, with complex routines, expectations, and emotional labor involved (Rivers-Moore 57). Moreover, these men suggest that U.S. women understate the significance of love and affection while overemphasizing the monetary aspects of relationships (Rivers-Moore 60). Consequently, traditional relationships become overly transactional and expensive, often financially unaffordable for men of lower socioeconomic status. In contrast, the Girlfriend Experience, accessed through sex tourism especially, offers lower cost and commitment. After a brief sexual encounter, there is no need to spend additional time or money on social obligations such as dinners (Rivers-Moore 57), allowing sex tourists to experience a spatially and temporally limited sense of social mobility (Rivers-Moore 62). Hence, as long-term

intimate relationships increasingly become a luxury for men of lower socioeconomic classes, those excluded from mainstream romantic discourse turn to the “bounded” GFE in sex tourism to achieve temporary status enhancement and access the illusion of erotic and romantic intimacy at a lower cost.

Finally, when wrapping the two exchanged ideals of customers up, it’s intriguing to see them collectively answer the question of whether prostitution is inherently gendered: meaning, if prostitution would still exist with the decline of patriarchy (McKeever 2). Combining the need for gender disposition validation, which is a product of patriarchy, and the demand for bounded authenticity, which is a newly arisen desire as society progresses, the answer is no. It is true that patriarchy indeed shapes the current form of sex work: men, framed by traditional gender norms as sexual power-holders, are more willing to pay for sex, benefiting from and facing less stigma for their dominant role (McKeever 12); and women, socialized as sexually submissive and constrained by “sexual purity” moral standards, deterring them from seeking sex services (McKeever 14). However, the industry will persist beyond gender norms, as demands for intimacy, pleasure, and learning in sex work—needs detached from gender/sexuality and align with societal transformations—will remain for all customers (McKeever 13).

Bibliography

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