

# Beyond Sex Tourism: Gay Tourists and Male Sex Workers in Puerto Vallarta (Western Mexico)

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## ABSTRACT

Literature on sex tourism has largely focused on the experiences and opinions of heterosexual tourists. Filling a gap in the literature, this article gives voice to male sex workers, and it analyzes their reasons for engagement in sex services addressed to men in tourist-oriented Puerto Vallarta (Mexico). By doing so, it explores the different layers of sex tourism that go beyond pure monetary transaction. This article also considers aspects regarding sexuality and identity in gay-friendly Vallarta. It concludes that sexual practices are negotiated, but sexual identities do not. Rather than an identity based on sexual grounds, what binds the sex workers together is a common (gay) lifestyle. Copyright © 2012 John Wiley & Sons, Ltd.

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## INTRODUCTION

Travelers have traditionally searched for “otherness”. Geographers, sailors, adventurers, conquistadores, and members of religious orders have expressed their opinions and

views of “others” in their chronicles and reports with both suspicion and curiosity. Their search, as observed by Said (1978) in his review of Western writers, involves a negotiation (occasionally a conflict) between the values and rules of people from different origins. This negotiation usually takes place within the context of the supposed superiority of Western values frequently protected by military and economic powers. In a globalized and diverse world, tourism somehow follows this tradition, although not necessarily from a position of power.

Tourism studies have been dominated by a positivist approach, and therefore, they have paid relatively little attention to the aspect of sexuality (Veijola and Jokinen, 1994; Waitt *et al.*, 2008). Even when dealing with sex tourism, the approach has traditionally been structural in nature and has been constructed from a middle-class heterosexual white male perspective (Waitt *et al.*, 2008). Recently though, there has been an emergence of a variety of research on sexuality related to tourism, specifically on sex tourism (see, for instance, Aggleton, 1999; Oppermann, 1999; Ryan, 1999; Clift and Carter, 2000; Herold *et al.*, 2001; Bauer and McKercher, 2003).

Sex tourism has been defined as travel for which the main motivation is to engage in commercial sexual relationships (De Albuquerque, 1998; Clift and Carter, 2000). Rather than purely a commercial transaction, Pruitt and LaFont (1995) argued that sex tourism may also entail courtship and that the liaisons between sex workers and tourists may involve romance, long-term relationships and emotional involvement. Considering this, Herold *et al.* (2001) found that the majority of the female tourists interviewed in the Dominican Republic thought that their sexual encounters were

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romance-framed (yet for their male counterparts, it was simply sex for money). These scholars suggest a romance/sex continuum for explaining the various motivations of tourists when paying for sex. In any case, the literature agrees that sex services involve some form of payment, monetary or otherwise (O'Connell, 1998), even if money is not always the main target (Oppermann, 1999).

Literature is far from conclusive regarding the "ideal" type of sex tourist. Oppermann (1999), for instance, argued that sex tourism goes beyond the image of an older, out-of-shape white man who travels to developing countries for sexual pleasure with younger women. Indeed, women have also been recognized as clients in sex tourism (Herold *et al.*, 2001). Contrary to these opinions, in his study on the Dominican Republic, Brennan (2010) concluded that the individuals who travel for sex tend to be white, working class men who can afford to travel internationally.

In evaluating research on sex tourism, it is relevant to note that investigations have mainly been undertaken from the tourist perspective. Available literature has clearly prioritized the experiences and opinions of tourists over those of the sex workers. Thus, we learn that the reasons for tourists to get involved in paid sex activities are various, including 'the search for the racialized other' (Cantú, 2002; Hughes *et al.*, 2010), 'attitude' (Liguori and Aggleton, 1999), pure sex techniques and genitals (De Albuquerque, 1998), and romance (Pruitt and LaFont, 1995; Herold *et al.*, 2001). Yet, few researchers consider the opinions of the sex workers themselves. Indeed, when research has taken sex workers into account, the emphasis has primarily been on the negative sides of sex and tourism, such as child prostitution (e.g. O'Connell, 1998; Lim, 1998; Azola and Estes, 2004) and the transmission of sexual diseases, such as HIV (e.g. Aggleton, 1999; Kibicho, 2009).

It is also relevant that sex tourism literature has largely focused on heterosexual practices. Despite the studies on gay male tourism (e.g. Clift and Forrest, 1999; Howe, 2001; Hughes, 2002; Hughes *et al.*, 2010), research that specifically focuses on the sex tourism of non-heterosexual people is scarce. In an attempt to broaden the perspective, Luongo (2000) analyzed

the use male travelers to New York make of the city's large gay infrastructure, including escort services. From a less commercial point of view, Hubbard (2002) explored representations and sexual identities and argued that sex tourism enables the construction of interchangeable, disputed, fractured sexual identities. "Heterosexualities" and "homosexualities" are diverse enough to show a great deal of emotions, experiences, and sexual practices, which could be represented by different "landscapes" (Hubbard, 2002; see also Cantú, 2002).

Set in this context, the objective of this study was to analyze the reasons and motivations of a group of Mexican men to engage in sex services addressed to men in Puerto Vallarta (Mexico). Certainly, as pointed out by Oppermann (1999), an interpretation of prostitution which is reduced to money does not take into account the complexity of the phenomenon of the sex tourist industry itself. Thus, following Pruitt and LaFont (1995), Herold *et al.* (2001), and Bauer and McKercher (2003), we explore the different layers of sex tourism that may go beyond pure monetary transaction. Indeed, this literature suggests that sexual encounters may entail some kind of personal involvement on the part of both the client and the sex worker. Thus, it is anticipated that, besides money, there is a circulation of values, stereotypes, and expectations between clients and sex workers before, during, and after the sexual intercourse. Expectations also help to see sex work from another light: as a temporary job that will probably conclude at a certain point in people's lives. Taking this into account, we analyze the motivations and expectations of sex workers over time.

By giving voice to sex workers, the article also considers aspects regarding sexuality and identity. Considering Cantú's (2002) ideas on the shifting boundaries of Mexican male sexuality, we explore the idea of 'disputed, fractured sexual identities' in sex tourism (Hubbard, 2002) from the worker perspective. This is new in literature, since tourist studies have generally accepted dual sexual hierarchies, such as heterosexual/homosexual in their analysis (Jamal and Hollinshead, 2001). Furthermore, the few studies on sex tourism that explore

sexual identities from nonconventional sexual hierarchies focus primarily on tourists (Luongo, 2000; Hubbard, 2002).

#### SPACE, PLACE-RELATED IDENTITIES, AND SEX TOURISM

The complex relations between sex, identity, and space have been studied in gay tourism literature (e.g. Hughes, 2002; Herrera and Scott, 2005; Monterrubio, 2009) and in lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) geographies (e.g. Tattelman, 2000; Nash and Bain, 2007; Brown, 2008). Yet, this is not the case with the literature of sex tourism for which the geographical aspects of this tourism are mainly reduced to "scenarios" in which negotiations and encounters occur. These scenarios are rarely considered to be decisive in understanding the practices and behavior of sex workers and tourists (for a clear exception to this rule, see Bauer and McKercher, 2003). Even less frequent in the sex tourism literature is that these spaces are used as an explanatory factor for interpreting the identity construction (or enhancement) of sex workers.

Research on gay male tourism, even if not on paid sex, has made a contribution to the debate on the intertwined connections between place-related identities and gay tourism. Thus, leisure activities and holidays in areas with a substantial offer of homosexual-oriented businesses are thought to enable gay men to enjoy a space of freedom, which in turn validates a common gay identity among tourists (Holcomb and Luongo, 1996; Hughes, 2002; Herrera and Scott, 2005; Monterrubio, 2009). Furthermore, some scholars have argued that gay male tourism is not only an opportunity for reinforcing identities, but it also constitutes in itself a sort of 'identity tourism' (Howe, 2001; Herrera and Scott, 2005).

Outside the field of tourism, the geographical literature on LGBT studies has extensively explored the complex relationships between space, sex, and identity. For instance, Valentine (1993) and Binnie and Valentine (1999) reckoned that the use (and even colonization) of public spaces by non-straight individuals in oppressive circumstances enable re-territorial processes and the visibility of sexual subcultures

that resist heteronormativity. Bassi (2006) also argued that the development of LGBT-oriented businesses in Birmingham, England, and the consolidation of Asian gay nights in local clubs have had a clear positive impact on the visibility of both ethnic and sexual differences in the urban context and on a process of identity reaffirmation (for critical accounts on LGBT commercialization, see Nast, 2002; Nash, 2006).

Theorizing about the power of geography in constructing identities, Nash and Bain (2007) proposed the concept of 'queering of spaces', suggesting the existence of spaces that enable participants to experiment with their sexuality beyond strict sexual identities. On their research into the exclusive women's event *Pussy Palace* organized in a Toronto bathhouse, they concluded that this location intended to 'reclaim the raunch' of the participants by vindicating the sexuality of working women, whom they supposed were more liberated than were more-constricted middle-class women. Looking at the same issue, Brown (2008) on his research on gay men's behavior in public spaces in East London concluded that alternative sexualities are explored and experienced in these spaces in the immediacy of each encounter, free from strict sexual identities. Similarly, Tattelman (2000) argued that spaces that are constructed by non-heterosexual individuals imply the construction of a parallel world, filled with possibilities and pleasures that, despite being inserted into the dominant culture and values, facilitate the redefinition of fixed heteronormative principles and the end of binary categories of sexual behaviors.

Through these analytical lenses, this article analyzes the scenarios in which sex services occur in Puerto Vallarta, and it observes that the everyday life of sex workers is conducted around specific places where paid sexual activities are negotiated and carried out. Whether this spatial structuring of everyday life experiences and practices generates a gay identity among male sex workers is another issue. Indeed, since the bulk of the research on both gay male tourism and LGBT geographies has centered on the gay and lesbian community in North American and European cities, it is at least debatable that their conclusions on space

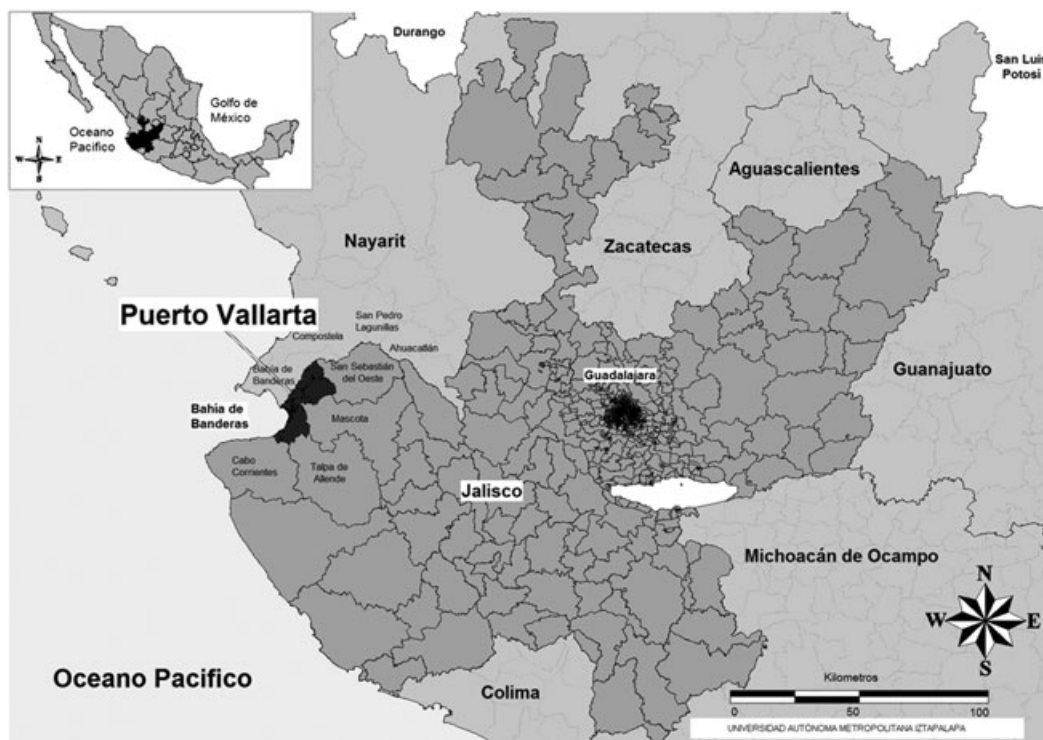


Figure 1. Location of Puerto Vallarta (Jalisco) in Western Mexico. Author: Alfredo Grimaldo.

and identity are easily transferred into Mexican sex workers in Puerto Vallarta.

## STUDY AREA

Puerto Vallarta is located in the northwestern part of the state of Jalisco and forms a tourist corridor along with Bahía de Banderas in the neighboring state of Nayarit (Western Mexico; see Figure Figure 1). According to the 2010 Census data, these municipalities have a joint population of 379 886 people (INEGI, 2011), meaning a constant annual population rate as high as 4–5% during the period 1970–2010. This growth is mainly due to the development of tourist-oriented activities from the 1970s when an alliance between local entrepreneurs and governments took place within the framework of the national policy on the development of tourist centers (Munguía, 1994).

The profile of the average tourist in Puerto Vallarta is a 36- to 50-year old men from the USA or Canada. From original survey data,

César and Arnáiz (2006) found that visitors are mainly men who travel for pleasure and to rest, a distinctive characteristic of the sand-and-sea tourism. Puerto Vallarta specializes in gay tourism<sup>1</sup> as more than 35% of its hotel capacity is oriented toward this segment (an estimate of 18 200 rooms; Torres, 2006). For Mexico as a whole, the economic spillover of gay tourism is as high as 4.5 billion dollars annually, since this group is mainly composed of high-income single professionals or businessmen from the USA, Canada, and Europe (Vidal Aldana, 2007).

Indeed, Puerto Vallarta is a well-known gay-friendly tourist destination on the Mexican Pacific coast (Carranza, 2006; Torres, 2006; Vidal Aldana, 2007). Moreover, the city ranks second among the international homosexual destinations for US male visitors (Hughes *et al.*, 2010). The numerous gay clubs and bars are highly concentrated in Old Vallarta. This area is well delimited by the gay beach (*Playa de los*

<sup>1</sup>Henceforth, unless otherwise stated, “gay” refers to homosexual men.



*Muertos*), the Cuale River, and Insurgentes Street. Here, the city offers a wide range of services to gay-friendly tourists, such as restaurants, hotels, bed and breakfast, boutiques, and real estate companies. This constitutes an articulated identity-based network of various markets, from consumption to exchange (see also Knopp, 1992; Bassi, 2006), which is unique in Mexico. Although Mexico City has more nightlife to offer, it does not have many specialized gay services (Sánchez and López, 1997). In Old Vallarta, affection is normal between men. In short, this part of the city shows most of the characteristics of queer marketing spaces that the literature has highlighted elsewhere: a high density of gay-oriented businesses, permissiveness, and the recreation of a certain gay lifestyle (e.g. Valentine, 1993; Binnie and Valentine, 1999; Bassi, 2006).

## METHODS

This article is based on qualitative information. In tourism research, the qualitative approach is thought to be useful to gain insight into behaviors, concerns, and attitudes that are difficult to obtain in quantitative analysis (Walle, 1997; Riley and Love, 2000). This approach seems to be the most convenient due to the difficulties in implementing more structured statistically bound survey techniques for studying gay-related issues in macho-dominated Latin American countries (see for instance Carrier, 1995; Prieur, 1996; Fernández-Dávila *et al.*, 2008).

During the first stage of our fieldwork, we identified the organizations that work with sex workers.<sup>2</sup> Their main aim is to give them health information and support. The organizations provided background information on problems that sex workers may face in the city (e.g. lack of institutional support for

health schemes), and they informed us about the places and times that male-to-male sex services occurred.

Second, we undertook participant observation in the places where sex services are negotiated (beach, bars, and night clubs). We adopted the role of a covert participant observer in these scenarios. Participant observation was systematic, passive, and moderate (Spradley, 1980). Through participant observation, we observed how the high density of gay-oriented businesses in Old Vallarta helps to recreate a certain gay lifestyle. We also observed the general dynamics of interactions between locals and tourists on the beach (*Playa de los Muertos*) and in bars and in night clubs. Man-to-man expressions and affections were normal in these scenarios, but prostitution is unnoticeable at first sight. Observations were made in October–November 2007.

Following participant observation, the methodological strategy centered on the semi-structured interviews. We adopted different strategies to contact sex workers. First of all, the health organizations introduced us to several sex workers. Second, through direct questioning of staff in gay bars and hotels, possible interviewees were identified. Third, the Internet was also used as a way of approaching sex workers. Finally, all the interviewed sex workers were also asked about possible friends who were in the sex industry. Snowballing therefore was a fourth strategy.

Participants were assured that the interviews would be treated confidentially, and pseudonyms would be used in the academic publications resulting from the research. Sex workers were also informed about the objectives of the research, the anonymity of their responses, and the ethics of the work. They also knew the names, affiliations, addresses, phone numbers, and e-mails of the researchers in charge of the project. Participants were paid 200 pesos (around 18 US dollars at the time of research).

The interviews were held in Old Vallarta in October and November 2007. As previously stated, Old Vallarta is a well-defined gay space, and interviews were conducted with men who have sex with other men for money. A total of 12 male-to-male sex workers were interviewed, seven of them were in

<sup>2</sup>The research team consisted of three people (two men and one woman) with different sexual preferences. The interviews were carried out by at least two of the three members. Two of us are academics in Mexican universities, and the third was completing his degree thesis on sexual workers at the time of the fieldwork (Estrada Vázquez, 2011). One person in the research team lives permanently in Puerto Vallarta and has worked on health issues concerning sex workers in the city for a long time.

their 20s, four were 18–19 years old, and one was in his 30s (Table 1). Interviews were carried out in public spaces; six on Vallarta's unofficially gay beach (*Playa de los Muertos*),

four in two gay bars, and two more in a gay-friendly hotel. Interviews were held in Spanish and were recorded and transcribed. They lasted an hour on average.

Table 1. Profile of the interviewed sex workers

Pseudonym	Age	Place of birth	Time in Puerto Vallarta	Sexual preference	Self-definition	Encounter places
Ángelo	19	Comatlán, Jalisco	1.5 years	Homosexual	Prostitute	Gay clubs and beach
Iván	28	Coastal village of Colima	1 year	Bisexual	Escort	Gay clubs and beach
José Manuel	25	Guadalajara, Jalisco	4 years	Homosexual	Escort	Gay clubs and Internet
Carlos	24	Delicias, Chihuahua	Seasonal	Bisexual	Prostitute	Gay clubs and beach
Alberto	18	Puerto Vallarta, Jalisco	Vallarta-born	Bisexual	Prostitute	Beach, school
Fernando	20	Tecomán, Colima	5 years	Heterosexual	<i>Mayate</i>	Gay clubs and beach
Óscar	25	Guadalajara, Jalisco	3.5 years	Heterosexual	No Answer	Gay clubs and beach
José	19	La Cruz de Loreto, Jalisco	3 years	Bisexual	No Answer	Gay clubs and beach
Johan	22	Distrito Federal	Seasonal	Homosexual	Escort	Gay clubs and beach, Internet
Enrique	37	Guadalajara, Jalisco	14 years	Bisexual	Masseur	Gay clubs and beach
Karla	22	Autlán, Jalisco	5 years	Homosexual	Transvestite	Streets and gay clubs
Francisco	19	Monterrey, Nuevo León	5 years	Bisexual	<i>Mayate</i>	Gay clubs and beach
Pseudonym	Current jobs		Past jobs		Plans for the next five years	
Ángelo	Only prostitution		<i>Quesadillas</i> stall		Study, permanent partner, live in Guadalajara	
Iván	Only prostitution		Hotel sales department		Work in hotels or in real estate companies	
José Manuel	Prostitution; mornings, clerical job		Clerical jobs		Be in my current position	
Carlos	Only prostitution		Many years in prostitution		Buy a car	
Alberto	Prostitution; high school student		No jobs		Get a permanent job and partner	
Fernando	Only prostitution		Gardener, painter, dishwasher		Migrate to the USA, Canada; study, work, have a family	
Óscar	Prostitution; mornings, shop assistant		Shops		Have a "normal" job; study	
José	Only prostitution		Construction		Living life	
Johan	Only prostitution		Working on a commission basis, petrol station		Keep on prostitution	
Enrique	Only prostitution		Shop assistant, workshop, time-sharing sales		Keep on prostitution	
Karla	Prostitution and dancer		Family business		Be on this	
Francisco	Only prostitution		Prostitution in Colombia, plumber, construction, masseur		'Here I'm and I haven't quit'	

Source: Fieldwork (October–November 2007).

This research was part of a broader project on male-to-male sex tourism in Mexico.<sup>3</sup> Guidelines for interviews were common to the whole project, which consisted of a total of 10 researched cities throughout the country. These guidelines were derived from literature and from previous exploratory fieldwork in Mexico City. The interview was structured around broad topics (i.e. socio-demographics and labor trajectory, motivations for involvement in sex services, worker–client interactions, places and scenarios for sex work, sexual practices, sexual identities, plans for the future and expectations, and risks and social exclusion). Rather than obtaining specific data on each subject area, questions were left open to gain individual opinions and concerns. Generally speaking, answers were candid and direct. Yet, issues of sexual identity (not on sexual practices) were sometimes difficult to address. A few sex workers even felt that we questioned their sexuality, which was indeed not the case.

The sample used in this study was nonprobabilistic. The method (a small number of semi-structured interviews with sex workers) has also been used with other studies on sex tourism (Herold *et al.*, 2001), gay tourism (Pritchard *et al.*, 2000; Hughes, 2002; Hughes *et al.*, 2010), and gay sex tourism (Luongo, 2000). Although small, we consider that the number of informants reached a level of the saturation point (i.e. answers were repetitive, and no new issues emerged; Creswell, 1998; Crouch and McKenzie, 2006). Although the research did not attempt to achieve a representative sample, efforts were made to collect information from sex workers with different backgrounds. Thus, the sample included both full-time and part-time sex workers, people with different migration trajectories (born in Puerto Vallarta, non-local-born residents, and seasonal migrants), and people with various sexual identities (gay, bisexual, and heterosexual), as well as people with diverse ages (ranging from 18 to 37). Given the number of interviews, the objective of this article was not to be conclusive about large-scale generalizations but to identify concerns, issues, and trends regarding gay

sex tourism in developing countries (see also Phillimore and Goodson, 2004). Data were analyzed through content analysis method. This process included open coding, creating categories, and abstracting (see Weber, 1990). Content analysis is well suited to analyzing data on multifaceted, sensitive phenomena (Elo and Kyngäs, 2008).

The next section analyzes the scenarios (i.e. streets, bars and night clubs) where sex services are negotiated in Puerto Vallarta, thus noting the diverse implications of these geographical settings for the development of the sex industry in the city. This broad panorama highlights the interviewees' views on their life and work in Vallarta, which is generally seen in a positive light. In fact, life in town is a liberating experience for some interviewees who come from rural areas and small towns. Finally, from a micro perspective, this section concentrates on the spaces and times of sex tourism in Vallarta. Perhaps predictably, sex workers follow a sort of routine organized around gay tourist activities in Puerto Vallarta.

## SPACE AND SEX IN PUERTO VALLARTA

Puerto Vallarta is an openly gay-oriented city in which sex is part of the tourist activities on offer. As was highlighted clearly during the fieldwork, the laid-back beach atmosphere of the city (plus a high concentration of gay businesses in Old Vallarta) facilitates encounters between gay men (on holiday preferences of homosexual males, see Clift and Forrest, 1999; Hughes, 2002). In Old Vallarta, affection is normal between men (and to lesser extent women). An interviewee who was originally from Guadalajara, the second largest city in Mexico, has no doubts about tourism being the main reason for the relaxed gay-friendly ambience in Vallarta ('gay tourists come over here and they think differently. It's another culture. They openly hold hands and they kiss each other shamelessly – *sin pena*'. José Manuel, 25, Guadalajara).

Indeed, the general impression from the interviews is that Vallarta has a permissive liberal atmosphere concerning male sex work. Except for one, the sex workers said that they had not experienced police harassment or rejection by local people. Maybe the permissive attitudes are related to the sex service

<sup>3</sup>The project was coordinated by Álvaro López (UNAM, Mexico City), and it researched three types of cities: beach places (such as Puerto Vallarta and Acapulco), large cities (e.g. Mexico City, Puebla), and one border town (Tijuana).

negotiations being mainly circumscribed to limited spaces (gay bars, night clubs, and beach). In fact, prostitution is unnoticeable at first sight in these spaces. The exception to this rule is Karla. Dressed in drag, he usually offered his services on the streets. At the time of interview, he also performed in a famous Old Vallarta gay club. In his own words

*Where do you work (as a sex worker)?*

Mainly on the streets.

*What about the bars?*

Occasionally, I work in bars, if allowed. Right now, the streets are dangerous. The local government has a tough position on street prostitution. If they see me in drag, police take me to the station, even if I'm clean (Karla, 22, Autlán, Jalisco).

A similar opinion is shared by José. He moved from a small rural town in Western Mexico to Vallarta at the age of 16 years. At that time José started to work on a construction site, but, after few months, he decided to take up sex services because of their higher wages. Having worked for three years in the industry, he clearly recognized the different types of male-to-male sex work in Puerto Vallarta:

Transvestites are frequently arrested, because they work on the streets. They give a bad impression. Gay people [gay sex workers] are in bars or on the beach, but not on the streets. Transvestites work with low-income locals, and we [gay sex workers] prefer foreigners (José, 19, La Cruz de Loreto, Jalisco).

These opinions suggest that the sex industry is accepted (or at least tolerated) in specific places. More visible city areas that are used "inappropriately" are constantly the focus of heightened police scrutiny. This double standard, which may imply a process of inclusion and exclusion, has also been seen in other cases. In Manchester, for instance, Hughes (2002) observed a high degree of permissiveness toward displays of explicit affection in the gay village but strict police persecution in outer public spaces.

Another general impression which is highlighted by the interviews is that entry into

prostitution is easy, smooth, and unproblematic. The sex workers suggest that the laid-back ready-to-party atmosphere of Puerto Vallarta somehow helped them (or even pushed them) into the sex industry. According to the majority of their narratives, sex for money was not something that they sought to do, but a merely quick way of obtaining a good wage in (liberal) Vallarta. To illustrate this, we selected excerpts from two workers.

I came here because I was told that life was easy in Vallarta. I came here with friends, and they do the same as I do...at the beginning it was hard. I tried to get a normal job, but when I saw the wages, I decided to start doing this...A friend of mine told me that there were many tourists, and they have a lot of money. I was told that prostitution was very easy in Vallarta (José Manuel, 25, Guadalajara, Jalisco).

I came into this by chance. I worked in a *quesadilla* stand nearby Mañana [a popular gay night club in Vallarta], and I saw many young people who were in this business. I was not really interested, but all of sudden the opportunity came up (Angelo, 19, Comatlán, Jalisco).

The liberal atmosphere of Vallarta contrasts with the closed (or even hostile) environment in the hometowns of some interviewees. Five out of 12 came from medium- to small-sized towns in Western Mexico (plus one being born in a medium-sized city of the northern state of Chihuahua, see Table 1). Migration to Puerto Vallarta from these areas was, in these cases, a 'flight', a 'point of no return' in their lives. Thus, some sex workers such as Angelo or José 'fled' from the lack of tolerance in their hometowns (and in their families). They both define themselves as gay and believe that Vallarta is a liberating place, since they could be themselves as gay people and escape from family bigotry.

After finishing high school, I came here. I had problems with my dad. He knew that I was homosexual...He would bother me, attack me (Angelo, 19, Comatlán, Jalisco).



I've been living in Vallarta for three years. I came here because I had problems with my parents. They didn't accept me (José, 19, La Cruz de Loreto, Jalisco).

For others, though, their migration to Vallarta is a response to the seasonal cycles of international tourism. Specifically, the two nonpermanent residents in Vallarta in our nonrepresentative sample usually migrated annually to the city for the high season (October–May). The example of Carlos illustrates this pattern, since he has worked in male sexual services in different Mexican cities. At the time of interview, he had a very well-defined route between Guadalajara and Puerto Vallarta. Carlos also expressed the difficulties in obtaining clients outside the peak season. In his words,

I stay in Vallarta until May, and then I go back to Chihuahua [his home state]. In September, I usually go to Guadalajara for one month. Then, I come back to Vallarta for six months. This year, I came to Vallarta in September, and it was tough. I couldn't find clients, and I had to sleep on the beach (Carlos, 24, Delicias, Chihuahua)

Regardless of their origins or their motivations in moving to Vallarta, most of the interviewed sex workers internalize pleasure ('they have fun') but externalize guilt. They enjoy sex and a "gay" lifestyle, but they blame "others" (friends, foreigners, tourists, or even the city) for their entry into prostitution ('I was walking on the beach, and I was offered money for sex'; José, 19, La Cruz de Loreto, Jalisco). According to their views, Puerto Vallarta is a "tempting" place that facilitates sex work.

### **Spaces and times of sex tourism in Puerto Vallarta**

The everyday life of sex workers occurs in specific places and at specific times. Male prostitution follows a sort of routine as it is organized around gay tourist activities. For Puerto Vallarta, as the interviewees said, the morning is dead for business, as tourists are sleeping. Homosexual tourists spend time at the gay beach from midday until dusk. The *Playa de los Muertos*, particularly the Blue

Chairs bar and hotel, is a place for casual meetings in the afternoon. A rainbow flag flying over the Blue Chairs hotel clearly marks the place as being "gay". The clientele comes from all ages, and expressions of affection are normal here. At dusk, at Blue Chairs, the bright and colorful chairs after which the bar is named are cleared off the beach.

Sexual negotiations are more noticeable in bars in the evening and at night. The second scenario where participant observation took place was a bar located in Old Vallarta. The poorly lit American-style circular bar has relatively cheap drinks that attract a diverse clientele. It is mainly frequented by old US and Canadian citizens; many of whom are retired and live in Mexico permanently (in fact, the owner, also a bartender, is originally from the USA). The Mexicans are generally younger. People usually mingle easily, and physical contact is common. In the bar, flirting between older foreign men and young Mexicans does not go unnoticed. The commerce side of sex services is recognizable by an external observer, since the young usually take the lead to more intimate contacts (e.g. kissing) with older foreign men. This is in line with the opinions the interviewed sex workers gave us on their clients who were described as gringos, white, oldies (*viejitos*), and *señores*.

However, despite their differences, both examples share some traits: easy first contacts, relaxed people, and drinks. These places are permissive in terms of sex work, which is not perceived as being violent by anyone, be they tourists, locals, workers, or business owners. Beyond prostitution, these scenarios represent a way of understanding gay sexuality, apparently clear, direct, and uninhibited. People seem to share values and lifestyles, regardless of their age, social class, or nationality (see also Altman, 1996).

The previous descriptions point to the fact that male prostitution follows a work schedule that is carried out in specific places in Vallarta. Some interviewees may visit the beach, bars, and clubs in search for clients all in one day. In his interview, 19-year-old Francisco, from Monterrey, said, 'we're awake all day long. It's our job. We, *mayates* (men who have sex with other men but reject a gay identity), have a work schedule'. Not only do they have a

schedule, but they are always up for business if it comes along. 'I'm off today, but if something comes up... Nobody would say "no" to hard cash' (Carlos, 24, Delicias, Chihuahua).

#### MOTIVATIONS FOR INVOLVEMENT: KEEPING IN BUSINESS

'Hard cash' is the main reason given by the interviewed workers for being involved in sex tourism. For the majority of them, the sex industry seems to be a matter of a choice between possible jobs in town. In fact, four of the 12 were part-time sex workers (Table 1). However, a few said that they would not be doing this job if they had not been pushed into it by economic circumstances. Fernando is the clearest example of someone who moved into prostitution due to difficult personal circumstances. After leaving school, he started to work at the age of eight years as a gardener back in his hometown. In Puerto Vallarta, Fernando clearly dislikes sex work, but he believes that he has no choice. 'I don't like this. I'm here for the money. I need to pay the rent, buy food, help my mother' (Fernando, 20, Tecomán, Colima).

Apart from money, transactions may involve other material gains, such as gifts, temporary help, or being treated to dinner (see also Oppermann, 1999; McKercher and Bauer, 2003). Clients are considered to be friends who 'want to help', and transactions are not made in a straightforward manner. The commercial part is simply 'hidden' in the negotiation. Both Iván and Óscar (full- and part-time sex workers respectively) reckon that company and 'friendship' are relevant for some clients:

*What do you think that they are looking for? Most of them are looking for company... If they are your friends, you got it, you don't go straight to the point. They buy you a drink, they buy you clothes, they invite you to dinner, and they want to be with you all the time, and then they become friends. They come over every year, and they look for you (Iván, 28, coastal village of Colima).*

*When do you say this is a business for me... or I charge? How do you ask for money?*

Look, I don't have rates. So I spend time with them and talk about my situation. That's it. I need to pay the rent, and they understand. In many cases, there are lonely people who understand my situation, and they offer to help.

*Do they value company?*

Yes, they do. They want to help (Óscar, 25, Guadalajara, Jalisco).

These extracts suggest that prostitution does not only entail financial but also emotional help. Illustrating this idea, Iván, an ex-hotel sales representative, said that he preferred older clients because they were quieter and more relaxed. This is in line with the findings of Herold *et al.* (2001) on "beach boys" in Santo Domingo who favored overweight women 40 years and older because they were thought to be the best clients. For Iván, though, it is not only a question of age, but also of attitude ('I also like the way they behave'). In his own words,

*...I prefer older people. I also like the way they behave. I'm more attracted to them. They are not vain or arrogant. Because of their age, they are quieter, more relaxed, cleverer, and you learn more. I prefer them to guys like me. I'm the pretty one (Iván, 28, coastal village of Colima).*

Negotiations about sex services may also include retiring from the sex service (yet only five out of the 12 interviewees foresee possible alternative jobs outside of prostitution in the next five years, Table 1). For future plans, the lure of a trip (or even migration) to the USA and Canada came up in some narratives. In relation to this, Fernando, who expressed the strongest negative views on his job, clearly stated that he would like to migrate to the USA or Canada to 'escape' from prostitution, to have 'a new opportunity'.

*[I came here] because I was told that Vallarta was very tourist oriented. And I make a good living at this [as a sex worker]. But it's time to make a move, because this is not where I see myself. I want to get a job, study, or look for a new opening in the US or Canada. Then,*

I will quit doing this [prostitution]; hanging out with gays, with men (Fernando, 20, Tecomán, Colima).

Migration as a powerful image is seen in other research on sex tourism. For instance, DeMoya and García (1999), in their study on Santo Domingo, concluded that one reason for prostitution was the desire to travel and emigrate. Similarly, Boushaba *et al.* (1999), on their research in Morocco, pointed out that many sex workers prefer foreigners, because they would eventually like to travel to Europe. However, migration studies do not usually take into account (or directly ignore) the emotional dimensions linked to migration and mobility processes (for a clear exception to this rule, see Gorman-Murray, 2009, who demonstrated that desires and sexuality “mold” mobility patterns of gay couples in Australia. Certainly, our fieldwork points in this direction, finding that both emotions (and relationships), not only labor market dynamics, are relevant to understanding migration patterns of sex workers.

## THE BODY AND SEXUALITIES

Migration as a possible escape from sex services is referred to in some narratives, but migration is only a (remote) possibility. What is not a matter of choice or opportunity is ageing. The interviewees clearly said that sex services were reserved for the young, and they expressed their concerns on ageing. Iván (28 years old) and José Manuel (25 years old) felt that they were ‘old’ and said that, because of this, they would eventually retire from prostitution. However, this was not the case for 37-year-old Enrique who was still in the business at the time of his interview. After resigning from his previous job as a shop assistant, he has worked in the sex industry for more than 14 years. He reckoned that his drug addiction did not allow him to consider a change of job. Enrique also expressed his concerns on ageing. Because of his ‘aged body’, Enrique considered that he was not able to attract clients as he did before, even if he substantially lowered his rates for sex. At the time of interview, he slept on the beach (unless a client invited him to stay overnight).

Age and physical conditions are key elements in sex tourism, and, indeed, an aged body may be a ‘barrier’ to it (see also Altman, 1996). This final section focuses on the body and sexuality. Through the narratives of the interviewees, we analyze images and representations of “Mexican otherness”. Considerations on how others observe sex workers will give way to a reflection on how sex workers see themselves in terms of their sexual identity. The relationship between sex practices and identity processes is particularly complex for some interviewees, for whom identity is in contradiction with regard to the practice of sex services (yet for others sexual identity is unproblematic).

### Selling the exotic

With the exception of Enrique, the interviewees were in their 20s or younger and in good shape, but not always athletic. Their physical characteristics may be associated with a certain idea of ‘dark-skinned Mexican macho’. Effectively, skin color matters. Two sex workers, Johan and Carlos, stated it clearly. Twenty-year-old Johan, from DF, said that he was not successful with Americans because of his skin color. ‘They don’t like me, because I’m light skinned’. Dark-skinned Carlos, 24 years old, from the northern state of Chihuahua, also recognized that color is relevant in the sex industry in Vallarta. In his own words,

Look, since people in the US are very light skinned...they are attracted to dark-skinned people. They love them. I have fair or blonde friends, who are in the same business, and they’re not as successful as me. Why? They are light skinned and blonde. Gringos are used to this, they come here to get dark-skinned people... I used to say “Ay! Why wasn’t I white?” And right now I couldn’t be happier (Carlos, 24, Delicias, Chihuahua).

The search of “otherness” in sex tourism is rooted in racial stereotypes of Western gay images of the “Mexican male” (Cantú, 2002). Pointing at the same direction, Hughes *et al.* (2010) observed that gay guidebooks, travel brochures, and Web sites tend to describe Mexican men in ways that represent them as ‘the exotic other’. Besides color, our interviewees

expressed that clients search for certain stereotypes. Indeed, Liguori and Aggleton (1999) observed that sex workers in Mexico's public bathhouses did not just sell their bodies, but also a male attitude. Illustrating this idea, two sex workers (the youngest and the second oldest of the interviewees) told us the following.

*What do you think that they look for in you?*  
My personality, I believe, and my mysteriousness.

*Anything else?*

My masculinity. (Iván, 28, coastal village of Colima).

*What do you think that they look for in you?*

Well, I could say my masculinity, my body, my cock.

(Alberto, 18, Puerto Vallarta, Jalisco).

As Alberto pointed out, genitals matter as objects of desire for many tourists. Certainly, 22-year-old Johan displays a very explicit picture in which his penis is his business card on a personal profile on a gay contact Web page. In the interview, he was clear about the fact that 'the clients look for his 22-centimeter gift'. Similarly, in a study on male prostitution in Barbados and Jamaica, De Albuquerque (1998) concluded that penis size was relevant for female tourists who had fantasies of having sex with black men from these islands who were supposed to be 'excellent lovers'.

### Sexual practices, preferences, and identities

While conducting fieldwork, it was noticeable that some interviewed sex workers differentiated between their jobs and their sexual identity and preferences. In fact, Table 1 shows that only 4 of the 12 interviewed sex workers declared that they were homosexual, with 6 more defining themselves as bisexual and the last 2 as heterosexual. Particularly in these latter two cases, sexual identity is a cause of personal conflict. For example, 20-year-old Fernando defines himself as heterosexual and expresses negative attitudes to his work. He rejects the link between sex work and personal identity.

*And now do you have a partner here?*

I have had partners, but they have not lasted for long.

*Men or women?*

Both, but to be honest, I don't want to do this anymore.

*Do you fancy men or do you do this just for the money?*

Just for the money.

*Do you really not like men?*

No, actually...I don't want to do this work anymore.

*Physically are you attracted to them? Are you aroused by men?*

Let's say I like it when they touch me, but being with gay men isn't really for me. (Fernando, 20, Tecomán, Colima).

For others, though, sexual identity is related to the type of sexual practices undertaken. Indeed, in countries with a strong macho tradition, men who penetrate other men do not think of themselves as being gay, and, in general, they are not stigmatized socially, as is the case with those who prefer a "passive" role in sexual intercourse (see Carrier, 1995; Prieur, 1996, for classical studies on Mexican sexuality). Iván, who was the only one to refuse to tell us his place of birth for privacy reasons, is a good example. The interviewee reacted abruptly when he believed that his sexual preference was somehow being questioned.

*Because you're always, let's say, the macho [the man who penetrates in the sexual intercourse], right?*

No doubt. I'm the macho (Iván, 28, coastal village of Colima).

However, conflict does not always occur. For a few sex workers, such as José Manuel, a part-time sex worker from Guadalajara, there is no contradiction between his sexual preferences and job. By stating that he is in the sex industry for pleasure, José Manuel reasserted his own identity through his job in his interview:

*Why are in prostitution? For pleasure? Do you like it?*

Yes. I enjoy it. It's just natural (*van de la mano*), isn't it?

*Do you really enjoy it? You know. There are people in this unwillingly.*

I know. There are. But this isn't the case for me (José Manuel, 25, Guadalajara, Jalisco).



What clearly comes out of these extracts is that not all homosexual practices imply a non-heterosexual identity. Although for some there is no contradiction between sexual preferences and male-oriented sex services, for others, prostitution is a cause of personal conflict and sadness. For a third group, male sex services are only acceptable within the limits of (perceived) manhood. As said by Altman (1996), most people who are involved in having sex for money are not conscious of having an identity that derives from their activity.

## CONCLUSIONS

This research challenges previous evidence about sex tourism. Our results do not fit easily in "sex-for-money" (De Albuquerque, 1998) or "romance tourism" (Pruitt and LaFont, 1995) assumptions. Neither did the continuum between sex and romance, which Herold *et al.* (2001) proposed as a conceptual framework to understand motivations of tourists when getting involved in sex services, exactly apply to Vallarta's sex workers. Even if these conceptualizations broaden the perspective of sex tourism, they are mainly constructed from the tourist point of view using fieldwork evidence based on opinions and feelings of Western visitors.

Following the idea of a continuum, we propose to understand the motivations of the Mexican male workers for being in the sex industry through time. We found that motivations for getting into, staying in, and exiting sex services are different (in some cases, radically different). As for entry, the narratives stress "normality". It seems to be an offer-and-demand commercial issue that is facilitated by the liberal atmosphere of the town. Prostitution offers better wages than do other paid activities in Vallarta. Yet, when listening more carefully to workers' voices, sex services come up as substantial factor in sustaining a particular lifestyle. Sex workers stay in the business because they are accustomed to an income level that only can be maintained through sex tourism. This does not necessarily imply money for sex, but other forms of transactions (e.g. treats or indirect payments) during "encounters" which may last for several days. It is a fact that money is a core concept, but it is also obvious that only a few of the interviewees see themselves as being

professional sex workers. Access to a previously forbidden expensive lifestyle keeps people in the sex industry in such a way that exiting the business is only considered if the right conditions come up (e.g. through migration). Such high expectations make sex services a catch-22 situation from which an exit is hard to achieve. In short, getting into prostitution is easy; getting out is complicated.

Considering Cantú's (2002) ideas on the shifting boundaries of Mexican male sexuality, our research confronts the mainstream perspective found in tourist studies that consists of accepting the dual sexual hierarchy homosexuality/heterosexuality on their analysis (Jamal and Hollinshead, 2001). The relationship between sex practices and identity processes is complex in nature. For some, identity is contradictory to the practice of sex services with men. These sex workers generally externalize guilt (e.g. blaming the city) and internalize pleasure, although this is occasionally denied. For others, identity processes are challenging and nonconformist, coming together in a gay-friendly place. Here, 'boys from the countryside' (some of them openly gay, others not), with no previous contact with sex services, go into prostitution 'smoothly', 'naturally', even 'involuntarily'.

However, we do not conclude that tourism enables the construction of interchangeable, disputed, fractured sexual identities (Hubbard, 2002). Rather, identities are fixed according to interviewees' sexual preferences. The clear straight-to-the-point (even blunt) answers to questions concerning sex and identity reveal that sexual practices may be negotiated (Cantú's shifting boundaries of male sexuality), but sexual identities do not. Interviewees do not share an identity that is based on sexual grounds. What binds the interviewed sex workers together is a common (gay) lifestyle. For most, prostitution is more than a job; it is a lifestyle that follows Vallarta's gay tourist circuit through repeated scenarios and routines.

Finally, LGBT geographies argue that sexual practices and behaviors that are repeated in specific places give way to identities (see Valentine, 1993; Hubbard, 2002; Nash and Bain, 2007). Although evidence on this point is not conclusive, this does not seem to be the case with Vallarta (or specifically Vallarta's

gay circuit). Although some young sex workers believed that they started experiencing their sexuality in Vallarta, the general impression coming from the interviews is that their living spaces in town are simply scenarios. Yet, this certainly needs further research, particularly, from the perspective of what has been called 'spaces of desire' in recent literature (Frohlick, 2007; Nash and Bain, 2007; Brown, 2008).

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