

DEBRA A. CASTILLO, MARÍA GUDELLA

RANGEL GÓMEZ, AND ARMANDO ROSAS SOLÍS

Tentative Exchanges: Tijuana Prostitutes and Their Clients

Debra A. Castillo was born in the United States in 1953. A literary and cultural critic, she is a professor at Cornell University in Ithaca, N.Y. Her main titles include *Talking Back: Toward a Latin American Feminist Literary Criticism* (1992) and *Easy Women: Sex and Gender in Modern Mexican Fiction* (1998). María Gudelía Rangel Gómez was born in Mexico in 1965. She is a health scientist at the Instituto Nacional de Salud Pública in Cuernavaca, Morelos, México. Her main titles include "Antecedentes de los servicios de salud e imágenes de las comunidades de los centros de la secretaría de Salud en Tijuana" (1999) and "Border Lives: Prostitute Women in Tijuana" (1999, with Debra Castillo and Bonnie Delgado). Armando Rosas Solís was born in México in 1950. He is an economist in Cuernavaca, Morelos, México.

Prostitution has been a defining characteristic of Tijuana's vast tourist industry since the growth boom at the beginning of the century, and serves as the basis for its infamous reputation—on the U.S. side of the border—as a sin city and giant brothel existing to serve the San Diego naval base, and on the Mexican side as a rest stop, point of departure, and haven for the Mexican field workers coming up from the south of the country. Nowadays, the presence of drug dealers and the fifteen thousand prostitutes¹ continue to feed this ugly stereotype, despite efforts by long-time residents to change the way people both in Mexico and in the United States think of the city and to encourage the image of the city as a modern metropolis that welcomes family-type tourism. These revisionary intentions, however, seem to be caught up in a tacit conflict with traditional expectations and with economic realities. Thus, for example, there is the curious phenomenon of Revolu-

tion Avenue and its attached "Zona Norte," the old center of the brothel-cum-nightclub industry, which currently by day functions as a family-oriented tourist area with restaurants and handicraft shops, and by night transforms back into its old identity as an area of discotheques/bars/brothels.

One reason the Zona Norte is so important for all sorts of commercial transactions is that it is not only the site of the city's official "red zone," it is also here that a large number of contacts are made between prospective border crossers and the polleros (the person who makes a living guiding illegal immigrants into the United States). These contacts usually occur in the area's restaurants, in the billiard rooms, and in the run-down hotels. The Zona Norte is a major way-station for those people who hope to immigrate illegally into the United States. These are poor people, transient people, who come to the area, stay in the hotels and boarding houses, and make use of all the wide panoply of services offered in the area: not only sexual services, but also second-hand clothing and hardware, food and pharmaceuticals. There is in the Zona Norte a wide range of shops not found in the nearby downtown area, making this an obligatory stop for both transients and the permanent population living in the area. This is a doubly captive audience for products; both the temporary and the permanent residents are equally users of the many and varied services, so that internal immigrants and local people, tourists and clients for sexual services all fall into the same vast network.

Zaldunondo, Hernández Avila, and Uribe Zúñiga remind us that an understanding of the social context of paid sex requires the perspectives of clients, pimps and bar owners, rooming house owners, and police and other authorities as well as sex workers (1991, 173). To take into account this full perspective is beyond the scope of this essay, and is in fact the task of our book-length study currently in the final stages of revision for publication. Our more modest task in the pages that follow is to draw a narrower sketch, one that puts together complementary aspects of sex workers' narratives about their profession with what we have been able to glean about the narratives that their clients construct of their encounters.

In addition to published research and consultation with health and municipal officials, direct information from the women themselves came from a two-phase qualitative project. The first phase involved ethnographic work in 1988, including visits to different zones of Tijuana to compile a list, as complete as possible, of places where prostitution occurs and to learn the social characteristics and study the dynamics of each of these places. This phase of the project included interviews with 184 women working in prostitution in Tijuana. The principal goals of the

interviews were to evaluate their knowledge of HIV/AIDS and to take blood samples to test for seropositivity. During this process (1) a complete census was made of all the places in which prostitution is practiced in Tijuana; (2) researchers surveyed the areas to observe the working dynamics in each site; (3) through participant observation, researchers studied the characteristics of women working both in establishments and on the street; (4) researchers classified the zones based on the social characteristics of the sites in which prostitution is practiced and of the women who work in them. The second phase took place in 1994-95 and consisted of in-depth interviews conducted in their workplaces with thirty Tijuana prostitutes; these women were chosen by taking into account this complete census of places in which prostitution is practiced and the types of services offered. This information has been continuously updated by the researchers.

In general, scholarship on clients is even sparser than available information on women in prostitution, for if the women are frequently reluctant to speak to outsiders, the men who hire women for prostitution are even more elusive. Efforts to speak to clients in the Tijuana bars have been unproductive, even without taking into account the language barrier between potential interviewers and many of the clients, some of whom are Mexican, but many of whom are international sex tourists from the United States as well as other countries. The men tend to be incommunicative or incoherent in the bar setting, and it is difficult to imagine other settings in which interviews with this diverse and largely nomadic population might take place.

We have been able to obtain a partial understanding of a particular set of Tijuana sex workers' U.S. clients through reviewing postings on the internet, and especially through the relatively large body of reports available on two main text-based sites: the usenet site <alt.sex.prostitution.tijuana> and the Tijuana listings on the World Wide Web's extremely complete "World Sex Guide."² In addition to these two main sites, there are a growing number of other websites focusing on prostitution in Tijuana, ranging from an entire site dedicated to narrative fictions set in Tijuana, to an evolving set of websites that include scanned photographs of bars, hotels, and women, to several webpages written in hypertext markup language to allow readers to click on highlighted words (streets, bars, women's names) and link to images. Through these sites we have been able to glean reactions from several hundred clients, as well as to gain stronger and more individualized accounts from a couple of dozen more frequent commentators.

In cyberspace, clients of Tijuana prostitutes not only exchange infor-

mation about women and places to find them, but also find themselves in occasionally raucous, but usually cordial, dialogue. At the same time, internal evidence suggests that this dialogue occurs mostly in the net, where strangers can establish a pseudo-community of prostitutes' clients, while generally—though not always—ignoring each other in the Tijuana nightclubs themselves. Although some of the novice writers ask for assistance or a guide to the nightclubs, and <tecman@pacbell.net> offers his credentials as the guide for the very finest sex tours ("I sell these out very fast . . . Space is very limited"), O'Toole's conclusion represents the general consensus: "You're right to recommend seeking out a colleague. But I have found that many guys lack the collegial approach to a Zona Norte visit. In fact, they seem almost ashamed to be in the Zona and they're loathed to interact with others. That's why I started the FAQ."

For the prospective client, the undoubted premier guide to Tijuana's prostitutes is "Brocton O'Toole," who has not only authored the definitive FAQ on Tijuana, but who also frequently serves as the intermediary for other men who have comments, but do not want to risk posting in their own name or who do not want to deal with the hassle of anonymous posting. Brocton O'Toole is also one of the most frequent contributors to <alt.sex.prostitution.tijuana>, and his cool, detached style sets the tone for other clients as well, who are made the objects of his chastising, elder statesman response if they step out of line. This mock-ponderous tone is clearly a highly mannered, self-consciously literary style. In response to one usenet note, for example, he writes: "Take care my friend, Sir Brocton may get excited and spill his Earl Grey all over the keyboard!" Not all of the readers appreciate O'Toole's literary style. As one fellow reporter complains: "I don't know if it's just me or what, but I think you're getting to be a bit full of yourself. 'World Famous FAQ'? Jesus Christ man, you're a guy that's written a few pages on how to get to TJ and get laid. Are you expecting the Pulitzer prize soon? I remember when you first began to frequent ASP . . . Little did I know what a pretentious little dweeb you would become."

Studied mannerisms aside, O'Toole's Tijuana FAQ takes itself very seriously indeed. He recommends only two clubs, Adelita and Chicago, though he mentions in a late January 1997 usenet note "during my last several visits to the Miami Club, I was 'quite' impressed with the selection of girls. Accordingly, I am considering recommending it." Thus, O'Toole does not exactly recommend the club yet, nor does he modify his October 1996 FAQ to add the Miami; the usenet note hints that it is being posted as a trial balloon for comments before he takes the grave step of

making a major change in his formal document, which is located not on the usenet, but on the World Wide Web's research tool, the "World Sex Guide." O'Toole divides his FAQ into seven sections: location and lodging, changing money, getting to Tijuana, the zona roja, Adelita, Chicago, and returning home. The document as a whole is a model of the concise, restrained travelogue; each subsection offers specific directions and useful hints. His hotel recommendations come with prices and phone numbers; his advice on changing money (he is against it) remind the client to carry small bills; his discussion of getting to Tijuana reviews Mexican automobile insurance code. He tells his readers where to park their cars on the U.S. side, reminds them to have exactly \$5 cash to pay for the taxi, and how to tell the driver "you want to go to Adelitas (ah-day-LEE-tas)."

For each of the two clubs he recommends, he describes the place, the women, the kinds of services offered, and the price a client can expect to pay. O'Toole calls Adelita "pure South of the Border," and another anonymous researcher elaborates: "When the taxi dropped us off . . . we knew we weren't in Kansas anymore. This was the Mexico of the movies . . . steamy streets, food vendors everywhere, ladies more then [sic] everywhere." Still another writer describes it as "like walking into a brothel in some old Western." If the Adelita Club stands in for the internet-aware clients as the representation of authentic Mexicaness, that is, of a living culture read as if it were a movie set created to respond to U.S. consumer dreams of the picturesque, then the Chicago Club is the Adelita's absolute contrast. O'Toole calls Chicago "easily the finest hooker bar in Tijuana," but he warns that the women are in high demand and "the competition can be tough." Papa Dave tells readers that for his taste the Chicago Club is "cold and unfriendly" and other readers comment that the women are so uniformly beautiful that they can be intimidating. Jayhawk, for example, mentions that one woman, a stunning brunette beauty, "had a really nice dress on and reeked of class. I was actually a little scared off by this." Another writes of an attractive woman named Jessica, "I couldn't even get near her the last time I tried." Clearly, for the clubs that O'Toole recommends as the most desirable, the message he gets across in the FAQ is that clients will need the benefit of his advice in order to connect with the woman of their choice. Indeed, much of his discussion of the two nightclubs involves elaborate descriptions (other clients even include rudimentary maps in their reports) of where to stand, what to say, and who to tip in order to make contact.

Though we have not been able to identify any postings on the more commonly used sites as originating in Tijuana, several of them originate in Mexico, and one of the (now disappeared) websites was clearly spon-

sored by a Tijuana establishment known for catering to U.S. sex tourists. Likewise there are several self-identified Mexicans who participate frequently in the exchanges. Interestingly enough, while the women involved in sex work tend to be almost illiterate and certainly not computer users themselves, a number of clients comment that there is, at least at some levels in the sex worker community, an awareness of the possibilities of the internet and of the way the "World Sex Guide" and other internet exchanges have mediated the women's contacts with some of their clients. Several years ago (dinosaur times in computer years) there was already a growing awareness of the possibilities of the internet. "MR BSO" reports on a conversation he held with a woman he met in early February 1997: "I met a very cute girl at Adelitas at the end of the night that particularly intrigued me . . . Turns out she used to work at the Chicago Club. She also spoke perfect English and spent a lot of time living in the states. She was also familiar with the internet and recited the FAQ almost word for word." Another client recommends a woman named Veronica in the bar Nuevo Río Rosas and says, "I told her I'd be telling my friends about her so if you want to take her back to a room tell her you're a amigo de jeff and I'm sure she'll understand." Bignina tells of asking another woman if he could take her picture and post it on the internet; "she said she'd be OK with it," and shortly afterward, pictures of "Heidi" appeared on a popular website, along with images of a dozen other women. Heidi, apparently, kept track of the status of her postings through conversations with her clients. Another man, "The Seeker," describes a conversation with a fellow netizen at a border checkpoint: "He claims to have hooked up with Heidi, who he told me was great . . . He told me he talked to her for an hour B4 the main event, and she sat with him for a long while after they were done. He told me she was flattered that Americans would come to look for her by name from posting in this newsgroup." "Sr. T. Jota" adds a first-person account of a similar dialogue: "She shyly asked me if I had a computer. 'Yes.' 'Did you read my name on it?' 'Yes.' She seemed somewhat embarrassed and unbelieving that she was 'muy famosa.' Gentlemen have often come in asking for her."

A final example of such canny and mediated exchanges involves a popular young woman named "Rosie" from the Chicago Club. Clients frequently comment on her excellent English—"I've discussed everything from Gangsta' Rap to Beavis and Butthead with Rosie" says "señor Pen-deo." "Oliver" writes about his encounter with the legendary "zona norte superstar," "the idea that this was 'the' Rosie made me even more excited. On the way to the hotel, I told her I'd heard about her. 'From the

waiter?" she asked. "No . . . uh . . . have you heard of the internet? She had, of course." After a description of his sexual relations with her, Oliver continues: "Rosie asked me if I'd write about her on the internet; I said of course, so here you have it. She wondered if any of her internet fans were asking questions about her hair." This brief and suggestive note opens up an entirely unexpected realm, in which the concrete exchanges between certain Tijuana prostitutes and their clients have been for several years already infected by a metadiscourse occurring on the World Wide Web.

The contents of the usenet group listings change continually and the site is flooded by and plagued with enormous amounts of spam—out of 150 messages there may be only 2 or 3 relevant ones at any given time—hence users more and more frequently access the favored sites through search engines like Altavista, Metacrawler, and (for the usenet) Deja-news, thus screening out unwanted materials.³ Furthermore, while the usenet contents are constantly changing, only a few of the relevant messages are long enough to contain sufficient material to allow for a sustained discussion. For example, one complete exchange consists of "Harold" querying: "Would love to do oral sex on a young girl from TJ. Please e-mail me with way to contact you." <hojir@mail.earthlink.net> and David Start's response: "The best way to do that is to go there" <travagti@primenet.com>.

And go there they do: sometimes several times a week, often posting cryptic rankings of the "hottest" women each visit. The general perception of Tijuana from the clients' point of view is that Tijuana is both accessible and safe (both physically and sexually), and that standardization of fees for services prevents price gouging while still allowing the client an opportunity for a certain amount of negotiation. It is also clear that the "World Sex Guide" FAQs as well as the more experienced clients on the usenet are responding to an understood generalized perception about Mexico in general, and Tijuana in particular, that is quite different from the safe space they describe. Novice clients continually write in to the usenet asking not only about places and women, but more generally to inquire if Tijuana is really as dangerous as everyone says. Brockton O'Toole's "World Sex Guide" Tijuana FAQ sets the tone with its reassurances, "Don't be concerned about your safety," he writes, clearly imagining an audience whose first reaction would be precisely such a concern. "You won't have trouble if you behave yourself. The TJ cops do NOT care about prostitution, but they DO notice if you act like an asshole." Atta's shorter report confirms this perception: "Tijuana is generally a pretty safe place. Just make sure you don't look too rich. If you start a fight or

drink alcohol on the street, la policia will be there and you can decide between la casa and a hefty tip." Still another client agrees: "If Tijuana was known as an unsafe place of a ripoff joint, no one would go there. They go an extra mile (at least by Mexican standards) to make it clean and safe." To a usenet message's worried posting, "I was wanting to go down to TJ but everyone I have talked to say it's not that safe at night," Cachondo responds: "I live in San Diego and have been to the TJ clubs literally hundreds of times over the last few years . . . Show respect and you'll be respected."

Still, muggings do occur, though the clients' reports suggest that they happen more frequently at the international border than in the Zona Norte, and for this reason clients writing to the internet sites advise their readers to take a cab to that area even though it is within walking distance. Cachondo's comments stand for the general perception among experienced clients:

Behind most every story of someone being hassled by cops there is another story untold. For example—I know a guy that said he was through [sic] in jail and his car impounded by the police. Upon further questioning, I found out that he was completely drunk, tried to drive out of a parking lot without paying the \$5 parking fee, tried to outrun the cops, tried to run out of the jail area where he was being questioned, etc. He spent one night in jail, paid a fine (I think less than \$200) and got his car out of impound the next day.

Take a cab to and from the clubs and you'll avoid walking through some bad areas where someone could mug you. I've made the walk myself many times, but usually not alone. The area around Adelitas and the Chicago Club looks scary, but it's not that bad, it's just poor. Use common sense, don't look down on the people, don't get completely shit-faced, and you'll be fine.

Like other experienced clients, Cachondo reminds his novice interlocutor that poverty in Mexico has different connotations than in the United States, where areas in which prostitution is openly practiced are often extremely dangerous as well as poor. In Tijuana, by contrast, the police, as well as the sex workers and all the others who profit from Tijuana's major tourist draw, are complicitous in their concern for maintaining good relations and encouraging repeat customers. In turn, the U.S. tourist has to act with a minimal amount of common sense and respect for another culture. In another long letter, he adds: "Just pretend you're in the States and that there are laws (as there are) and that you're not any better than the Mexican people (which you aren't) and you'll be just fine."

Interestingly, given a general perception of Mexico as the place to go for cheap everything, the general consensus of the clients is that Tijuana's commercial sex scene is attractive as a different kind of experience but not as an inexpensive one. While a few of the men talk about going with women who work on the streets, and who charge them as little as ten dollars for service, the overwhelming majority of them have stated preferences for women who work in a very narrow range of bars (Adelitas and Chicago are by far the two favorites). Papa Dave, who identifies himself as a thirty-year veteran of the Tijuana sex scene, bemoans the fact that "Tijuana is NOT cheap. A short-time, as I indicated, with a girl from the Chicago Club will cost you AT MINIMUM \$80. You could get the same thing on the streets of most U.S. cities for \$50," and he also comments that drinks in the bars are charged at U.S. prices. Other clients agree: in the United States, commercial sex is cheaper than in Tijuana or at least similarly priced. The question the clients frequently ask themselves and each other is, "Was it worth it?" Their answers range from a disappointed "not really" to an enthusiastic "yes," with the majority of the clients agreeing that all-in-all the experience is worth the extra outlay of cash if only because it offers something different—usually defined as a taste of real Mexico—in a setting that is clean and safe.

In this sense, the clients' perceptions of Tijuana's relative safety dovetails precisely with the image that the prostitutes hope to convey in their interviews; they provide safe sex in clean surroundings, where the men do not have to worry about assault. In one of the few messages from a client who was mugged, the man emphasizes exactly how unusual it was, not only because of the infrequency of such a happening, but also because of the bystanders' response. He describes an attack in the Zona Norte in which someone came up behind him, choked him, grabbed his wallet, and disappeared. What is particularly surprising about this report, and which offers an absolute contrast with similar stories from the United States, is that the man comments, "after the attack several people including a couple of prostitutes ran up to me to make sure I was OK. One of the prostitutes even offered to give me some spare change—which was very nice of her to try to help me!" Another client tells of spending a few minutes talking to one of the prostitutes after they finished. He says, "She was fairly open and she asked me how I was getting back to the border. When I said I was walking, she asked why not take a taxi. I replied that I had spent my last dollar on her. She then handed me a \$5 for taxi fare." The client concludes, "My heart melted immediately." Stories like these are sufficiently common to establish the women's commitment to their clients' safety, a factor the women also emphasize in

their commentaries on their relations with their clients as only making good business sense besides promoting a better working environment for them. Even more, such comments hint at a complexity to the prostitute-client relationship that is generally unaccounted for in the literature.

Occasionally, these stories develop into full-fledged narratives. "MR BSO," a frequent contributor to the usenet and one whose net persona was that of a detached "researcher" cum stud, suddenly reveals another side of his personality in a long and involved story about an ongoing relationship with a particular woman from Adelitas and his concern that he was both hurting her and complicating his own life impossibly by raising expectations he could not fulfill: "I wouldn't mind being a preferred customer but there seems to be no way back to that . . . It is not that I am afraid of a relationship, I just don't have the money, I have cancer, I am old, and I cannot promise anybody much . . . It was my last wish to fuck up the place I like to play. I have never really hurt anybody in there, I don't get drunk or rude . . . yet I have fucked it up just as much as any asshole." El Chamuco writes back that MR BSO should remember that the usenet is "to talk business, not relationship problems," but gives his interlocutor a several page primer:

OK, first of all I am Mexican, so I do know what I'm doing. Second: WHAT THE FUCK IS YOUR PROBLEM MAN!!!? DON'T YOU KNOW ANYTHING?? YOU "DO NOT GET INVOLVED EMOTIONALLY WITH PROSTITUTES!!" . . . First item: Just because they are prostitutes does NOT mean they don't have feelings . . . Second item: Some girls are TOO nice, and if they like you PHYSICALLY they will think that body and mind are the same . . . Third item: Once a Mexican girl gets emotionally attached to you BEWARE. Things are very different in Mexico.

The various comments on and responses to MR BSO's dilemma run the range from suggestions that he get his therapy elsewhere, to reminders such as El Chamuco's about differing cultural expectations for relationships between U.S. men and Mexican women, to comments about the desperation of many of these women who are living in miserable economic circumstances and quite naturally hope to find a way out of prostitution. In their work on Thai sex tourism, O'Connell Davidson and Sánchez Taylor conclude that the power that sex tourists exercise is not "simply or even primarily patriarchal. Their power is also 'racialised' and its currency is economic. . . . Women's sexual labor often wholly or partly supports the households that furnish both national and international

capital with a cheap, disposable workforce" (1996, 18-19). While British sex tourists in O'Connell Davidson and Sánchez Taylor's account willfully ignore these complicating factors, in stories such as MR ESO's, where both Tijuana prostitute and client are given a human face, the longer, thoughtful exchanges accompanying the narrative show client awareness of how these factors of race, culture, and local and international economics affect individual dilemmas. MR ESO, thus, has been playing out a fantasy, both as a narrator on the internet and as a client in Tijuana, but it is a fantasy that falls apart in the face of his own imbrication in an increasingly complex relationship with a Mexican woman, a relationship in which he became involved in a failed attempt to hold his ill health and encroaching death at bay.

Inevitably, however, most of the comments on both the World Wide Web and the usenet sites are concerned with the more superficial qualities of the women themselves: who are the "hottest," who are the most beautiful, where they can be found. As a number of the men note, the Tijuana sex scene is extremely fluid, echoing women's comments about stepping into, and dropping out of, the sex work environment based on personal or family economic need. "Do the girls when you can," advises one writer, "because you never know if you will ever see them again." From the clients' point of view the internet provides an ideal medium for the continuous updating that cannot occur in other formats, such as the book and the video that Atta recommends in his introduction to Mexico in the "World Sex Guide," or the other books on Tijuana hawked on the Web by "sexlatino" and "proball." A number of the men speak nostalgically about the "TJ Superstar, Rosie," who until a few months ago worked out of the Chicago Club and who reportedly combined a perfect body, a great face, superior taste in clothes, excellent English, and a terrific style in bed (as some of the clients suspect, Rosie's extreme popularity earned her a good deal of money by Mexican standards; what they don't take into account, however, and her friends in Tijuana know, is that it seriously compromised her health as well).

Mostly the clients trade anecdotes about "looks" versus "attitude"—U.S.-style beautiful women versus abilities in bed—and argue in favor of one or the other, with the more experienced clients firmly stating their preferences for the more experienced, if less immediately drop-dead gorgeous, women. They air differences of opinion about "newbies" or "diamonds in the rough" and discuss body type preferences, at times in terms that betray racism and stereotyping thinly masked by a presumed knowledge of Mexico and Mexican customs. For example, one client asks why there are so many "overweight unattractive women who are practically

GIVING it away" and another responds, "Mexican tastes are different. They're not giving it away, they just go with fat, ugly Mexican men." Here again, the usenet offers its own internal policing: to questions about availability of American women in Mexico one writer responds: "The fact that you are asking for American girls in MEXICO not only sounds stupid, but plain racist," and another contributor even reproduces material drawn from an author profile (easily obtainable through Dejanews) with the comment: "Have we noticed CuteGuy's other posts? . . . Another racist moron . . . Yet another correlation between racism and low I. Q."

Some writers have specific preferences about sex with women whom they know have children: "I do not like having sex with hookers that are mothers," says one, apparently not aware that almost all women working in prostitution in Tijuana have children to support; while another disagrees: "You'll meet the friendliest women during the day. These are the women that want to go home early to be with their children," and several others comment on particularly good experiences with women who are still lactating. One man, who is clearly aware that maternity is a precondition for most women working in prostitution, even shares his technique for getting particularly good service for those fellow clients whose Spanish extends to conversation beyond basic phrases: "After buying her one drink and complimenting her generously on her looks, her demeanor, and inner strength in raising her son as a single mother, we ended up in 'el cuarto.' It was nice, very nice."

These brief recommendations also have their accompanying typical narratives, usually of the sort that involves steamy sex with women who (a) come to orgasm, and/or (b) allow the client to remove his condom. Since "researchers" are urged to post "reports," there is a clear built-in interest in the homoerotic and voyeuristic possibilities of these tales quite beyond the satisfaction of the request for basic information about the best and hottest women of the moment. At the same time, tolerance for fantasy is finite. El Chamuco responds to one man's tale of hot sex with two women with the comment:

You are the guy who posted the bullshit story about fucking a 14-year-old on your way to TJ, right? Well, this one isn't working either . . . I suggest you stop pretending to be so 'lucky.' You aren't impressing anyone. If you have a thing for writing fiction then just say it's fiction and END IT. Or go to alt.sex.stories and post all the fiction you want . . . Nobody is buying it . . . It's getting annoying.

Interestingly enough, it is not the explicit content that provokes irritation, but the underlying fantasy representation of the hot Mexican

but their tendency to break. One of the women interviewed says that about one in four condoms breaks during use, causing her to worry continually about possible infection, and a frequent client seems to agree with this high failure rate, as well as offer a reason. He advises newbies to the Tijuana prostitution scene that "you should buy your condoms yourself—and preferably in the U.S. . . . Simple reason: condoms have due dates, and some of the stuff they sell in Mexico is way past overdue . . . Remember if the condom is overdue the risk of breaking it is VERY HIGH, so make sure you check the due date."

One of the curious results of this generalized condom use is that the removal of the condom at some point in the session has acquired a highly erotic significance. A particularly "hot" session that provides the occasion for much male bragging is one in which the woman allows a particularly favored man or regular client to remove his condom before ejaculation on some location on her body. The women are understandably more reluctant to talk about such activities, but when pressed, will agree that sometimes, with a very clean, well-known, favored client or with their non-client boyfriend, they will sometimes remove the condom for non-vaginal sex. Thus, removal of the condom becomes a particularly coded action, one that takes places only at the woman's discretion and that culminates an unusually successful sex act, or that offers the titillating spectacle of a powerfully transgressive one. "How times change," laments veteran Tijuana client Papa Dave, "in the 60s in TJ it was not uncommon for a girl to REFUSe to have sex if you insisted upon wearing a condom . . . I find myself thinking back to the great places like the Brooklyn Bar, where things were jumping 24 hours a day and the place was always full of gringos. I remember how hard it was (we used to make drunken bets on it) to come up with something the girl would say 'no' to . . ." Papa Dave's nostalgia tells us exactly how far distant those halcyon days are, but also suggests how the universality of condom use has created opportunities for a whole new set of erotic fantasies.

Another correlation between the clients' reports and the prostitutes' perceptions is that a number of the men are looking for conversation as much as they are anticipating the sex act itself. Both the women and their clients frequently comment on the awkwardness of the highly international nature of Tijuana prostitution, in which most of the women speak only Spanish, and a large number of the clients speak, for example, only English or Japanese, two of the more common languages among non-Mexican or Mexican-American clients. Many of the women in this very international sex market indicate that they prefer Mexican clients, since the common cultural grounding gives them a certain comfort zone both

in knowing what to expect of the sex act and in establishing a relation beyond sex that involves some conversation. As one woman says, "americanos poco, porque estoy estudiando inglés entre otras cosas, no lo domino bien. Además me dan un poquito de desconfianza porque hay señores muy tranquilos y como no son mexicanos no conoce uno muy bien la reacción. Es otra cultura pues. Otra todo" [Few Americans, because while I am studying English among other things, I don't speak it well. Besides, they make me a little uncomfortable because there are very calm men, but because they are not Mexicans, you don't know how they will react. It's another culture. Another everything!]. For many of the women, talking to clients not only alleviates their natural anxieties about exposing themselves to unknown men, but also helps reduce the tedium and disgust of their jobs: "Yo platico, cuento, o sea me doy amistad primero y luego. Para que no me tomen como lo que, ta, rápido y lo que viene . . . Ya pues se va formando la cosa más bonita para que no sea tan, vaya, tan fastidioso" [I talk, tell stories, that is, I give friendship first and then. So that they don't just grab me like, quick and then do it . . . And that way, well, something nicer develops so that it is not, so, so boring!]. Another comments that even if she does not know the language, conversation helps ease the awkwardness of the sexual encounter as well as earning her better fees. Describing herself as "international," she says, "Siempre los recibo con una sonrisa en los labios, les doy su lugar para que ellos también me den mi lugar así y yo puedo sacarle más. Yo no sé hablar inglés pero con todo . . . ni sé lo que platico. Ni sé si me entiende o no me entiende" [I always receive them with a smile on my lips and I treat them respectfully so that they will also treat me respectfully and I can get more money out of them. I don't know how to speak English but whatever . . . I don't even know what I talk about. Nor do I know if they understand me or don't understand me]. One woman says, shortly, succinctly, "necesito el trato" [I need the exchange].

Several of the women indicate that this dialogue is equally important to the men, in some cases overriding their ostensible purpose for seeking out a sex worker. Whether foreign or national, the men often come to a prostitute because they need moral support, one woman says, or are looking for a spiritual companionship. Ninety percent of the clients, says one woman, are men with very little education; thus, she helps them to think and to analyze by asking them questions and demonstrating an interest in their lives. Another woman adds that typically the client is lonely, and needs to connect with another person and unburden himself: "Muchas veces ya a la hora de hacer la relación ya no es tan importante para mí el sexo o sea porque yo les introduzco una cierta terapia mental

del cual muchas mujeres ni en su casa . . . El cliente mentalmente cambia lo que es el sexo por una convivencia" [Often when the time comes to have the relation sex is not so important for me because I offer them a certain mental therapy that many women don't even in their homes . . . The client mentally changes from what is sex to conviviality]. Yet another woman prides herself on her excellent memory, so that she can refer back to previous conversations and ask her clients if they have been able to solve a particular problem. This technique, she proudly comments, has earned her a solid living and frequent offers of matrimony. For a fourth woman, conversation with clients has become her specialty, to the degree that many of them seek her out primarily for her sympathetic ear. In these cases, she suggests that she and her client go to a more congenial setting—a restaurant or café—and talk for a while, with sex as an open option, paying her a modest rate for her time.

Thus, if for women specializing in Spanish-speaking clients or, alternatively, speaking at least some English (or, in one case, reported by a client, good Vietnamese) is a tremendous anxiety reliever as well as a guarantee of higher fees; from the men's point of view, ability to converse with the women makes the sessions both more interesting and more intensely erotic. Frequently, internet reporters lament their lack of fluent Spanish as an icebreaker. Several of the men comment on a particularly successful session as one in which they involve the women in conversation both before and after the "main event," and in which the woman shows "tenderness" rather than "matter-of-factness." A first-time Tijuana visitor complains, "I have been with a few professional women in my time and I always have big hopes that they are going to do something incredible but they seem to fall short. Maybe I expect too much from them." This comment precipitates a number of responses from other readers on the usenet. One suggests that he gets better results by allowing anticipation to play a role; another comments, "I try to blend romance, conversation, shows, and fucking" because in that way—especially on less busy weekdays—he is more likely to get an extended session "rather than the usual business fucks." A third client reminds the whining newbie that most of the women working in prostitution are really very nice ladies, but they have no particular brief for clients who don't cultivate them:

What would you do for a measly fifty bucks? If you can answer that, then you kinda know how they feel screwing one hopeful guy after another . . . A lot of it is up to you . . . if they like you . . . and stay away from the hardcore business. You actually have to spend some time to

cultivate these good times you desire . . . Bottom line . . . you are the "trick," the sooner they pop you, the sooner they can get on to the next "trick."

Julia O'Connell and Jacqueline Sánchez Taylor's work on sex tourism in Thailand and elsewhere suggest that "one of the more curious findings of research on prostitution (at least for those who are surprised by the extent of human hypocrisy and capacity for self-deceit) is that many sex clients in European countries bemoan the impersonal approach of prostitutes" (1996, 7). While this kind of self-deceit also shows up on the Tijuana nets, it is immediately associated with immaturity and inexperience; more frequently the client shows that he is very well aware of the interlapping boundaries within the prostitutes' own world, in which the personal only rarely comes into contact with the commercial aspects, and where only certain favored clients are allowed the privilege of tenderness and of the kind of confidence in her partner that allows the woman to enjoy the encounter.

One of the things that becomes very clear in both the prostitutes' narratives about themselves as well as in the clients' representations of them is that while most exchanges involve straightforward sexual service in a heavily racialized and exoticized environment, the stereotypes seldom hold entirely. These women, who are so often portrayed in mainstream studies as nothing more than sexual objects, in the context of their professional activities frequently have the opportunity and flexibility to resist such conversion into objects, at least at some level, turning the tables on their clients and assuming a position of relative power. Their provocative looks and arousing dancing (not to mention the fact that the most highly solicited of these women may earn considerably more money than even the more affluent of their customers) may strategically turn the tables on the men, turning the potential clients into their supplicants.

Still further; at least one insightful study points out the degree to which both the prostitute and her client engage in a kind of *transo*, or con game, in which roles are consciously manipulated. Holzman and Pines note that "the position accorded customers in the occupational ideology of prostitutes is not one of respect. Johns are considered 'marks' in what is perceived by prostitutes to be a sexually based con game. . . . Prostitutes are taught different pitches or stories to tell the mark so as to extract more money from him" (1982, 92). In this respect, the women see the client as an exploitable object. In Holzman and Pines's study of U.S. clients, however, they learn that while the client is often amused by such tactics, he is seldom taken in by them. These researchers find that whether the

client is an infrequent user of prostitutes or a very experienced one, he understands the delicate rules of the game in which they are engaged; he will listen to the stories and "routinely modifies his behavior to help create or maintain a good rapport" (95). In the back and forth negotiation of this *transa*, both the woman and the man shift continually between subject and object positions, sometimes occupying both at the same time, but from different perspectives. In the simulacrum of a social relationship, both remain on guard, and both imagine that they are fooling the other. If the woman tells a particular story to try to elicit more money, the client seems perfectly aware of the fictionality of the narrative, though he may give her the money anyway, just to ensure a more agreeable encounter.

And yet, at some point, the studied fictionality can turn into a real conversation with a woman who "seems like a nice person," and where there is a sexual relationship involving mutual enjoyment and even a simulated or real tenderness between client and sex worker. In the midst of the usenet reports ranking women by numbers, there are also comments like this one: "I've always wanted to really get into the head of some of these women and figure out what they're really feeling, but my Spanish isn't perfect and my communication with them is strained. The life of a prostitute has got to be a strange life to say the least. Couple that with cultural differences and who knows what they're really feeling." El Chahumuco talks about how some of the most daring strippers and the hottest prostitutes have deep concerns about how their work might affect their private and family lives. Someone else writes about a Catholic woman and mother of seven working in prostitution who was always very upset about the mortal sin she was committing, and the terrible conundrum of having no education and not being able to feed her large family in any other way. Cachondo—a frequent contributor who writes numerous explicit reports to the usenet and the "World Sex Guide," including his comments on fulfilling his fantasy of being with two women—also writes meditative reports, such as this one in which he discusses his ongoing relationship with a former regular of his who quit prostitution for a time, and who was now back in Tijuana working on an occasional basis: "She told me she had breast cancer. She's getting chemotherapy now in Mexico DF. Really quite sad. She has to come to TJ once every month or two to make some money to support herself, two kids, and her mother. She's worried that her hair will fall out and she won't be able to work any more." In comments such as these, we can see how easily an artificially defined encounter, in an ugly setting, can somehow slip into some other kind of human relationship—transient, but nonetheless real.

Thus, the interviews and the client reports both describe a world that combines horror and personal agency, in which from the women's point of view the fundamental paradox is defined by a position in which they are experiencing at the same time blatant exploitation as sexual objects and a kind of personal freedom to choose the best remuneration for their labor. From the clients' point of view, the women are both living dolls that they use for sex, and queens for whose attention they compete. And, too, both the men and women are frail and complex human beings: the women are mothers and caretakers who sometimes find sexual satisfaction with the clients; the clients at times establish more complex, human contact with the prostitutes. There is also a paradox imposed by the very nature of the commercial exchange. Holzman and Pines describe the median income of the U.S. client as \$30,000 a year, with a range from \$8,000–\$75,000 (1982, 101). In this context, Cachondo's realization of the kind of money that can be potentially earned in prostitution by women in Tijuana comes as a real shock: "I spoke with a woman working in Adelitas that I've been with several times now so we're a bit more open with each other. I asked her how much she makes working there. She said a good week's \$2,500. Sometimes only \$1,500 though. She works six-day weeks. Figure an average of \$2,000 per week. That's \$100,000 per year if she takes no more than two weeks vacation." Furthermore, Cachondo reminds us, this putative income is tax free.

Just as there is no single image of the woman who works in prostitution, so too there is no single characterization of the client. A number of the more self-reflective threads on the usenet describe the men's feelings about their own roles in these transactions, quite apart from bragging about particularly "hot" sessions or recommendations for specific women. One series of comments is sparked by the question, "How many of you guys would marry a prostitute?"; another by the comment of a client that he frequently feels depressed when he reflects on his "expensive hobby" and wonders, "Does anyone else experience feelings like this? And how do you deal with them?"; still another by a writer who broadcasts to the net his challenge: "I am astounded by these guys who go to TJ to get lucky—and pay for it. What a bunch of losers . . . Get a life—and a good therapist." The responses to these questions and comments remind us that many of these men have given considerable thought to their activities. The answers to these questions are: (1) yes, a fair number of the clients marry or are tempted to marry prostitutes: "Turns out that these women have MUCHO opportunities to settle down with their customers. In fact, they get tired of men falling in love with them . . . though I don't know what kind of husband material most Johns would be. Not at

all what I expected the situation would be" (a response confirmed by the women who talk about their many offers of marriage, and about the women they know who have—successfully or not—taken up clients on these offers); (2) yes, the feeling of depression is common since the men are often aware that they are trading a sex life for a love life and that this activity is not in the long run healthy either physically or emotionally, even though it fulfills a specific immediate yearning to touch and be touched—responses that echo the women's sense that men want to talk as much as they want to have sex; and (3) the writer who calls them "losers" is uninformed: "You know nothing of what you're talking about and are basing your opinion on 'feelings' rather than facts. In short, you're stupid and you're stereotyping." In each of these answers, the writer's comments complicate the stereotypical picture of the prostitute-client transaction. The client's feelings of inadequacy and depression, the questioning of his own fitness as husband material, his defensiveness about oversimplifying his motivations all point to specific locations at which subcultural values resist and recognize dominant culture morality. These paradoxes remind us that as investigators coming to the world of sex work from the outside, we are too often apt to reduce its complexities to a single, and much flattened, vision. One of the women brought us up short with the poignant reminder: "Mi vida es mía. Yo vivo una vida normal, como Ud., como cualquier otro ser humano" [My life is my own. I live a normal life, like you, like any other human being].

James Clifford describes the predicament of postcolonial ethnography as an unnerving process of negotiating across resistances while at the same time dealing with the moral tensions, inherent violence, and tactical dissimulations of modern fieldwork. His comments seem appropriate to the way we undertake a study of Tijuana prostitutes and their clients as well:

Some "authentic encounter," in Geertz's phrase, seems a prerequisite for intensive research; but initiatory claims to speak as a knowledgeable insider revealing essential cultural truths are no longer credible. Fieldwork . . . must be seen as a historically contingent, unruly dialogic encounter involving to some degree both conflict and collaboration in the production of texts. Ethnographers seem to be condemned to strive for true encounter while simultaneously recognizing the political, ethical, and personal cross-purposes that undermine any transmission of intercultural knowledge. (Clifford 1988, 90)

Here too, in commenting upon the prostitutes' stories—created in dialogue with an interviewer who is not a sex worker, and upon the clients'

stories—created in dialogue with each other, we find ourselves striving for some version of "true encounter" in the realization that the stories we hear, or eavesdrop upon, are narratives shaped for a particular audience and with a particular political, ethical, and personal stake. Wendy Chapkis suggests, "We need new tools that allow us to listen to the different stories told without simply asking 'is this True.' We need tools that help us listen for meaning rather than fact—to ask what it means that a story is told in this way . . ." (1997, 2). The question is still open.

Notes

1. There is no particular consistency to our use of terms for the women engaged in paid sex work in Tijuana. Some of the women accept the term "sex worker," others find it a silly academic affectation. Some prefer the straightforward term "prostitute," many find it harsh and suggest the circumlocution "work in the (night) scene."
2. We have consulted numerous other sites as well, but find in general that they are far less complete. Most of the material tends to be cross-posted in one of the main sites, though it is most efficiently gleaned through use of World Wide Web search engines like Dejanews.
3. The pervasiveness of search engine use can be attested by this sample note from O'Toole, making reference to an earlier query: "On Fri, 15 Nov 1996 . . . proball@electrici.com made what appeared to be a typical newbie clueless 'wannat post. . . Obviously someone who can't use Dejanews or Altavista. So I ignored him."
4. Lamas's conclusion is also consistent with other local studies, though not with the statements made by the women interviewed in depth for the Tijuana study. For example, the CONASIDA report on sex workers in the area of Tuxtla Gutiérrez in the south of Mexico indicates that women in that area "do not include negotiations about condom use as part of their daily practice, and their experience is slight. They reiterate a rejection of condom use in almost all types of clients, except 'rich boys'" (1995b, 13). Similarly, clients interviewed in Ciudad Hidalgo, also in the south of Mexico, tell interviewers that in that city the reported condom use by sex workers is much higher than actual condom use by clients (1995a, 19).