

<https://helda.helsinki.fi>

Book Review on Economies of Desire by Amalia L. Cabezas

Härkönen, Heidi

2011

Härkönen , H 2011 , ' Book Review on Economies of Desire by Amalia L. Cabezas ' ,
Suomen Antropologi , vol. 36 , no. 4 , pp. 84-86 .

<http://hdl.handle.net/10138/333147>

publishedVersion

Downloaded from Helda, University of Helsinki institutional repository.

This is an electronic reprint of the original article.

This reprint may differ from the original in pagination and typographic detail.

Please cite the original version.

into each other through branding and changing labour practices, the stories of 'Golden Valley' residents show that similar processes unfold even in the absence of branding and above all, in the absence of jobs.

EEVA BERGLUND
INDEPENDENT SCHOLAR
DOCENT AT THE UNIVERSITY OF HELSINKI
eeva@eeva.co.uk

AMALIA L. CABEZAS. *Economies of Desire: Sex and Tourism in Cuba and the Dominican Republic*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2009. Pp. 219. ISBN: 978-1-59213-749-7 (cloth); ISBN: 978-1-59213-750-3 (paperback).

The study of tourism has been an emerging theme in recent research on the Caribbean. In particular in post-Soviet socialist Cuba, rapidly increased tourism in the late 1990s has interested anthropologists as it ambiguously interplays between socialist state ideology and frequent sexual encounters and prostitution between Cubans and foreign tourists. In *Economies of Desire* (2009), Amalia L. Cabezas examines this complex relationship between tourists and locals, concentrating on the commercializing of sexuality and the problematic of the term sex worker.

Cabezas focuses on the unifying tendencies of the expanding, neo-liberalist, capitalist tourist-industry, and on similar dynamics in Cuba and in the Dominican Republic due to both states' prioritizing of the tourist industry to a high degree. In her view, in both places, the tourist industry produces new types of sexual-affective relations between tourists and locals that reproduce old social inequalities reminiscent of the plantation era (pp. 4–6). The tourist industry promotes an eroticization of labor in the resorts and stimulates social relations based on an intertwining of pragmatic economic considerations, affect, friendship and sexuality. Concentrating on women, Cabezas wants to reject the notion that the intermingling of sex and money is always oppressive and should be labeled as prostitution.

Cabezas argues that many women try to emphasize the affective side of their encounters with tourists and reject the pure commercialization of the relationship. She states that the women she studied do not identify with the term sex worker, but instead use sex pragmatically to achieve their goals of social mobility. Such goals may range from marrying a foreigner in order to migrate abroad to using sexual encounters with tourists to collect money to build a house. Cabezas introduces the term tactical sex to describe such a pragmatically-oriented short-term engagement in sexual encounters with foreigners in exchange for material gain (p. 4). She sees this as women's resistance to the neoliberal tendencies that the tourist industry has brought about both in Cuba and the Dominican Republic.

Cabezas stresses the importance of accounting for such differences as skin color or race and class between the women who engage in sex work, instead of lumping all women exchanging sex for money under the homogenizing term sex worker (p. 20). This is one

of the merits of Cabezas' work: she underlines that exchanging sex for material advantage can be a highly ambiguous practice and it should not be universalized as being the same everywhere. Instead, Cabezas argues that we should pay more attention to local meanings and the significance of both sex and money (pp. 4, 8–12, 18–22). This is something that anthropologists usually know: the same practice may have different meanings in different contexts. However, in order to truly understand what it means for Cuban or Dominican women to engage in exchanging sex for money and material gifts with foreign men, the book would have benefitted from a more thorough examination of the meanings that such practices—sex, money, material and gifts—hold in other types of contexts both in Cuba and the Dominican Republic; in interaction between local men and women. I understand the difficulty such a broad approach poses to a single book, but without wider contextual information on the local conceptualizations of these practices, it is difficult to gain an in-depth understanding of the meanings of sex, money or gifts in interaction with non-locals.

At the end of the book, Cabezas states that 'money and sex are just two of the factors that motivate people, and not necessarily consistently the most significant ones. There are many other kinds of relationships where financial exchange does not simply indicate commodification, but also communicates support and solidarity as a sign of obligation and love' (p. 168). However, as most of Cabezas' examples feature single mothers desperate to feed their children (pp. 112–116, 149) or care for an elderly relative (pp. 107–108, 134–135), it is difficult to see their choices as being motivated by anything other than love for their kin and an acute anxiety, rather than representing acts of resistance or solidarity. Moreover, since the title of the book emphasizes desire, I was expecting a more extensive reflection on the subject but, instead, Cabezas concentrates on describing how the need to provide for their children drives women into having sex with foreigners. More than economies of desire, this resonates for me as economies of need. However, the emphasis that Cabezas gives to not seeing her research subjects as mere victims without agency is a welcome contribution to discussing tourism and sexuality in the Caribbean. Yet I would be very careful in calling this women's resistance towards neoliberalizing tendencies.

The picture that Cabezas gives of Cuban and Dominican men in the lives of her female informants is very grim. Men abandon their children, beat up their partners and drive women into prostitution (e.g. pp. 139–140, 161). This largely conforms to the traditional picture of Caribbean men as 'missing fathers'. However, it surprised me that Cabezas' informants seemed to be so alone in such situations of abuse. While having a child with little or no participation by the father is very frequent in the Caribbean, women are rarely left alone in such situations. For example, my own Cuban informants tended to have wide support nets of mothers, grandmothers, siblings, uncles and cousins in place in such situations; kin that help the woman to survive with her child even if the father made little or no contributions.

Moreover, while Cabezas concentrates on women in her account, these types of pragmatic sexual-affective encounters between locals and tourists are by no means limited only to Caribbean women. At least in Cuba, men engage in similar practices. It would have been interesting to know whether the Caribbean men engaging in similar practices conceptualize the situation in the same way as women. This might have also brought more nuances to the bleak picture that Cabezas gives of Caribbean men as the women's partners.

One of the merits of Cabezas' work is in its drawing attention to types of state violence against women who engage in sexual encounters with tourists. This deserves more attention; the ways in which tourism is used as a justification to drive through gendered and racialized oppressive state measures. As such, *Economies of Desire* is a welcome contribution to an emerging field of study, and is of interest to anyone engaged in the study of tourist industries in the Caribbean.

HEIDI HÄRKONEN
SOCIAL AND CULTURAL ANTHROPOLOGY
UNIVERSITY OF HELSINKI
heidi.harkonen@helsinki.fi

HEATHER MONTGOMERY. *An Introduction to Childhood: Anthropological Perspectives on Children's Lives*. Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009. Pp. 288. ISBN: 978-1-4051-2590-1.

The past few years have seen the publication of a number of introductory works on children by senior anthropologists, including those by Lancy (2008) and LeVine and New (2008). With the more recent publication of Heather Montgomery's excellent monograph, it is increasingly difficult to claim that anthropologists 'don't like children' (Hirschfeld 2002).

This book is organized into eight thematic chapters that intermingle theoretical discussions with ample ethnographic data. The first chapter is a welcome and very detailed history of children in anthropology. Montgomery traces the anthropological interest in children all the way back to nineteenth century evolutionists, who focused upon them because of the belief that the development of individuals was mirrored in the development of the human race. The author then discusses children as they figured elsewhere in the history of anthropology, including the culture and personality school, cross-cultural studies of child-rearing (such as the famous Children of Six Cultures Study), and in the British tradition, associated with scholars such as Malinowski, Firth, Fortes, and so on. Beginning in the 1970s, Montgomery points to a growing interest in placing children at the centre of ethnographic projects. In accounting for this trend she suggests that the move by feminist scholars to focus on groups that are powerless and unseen inspired anthropologists to attempt to counterbalance their previous neglect of children.

The second chapter addresses the important question of 'what is a child?' Montgomery suggests that there is no universal childhood, and argues instead that it is 'a status that can be assigned, manipulated, denied, or revoked' (p. 73). She illustrates this by examining culturally variable constructions of children, showing how they are viewed as everything from subordinates, to equals, to economic investments, and even nonhuman beings like witches. In the third chapter, the author discusses a topic that is often not covered in other works about children: cultural models of procreation as well as the social status of unborn and neonatal children. Chapter four covers some of the vast literature on caregiving, kinship, child fosterage, children living outside the family (e.g. street children), and children's peer groups. The fifth chapter is somewhat peculiarly devoted to three