

Prostitution in Contemporary Rio de Janeiro

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A Trip Down Rua Buenos Aires

One way to appreciate the diversity of prostitution in Rio de Janeiro is to walk through the downtown area. Starting near the beginning of Rua Buenos Aires, one can find five *termas*—heterosexual saunas catering to the day trade of foreign tourists and carioca¹ businessmen. Each *terma* is typically composed of a sauna and bathing area, a *whiskeria* or bar, and a discotheque. The men pay 20–50 Reais² to swap their business suits for bathrobes. Inside, anywhere from fifteen to sixty young women are available for sex in rented “cabins” at 100 to 300R\$ for forty to sixty minutes of sex. One-third to one-fourth of this money is taken by the house as “room rental fees.” There are better and worse *termas* in the business district, but all of them are clean, safe, and relatively expensive.

Crossing over Av. Rio Branco, the “Wall Street” of Rio, one comes to a commercial district similar to the immediately preceding area. Here one finds small *privés* and massage parlors—rented apartments or offices in which two to six women offer forty to sixty minutes of sexual services for about 55–150R\$. The clients are middle-management and skilled workers looking for sex on their lunch break or after work. The *privés* are small but quite clean and safe. They charge no entrance fee and do not have bars or other diversions: clients come for sex only.

This stretch of Rua Buenos Aires, however, also has a series of places which carioca clients call, in a pun on the English term “fast food,” *fast fодas* [fucks]: small brothels generally situated in decrepit nineteenth-century townhouses that cater to working-class men. These houses typically charge 1 Real per minute for fifteen to twenty minutes of hot, sweaty sex in tiny cubicles without air conditioning. *Fast fодas* range from surprisingly good to hellishly bad in terms of their safety and sanitary conditions, but they all

tend to be crowded in the late afternoon, with five to ten women on duty and twice that number of clients waiting their turn. Sometimes a single building will contain several *fast fodas*.

Continuing on down Rua Buenos Aires and crossing Rua Uruguaiana, one leaves the business district and enters the SAARA popular market: sixteen square blocks of commerce crammed into tents and the *Centro*'s ubiquitous decaying townhouses. Here one finds *fast fodas* and *privés* but also encounters more traditional *casas*, or brothels. These are relatively spacious and often offer strip shows for clients, who are young, working-class men and middle-aged merchants. Prices hover around 40–80R\$ for forty minutes of sex, though the *fast foda* option is often available. *Casas* have anywhere from five to fifteen women on duty and, although they are less crowded than *privés*, they also tend to be more precarious structurally. Recently a downtown *casa* had to close because the facade of its 150-year-old building collapsed.

In the SAARA one also finds prostitutes on the street in three main concentrations: near Praça Tiradentes, in the Praça da República, and around the Central do Brasil railroad station. These women are typically thirty years old and older and alternate between streetwalking and sitting in front of bars, drinking and chatting with friends. When they find clients, they retire to nearby rundown hotels, where rooms can be rented by the half-hour. The women charge from 30–60R\$ for thirty minutes of sex. Clients tend to be the same sort of men who frequent the *casas* and *fast fodas*, though the women of the Praça da República specialize in selling sex to senior citizens.

Finally, at the margins of the SAARA one can find a new sort of establishment in Rio de Janeiro: the swingers' club. Only one of these has been established in the region, but its popularity indicates that others may soon appear. The swingers' club is the BYOB of commercial sex. Men show up with "dates": generally prostitutes contracted via call girl services or off the streets. The couple pays around 40–60R\$ to enter the club (which sports a disco, bar, showers, and several small bedrooms) and can have sex with anyone who is willing.

Rua Buenos Aires ends at the Praça da República, but if one were to cross the park and continue in a straight line, other interesting places come into view. One kilometer further on is the Cidade Nova, Rio's administrative center, built in the 1970s and 1980s on top of the Mangue, the city's traditional working-class red light district. In the 1970s and 1980s the Mangue was leveled to make room for the new municipal government complex and a subway station. Today no prostitutes walk its streets, but Rio's imposing City Hall and attendant Annex are known as the "Big Whore" (*Piranhão*) and the "Big Pimp" (*Cafetão*).

Part of the Mangue relocated to Vila Mimosa (VM) in 1987 (Pasini 2005). VM is located an additional kilometer ahead and slightly to the north of our imaginary line extending from Rua Buenos Aires. It is a warren of small *casas*, strip joints, and cut-rate *termas* established in and around an abandoned warehouse. Some three thousand women work there (Simões 2010), although only about three hundred to five hundred are present at any given time. Unlike downtown, VM comes alive in the evening, frequented by men looking for cheap entertainment. Prices are around 25R\$ for fifteen to twenty minutes of sex in tiny cubicles, with 5–10R\$ of this going to the bar or club owner for a rental fee and a condom. VM is often considered to be one of the least hygienic and most dangerous commercial sex venues in town, but several street scenes, *fast fodas*, and *casas* downtown are even worse.

But Vila Mimosa is not the last stop for commercial sex. Continuing on a few more blocks, one comes to an area where interstate highways merge with the municipal road network. Here, near the Quinta da Boa Vista, streetwalkers converge in the early evening to meet the needs of taxi drivers and long-distance truckers. This is a street prostitution scene that is considered by sex workers and clients alike to be one of the most dangerous in the city. Recently a police raid caught three children selling sex near the Quinta, allegedly under the control of drug gangs from nearby shantytowns (“Tráfico prostitui menores” 2009). It would be a mistake, however, to believe that sex here is necessarily cheap. Though tricks can be bought for 30R\$, women can charge as much as 100R\$ for an hour in nearby hotels.

Our imaginary jaunt should give the reader an appreciation of the size and variety of Rio de Janeiro’s commercial sex market. The downtown area and the associated port district, however, contain only about a third of the prostitution venues that we have discovered in the city. Another large concentration can be found in the beach neighborhoods of Ipanema and Copacabana. Here the *privés*, massage parlors, brothels, and streetwalkers that meet the sexual needs of local clients are intermixed with *termas*, nightclubs, and restaurants geared toward the tourist trade. Meanwhile, out in the suburbs, cut-rate brothels and *termas* abound, and a growing series of Internet-based agencies send call girls all across the metropolitan region.

Rio de Janeiro boasts a large and complicated commercial sexual scene, but the reports that have been written about it (Ribeiro 2002; Blanchette and DaSilva 2005; Pasini 2005) tend to concentrate on one particular aspect or area of sex work in the city. Rio de Janeiro, by any definition, is not just a singular and homogeneous sexscape (Brennan 2004, 16) but is better con-

ceived of as a series of overlapping and intertwining commercial sex scenes of almost bewildering variety and complexity.

As pointed out by urbanists such as Mauricio de Abreu (1997), Gilberto Velho (1994), and Lícia Valadares (2005), Rio de Janeiro has long contained structural inequalities along various axes of identity (race, class, and gender). It also hosts multiple migratory movements encompassing foreigners who come to Rio, Brazilians who leave it for overseas destinations, and Brazilians who arrive in the city from elsewhere. The result has been the creation of prostitution venues for every type of consumer imaginable and the maintenance of these venues over the long term, in some cases over generations.

The age and persistence of the commercial sexual market in Rio, as well as its penetration into the city's nightlife and politics, has given sex work an intergenerational character. Older prostitutes often retire to become madams, or "agents" for younger workers, and the general fund of sex work knowledge grows and is passed on from one generation to another. It is notable that the city's two main sex work organizations have been created by madams and prostitutes, both groups over the retirement age. Although this in no way resolves the inequalities that make up Rio as a sexscape, it does create a situation in which sex workers are relatively well informed and pragmatically equipped to deal with such inequalities—and often bend them to their favor.

Prostitution as Option

Why do women in Rio de Janeiro work as prostitutes? Our informants give one main reason: it is the best way to earn enough income to survive and improve their socioeconomic status. All our female informants report having access to other forms of labor, often with retirement and health benefits. Many of these jobs, however, pay the equivalent of a Brazilian minimum wage for forty weekly hours of work. Prostitution pays more, sometimes much more.

Three types of jobs are constantly cited by our informants as common alternatives to prostitution: paid domestic labor as a maid, unpaid domestic labor as a housewife, or work as a supermarket checkout clerk. These jobs are readily available, but our informants describe prostitution as more lucrative and often more agreeable. Two other advantages of prostitution, we were told, are the relatively flexible hours and the possibility, though remote, of making a large amount of money from wealthy clients. We thus believe that one motivation behind prostitution is *ambition*, given that, of all the typically feminine forms of labor in the city, only prostitution and marriage hold

out hope for socioeconomic ascension. In this sense, as anthropologist Dawn Pankonien has pointed out (2009), prostitution holds a distinct advantage over marriage in that it does not tie a woman's future to any one man in particular but let's her "play the field."

Many of our informants are married or have been married. Still, they do not see marriage as a substitute for prostitution. One reason is that they distrust men's capacity to sustain them. In the words of Wilma, a thirty-five-year-old white prostitute in a Copacabana nightclub, "Men promise a lot of things, but can't keep their promises."

What I do out here in the street isn't any bit different from what I did at home when I was married. . . . It was a job, just like this here. Actually, that's a lie: it was a *duty*. And you don't make money off of a duty. Here, at least I get paid for what I do.

Women also recognize that a single wage is not enough to support a family. This leads some women to engage in sex work when they are married. According to Dara, a forty-year-old black streetwalker in Praça Tiradentes, "My husband can't cover all our bills on his own":

The days are gone when a man made enough for a woman to stay at home and take care of the kids. . . . At least [working] like I do, I earn enough to help out at home and I still have enough time to take care of my daughter . . . [My husband] knows what I do and knows I do it not because I enjoy it. I've already told him: I'll stop whenever you want, but you better be able to carry this whole thing by yourself, because I'm not going to be able to find another job that pays as well as this and lets me stay home six days a week.

For Dara, prostitution complements family life; it is the only way that she feels she can adequately enjoy a "traditional" domestic existence. Many of our informants have offered similar observations.

Even well-paid, conventional employment may not compare favorably with prostitution. For example, Dara and Wilma turn tricks at the basic rate of 1 Real (U.S.\$0.50) per minute and generally earn 20R\$ per trick, with twenty-five tricks—slightly more than eight hours of work—earning them the equivalent of a monthly minimum wage. Thirty-one-year-old Vânia, on the other hand, has been in the sex trade for nine years and works downtown at the Wagon Wheel *termas*, having quit her job as a real estate agent to work as a prostitute:

My old job paid well, when it paid. . . . But there were periods in which nothing came in. A friend told me about the Help disco in Copa[cabana]. I'd go there and make 200R\$ per trick. It helped a lot and I could still work as an agent . . . Then I was offered a job at the Unicorn *termas*. I only made 160 Reais a trick there and had to work every day, but it was safer. Three years later I came here [to the Wagon Wheel] because I fought with the owner [of the Unicorn]. Now I'm thinking of quitting whoring and going back to real estate because I'm getting to be too old to be a whore. Except this time, I have my apartment and my car, everything paid for by whoring. Now, I can get through the bad times.

Vânia's account testifies to the economic logic of prostitution and its configuration as a career. Vânia is middle-class, white, and holds a university degree. She initially engaged in freelance sexual work at Help discotheque in order to meet economic crises caused by the irregular income flow of her job as a real estate agent. She later abandoned her freelance and regular jobs to work full-time in a *termas*, the Unicorn, making less per trick but gaining in security and client turnover. Vânia decided to leave the Unicorn because of an argument with her boss. The misunderstandings between Vânia and her boss may have been affected by Vânia's relatively advanced age for *termas* work, as the Unicorn is among the most expensive *termas* in Rio and has a constant turnover of young female employees.

Vânia's tale seems to follow the pattern of a decadent career, as described by sociologist Paul G. Cressy (2008 [1932]). According to Cressy, age exercises a downwardly mobile pressure on individual careers in occupational fields that value youth. An older woman among younger women will thus have to work harder to attract the same number of clients. This dilemma has two solutions: change careers or move to a less exclusive venue. The final result of this process is "reduction" to employment in the cheapest houses. In the context of carioca prostitution, this process may lead to work in the streets around the Central do Brasil or the Quinta da Boa Vista. Vânia contemplates a return to her former profession as real estate agent, but this time she feels that the agency career will be viable because prostitution has allowed her to stabilize her economic situation.

Neither marriage nor other employment can thus necessarily substitute for sex work as a means of earning a living in Rio de Janeiro. Vânia's case is relatively rare among our informants, who normally do not leave middle-class jobs for prostitution. But we have encountered numerous middle-class women at the bottom rungs of ascending professional careers who also work

as prostitutes. During the week before Carnival 2010, for example, we met three university students, a secretary, and an intern at the Bank of Brazil turning tricks in Copacabana.

The majority of the women we interviewed live in the working- and lower-middle-class carioca suburbs and not the city's many shantytowns. They are often engaged in long- and medium-term plans for social mobility that include acquiring property or achieving a professional education. Prostitutes in Rio de Janeiro are demoralized as a class, and current legislation regarding sex work is contradictory: adults can prostitute themselves, but "sexual exploitation," understood as third parties profiting from prostitution, is prohibited. What this actually means is debatable. For example, a traditional *casa* where women work while giving a set percentage of their earnings to the madam is illegal. A bar used by prostitutes to meet clients prior to retiring to other places for sex is not considered illegal. In practice, however, the *casa* may have police partners among its owners, whereas the bar does not. Alternatively, the *casa* may be located in a rundown commercial or industrial district, whereas the bar may be in a middle-class, beachfront neighborhood. These conditions mean that pressure to crack down upon "sexual exploitation" will probably result in raids on the bar rather than on the *casa*. Simply put, the city and police rarely define "sexual exploitation" in accordance with concern over violations of prostitutes' rights.

Effective regulation of the conditions under which sex workers operate thus becomes very difficult in Rio de Janeiro. Sex workers' rights are routinely violated by the owners of the clubs, *termas*, escort agencies, and *casas*, all of which profit—directly or otherwise—from the sale of sex. Although pimping is illegal in Rio and its more brutal manifestations seem to be repressed by the police, a series of agents manage to extract a surplus from sex work.

Because of the legal restrictions on profiting from the sexual labor of others, prostitutes in Rio de Janeiro are formally defined by their employers as performing a different kind of work or, in fact, as independent. In either case, the prostitute has control of her body and of the decision whether to have sex or not. The production of a commercial sexual act, however, implies the use of means of production that are typically not controlled by the prostitute. For example, a prostitute needs a place where she can meet with clients. This involves the creation of what Robert Park and Ernest Burgess (1984 [1925], 45–48) call a "moral region," a space where a distinct moral code prevails. Such spaces must minimally attract clients, offering anonymity and some degree of choice in sexual partners; they can be virtual, such as an Internet site, or even interspersed with other spaces, as is the case of much of Copaca-

bana, where “normal” bars also serve as meeting places for prostitution, but they must exist for prostitution to occur. In Rio de Janeiro, surplus is generally extracted from prostitution by third parties through the control of these moral regions where prostitution is tolerated or permitted.

Our research has revealed 278 prostitution venues in the city of Rio de Janeiro, 58 of which we have personally visited. For the purposes of this chapter, the term “venue” is understood to mean a single address or cohesive moral region. Thus Vila Mimosa, which has some twenty-five separate clubs, houses, bars, and *termas* qualifies as a single venue. If we were to consider each discrete prostitution space that exists in venues like these, our total count of prostitution venues would rise above 500. These venues are generally “hiding in plain sight,” as that can easily be found in normal, everyday neighborhoods. With the exception of VM, they are not segregated into their own specific spaces.

Prostitution venues in Rio are grouped into seven main regions. Region I is virtual and composed of call girl services and agencies operating over the Internet. Region II is clustered around the North Zone suburb of Madueira. Region III takes in another cluster in the neighborhoods of Tijuca, Saens Pena, and Maracaña, and this region runs into Region IV, grouped around Praça da Bandeira, Vila Mimosa, and the Quinta da Boa Vista. Region V includes downtown and the port district, and Region VI is composed of the neighborhoods of Copacabana, Leblon, Ipanema, São Conrado, and Jardim Botânico. Finally, Region VII is made up of the southern coastal neighborhoods of Barra da Tijuca and Recreio, plus adjacent areas. Table 1 gives a breakdown of the venues by region, subregion, and type.

Sex Work and the State in Rio de Janeiro

State intervention in prostitution in Rio has a long history. Historian Magali Vainfas (1985) outlined the nineteenth-century discourses that led to attempts to confine “common” prostitution to the old Mangue district. Historian Sueann Caulfield (1997) detailed the resulting division in the organization of sex work in the city, with the Mangue established as the working-man’s red light district and Lapa, the “Montemarte of Rio de Janeiro,” enshrined as the Bohemian and tourist alternative. As Caulfield reports, the social boundaries of both areas were patrolled by the city’s police, who took it upon themselves to determine which women fit where:

Police may have been unable to control prostitution completely, but they were able to concentrate some of the most conspicuous sex workers to

TABLE 1
Prostitution Venue By Region, Subregion, and Type

<i>Region (Subregion)</i>	<i>Total</i>	<i>C. Girls</i>	<i>Termas</i>	<i>Privés</i>	<i>Massage</i>	<i>Brothels</i>	<i>Closed</i>	<i>Bar/ Rest.</i>	<i>Beach</i>	<i>Street</i>	<i>Open</i>	<i>Mxd</i>	<i>N. Class</i>
I. Virtual	54	54					54				0		
II. Madureira	9		5			4	9				0		
III. Tijuca	7			5	2		7				0		
IV. Pça Bandeira	8		5	1		1	7			1	1		
V. Downtown	90												
Port	18		7	3	2	5	17			1	1		
Cent. Do Brasil	5		2			2	4			1	1		
Tiradentes	17		2	3		7	12	1		2	3		2
Rio Branco	40		10	9	13	8	40				0		
Lapa	10		2	3			5	2		3	5		

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VI. South Zone	70												
Copacabana Prado Jr.	28		9	6		1	16	11		1	12		
Copa. Siq. Campos	21		7	2	4	1	14	3		1	4		3
Copa. Posts 5 e 6	6				1		1	2	1		3	1	1
Ipanema	10		1		1		2	7	1		8		
Leblon	3						0	3			3		
JD. Botânico	1		1				1				0		
São Conrado	1						0				0		1
VII. B. da Tijuca	12		5	2	2		9		1	1	2		1
Unassigned	29		9	5	2	5	21	3	1	3	7		1
<i>Total</i>	279	54	65	39	27	34	219	32	4	14	50	1	9

areas designated for “tolerated prostitution,” such as the Mangue. . . . Prostitutes who were considered less coarse, “whiter” and more attractive gained a firmer hold on higher income markets, and generally chose to avoid Mangue. They worked instead in the more discrete brothels or private apartments or houses known as *rendez-vous* in Lapa or Glória, an adjacent upper crust zone. Most prostitutes, however, continued to work clandestinely in “moralized” areas, hiding from or bribing patrol officers or waiting out the short-lived morality campaigns. (Caulfield 1997, 91–92).

During the 1940s and again in the 1950s both the Mangue and Lapa were raided (Leite 1993) and finally were leveled by urban renewal projects during the military dictatorship in the 1970s and 1980s (Abreu 1997). Working class prostitution moved to the port region and the area around the Central do Brasil railway station. Vila Mimosa was also born out of the ashes of the Mangue. Meanwhile, Lapa’s “chic” prostitutes followed the bohemians as middle-class nightlife shifted to Copacabana during the Bossa Nova era of the 1950s and 1960s.

Today we can still discern the general outlines of the split caused by state intervention in the division of most of the city’s prostitution venues into two main zones based around downtown and Copacabana. A look at Table 1 confirms that the majority of “open” venues are situated in the South Zone, whereas the Central Zone is mostly made up of “closed” venues. The class and ethnic divisions between these two sides of the market no longer apply, however. Women of all ethnic groups work in the downtown venue, for example, which contains some of the city’s most exclusive and expensive *termas*, and also in the South Zone with its cheap *privés* and street scenes.

From the 1980s on, the military dictatorship then ruling Brazil was in retreat and liberal movements were in full flower. Sex workers themselves were resisting police repression (Leite 2009), but as anthropologist Adriana Piscitelli remarks (2008, 38–39), prostitution was not on the feminist agenda in Brazil. Rio’s sexual market thus thrived in relative peace, obtaining the general configuration described above, with all venues attempting to avoid the legal definition of “exploitation of prostitution” and stay within the bounds of the legally permissible. We can thus say that although “pimping,” in its more sensational and brutal aspect, certainly still occurs in individual cases, it is not a structurally significant component of the market in general. In fact, prostitution activist Gabriela Leite explained in an interview with the authors that “traditionally, nothing is more likely to get a carioca cop motivated to arrest someone than the accusation that there’s a pimp who’s abusing a prostitute.”

Today, however, things seem to be on the verge of change. Interest in the repression of prostitution has been renewed by political pressure resulting from social panic (Cohen 1972) over the trafficking of women (see Piscitelli 2008; Grupo Davida 2005), by the sexual exploitation of children (Amar 2009), and by the subsequent conflation of sexual tourism as synonymous with these two crimes (Blanchette and DaSilva 2005, 2008). Although the sale of sex continues to be legal (or, more apt, “not illegal”), governments have increasingly used zoning ordinances, eminent-domain law, and police harassment to curb prostitution or channel it into areas where it will not intermix with tourism and middle-class life. As anthropologist Paul Amar (2009) pointed out, these political pressures have resulted in an expanded notion of “sexual exploitation” and the creation of the first official vice squad in Rio in the last seventy years.

Prostitution was a hot issue in the 2008 mayoral race, with winner Eduardo Paes comparing the legalization of sex work to the institutionalization of pimps (“Paes se diz contra a legalização da prostituição” 2008). This climate has been exacerbated by the fact that Rio will host the 2014 World Cup and the 2016 Summer Olympics. Recent declarations by federal tourism minister Marta Suplicy (Fussy 2008) indicate that Rio’s preparation for the games will include the repression of prostitution. Sex workers in Rio thus face a situation where both local and federal government see the sale of sex as a “problem” that must be eliminated or, at the very least, discretely managed. Rio has even gone so far as to contract former New York mayor Rudy Giuliani as a security consultant for the Olympic Games (UOL 2009).

Part of this campaign has been the systematic harassment of visible prostitution venues, especially those in middle-class areas or regions targeted for games-related urban renewal. Café Dunas, a beachside *termas* in Barra da Tijuca, repeatedly has been closed for alleged “health code violations,” which include the discovery of a cockroach in its kitchen. Meanwhile, the eighty-two-year-old Alhambra in Praça Mauá has been fined heavily for maintaining an illegally large neon marquee (in place now for close to a decade). Several *privés* along Avenida Rio Branco have been raided and closed for not operating in accordance with their rental contracts. In all these cases, none of the laws regarding prostitution and sexual exploitation has been applied; instead, minor code violations, normally ignored in other businesses, have been cited in order to close down commercial sex venues. Another front in the antiprostitution campaign involves the use of eminent-domain law. Praça Mauá is scheduled to be transformed into an entertainment and museum complex, removing some fifteen *termas* and *casas* (Goes 2010). Vila Mimosa

and Praça da Bandeira will be leveled to make way for a bullet train station, eliminating in one blow the last vestiges of the old Mangue and the largest remaining commercial sex venue in the city (“Vila Mimosa no caminho do trem” 2010). The State of Rio de Janeiro’s recent expropriation of the Help discotheque, however, has been a paradigm of the kinds of changes “urban renewal” will bring about.

The Help discotheque scrupulously followed the law regarding sexual exploitation. Minors were not allowed in the club nor were drugs or sexual activities. The women who frequented the disco were treated not as employees but guests, exactly like the men. House security was tight, and fights were immediately stopped and the instigators expelled. The hundreds of women we have talked to over the years who used Help to meet clients were universal in their praise for the establishment and in their claims that management did not touch prostitutes’ earnings. Close to five hundred women a night would show up at the disco during high season, and thousands of women used the facility.

Help, unfortunately, was also sitting on prime beachfront real estate. Claiming that he was “transforming a brothel into a temple of carioca culture” (Revista Terra 2009), Governor Sergio Cabral employed eminent domain law to confiscate the lot for a new Museum of Sound and Imagery. On January 7, 2010, the disco closed its doors after twenty-five years of business. Within weeks, the building was leveled, but construction on the new museum has yet to begin.

Since Help closed, prostitutes have migrated to other venues in Rio and elsewhere. Some have gone to São Paulo; others have crossed the bay to Niteroi or have gone two hours up the coast to the petroleum boomtown of Macaé. A greater number have moved down to the Prado Junior region of Copacabana and, in particular, to the Veranda Bar where, during Carnival 2010, more than 600 prostitutes and tourists congregated nightly. The bar’s capacity is 150, and crowds would pour out onto the surrounding sidewalk, causing public disturbances. The crush was so thick that the waiters and bouncers often could not move about. In contrast to the calm and controlled scene at Help, Veranda Bar was utter chaos. Drug dealing took place on the nearby street, and child prostitutes worked the crowds. A few child prostitutes have always been present on Copacabana, but they were kept away from Help by the disco’s security staff. At Veranda, during Carnival, bouncers could barely get out of the bar, let alone police the area around it. The situation became so bad, with so many women fighting for so little space, that by early March many of the immigrants from Help were already looking

for other venues. In this endeavor they have been “assisted” by people whom the prostitutes qualify as “pimps” and who began frequenting Copacabana months before Help’s closure. As one of our informants put it:

There are a lot of pimps on Copa now. Militia types. Two nights ago, an off-duty civil policeman drew his pistol on an off-duty fireman and shot a bunch of holes in the bar awning. The sharks are circling.

The unusual juxtaposition of the terms “pimps” and “militia” is relevant. Rio’s “militia” are vigilante gangs based in the city’s outlying working-class suburbs and shantytowns who charge protection fees from local merchants and become the ipso facto rulers of their region. Militia members are often off-duty, retired, or fired members of the city’s public security forces. In many cases they run nightclubs and bars in their areas, and rumors circulate that militia-run brothels are being established along the main highways leading into Rio. On several occasions since Help has closed, we have seen Brazilian men (who until then had been an almost negligible presence in the Copa tourism prostitution scene), sporting clothing styles and tattoos typical of the security forces, talking to women at the Veranda. It is these men whom our informants point out as “pimps” and “militia,” and it is in this context that the informant’s comment above regarding “circling sharks” must be understood. Apparently the post-Help exodus from Copa has caught the attention of recruiters for gang-run commercial sex venues.

Post-Help Veranda, in other words, is a good example of the chaotic and exploitative commercial sexual scene that the city and state governments say they wish to avoid but which has been created almost entirely by the forced closure of Rio’s largest, safest, and least exploitative commercial sex venue. With the World Cup and the Olympics on the horizon, Rio now seems poised to repeat the past. Sueann Caulfield’s remarks about the birth of the Mangue in the 1920s seem to prefigure the situation that the city faces today:

Brazil’s desire to portray itself as a modern nation involved obscuring prostitution control in its capital city, Rio de Janeiro. How could Brazil regulate prostitution and still be considered modern? While prostitution became an astonishingly frequent topic of debate among diverse groups of public officials and professional elites, control measures in Rio were never clearly delineated. Official regulation was considered by legislators to contradict both Catholic morality and civil liberties guaranteed by Brazilian law. Nevertheless, pressures to clean up the city so that elite families

and foreign visitors would not have to view prostitutes forced the police to follow extralegal policies. Their actions, including the relocation of some prostitutes to less visible and less desirable parts of the city, reflected the racial, ethnic, and class prejudices that informed elite ideals for the nation. (Caulfield 1997, 86)

That the new wave of repression and urban renewal will eliminate prostitution in Rio de Janeiro is highly unlikely. It is, however, apparently forcing it out of many long-established venues where sex workers had achieved some degree of autonomy and an enviable market position. The result of these policies, if the experience of Help is anything to go by, will be the reorganization in the city's commercial sex market. As obvious sex venues in middle-class and tourism areas are labeled an embarrassment to the city, sex work will be pushed to the margins of town and into less tourism-oriented areas, reducing profitability and forcing women under the control of new club owners in areas where they are isolated from the population at large. Prostitute-rights activist Gabriela Leite (2009, 64) sees this as a very worrisome tendency:

For decades, prostitutes have been part of the carioca urban scene, mixing freely with families and bohemians alike. Different from many cities in Brazil, Rio has never had a delimited red light district. Vila Mimosa and the Mangue are the exceptions that prove the rule because they were never able to keep us confined to those areas. When prostitutes are pushed out of public sight and mind, however, it becomes easier to stigmatize and control them. A woman who works a downtown *privé* is literally six meters away from help: a woman in a closed club set out along the highway or segregated in a shantytown has little contact with anyone but pimps, clients and other whores. She's easily eliminated if she becomes a problem.

By pushing commercial sex venues out of the public eye, the government of Rio de Janeiro seems to believe that it is “making the city safe for families and tourists”—two groups that have never before been threatened by the presence of prostitutes. The practical effect, however, is that the government is intensifying the stigmatization of sex workers and forcing the sexual market to consolidate under the tighter control of third-party exploiters (namely, “pimps”) in venues farther removed from public oversight. If current trends continue, we can expect to see another division of the carioca sexual market, with the upper-end and tourist-oriented call girls driven to virtual venues on the Internet or to a handful of discrete, expensive *termas*,

while lower-end, working class prostitution is driven into the city's margins and shantytowns.

Fortunately for prostitution rights activists, this process has just begun and may yet be resisted.

NOTES

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1. "Carioca" is the adjectival form of "Rio de Janeiro."

2. For the period between 2006 and 2010, the exchange rate has hovered around 2R\$ per USD. The prices quoted here are current for June 2009.