In Search of the Big Bamboo

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The Big Bamboo, performed to the inevitable accompaniment of limbo dancing and fire-eaters, is a highlight in the boisterous floor shows that dominate resort hotels from the Cayman Islands to St. Lucia. The calypsonian performing the song usually grabs his crotch as he sings the refrain, eyeing his white audience suggestively. The tourists seem enthralled, if abashed: Males look away, embarrassed, while their female companions titter nervously. The black staff glance at one another knowingly.

Meanwhile, in contemporary dance-hall and reggae, lyrics boasting of sexual performance and "hood" size are more common than ever. The sexually explicit songs of popular DJs like Shabba Ranks ("Stamina Daddy"), Lady Saw ("Winning Skill"), and Little Lenny ("Nine Inches Long and Coming") propagate the myth of the big bamboo at home and abroad.

But the big bamboo has a life outside popular song. In the work of many "intuitive" Rastafarian artists, the dreadlocked male is portrayed nude, with a huge penis, often erect, dwarfing the rest of the body. West Indian fiction also celebrates the sexual power of the Caribbean male. The work of Earl Lovelace, Anthony Winkler, and Jacques Romain is filled with strong and virile male protagonists who lay down the bamboo all night, reducing their
female partners to whimpering submission. The tradition of sexual exaggeration reaches a new extreme in Raphaël Confiant's *Eau de Café*: Confiant's protagonist is endowed with a two-meter penis that he keeps wrapped around his waist. When female characters appear in these stories, they are inevitably restless and hungry, like Sandra in Kwadwo Agymah Kamauí's *Flickering Shadows*. Having spent most of the novel with a sexually inadequate white husband, Sandra ultimately finds deliverance in a virile black man who leaves her spent, weak-kneed, and satisfied.

It has been suggested that the relentless celebration of phallic imagery is, in part, a playful response to white stereotypes of primitive black male potency, that these works of culture, high and low, reflect the exoticist tropes of the racial imagination. But if this sexual exaggeration is ironic, it is nevertheless ubiquitous in the Caribbean. On many street corners throughout the islands, West Indian males strike a familiar pose: One hand rests authoritatively on the crotch. Sometimes this is simply a reassuring habit, a reminder that the bamboo is ready for action, but often the poser harasses female passersby: "Here gyall, yu wud lub some of dis!"

Female sex tourists first came to the Caribbean early in this century. They were older white women, come to winter in Bermuda, the Bahamas, and the U.S. Virgin Islands. The stuff of island legend, these well-heeled women arrived with steamer trunks, took up residence in large quarters, and tapped young black males to service them discreetly for the duration of their stay. The men were rewarded handsomely, so there was no shortage of potential gigolos. Everyone knew which young man went with which dowager; when the women arrived at the jetty, there was loud teasing: "Simon, your mudder com!" The entry of younger women into the sex tourism market dates to the early 1960s, when Scandinavian, British, and German women first began to travel to the southern coasts of Europe: Italy, Spain, and Greece. In Greece, the term Kamaki evolved to describe local men, many of them
fishermen, who had sexual relations with tourist women in exchange for money and gifts. Since the emergence of package travel tours in the 1970s, European women have been able to safely travel farther afield. And so they're off to Gambia, Kenya, or Ghana, to Jamaica or Barbados, to Thailand, the Philippines, or Indonesia, India, or Brazil.

Since the early 1970s, Barbados has become a popular destination for female tourists seeking what the sociologist Graham Dann has called "close encounters of the Third World kind." Young males—"beach boys"—cruise the sands in search of unattached tourist women. Beach boys are easy to spot because of their distinctive wardrobe: They go in for T-shirts, baggy swimming trunks, Teva sandals, gold bracelets, and brand-name sunglasses, preferably Oakley or Ray-Ban. They are without exception physically fit. Some have bleached hair, and a few sport baby dreadlocks, called "nubbies."

A beach boy might rent out beach chairs and umbrellas for a living; he might sell coconuts or aloe vera or coral or handcrafted jewelry. He might deal drugs. But most beach boys spend their days leading tourists to water: renting out Jet Skis, giving water-skiing lessons, organizing sailboat trips, staffing glass-bottomed boats. These jobs are usually part-time or seasonal, and the relatively low wages they command are insufficient to maintain the enviable beach boy lifestyle. Beach boys require the latest clothes and shoes, immodest jewelry, meals and drinks at pricey tourist restaurants and nightclubs. Hustling female tourists earns them these necessities.

Sex tourists advertise their availability in various ways. Novices are much more likely to travel in groups, and they respond warmly to the faintest invitation: "Is this your first visit to Barbados?" or "Would you like to come on a Jet Ski ride with me?" The veteran sex tourist is much more direct. She sits on the sand alone, masked
by designer shades, scouting for the most appealing beach boy. If the wrong one saunters over, she sends him away. Of course, the older she is, the less discriminating she can afford to be.

Even before the initial encounter, a beach boy is able to glean some information about a potential client from her swimwear, her reading material, her accent. This sizing up is important: Beach boys have a hierarchy of preferred clients based on nationality, affluence, age, and attractiveness. A wealthy, attractive French Canadian in her 30s tops most lists. My informants believe that French Canadian women have prodigious sexual appetites and a correspondingly inexhaustible supply of gifts. (Among the beach boys of Martinique, Air Canada is known as Air Couconne, or Air Pussy.) Germans and other Europeans rank below French Canadians. Young Brits are fine in a pinch, but they are usually on a tight budget; older British women are preferable. Young white American women are at the bottom of the hierarchy, because their racial hang-ups are said to translate into sexual inhibitions. Black American women are preferable, if they're rich, but a black female tourist does not do much to enhance a beach boy's status. As one beach boy told me, "I can get a black girl anytime."

First contact is usually made on the beach. Beach boys employ a range of techniques to stimulate prospective clients. Unfazed by the scrutiny of countless appreciative gazes, one will perform stunts on a Jet Ski, while another might embark on a routine of seaside calisthenics. One young man who frequented the Carlyle Bay tourist beach would strip down to his Speedo and engage in an acrobatic and sexually suggestive game of paddleball that had even the most jaded tourist—and writer—staring in amazement.

The island of Jamaica has bred its own peculiar kind of beach boy: the rent-a-dread. These longhaired hustlers have achieved a kind of perverse fame on the island, having been lampooned in cartoons, in comedy skits, and even on greeting cards. Rent-a-dreads are
invariably unemployed, and most are significantly poorer than their Barbadian counterparts. The average rent-a-dread has little formal education. Most are migrants from rural areas, living in shanties on the "capture land" ringing the tourist resort towns of Ocho Rios, Montego Bay, and Negril.

Rent-a-dreads are fixtures at most tourist beaches and bars. Like Barbadian beach boys, rent-a-dreads try to make a memorable first impression. Most spectacular is the young man who, upon emerging from the ocean, vigorously shakes his long locks dry on the beach. A few resort to more shameless advertising: Rent-a-dreads have been sighted swimming naked, late at night, in the artificially lit water around the Pier I restaurant and bar. Like beach boys, they are extremely adept at "chatting up" women, a West Indian tradition that demands transparently false declarations of love, extravagant romantic gestures, and flowery language. Some enterprising young hustlers have even learned a bit of German to help with business.

Jamaica's reggae festivals attract women from around the world, many of whom seem to share a predilection for young, dreadlocked locals. Female tourists find that a rent-a-dread can be very helpful in negotiating with taxi drivers, securing tickets to festivals, and providing protection in an environment where tourists are often victims of crime. In return for these services, female tourists usually provide drinks, meals, cigarettes, tickets to expensive nightly shows, transportation, and a modest sum of cash. If a tourist is looking for sex as well, she will have to be more generous.

Japanese females who come to the reggae festivals are known to be big spenders, but they are said to be less aggressive when it comes to pursuing sex. Germans and other Europeans are prime targets. Once again, young white Americans are considered poor prospects in Jamaica: Every spring, when thousands of college students
descend on Jamaica's north coast, rent-a-dreads complain of slow business.

African American women are known for their interest in long-term relationships with Jamaican men, and they represent a rent-a-dread's best chance to obtain a highly coveted U.S. green card. African Americans have been coming to the island in greater numbers ever since Terry McMillan's very public recommendation. The popular author of Waiting to Exhale, a book that takes African American men to task for their lack of commitment to black women, McMillan met a young local during a vacation in Jamaica. She subsequently arranged for the man to come live with her in the States, and she has suggested that professional black women who experience difficulty finding a suitable husband in the United States should try their luck in the Caribbean. According to McMillan, Jamaican men are romantic, sensitive, considerate—and passionate.

McMillan wrote from her experience in her second novel, How Stella Got Her Groove Back. The book was recently transformed into a successful feature film starring Angela Bassett as Stella and Taye Diggs as a 20-year-old Jamaican hunk named Winston Shakespeare. Stella bumps into Winston one morning at her resort and he suggests that they meet at the pajama party to be held later that evening in the hotel. A reluctant Stella shows up in a modest negligee, but she livens up after the first slow dance. Later, Stella seems to cop a feel of Winston's bamboo in a swimming pool. Her suspicions confirmed, she embarks on a passionate affair that ends with marriage in sight by the time the credits roll.

Stella's pajama party seduction is not unusual. In both Barbados and Jamaica, vacationers are seduced on the dance floor. After several draughts of rum punch and a few tokes of ganja, the sex tourist is ready for a "bump and wine"—a crotch-to-crotch pantomime performed in time to the latest soca or reggae rhythm.
Much of the foreplay that takes place on Caribbean dance floors could not be shown on American television.

The beach boy is notorious for his lack of commitment to women. If a more appealing woman shows an interest in him, he turns his attentions to her. But many sex tourists are just as adventurous, or fickle: It is not uncommon to see a woman at a nightclub abandon her young companion for another local who has caught her fancy—perhaps someone she met while her escort was getting drinks from the bar. This often provokes a verbal altercation, especially if the men do not know each other, but the outhustled hustler usually backs off. Soon, he will be back on the dance floor, in search of another unattached tourist.

Despite McMillan's endorsement, not every West Indian is charmed by the beach boys' philandering ways. Many in Jamaica and Barbados frown upon interracial liaisons and public displays of affection. Older residents, and some members of the clergy, condemn the culture of casual sex that makes sex tourism possible in the first place. But many Caribbean men, especially workers in the tourist trade, privately envy the young hustlers. I have heard taxi drivers, security guards, and hotel waiters ponder the glamorous life of the hustler. "If only I was younger," they say. Local women, on the other hand, tend to reserve their hostility for the tourist women, whom they accuse of preying on their young men, leading them astray.

Like many West Indian males, beach boys and rent-a-dreads like to exercise what they consider a husband's authority over their temporary girlfriends. The men determine when and how to have sex, what restaurants and bars and nightclubs to patronize, what sights are worth taking in. First-time visitors generally acquiesce. But for sexually sophisticated women already familiar with the Caribbean, the perquisites of masculine control wear thin after a day or two. Few of these young men have ever been off the island;
most never finished high school. When conversation runs aground, their elaborate flattery can lose much of its charm, and the woman may find herself paying for tiresome company. At this point, the terms of the relationship may be renegotiated—just the sex, please—or the man may be given his walking papers.

Older female tourists are, of course, more circumspect, preferring to entertain their lovers in rented apartments or condominiums. The young men, likewise, wish to avoid being seen in public with these companions, because West Indian society tends to frown upon relationships between younger men and older women. In McMillan's book, when Stella meets Winston's parents, she suffers such a barrage of criticism about her age that she nearly flees their house. A number of my informants insist that they avoid the older tourists. But like the pioneering dowagers of the late 19th century, these women always seem to find willing companions.

The most curious thing about Caribbean sex tourism is how banal the sex can be. In accordance with local tradition, beach boys and rent-a-dreads prefer straight sex. They tolerate few deviations from the missionary position, and they perform no cunnilingus—the West Indian male's aversion to "eating poom poom" is well known. The island hustler approaches sex with a female tourist as if he is doing her a favor. Fellatio is acceptable, but foreplay is generally limited. Kissing is kept to a minimum. The entire sexual service is often permeated with indifference.

So what's all the fuss about? Many Caribbean women may well be wondering the same thing. The West Indian academic Everold Hosein conducted in-depth interviews with 112 women in 12 Caribbean countries, including Barbados and Jamaica. Most interviewees said they often faked orgasms while making love. Women in the study complained that men usually rushed perfunctorily through sex and tended to be ignorant about female sexuality. Hosein concluded that most women in the study did not
have a satisfying sex life: He wrote that the average West Indian man's "understanding of good sex is restricted to painful banging."

The reaction to Hosein's highly publicized study was predictably vitriolic. Men complained that it was not scientific, that the women interviewed were not representative, that the sample size was too small. Men across Jamaica volunteered to give the interviewees "de fock of dey lives." There was more macho talk throughout the islands, while some women stood by their lovers. A phone-in organized by the Barbadian Daily Nation had one man complaining that all 13 Barbadian women interviewed were lesbians, while another opined that Barbadian women were sexually repressed. A third man posed this question: If Caribbean men are so bad in bed, why is it that beach-bumming "brings droves of foreigners to our shores every year"?

Why indeed? While Euro-American women flock to the Caribbean in pursuit of the big bamboo, the women of the Caribbean are speaking openly of their partners' insensitivity and ignorance—and, as the Daily Nation reported, they may be becoming more sexually independent, resorting increasingly to masturbation and sex toys. Perhaps Caribbean women are more demanding. Or perhaps their Euro-American counterparts are prepared to accept their nights with the big bamboo as just another holiday activity: pleasurable, if not completely satisfying, like tourist attractions everywhere.

See related article: The Accidental Sex Tourist

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