

Neel Ahuja

University of California, San Diego

Paper: Intimate Labors Conference, October 4-6<sup>th</sup>, 2007, University of California, Santa Barbara

*The Criminalization of Sex Work and Panamanian Women's Resistance to U.S. Empire*

In my presentation, I will review the history of the 1942-1943 venereal disease dragnets that the U.S. and Panamanian governments collaboratively carried out in the Republic of Panama. Officials attempted to strictly segregate white U.S. soldiers stationed in the Panama Canal Zone from multiracial (Asian, black, and Latino) Panamanian and Caribbean migrant women. As an initiative aimed at criminalizing sex work near major U.S. military bases, the dragnets ultimately criminalized the public life of women in Panamanian cities as new medical diagnostic technologies helped enforce hospitalization of large numbers of women associated with venereal disease. As the dragnets addressed U.S. fears of miscegenation and "tropical disease" at a moment when U.S. soldiers circled the globe, it also worked to shore up patriarchal power in Panama in the wake of the recent establishment of women's suffrage. Women and some political leaders openly protested the dragnets, leading to the quick demise of the policy. Sex work here becomes a locus of political struggle as it is in part a result of U.S. presence and as it threatens the racial-sexual logics of wartime U.S. imperialism (in both its military and client state manifestations). The fact that the dragnets spurred women's political resistance to U.S. empire demonstrates the ways in which the development of new carceral approaches to medicine and health across colonized space provided important terrains of subaltern political mobilization.