Challenging 'Place': Leaving Home for Sex

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As soon as people migrate, there is a tendency to sentimentalise their home. Warm images are evoked of close families, simple household objects, rituals, songs, foods.[1] Many religious and national holidays, across cultures, reify such concepts of 'home' and 'family', usually through images of a folkoric past. In this context, migration is constructed as a last-ditch or desperate move and migrants as *deprived* of the place they 'belong to'.Yet for millions of people all over the world, the birth and childhood place is not a feasible or desirable one in which to undertake more adult or ambitious projects, and moving to another place is a conventional—not traumatic—solution.

How does this decision to move take place? Earthquakes, armed conflict, disease, lack of food impel some people in situations that seem to involve little element of choice or any time to 'process' options: these people are sometimes called refugees. Single men's decisions to travel are generally understood to evolve over time, the product of their 'normal' masculine ambition to get ahead through work: they are called migrants. Then there is the case of women who attempt to do the same.

Research in a marginal place: Geographies of exclusion

For a long time I worked in *educación popular* in various countries of Latin America and the Caribbean and with latino migrants in North America and Europe, in programmes dedicated to literacy, AIDS prevention and health promotion, preparation for migration and *concientización* (whose exact translation does not exist in English but combines something about consciousness-raising with something about 'empowerment'). My concern about the vast difference between what first-world social agents (governmental, NGO workers, activists) say about women migrants and what women migrants say about themselves led me to study and testify on these questions. I have deliberately located myself on the border of both groups: the migrants and the social, in Europe, where the only jobs generally available to migrant women are in the domestic, 'caring' and sex industries. My work examines both the social and the migrants, so I spend time in brothels, bars, houses, offices, 'outreach' vehicles and 'the street', in its many versions. Data on what migrant women say come from my own research and others' in many countries of the European Union; women have also been interviewed before or after migrating in Latin America, Eastern Europe, Asia and Africa. Data on what social agents say come from my own research with those who work on prostitution issues in those countries, including as evaluator of projects for the International Labour Office and the European Commission.

Although researchers and NGO personnel have been working with migrant prostitutes for nearly twenty years in Europe, publication of their findings remains outside mainstream press and journals. Most of the people who have met and talked with many migrant prostitutes are neither academics nor writers. ‘Outreach’ is conceptualised as distinct from ‘research’ and generally funded as HIV/AIDS prevention. This means that the published products of outreach research are generally limited to information on sexual health and practices; the other many kinds of information collected remain unpublished. Some of those who work in these projects have the chance to meet and exchange such information, but most do not. Recently, a new kind of researcher has entered the field, usually young academic women studying sociology or anthropology and working on migrations. These researchers want to do justice to the reality around them, which they recognise as consisting of as many migrant prostitutes as migrant domestic/‘caring’ workers. Most of these researchers do oral histories and some have begun to publish but it will be some time before such findings are recognised. Stigma works in all kinds of ways, among them the silencing of results that do not fit hegemonic discourses.[2] The mainstream complaint says ‘the data is not systematised’ or ‘there is no data.’ In my research, I seek out such ‘marginalised’ results.

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[1] The word 'home' in English connotes much of this all by itself, but this is not omnipresent in other languages.

Discourses of leaving home

It is striking that in the year 2001 women should so overwhelmingly be seen as pushed, obligated, coerced or forced when they leave home for the same reason as men: to get ahead through work. But so entrenched is the idea of women as forming an essential *part* of home if not actually *being* it themselves that they are routinely denied the agency to undertake a migration. So begins a pathetic image of innocent women torn from their homes, coerced into migrating, if not actually shanghaied or sold into slavery. This is the imagery that nowadays follows those who migrate to places where the only paid occupations available to them are in domestic service or sex work.[3] The ‘trafficking’ discourse relies on the assumption that it is better for women to stay at home rather than leave it and get into trouble; ‘trouble’ is seen as something that will irreparably damage women (who are grouped with children), while men are routinely expected to encounter and overcome it. But if one of our goals is to find a vision of globalisation in which poorer people are not constructed solely as victims, we need to recognise that strategies which seem less gratifying to some people may be successfully utilised by others. Therefore, this essay is not about whether domestic service can ever be pleasant or prostitution should be accepted as ‘work’.[4]

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[2] David Sibley has contributed invaluable evidence of this in his chapter on W.E.B. DuBois’ rigorous sociological research on ‘The Philadelphia Negro’, which never was accepted by the academy (1995).

[3] Domestic service involves many of the same isolating characteristics as work in the sex industry, and the two are undertaken simultaneously by numerous women looking to acquire more money in a shorter amount of time.

[4] As one member of Babaylan, a migrant domestic workers’ group, said: “We look at migration as neither a degradation nor improvement . . . in women's position, but a restructuring of gender relations.*This restructuring need not necessarily be expressed through a satisfactory professional life*. It may take place through the assertion of autonomy in social life, through relations with family of origin, or through participating in networks and formal associations.The differential between earnings in the country of origin and the country of immigration may in itself create such an autonomy, even if the job in the receiving country is one of a live-in maid or prostitute.” Anny Misa Hefti: 1997 (*my emphasis*).

The bad beginnings or sad, frightening or even tragic moments of people's migrations to work need not forever mark them nor define their whole life experience. Relative powerlessness at one stage of migration need not be permanent; poor people also enjoy 'multiple identities' that change over life-courses composed of different stages, needs and projects. By insisting on the instrumentality of migrating under less than ideal conditions, the existence of the worst experiences are not negated. The abuses of agents who sell ways to enter the first world extend to migrants who work as domestic servants and in sweatshops, maquiladoras, mines, agriculture, sex or other industries, whether they are women, men or transgender people. But these most tragic stories are fortunately not the reality for most migrants.

Displacement or misplacement? Questions of will and 'choice'

Research among migrant prostitutes and domestic workers reveals little essential difference in their migration projects and demonstrates that migrations that may have begun as a kind of *dis*placement (a feeling of being pushed out, of having no reasonable choices) are not doomed to be permanently sad stories.[5] Even the poorest and even the partially 'trafficked' or 'deceived' look for and find spaces to be themselves in, run away, change jobs, learn to utilise friends, clients, employers and petty criminals. In other words, they do the same as other migrants and in all but the worst cases tend to find their way eventually into situations more to their liking, whether that means finding a good family to clean for or a decent brothel owner or the right contacts to work freelance.

Neither are migrations totally economically motivated. Exposed to media images that depict world travel as essential to both education and pleasure, potential migrants learn that first world countries are highly comfortable and sophisticated places in which to live. They are excited at the prospect of meeting people from other countries. All poor people do not decide to migrate; many that do are people interested in and capable of taking the risks involved in uprooting in order to 'find a place in the world'.

My example here is migrant women and transsexuals in Europe, but the discourses which construct them as 'trafficked' exist all over the world and are being addressed by international bodies.[6] At the time of this writing, the majority of migrant prostitutes in Europe come from the west of Africa, Latin America, eastern Europe and countries of the ex-Soviet Union. While domestic workers have begun to unite across ethnic borders to demand basic rights, sex workers have not, making them impossible to fit into classic migration frameworks, in which associations are formed as an essential step to 'settling' down. For a variety of legislative and social reasons, not least of which are the repressive policies of police and immigration all over Europe, prostitutes tend to keep moving, from city to city and from country to country.[7] This itinerant lifestyle creates a particular relationship to 'place' that impedes doing the things migrants are 'supposed' to do, related to establishing themselves and becoming good (subaltern) citizens (the Roma suffer from the same impediment). While nomadism is found romantic in people who live far away (such as the Bedouin) it tends to be seen as a social problem inside the West.

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[5] Published findings by and personal communications with researchers in Spain, the U.K., Italy, France, Belgium, Germany, Holland and Switzerland.

[6] Important other current sites of discourse on the issues are India, the Mekong Delta, Nigeria and the Dominican Republic, as well as Canada and the U.S.

Writers on migrations and diaspora maintain a nearly complete silence about migrant prostitutes,[8] though they can be studied as daring border-crossers who typically and (repeatedly) arrive with little information, luggage or local language. But the only aspects of their lives discussed (by everyone, not only by lobbyists against prostitution) are their victimhood, marginalisation and presumed role in the transmission of HIV/AIDS, injustices which reproduce stigmatisation. Yet it is safe to surmise that if men were the large group using prostitution as a strategy to get into Europe and good wages then it would be seen as a creative move and not routinely characterised as a tragedy.

Finding pleasure in the margins

A crucial element in this gendered reaction is the widespread assumption that a woman's body is above all a sexual 'place', where women's experiences of sex and their sexual organs is essential to their self-respect. While this may be true for many, it is not universal, and the use of the body for economic gain is not considered so upsetting or important by many prostitutes, who usually report that the first week on the job was difficult but that later they adapted.[9] Some theorists assume that something like the soul or real self is 'alienated' when sex occurs outside the context of 'love', and that women are fatally damaged by this experience, but these must remain moralising hypotheses impossible to prove. Some women feel this way and some find pleasure in prostitution, which only means there is not a single experience of the body shared by everyone—no surprise, after all. In any case, even prostitutes who don't like what they do say it's better than a lot of other options that they *also* don't like; learning to adapt to necessities and ignore unpleasant aspects of a job is a normal human strategy.

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[7] Police and immigration efforts to 'clean up' prostitution sites or pick up 'undocumented' workers vary from city to city across Europe, change from day to day and are targeted, according to the moment's policy, on street, bar or brothel workers. Few workers are completely exempt from fears of police attention.

[8] The most notable exception to this silence is negative and emblematic. Discussing Mira Nair's film *India Cabaret*, Arjun Appadurai begins by describing young women from Kerala who "come to seek their fortunes as cabaret dancers and prostitutes in Bombay", a neutral enough treatment of the situation. Two sentences later, however, he refers to "these tragedies of displacement", without providing any justification, and likewise criticises the men who frequent the cabarets as returnees from the Middle East, "where their diasporic lives away from women distort their very sense of what the relations between men and women might be". Appadurai provides no references and no theoretical backup for these typically moralistic opinions about how sex and relationships 'ought' to be. (Appadurai 1996, 38-9) It is also interesting that he did not change his vision of this phenomenon since its first publication six years earlier, in *Public Culture*.

[9] I am not referring here to particular people who actively enjoy their sex jobs and want their rights as workers recognised. Some of these are organised and lobby against the criminalisation of prostitution and for prostitutes' rights.

In the sentimentalising that occurs around ‘uprooted migrants’, the myriad possibilities for being miserable at home are forgotten. Many women, homosexuals and transsexuals are fleeing from small-town prejudices, dead-end jobs, dangerous streets, overbearing fathers and violent boyfriends. ‘Home’ can also be a boring or suffocating place, as evidenced by the enormous variety of entertainment sites located outside of it. In many third-world cultures, only men are allowed to partake of these pleasures, occupy these spaces; in Europe, everyone can. People in prostitution also have private lives, go to films, bars, discotheques, restaurants, concerts, festivals, church parties and parks. Their wish to leave work behind and be ordinary is no different from that of other people; in the context of urban spaces they become *flâneurs* and consumers like anyone else.

Social constructs of prostitutes’ ‘place’

Various NGO projects in Europe work with migrant prostitutes and would like to foment their self-organisation to defend their basic rights.[10] Such projects inevitably require, however, that subjects *identify* as prostitutes, which few do; rather, they identify as migrant people from Cali or Benin City or Kherson who are doing sex work temporarily as a means to an end. This means they are less interested in questions of identity than in being allowed to get on with earning money the way they are without being harassed and subjected to violence on the one hand or pitied and subjected to projects to ‘save’ them on the other[11].

Very often the discourse of solidarity sets up a dichotomy about ‘place’ for migrants which consists of (1) home (which you loved and were forced to leave) and (2) Europe (which you don’t want to be deported from). The complicated relationships migrants have to ‘home’, which may or may not be a place they wish to visit or actually live in again, are excluded from discussions about them. And when migrant prostitutes are constructed as ‘trafficked’ they are assumed to have been wrested away against their will, allowing immediate unsubtle deportation measures to appear benevolent (and to be characterised by some ironic activists as ‘re-trafficking’).[12] Various theorists have pointed out how migrants’ work of caring for children, the elderly and the sick creates ‘chains’ of love and affection which take in the families migrants leave behind, the families they come to work for and new relationships started abroad. This more nuanced vision of the role of ‘place’ in women migrants’ lives is generally not extended to sex workers, however.

Milieux as workplaces

All this theorising impinges little on women focussed on getting ahead, whose relationship to ‘places’ is dramatically mediated by the industry they work in, a series of *milieux.* A rural woman from a third-world country can arrive in Europe and, with the right contacts, soon be in a position to earn 5000 or more euros a month. This figure does not refer to what are sometimes called 'luxury' prostitutes who work with 'elite' customers (and who can earn much more) but refers to an amount commonly earned in large or small clubs and brothels as well as flats, whose names and particular characteristics change from country to country.[13]

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[10] Note that these are solidarity projects *with* sex workers and not composed *of* sex workers.

[11] Many will note that being allowed to ‘get on’ in sex work relies on the prior social proposition.

[12] The late realisation that such arguments are convenient to conservative immigration policies—those basically intended to close borders and exclude migrants—has led to various national proposals to allow trafficked people to remain, whether they agree to denounce their exploiters or not.

With this amount, a migrant may be able to pay back debts undertaken to migrate fairly soon, and to earn it she works in multicultural, multilingual clubs, brothels, apartments and bars. Here you find people from Ecuatorial Guinea working alongside people from Brazil and Russia and people from Nigeria alongside people from Perú and Bulgaria. *Milieux* are 'workplaces' for those selling sexual services in them, who spend many hours in the bar, socialising, talking and drinking with each other and the clientele as well as other workers like cooks, waiters, cashiers and bouncers. In the case of flats, some people live in them while others arrive to work shifts. The experience of spending most of their time in such ambiances, if people adapt to them at all, produces cosmopolitan subjects, who, by definition, have a special relationship vis-a-vis 'place'. The cosmopolite considers the world his oyster, not his home, and there is nothing in the concept which impedes him or her from being poor or a prostitute.

It is easy to find migrant sex workers who have lived in multiple European cities: Turin, Amsterdam, Lyon. They have met people from dozens of countries and can speak a little of several languages; they are proud of having learnt to be flexible and tolerant of people's differences. Whether they speak lovingly of their home country or not, they have overcome the kind of attachment to it that leads to nationalist fervour and have joined the group that may be the hope of the world, the one that judges people on their actions and thoughts and not on how they look or where they are from. This is the strength of the cosmopolite.

Some doubt that ordinary work relations can exist in *milieux*. This doubt seems to construct all other work sites as less alienating: office, medical, factory, domestic, mining, sweatshop, farming, academic, homework, etc. But the sex industry is huge, taking in clubs, bars, discotheques and cabarets, erotic telephone lines, sex shops with private cabins, massage parlours and saunas, escort services, some matrimonial agencies, flats, pornographic cinema, erotic restaurants, services of domination and submission and street prostitution. Much of this work is part-time, occasional or a second job, and working conditions for these millions of jobs worldwide vary enormously, so they cannot be generalised in terms of 'place'. Though frequent change of personnel is common, this is also a characteristic of work in the cinema and performing arts, as well as of 'temporary' office and computer workers (where no one doubts that normal relationships occur). Relationships with colleagues may cross ethnic lines or not, according to the individual; the chance of this is increased where a great variety of people is found with no one type predominating. This is the situation in the *milieux*, now that migrants constitute the majority of prostitutes across Europe—as many as 90 per cent in Italy (Tampep 200).

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[13] The surprise this figure may cause is related to the media's nearly exclusive coverage of either street prostitution or interior sites of worst exploitation. The ability to earn such an amount depends on being introduced or introducing oneself into this market, having the skills to operate there and learning to manage this kind of money (a frequent problem is large-scale consumption which tends to cancel out high earnings). Working fewer hours or days or taking breaks between contracts reduces income. For more on the 'skills' required, see Agustín 2000.

. . . and *milieux* as borderlands

Milieux are not only multi-ethnic; they are borderlands: places of mixing, confusion and ambiguity, where the defining 'lines' between one thing and another are blurred. Since so many of Europe's migrant prostitutes are foreigners, languages spoken in the *milieux* include pidgins, creoles, signing and lingua francas, where Spaniards learn to communicate with Nigerians, Italians with Russians, French with Albanians. Similarly, many clubs would appear to be carnival sites, the world upside down, where the prostitute is like the *pícaro*, the half-outsider who substitutes trickery for dignified work, living the role of "cosmopolitan and stranger . . . exploiting and making permanent the liminal state of being betwixt and between all fixed points in a status sequence" (Turner 1974, 232).

The *milieux* are sites of experimentation and show, where masculinity is performed by some and femininity by others. Investigations as far apart as Tokyo and Milan demonstrate that for many the sexual act carried out at the end of a night on the town or *puttan tour* is not at the centre of the experience, which rather resides in sharing with male friends an experience of talking, drinking, looking, driving, flirting, making remarks, taking drugs and, in general, being 'men' (Allison 1994, Leonini 1999). The prostitute in her work uniform does what will lead to making money, in the case of the transsexual a hyperperformance of womanliness. While any sexual service contracted usually occupies no more than fifteen minutes, not only workers but clients spend long hours having no sex at all.

In the patriarchal institution of the sex industry it is men who are publicly 'permitted' to experiment with their masculinity and relate to people they would not meet anywhere else. The availability of migrant women, homosexual men and transsexuals means that millions of relationships take place every day between people of different cultures. The essentialisation of these relationships as undifferentiated 'acts' and their elimination from cultural consideration because they involve money cannot be justified.[14] For some who theorise sex as culture, sexual practices are seen as constructed, transmitted, changed, even globalised, and migrant sex workers as the bearers of cultural knowledge.[15]

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[14] The latest 'place' to be inhabited by migrant prostitutes is cyberspace, like cosmopolitan space borderless. The stigmatisation of prostitutes and the wish of many clients to hide their desires make cyberspace ideal for everyone, and, in a rapid proliferation of forms, sexual services are offered and/or completed in chat rooms, on bulletin boards, in pages with images and recorded sound, in direct advertisements with telephone numbers, and, via webcams, in both one-on-one and more 'public' shows. Here women are emerging as consumers, perhaps because of the dearth of 'places' where women may go to seek anonymous, public or commercial sex. Consider a study carried out in Europe which showed women to make up 26 per cent of visitors to pornographic websites. (Nielsen Netratings 1999)

[15] "Contextualising sexuality within political economy has underscored how extensively prevailing notions about sexuality, gender, and desire are fueled by a colonialist mentality that presumes a crosscultural rigidity and consistency of sexual categories and the durability of geographic and cultural boundaries imposed by Western scholars." (Parker, Barbosa, and Aggleton: 2001, p. 9).

Everyone agrees that the sex industry exists within patriarchal structures. Some critics will continue to lament migrant prostitutes' loss of home and the near impossibility of their organising formally. But one must also give credit where credit is due, recognise the resourcefulness of most migrant women and allow them the possibility of overcoming feelings of victimhood and experiencing pleasure and satisfaction within difficult situations and in strange places.

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