

Still Challenging “Place” – Sex, Money and Agency in Women’s Migrations

Excerpt from a presentation, and an article by Laura María Agustín

I am originally from Latin America, but I guess I’ve lived in so many countries and migrated so many times that I no longer have a national identity. I think it’s very important that the topic that I’ve been given is migration – it’s not trafficking. We understand that trafficking and forcing people to do things is a part of migration processes – and that they’re very important, and that we need to do things about them – but that the larger category to talk about is migration.

If you have talked to plenty of migrants, you realise that what they describe about their experiences is not what’s being defined as trafficking by the press, by a lot of government agents, by a lot of feminists, by a lot of people who want to help, but maybe haven’t listened to enough diverse voices.

Most people who come from different countries don’t call themselves migrants before they go anywhere. Most people are just thinking, “well I think I’ll go and see what happens in another country.” So I usually talk about this as informal travel.

We have all of these kinds of informal jobs that are available for migrants (construction, domestic labour – taking care of people’s grandmothers, sick people,

babysitters). You can have a university degree, or already be a professional in your country – be something that you were trained to do and you would like to do – but when you come to Europe, if you’re not going to be able to enter in a legal way and you really are trying to come and make some money, then you might become a domestic worker. You might make more money as a domestic worker – and you’ll certainly make more money selling sex – and so that becomes the priority for lots of people. So they’re coming, and they’re coming in informal ways. People are buying services to travel and to get work in informal sectors of the economy.

This is gendered labour in a lot of different ways. A lot of feminists now are talking about the feminisation of poverty, the feminisation of migration. Actually this really can’t be proved.

Women have been at least

half of migrants for at least 50 years. Looking at some work people have done in the 19th century, it seems that women were also half of the people who migrated then. But there is a disproportionate sector – a disproportionate amount of these informal jobs are available for women. That’s clear, we know. But there are other gender identities that are affected by that.

Let’s say I’m a man or a transgendered person and I would like to be a domestic worker. Well it’s not going to be easy to get those jobs. There’s an idea that it has to be a woman, and it should be a biological woman from the Third World. So that’s one kind of limitation.

In general, when people talk about these things, transgendered people are made to disappear. Some people count them as women. Some people simply leave them out. Many of them would like to do other kinds of jobs – not sell sex. It’s very difficult because of prejudice.



Soon banners and signs block the entrance.

PHOTO: Quentin Deltour (Espace P)



CENTRE PHOTO: Laura Agustín (right) & Alexandra Oliveira (credit: A. Sorfleet)

Male sex workers are ignored by almost everyone. People who count really think that maybe a third or half of migrants who sell sex are probably men. There's very little attention about that. So when you have this kind of obsession with looking at a particular group, then everyone else disappears.

The only way to protect the people who work in sex businesses is for governments to recognise those businesses in their formal accounts. That is the conclusion of the investigation done in four or five Asian countries in the mid-90s by the International Labour Organisation. When governments acknowledge that businesses exist then they have to keep track of them. They put them on the books. They have to give them licences. They have to carry out inspections. People who work in those businesses have to be covered by some kind of social security.

The following excerpt is reprinted from an article I wrote, published in *Women and the Politics of Place* (Arturo Escobar and Wendy Harcourt, eds. Bloomfield, CT: Kumarian Press. 2005).

Un-Gendering Migration, in a Way

It is striking that in the year 2005 women should so overwhelmingly be seen as pushed, obligated, coerced or forced when they leave home 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 shanghaiied or sold into slavery—the “trafficking” discourse.

This is the imagery that nowadays follows those who migrate to places where the only paid occupations available to them are in domestic service, caring labour or sex work.

The “trafficking” discourse relies on the assumption that it is better for (non-Western) women to stay at home rather than leave it and get into trouble, “trouble” seen as doing irreparable harm to women (who are grouped helplessly with children), while men are routinely expected to encounter and overcome it.

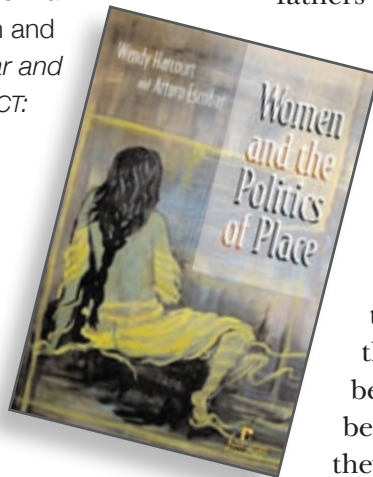


PHOTO: Quentin Deltour (Espace P)

Wearing the rainbow flag as a cape...

In the sentimentalising that occurs around “uprooted migrants,” the myriad possibilities for being miserable at home are forgotten. Many women are fleeing from small-town prejudices, dead-end jobs, dangerous streets, overbearing fathers and boring boyfriends.

Home can be a suffocating place, as evidenced by the enormous variety of entertainment sites located outside of it. In many cultures, only men are allowed to partake of these pleasures, occupy these spaces; women who travel to the West find themselves able to participate in many. Moreover, the possibility that some poor women might *like* the idea of being desirable to First World men (who may be seen as “White,” “rich,” “exotic”), or that they might *like* being a dancer or artist—even if with a sexual element—is practically never considered. Valerie Walkerdine has criticised British middle-class abhorrence of little girls’ talent contests popular among the working class:

“Girls form ambitions and desires around aspects of femininity which are presented to them. In fact... the lure of “fame,” particularly of singing and dancing, offers working-class girls the possibility of a talent from which they have not automatically been excluded by virtue of their supposed lack of intelligence or culture.” (1997: 50)

The same can be said of Third World women with limited prospects. Whether or not people are misled about the meaning of an offer to work, their own desires must be taken into account when considering their later experiences. A trip abroad, away from the limited prospects of home, may

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PHOTO: Maj Christensen

Protesters make time for a photo opportunity.

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represent the attempt to fulfil important personal desires, those considered essential to “self-realisation” and the acquirement of personal “identity” in the West. And 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 for fulfilling desires that seem less gratifying to some people may be successfully utilised by others. As one member of Babaylan, a migrant domestic workers’ group in Switzerland, 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.” (Hefti, 1997)

Nor do the bad beginnings or sad, frightening or even tragic moments of people’s migrations need to 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. Granting agency to migrating individuals does not mean denying the vast structural changes that push and pull them. On the other hand, granting them autonomy does not mean making them over-responsible for situations

largely not of their own making. Global, national and local conditions intervene in individuals’ decisions, along with doses of good and bad luck. (Agustín 2003b)

Many situations come up during a migration in which migrants have to choose between doing things the “right,” or legal, way, or doing them so that they might turn out the way they want. This brings to mind the conversation I had with a Colombian woman through the bars of the detention centre where she was being held in Bangkok after spending a year in prison. Her anguish did not derive so much from her having been in prison as from her own feelings of guilt because she had semi-knowingly broken the law, allowing a fake visa to be prepared for her in order to get into Japan. Her family had helped her with this, and her resultant conflicts over love and blame were tormenting her. While this woman had been a victim, she had also made choices and felt responsible, and I would not want to take this ethical capacity away from her.

By insisting on the instrumentality of migrating under less than ideal conditions, one does not deny the existence of the worst experiences nor the necessity to fight against them. 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 transgendered people. But these most tragic stories are fortunately not the reality for most migrants, according to their own testimonies. (Agustín 2005)

Dealing with Displacement

Research among migrant women doing sexual or domestic work reveals little essential difference in their migration projects and demonstrates that migrations that may have begun as a kind of displacement (a feeling of being pushed out, of having no reasonable choices) are not doomed to be permanently sad stories.¹ 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, if still imperfect, whether that means finding a good family to

clean for or a decent brothel-owner or the right contacts to work freelance. Consider the story of one Moroccan woman in Spain:

“I arrived in Almería through a friend’s mediation. I began to work as a domestic, I was badly paid and mistreated. Sundays I came to the edge of the sea and cried. One Sunday a Moroccan man saw me crying, I explained my situation to him, he took me to his house. I was a virgin, he promised he was going to marry me ... he got me a residence card... he found me work in a restaurant and let me stay in his studio. He told me I had to pay rent. I began to sleep with some clients from the restaurant ... Now, I would like to go to France, I want to get married... My sister who lives in Béziers says she’s going to find me a Frenchman, to get a residence card.”

(Lahbabi and Rodríguez, 2000: 18)

This testimony shows how migrant women, far from being passive victims, exploit their opportunities in any way possible. At the beginning, the woman is sad at being far from home and “out of place.” The big trip has been made across the sea, and the sea is returned to for solace. A countryman, perhaps because of his association with home, promises more consolation. But by the end, the woman’s tone has changed, setting her sights on yet another country, where she is prepared to live if she can find a husband.

“Place” Has Become an Endless Space to Move Through

People everywhere nowadays are exposed constantly to media images depicting world travel as essential to education and pleasure, and fomenting desire through the glamorous representation of places (see, for example, Mai, 2001). But since the majority of the world’s poor and desperate do not migrate, many of those that do must be people interested in exploring and capable of taking the risks involved in uprooting (even if they also feel frightened or forced to do it).

“Place” for migrants is often set up in terms of a dichotomy: home (which you loved and were forced to leave) pitted against your new country (which is not yet home but which you don’t want to be deported from). This classic focus is problematised by the work of many migration scholars. Consider the titles of two texts written about the Dominican diaspora: *Between Two Islands* (Grasmuck and Pessar, 1991) and *One Country*

in Two (Guarnizo, 1992). In this case, a large number of Dominicans are said to live in both Santo Domingo and New York City, or live between them, on the “bridge” they have built during the past 20 years.

Family arrangements in which one or both parents live in the US with none or some of their children, while their other children live on the island, are frequent. Although having more than one household in two different countries might be a source of emotional stress and economic hardship, it also arms family members with special skills to deal with uncertainty and adversity. They become more sophisticated than non-migrant people in dealing with a rapidly globalising world. (Guarnizo, 1992: 77)

The complicated relationships migrants have to home, which may or may not be a place they actually wish to visit or live in again, are too often excluded from discussions about them. People who sell sex 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 other people’s; in the context of urban spaces they become *flâneurs* and consumers like anyone else.

Underdog Cosmopolitanism

The term “cosmopolitan” is often applied to “sophisticated” travellers, “globetrotters” who are seen as carefree and urbane. According to this view, Most ordinary labour migrants are not cosmopolitans either. For them going away may be, ideally, home plus higher income; often the involvement with another culture is not a fringe benefit but a necessary cost, to be kept as low as possible. (Hannerz, 1990: 243)

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Some sex workers concealed their identity.

PHOTO: Quentin Deltour (Espace P)



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Here Hannerz fixes migrant identity in an early stage of reluctant leave-taking, self-protection and wariness toward the new, fails to reflect differences found among people of different ages, classes and cultures and forecloses the possibility that migrants don't remain "migrants" forever as they change and are accepted into new societies.

More seriously, here the lives of migrants appear to be a series of (dull) instrumental decisions in which travel and sophistication play no part. But the concept of the cosmopolitan does not necessarily exclude poor travellers. Jamaica Kincaid (1990) and Bharati Mukherjee (1988) both wrote novels in which a woman from a country on the "periphery" migrates to the "centre," initially to work as an *au pair*. The protagonists, Lucy and Jasmine, are portrayed as cosmopolitan, their discoveries about the metropole and their ability to reflect on cultures as astute as anyone's. They are migrants who begin with very little but who increase their cultural capital enormously as they travel. The cosmopolite eventually comes to have a special relationship *vis-à-vis* "place," considering the world his oyster, not his home.

In traditional centre-periphery theory, people who live outside the West are conceived as, literally, peripheral to the main story of modernity. James Clifford's travel theory (1997), which emphasizes flexibility and mobility rather than identity and fixed location, and encompasses such popular notions as New York City being "part of the Caribbean" and Los Angeles and Miami being "capitals" of Latin America, might have a place for ordinary working migrants, including those cleaning houses and selling sex.

Similarly, Arjun Appadurai's concept of the ethnoscape, a "*landscape of persons who constitute the shifting world in which we live; tourists, immigrants, refugees, exiles, guest-workers and other moving groups and individuals,*" seems open to including everyone. (1996: 33)

The wider issue is the disqualification of the experiences of postmodern working people who see mobility and adaptability as key to their futures. Whether these are maids, strawberry-pickers or sex workers, they are often allotted marginal spaces in actual geography, as well as in discourses of mobility. Why is it possible to view the illegal jobs of British women on the Costa del Sol as entrepreneurial (O'Reilly, 2000) while the illegal work of Rumanian or Moroccan women in the same location is seen as as "forced"?

It is common for migrant sex workers to have lived in multiple places. For a variety of legislative and social reasons, not least of which are the repressive policies of police and immigration everywhere, many migrant sex workers keep moving, from city to city and even from country to country. This itinerant lifestyle creates a particular relationship to place that impedes doing the things migrants are "supposed" to do: establish themselves and become good (subaltern) citizens. Moving a lot, migrants have met people from many countries and can speak a little of several languages, and some have inevitably learnt to be flexible and tolerant of people's differences. Whether they speak lovingly of their home country or not, they are on their way to overcoming the kind of attachment to it that leads to nationalist fervour and to joining those that may be the hope of the world, people who judge others on their actions and thoughts, and not on how they look or where they are from.

Sexing "Place"

Sex is sold in places. Though many commentators talk as though "the street" were the only place involved, in fact street prostitution is on the wane in many places and non-existent in others. In the "free markets" of advanced capitalism, products and services that used not to exist proliferate before our very eyes. Places to go have burgeoned, purchasable experiences continuously multiply, so the proliferation of sexually-oriented shows and services on offer is hardly surprising. In some of

"Discrimination: Shame!"

PHOTO: Quentin Deltour (Espace P)



these sites you can see women from Ecuatorial Guinea working alongside women from Brazil and Russia, and women from Nigeria alongside others from Peru and Bulgaria. What's called the *milieu* are "workplaces" for those selling sexual services in them, people who wear erotic uniforms and spend many hours in the bar, socialising, talking and drinking with each other and the clientele as well as with 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, is another way to produce cosmopolitan subjects.

All this is not particular to people who have migrated. The places associated with commercial sex are treated in hegemonic discourses as disgusting, perverted or marginal, but the idea that they are few and irrelevant to the social mainstream is ridiculous, given that all kinds of sexual businesses together generate multi-millions in profits. The people involved include not only those who directly sell sex but consumers, business-owners, investors and non-sexual employees. Sites and forms embrace bars, restaurants, cabarets, clubs, brothels, dance halls, phonedines, saunas, massage and beauty parlours, escort services, films and videos, spectacles, puberty rituals, sex shops, stag and hen events, fashion shows, shipboard parties, Internet sites and sometimes art exhibitions and theatre plays, many of these promoting non-sexual products and services as well.

Clearly a great deal that societies consider to be "cultural" and normatively "social" are included in the range of activities that take in both commerce and sex. Yet societies' twin reactions to commercial sex—moral revulsion and resigned tolerance—have permitted its uncontrolled development in informal economies, which simply means that the places of sexual commerce are not counted. People who sell are stigmatised, activities bought are taboo and places are either treated as invisible or zoned into marginal areas. But none of this inhibits the growth and proliferation of businesses, nor their use for many mainstream purposes.

This is a key issue. Pole dancing, lap dancing and belly dancing exist on an erotic continuum that in many cases provides little more than an evocative



PHOTO: Quentin Deltour (Espace P)

The demonstration made the news throughout Europe.

background for activities not sexual in themselves. Men who hold wealth and power routinely, in most cultures, use sexual spaces to do business, entertain clients, demonstrate their wealth, amass more cultural capital and reproduce their masculinity.

John Urry (1990) divides touristic gazing possibilities into "collective," in which the presence of other people adds to the experience, and "romantic," in which privacy is important. Both kinds of experiences are available in the sex industry, whose sites are used by clients to drink, eat, take drugs, get together with friends, do business, impress partners, watch films, travel, be with a variety of sexual partners and pay for a gamut of services. The sexual moment need not occupy a central place within the whole experience; for many, drinking and socialising in the presence of symbolic, decorative women or men may be more important. (Allison 1994; Leonini 1999; Frank 2002)

Meanings of Place

Many sites in sexual milieux are multi-ethnic, multicultural and they are even borderlands: places of mixing, confusion and ambiguity, where the defining "lines" between one thing and another are blurred. With so many foreign migrants employed in the sex industry, languages spoken include pidgins, creoles, signing and lingua francas, whether we look in Tokyo, Bangkok, Lagos or Sydney. Performance and experimentation are routine in spaces where sexual identities are malleable: anyone can buy or sell anything, unhampered by his or her everyday character. Many clubs would appear to be carnival sites, the world upside down, the sex worker like the *pícaro*, the half-outsider who substitutes trickery for dignified

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PHOTO: Maj Christensen

“Sex Workers Use Condoms, Do You?”

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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)

Cosmopolitan space seems to work against the grain of the “women and place” project and involve exactly that which does not fix people in places. I am aware that many will continue to lament migrants’ loss of home and see involvement in commercial sex as singularly tragic. But imagine what would be said if men were the large group using commercial sex as a strategy to migrate to good wages: it would be seen as a creative, entrepreneurial move, and not characterised as a tragedy. So one must 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. □

♥ Laura María Agustín studies social, economic and cultural issues linking commercial sex, migration, informal economies and feminist theory. She currently lives in London, researching the situation of migrant workers in the city’s sex industry. See http://www.nodo50.org/conexiones/Laura_Agustin/

Footnote

1. Studies that follow migrants over time show that there are gradual changes of levels of feeling alienated, strange, excluded and accepted or integrated to receiving societies.

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