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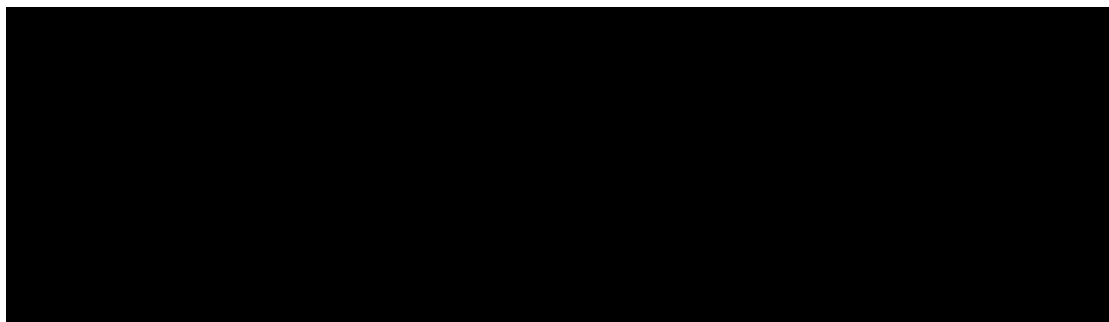
‘Too much suffering’: Understanding the interplay between migration, bounded exploitation and trafficking through Nigerian sex workers’ experiences.

Abstract

Migrant sex workers’ experiences of exploitation depend on a dynamic re-evaluation of the working conditions and relationships that frame their entry into the global sex industry according to the subsequent unfolding of their working and wider lives. Contrary to the essentialist obliteration of consent introduced by abolitionist scholarship and policymaking, migrants can decide to endure bounded exploitative deals with people enabling their travel and work abroad in order to meet the economic and administrative (becoming documented) objectives they set for themselves. When this deal is broken as a result of the betrayal of original negotiations, migrants can decide to reframe their migration and work experience as trafficking and denounce their original enablers as traffickers, which gives them a chance to obtain the right to reside in the country of destination through asylum.

Keywords

Migration, Sex Work, Agency, Exploitation, Working Conditions, Trafficking, Nigeria, France, Humanitarianism, Criminalisation.



Trailer of the ethnofiction *Travel* (Mai 2016, 63 min).

Introducing sexual humanitarianism

‘The question is too much’, Joy replied when I asked her whether she felt she had been forced to work in the sex industry. Joy was a 20-year-old woman selling sex along with many other young Nigerian women in the Bois de Vincennes, on the immediate outskirts of Paris. Immediately prior to this I had asked her whether she had decided to work in the sex industry for herself, which she promptly denied. These two questions were the beginning of a short survey I decided to undertake with 500 migrant and non-migrant sex workers in France between March 2014 and March 2015. The survey aimed to understand what people selling sex in France thought about the proposed law put forward by the Socialist Government of François Hollande introducing the criminalisation of clients. The law, which was inspired by the so-called ‘Swedish Model’ and thereby aimed at fighting trafficking through reducing the demand for commercial sex through clients’ criminalisation, was passed at the Assemblée Nationale on 6 May, 2016. Ninety-eight per cent of the surveyed sex workers, both migrant and non-migrant, were against it.

Contemporary debates and policies surrounding the global sex industry are characterised by the resurgence of the abolitionist movement, which understands prostitution as ‘paradigmatic of a system of male power and seeks its elimination by removing both the supply and demand of sexual services (O’Neill & Scoular 2008). These dynamics are best represented by the global resonance achieved by the so-called Swedish Model, a globally hegemonic abolitionist policymaking and epistemological framework equating sex work with violence against women and introducing the parallel decriminalisation of sex workers and criminalisation of demand (male clients) as an ideal instrument for fighting sex trafficking. The Swedish Model has been strongly critiqued by both sex workers’ rights and harm reduction organisations, on the basis of evidence showing that the criminalisation of clients exacerbates sex workers’ vulnerability to violence, exploitation and trafficking by pushing the sex industry further underground (Levy 2014).

Although liberal feminists first mobilised the concept of trafficking in the 1990s to fight new migration-related forms of exploitation within the global sex industry, it was later appropriated by abolitionist feminists in the context of the negotiation of the 2000 UN Palermo Protocol on Trafficking and Smuggling (Ditmore & Wijers 2003). The resulting definition of trafficking¹ provided by such protocol states that the consent of the person being exploited is irrelevant to determine whether s/he is a victims of trafficking, which has been critiqued extensively for ignoring the variety of practices and working conditions available within the global sex industry and for equating migrants’ involvement in sex work with trafficking and exploitation (Doezema 2010). The abolitionist salience of the definition produces an epistemological closed circuit presenting the enabling of the mobility of migrants working in the sex industry as inherently exploitative, which makes it impossible to distinguish clearly, if at all, between dynamics of smuggling and those of trafficking (Skilbrei & Tveit 2008).

The growing hegemony of abolitionist policies on global public and political debates reflects a wider shift toward humanitarian forms of governance. As migration increases, migration policies become more restrictive and humanitarian forms of governance proliferate, with the social protection of vulnerable migrant groups becoming invested with new functions of control (Fassin 2011). At the same time, discourses of sexual liberation originating in the global North reinforce wider Orientalist narratives and geopolitical hierarchies (Butler 2008). In the process, gender and sexuality-related moral panics and the associated humanitarian interventions target and control ‘undesirable’ migrant and ethnic minority groups in the name of their protection while offering limited opportunities for support. As a result, to get their rights recognised by humanitarian institutions and organisations (and to avoid deportation) migrants narrate and perform their subjectivities according to standardised humanitarian victimhood, vulnerability and gender/sex scripts acting as ‘biographical borders’ between deportation and access to social support, legal

¹ Article 3 of the Protocol defines trafficking as the ‘recruitment, transportation, transfer, harbouring or receipt of persons, by means of the threat or use of force or other forms of coercion, of abduction, of fraud, of deception, of the abuse of power or of a position of vulnerability or of the giving or receiving of payments or benefits to achieve the consent of a person having control over another person, for the purpose of exploitation’. The definition also explains what is meant by ‘exploitation’, which includes ‘at a minimum, the exploitation of the prostitution of others or other forms of sexual exploitation, forced labor or services, slavery or practices similar to slavery, servitude or the removal of organs’.

documentation and work (Mai 2014). My work further develops existing studies relating to how the problematisation of gendered social issues can operate as migration control mechanisms (see, for example, Ticktin 2008) and legitimises ‘carceral’ and repressive antitrafficking humanitarian interventions (Bernstein 2010). I introduce the concept of ‘sexual humanitarianism’ to focus specifically on the sexual salience of humanitarian migration control and to analyse the ways groups of migrants are strategically problematised, supported and face intervention from local, national and international humanitarian institutions and NGOs according to aspects of vulnerability that are supposedly associated with their sexual orientation and behaviour (Mai 2016).

Trafficking is a paradigmatic sexual humanitarian concept based on a rigid dichotomy between free and forced labour, which is grounded in definitions and concepts that originate from the fields of criminal justice and, at best, human rights (Andrijasevic 2010). The fight against trafficking both counters and reproduces migrants’ vulnerability to exploitation because it often legitimises repressive policies and interventions. As migrants develop their migration projects between restrictive migration policies and irregular employment sectors, including the sex industry, they face increasingly exploitative working conditions. Definitions of exploitation change across different sectors and national legislations and do not apply to the sex industry, which tends not to be recognised as a formal sector of employment. The danger posed by the interlocking of these dynamics is that they take place in the absence of an evidence-based debate and scientific data on the specific working conditions and degrees of dependency and exploitation that are seen as acceptable by migrants and non-migrants working in the global sex industry (O’Connell Davidson 2006). This means that existing notions of agency, exploitation and trafficking need to be translated according to migrants’ priorities and needs, which emerge in the context of their increasingly precarious and marginalised lives. It is precisely this gap that this article and the underlying research projects aim to fill, by analysing some of the findings produced by the *Emborders* project to discuss migrants’ complex and contextual understandings of exploitation and trafficking in relation to their involvement in sex work. It will do so by referring to the data gathered through the questionnaire, semi-structured interviewing and the production of *Travel*, a 63 minute ethnofiction exploring the life histories of young Nigerian women selling sex in Paris.

The Emborders project

The survey on the criminalisation of clients was part of the *Emborders*² project, which compared the impact of sexual humanitarian interventions targeting migrant sex workers and sexual minority asylum seekers in the UK (London) and France (Marseille/Paris). Its methodological approach combined, together with the 500 sample survey???, participant observation, 100 semi-structured qualitative interviews and the production of two experimental ethnographic films (ethnofictions). By combining ethnographic observation of sex work settings and semi-structured interviewing the project aimed to analyse meaningful contradictions and continuities between people’s narrated and lived lives. Participative ethnographic filmmaking enabled the project to analyse and represent the ways in which specific narrative,

² The Emborders project was directed by Nicola Mai, based at the Mediterranean Laboratory of Sociology - LAMES of Aix -Marseille University (AMU) and funded by the A*MIDEX foundation of AMU (2014-15).

affective and performative humanitarian repertoires are embodied and incorporated within the subjectivities and agency of migrants, asylum seekers and refugees.

The debate on the criminalisation of clients in France was a partial replay of a moral panic that unfolded in the UK between 2007 and 2009 while the Labour government of the time proposed and received approval for the UK's version of the Swedish Model. The Policing and Crime Bill 2009 gave the police even more discretionary power to close down premises arbitrarily 'linked to with sexual exploitation'. It also criminalised people paying for sex with a person 'subject to exploitative conduct', independently of whether clients were aware that the person providing sexual services was a victim of trafficking or not, a strict liability offence.

It is in the context of this controversy that I delivered the ESRC-funded *Migrant Workers in the UK Sex Industry* project, which adopted a peer-research methodology to gather qualitative interviews with one hundred migrant sex workers in London. Most of them thought that by criminalising clients and by closing down establishments arbitrarily suspected of being implicated in exploitative situations the sex industry would be pushed underground. They also thought that further criminalisation and marginalisation of the sex industry would exacerbate, rather than reduce, the extent of exploitation, as many sex workers, and particularly migrants, would become more dependent on agents and gatekeepers to be able to keep on working and staying in the UK. The main and most controversial findings of the research project were that only a minority of migrant sex workers felt they had been forced or trafficked and that the majority had decided to work in the sex industry in order to avoid being exploited in other sectors. When asked about what they understood as exploitation, most migrants mentioned retaining a substantial amount of their earnings, negotiating working hours flexibly, cleanliness of working premises and being able to decide what sexual services to sell as key criteria differentiating exploitative from non-exploitative work. Nobody, including the few victims of trafficking we came across, thought that selling sex was exploitative *per se*. On the contrary, everybody thought that the quality of working conditions and relations differentiated sex work from exploitation and trafficking. The findings made headlines in media across the UK and internationally. However, despite being the result of rigorous peer reviewed research, they were ignored by policymakers, politicians and (abolitionist) activists because they were too epistemologically dissonant from the hegemonic sexual humanitarian sensibility of our times.

The equally successful proposal to criminalise clients by the Socialist government in France, which was debated between 2014 and 2016, triggered reactions and produced results that mirrored very closely what happened in the UK in 2009. During the many parliamentary passages of the law proposal, public debates were characterised by the hegemony of the ideological slogans and flawed statistics produced by mainstream abolitionist organisations, which framed (yet again) all sex workers as victims of trafficking and exploitation. In the process, the opposing (and evidence-based) voices of harm-reduction and sex workers' rights organisations were discredited as ethically unsound for being too complicit with sex workers' political demands. It was exactly in order to respond to the contradictory and opposing claims of abolitionist organisations, sex workers' rights groups, politicians, law enforcement agencies and projects supporting sex workers that I decided to undertake the survey. Although its results, showing that 98 per cent of sex workers in France were against criminalisation, were disseminated to all senators and members of parliament and were covered, albeit briefly, by local and national newspapers, their implications and

suggestions were excluded from the main debates. Once more, relevant research findings were excluded from mainstream debates because they did not fit with the sexual humanitarian epistemological sensibility of our times, even though they were produced according to rigorous ethical and scientific standards.

The project adopted a participative ethical approach, characterised by the inclusion of people working in the sex industry and/or for organisations representing and supporting sex workers, both in the formulation of the research questions and in the gathering and analysis of the interview material. Respondents were recruited both through social support projects and directly through their work contacts (phone, websites, street and so on) in a deliberate effort to avoid the usual over-representation of subjects seeking help, which contributes to the widespread perception of sex workers as exclusively victimised.

In all of the street and offline contexts of the research the questionnaire was delivered individually and attention was paid to making sure that the participant was able to respond freely. Questions were asked in a neutral and non-leading way in order to ensure the objectivity and reliability of the survey results. Participants were explicitly asked to provide false names different from their working aliases and no pressure was exerted to fill out the questionnaires. Respondents included a majority of cis-gender women, as well as cis-gender men, trans women and trans men working in the main jobs available in the French sex industry. Seventy-eight per cent of respondents were street workers, the remaining were off-street sex workers and escorts, including those providing domination services. Thirty-nine per cent of respondents were French, the remaining being migrants living and working in France from countries of origin including Algeria, Brazil, Cameroon, China, Colombia, Ghana, Morocco, Nigeria, Peru, and Romania, these being the 10 largest migrant groups encountered.

Many respondents, both migrants and non-migrants, felt that the effects of the criminalisation of clients had partially been anticipated as prices had decreased and safer clients had stopped calling for fear of being fined.

These are the words of a 27-year-old French escort based in Paris:

The threat of criminalisation in the near future has already scared away some of my clients: the most respectful.

And these are the words of a 40-year-old Algerian transvestite selling sex on the streets of Marseille:

It already happened. Every time there they talk about the law on TV clients go down, and then they come up again, slowly. I now do for 20 what I would not have even considered doing for 40 just a year ago. I get on cars I would not have gotten into. There are no clients. So you have to get what you can.

These two excerpts show the ways in which media debates about the criminalisation of clients can impact very forcefully on the sex industry. As many clients started behaving as if the provision was already in place, many sex workers experienced a sharp decrease in prices and an increase in the risks they felt they had to take in order to keep earning a living through selling sex.

The questionnaire included four questions addressing the extent of trafficking in the French sex industry. The first question asked respondents whether they thought they had decided to work in the sex industry for themselves. A second question asked whether they had subsequently decided to work in the sex industry, if they had not

decided initially, in order to measure the possibility of voluntary implication after the first experiences of coercion. A third question asked respondents if they were aware that they were going to sell sex in France before leaving their country of origin. Finally, a fourth question asked respondents if they sold sex to repay debts to those who had helped them migrate. These four questions have been formulated in order to understand if the experiences of migration and sex work of survey participants corresponded to the UN Palermo protocol definition of trafficking. We adopted an inclusive approach and considered as potential victims all those who indicated that they did not decide to work in the sex industry, those who did not know that they were going to sell sex before coming to France and all those who indicated that they were selling sex in order to repay debts to those who had helped them migrate. According to these questions and criteria 33 migrant respondents were considered as potential victims of trafficking, corresponding to approximately seven per cent of the total sample, 11 per cent of all migrant respondents and 15 per cent of all migrant female respondents.

A large minority (38 per cent) of the Nigerian women we contacted felt that they did not decide to work in the sex industry. They indicated that economic problems and lack of legal status (papers) were the two constraints under which they felt had no choice but to sell sex. The fact that these were the very same factors that made the remaining 62 per cent of women feel that they decided to sell sex highlights the uselessness, when understanding migrant agency, of the free/forced neoliberal and north-centric dichotomy, which is overridden by needs and priorities grounded in the socio-economic and cultural realities of the global South and shared by migrants. All Nigerian female respondents, independently from whether they felt they decided or not to work in the sex industry, felt under pressure to sell sex due to the necessity to help their families while hoping to obtain the legal documentation allowing them to work outside the sex industry. All of them were strongly against the criminalisation of clients, which they felt would have made it even more difficult to meet their economic needs and obligations.

Assembling Travel

In Paris the *Emborders* project collaborated mainly with the *Bus des Femmes*, a harm reduction association supporting sex workers through an integrated approach including outreach, sexual health services, counseling, language courses, social integration services and an anti-trafficking programme. The association actively supported the research by allowing me to participate in outreach activities, during which I administrated the questionnaire, and by arranging interviews with young women who were in the process of obtaining humanitarian protection as victims of trafficking. The activities of the association also included French language courses, theatre classes and other cultural initiatives, which ended up by including my ethnofiction workshops.

The term ethnofiction refers to Jean Rouch's successful attempt to capture the 'ethos' of lived research experiences by transcending 'the distinction between fiction and nonfiction, participation and observation, knowledge and sentiment' (Stoller 1992: 143) through narrative ethnographic filmmaking. By asking collaborators and fieldwork informants to improvise their life-experiences Rouch's ethnofictions offer participants a fertile hybrid ground between fantasy and documentation allowing them to express themselves through their fictional characters. Inspired by Jean Rouch's ethnofictions and by his motto 'only fiction can penetrate reality', since 2010 I have

developed a participative and filmmaking-based methodology including research participants in the representation of their own lives by transcending the distinction between fiction and non-fiction, participation and observation, knowledge and emotions. In *Travel* and in my previous films *Samira* (2013) and *Normal* (2012)³, I use actors and ethnofictional filmmaking to represent and reproduce both the process of knowledge production (research interviews and ethnographic observation) and the socio-anthropological truth of migrant sex workers' complex decisions and priorities, which deeply question sexual humanitarian discourses.

From September 2014 until June 2015 I ran weekly improvisation and collaborative writing workshops with the original members of the association's theatre group at a local community centre adjacent to the *Bus des Femmes* association. The fact that the film's roles were going to be played by non-professional actresses alongside the original co-authors proved to be key in motivating them to get involved, as most feared being exposed as former prostitutes in the eyes of their friends, work colleagues and families in France and Nigeria. The ethnofictional workshops started by reviewing some existing improvisation scenes, which resulted from the previous theatre workshops and were drawn from the everyday lives of Nigerian women involved in prostitution in Paris. These existing scenes were soon complemented by new ones emerging from the unfolding fieldwork and semi-structured interviewing. Gradually, the new scenes substituted the previous ones and were organised around the history of Joy, a fictional collective character that allowed participants to express their individual stories of migration and involvement in the sex industry while protecting their identities and private histories.

The ethnofiction workshops were in synergy with the *Bus des Femmes* association's anti-trafficking programme, whose coordinator encouraged Nigerian women to participate hoping that it would help them reflect on their experiences. At the centre of the anti-trafficking programme of the association was the possibility of supporting women who claimed to be victims of trafficking through the construction of a 'good file', that is a case that can safely be brought to the attention of the authorities without compromising the credibility of the association presenting it (Jacsik 2013a: 211). The construction of a good file is a very long process requiring a lot of patience, during which the anti-trafficking programme coordinator listens to women's evolving claims and poses questions, potentially, but not necessarily, orienting their reassessment of their migratory project and sex work experiences towards the trafficking paradigm.

Women who had contacted the association because they felt that they were being exploited were encouraged to reflect on their experiences of migration and sex work and to reassess them through the epistemological prism of trafficking. This involved a gradual process of self-disclosure and reflection through which women re-apprehended the initial agreements that enabled them to come to Europe in relation to their transforming work conditions and to the opportunities for protection and regularisation offered by the possibility of obtaining subsidiary protection or asylum. As the director of the association, who is not inspired by an abolitionist sensibility, put it to me, the job involves providing girls with an alternative 'framework' (*cadre*,

³ In my films *Normal* (2012), *Samira* (2013) and *Travel* (2016), I used actors and naturalistic aesthetics to represent real interview transcripts and ethnographic situations emerging from original research on migrant sex workers. By both creating and interrupting a suspension of disbelief through the adoption of a hybrid fiction/documentary method my films aim to both reproduce and challenge the affective appeal and performative dimensions characterising sexual humanitarian documentaries. The trailers of my films are available online here: <https://vimeo.com/user3467382>

in French) through which they can understand their lives in terms of trafficking, or not. This relatively non-intrusive epistemological reorienting is a gradual and complex process through which the allegiances, arrangements and constraints framing the original migratory project are reassessed by Nigerian women in the light of the experiences of the present and of future opportunities and dangers posed by presenting themselves to French authorities as victims of trafficking.

The difference between subsidiary protection, which is offered for the duration of a specific and temporary threat, and asylum, which gives refugees permanent protection because there are systematically persecuted in relation to an inalienable aspect of their personal or social identities, became very salient during my fieldwork. This is because in March 2015 the specific National Asylum court case of a Nigerian woman set an important legal precedent in French jurisprudence, by determining that Nigerian victims of trafficking coming from the Edo state could be recognised in France as a social group, and as such as deserving asylum rather than subsidiary protection according to the 1951 Geneva convention. My research involved interviewing six women who were supported by the association's anti-trafficking programme. During fieldwork I also interviewed the person responsible for the anti-trafficking programme of the association, a lawyer specialising in human trafficking cases, and the anti-trafficking area coordinator of the OFPRA.

Too much suffering: Exploring the line between exploitation and trafficking

The ethnofiction workshops became very strategic ways through which to understand the complex and ambivalent processes through which migrants 'become victims' (Jaksic 2013b) by translating their subjectivities according to sexual humanitarian trafficking scripts (Giordano 2008). The screening of *Becky*, a short documentary by Danish anthropologist and filmmaker Sine Plambech on the migration experience of a young Nigerian woman who had attempted to go to Europe knowing that she was going to work in the sex industry, prompted a very heated and productive debate amongst the workshop participants. 'There is no such thing as a good madam!⁴' – said one of the participants during the screening, which involved around 15 young women. Most of the other girls disagreed. A vocal minority, and generally people currently involved in the anti-trafficking programme, denied the possibility of friendly and supportive relationships between 'girls', Nigerian sex workers, and the 'madams', the women who enabled them to come to Europe. However, an equally vocal majority did not, by insisting that many of the madams were working alongside the girls and that the relations between them could be friendly and supportive. These observations corroborate the results of existing studies of Nigerian women's involvement in sex work, which have identified the ambivalent mix of support and constraint characterising the relationships between girls and madams by contextualising them as part of an indentured migration system (Plambech 2016).

After the initial phase, eight women, who became the co-authors of the ethnofiction, attended the workshops regularly. The result of the workshops that took place weekly in Paris between October 2014 and June 2016 was *Travel*, a 63 minutes ethnofiction presenting the story of Joy, a young woman from the Edo state in Nigeria who travelled to France to help her family following her father's death. The story and the character of Joy result from the assemblage of the personal and collective histories of

⁴ The term 'madam' designates relatively older women who manage the sex work of others and sponsor their travel to Europe. It normally has a derogatory meaning, which is not dissimilar to 'pimp' and, more recently, 'trafficker'.

the eight Nigerian women who improvised it with me. Joy's role was played by four different actresses, including some of the co-authors, to embody different phases and the collective salience of Joy's history, which parallels the lives of many Nigerian women working in the global sex industry. The very title of the film evokes the ways in which Nigerian women's emic (subject-internal) and gendered understandings of their migration and work trajectories revolve around two closely interrelated concepts. The first is the notion of 'travel', which refers to women's movement abroad in order to support themselves and their families. The second is the notion of 'suffering', which refers to the lack of economic and social resources available to sustain the family. As existing research also confirms, many Nigerian women explain their decision to leave home (travel) as relating to an excess of 'suffering' for themselves and their families, in other words, by claiming that their suffering had become 'too much' to endure at home (Ratia & Notermann 2012: 149). These explanations are very important for the purpose of this article as the notion of 'too much' also emerges in relation to the amount of suffering that Nigerian women are prepared to tolerate as part of the original arrangements they agree to in order to migrate to Europe, and plays a key role in their decision to seek humanitarian protection in France.

The film begins with the ethnographic scene opening this article⁵, in which Joy challenges my sexual humanitarian question forcing her to choose whether she had decided or she had been forced to work in the sex industry. The following scene flashes back to before Joy's arrival in France and shows Blessing, the woman who will later enable her to come to France, being evicted by her flatmates and colleagues for wanting to bring a younger woman to France to help her pay her own debt, which casts her as a madam. We then see Joy shopping for sexy clothes alongside Blessing, who later does her make-up and instructs her about how to behave and stay safe with clients while they are both sitting in the van from which they both sell sex in the Bois de Vincennes. The first phase of the film highlights the fluidity of the relation between 'girls' and 'madams' as Blessing is portrayed as becoming a madam by arranging for Joy to join her in Paris and as selling sex alongside her in the Bois de Vincennes.

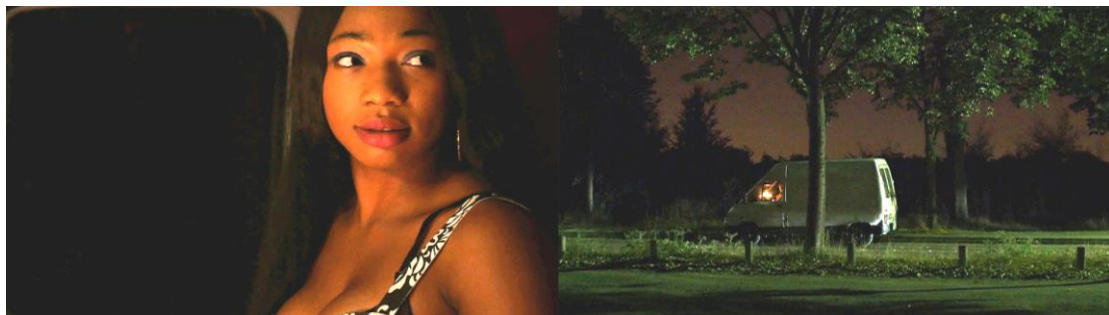


Fig. 1 Joy being instructed by Blessing in the Bois des Vincennes

Although *Travel* does not present Joy's story through a linear biographical trajectory, this is the way her story will be presented here for the sake of clarity and conciseness. The opportunity to leave home comes in the person of a returnee from Italy who comes to Joy's beauty salon to do her hair. As Joy complains about the suffering her family is going through, the returnee puts her in touch with Blessing, a woman living in France who is able to help her go to Europe for the price of 30,000 Euro. Although Joy is made aware that she is going to sell sex in France, she understands that she is

⁵ This initial scene is also the film's trailer (available at the beginning of the article).

going to be an escort rather than a street-based sex worker. In other words, she was not aware of the hard working conditions she would face.



Fig. 2 Joy negotiating biographical borders at the OFPRA

Once in France, Joy claims asylum by telling the OFPRA that she is lesbian and from the (predominantly Muslim) Kano state, a fake humanitarian story she buys from Blessing that gains her the right to reside in France until her case is heard, and rejected. In the meanwhile she sells sex alongside Blessing in a mini van parked at the Bois de Vincennes for almost two years. When only 5,000 Euro of the original debt remains Blessing kicks her out of the van hoping to get Joy to agree to pay her 10,000 Euro on top of the originally agreed amount of 30,000 Euro.



Fig. 3 Joy being attacked by Blessing in the Bois de Vincennes

It is at this moment that Joy feels exploited and seeks the help of the *Bus des Femmes* association, as the original deal was not respected. Although Joy is initially reluctant to denounce Blessing as a trafficker because she wants to respect the oath she swore in front of the local Ayelala shrine in Nigeria⁶, she gradually decides to do so as Blessing escalates the situation by threatening her family back home. The film shows Joy preparing a very good dossier with the help of the association and their affiliated lawyer, who explains to her the way her story will be questioned and analysed in

⁶ For an analysis of the specific role played by Ajelala temples and in the validation through a juju oath of the agreements between prospective migrants and the people facilitating their migration and involvement in sex work abroad see Simoni (2013).

court and focuses on the difference between subsidiary protection and asylum.



Fig 4 Joy builds the ‘good dossier’ with the director of the anti-trafficking programme of the association.

Once in court, when asked why she now considers herself to be a victim of trafficking, Joy responds that it is because Blessing did not respect the original oath, rather than claiming that she was deceived and forced. During the trial, the judges try to understand whether Joy’s fear of returning back to Nigeria is based only on the possibility of retaliations from Blessing, which would be the basis for subsidiary protection, or whether she feels that she would be persecuted socially. Joy is successful in explaining to judges that as Nigerian women deported back home with nothing to show are extremely stigmatised and marginalised she would become a social outcast if deported.



Fig. 5 Joy defending her case at the National Asylum Court in Paris.

Joy’s case is successful and she is granted the status of refugee on the grounds that she belongs to the social group of women victims of trafficking from Edo state. As she is now documented Joy starts working as a room cleaner at a hotel, but soon realises that she cannot support herself and her family through her meager salary.



Fig 6. Joy working at a hotel as a chambermaid.

The last scene sees her working independently in the sex industry. Joy explains to the researcher (me) that she now feels free and that things are ‘more better than before’ because she now has better working conditions: she can now decide when to work and with whom and, most importantly, gets to keep her money.



Fig 7. Joy tells the researcher that working independently in the sex industry is ‘more better than before’.

The plot of *Travel* reflects and highlights the findings emerging from both the ethnofiction workshops and the semi-structured interviews undertaken in the context of the *Emborders* project. These show that Nigerian women accept a bounded degree of exploitation, which they frame as suffering, in order to reduce the socio-economic hardship, which they also describe as suffering, of their families (and for themselves) in the long term. The project’s findings show that many young women are aware that they are going to work in the sex industry in order to repay the people enabling them to get to Europe before they leave Nigeria, although they often ignore the hard working conditions frequently attached to street sex work. However, the possibility of embodying their existential and social role of family supporters tends to override Nigerian women’s perception of being ‘cheated’, even when they are unaware of the working conditions they were going to meet in Europe. Most importantly for the purposes of this article, the findings demonstrate that Nigerian women tend to

recognise themselves as victims of trafficking only when the exploitation (suffering) they meet abroad becomes ‘too much’ in relation to the amount of suffering they had already accepted as part of the original agreement they made back in Nigeria and when they are prevented from capitalising on their migratory project.

These findings corroborate the results of my previous research with Eastern European migrants working in Italy and the UK, which showed that it was the betrayal of the original sentimental and economic agreements between female sex workers and their male agents that made them feel exploited (Mai 2013), rather than their involvement in sex work and in those agreements *per se*. They also confirm existing research with Nigerian sex workers in Europe, which shows that they can accept and endure suffering and exploitation in the hope of a better life (Peano 2013) as well as challenge the agreements sanctioned by customary law (juju) when people who enabled them to come to Europe do not respect them (Guillemaut 2008). These dynamics are refracted in *Travel*'s plot in two main moments. Firstly, Joy decides to denounce Blessing only after she realises that Blessing did not respect the original oath and that there is no other way to realise her migratory project in order to help her family. It's at this time that she decides to apply for asylum, which will give her the right to work independently and reside in France as well as offering humanitarian protection. Secondly, once she is documented, Joy tries to work in a different sector (hospitality). However, the enduring necessity to support herself and her family and the possibility of negotiating better working conditions autonomously lead her to decide, for a second time, to work in the sex industry, which she prefers to working as a chambermaid.

Theorising migrant agency: Mobile orientations

The unfolding of Joy's life trajectory between different biographical borders and priorities in relation to evolving opportunities and constraints strongly evokes Stuart Hall's anti-essentialist definition of identity as ‘strategic and positional’ (Hall 1996: 3). This means that identities and subjectivities do not exist *per se* in a unified and coherent form, but are continually re-constructed in time and performed in social interaction according to the strategic needs and priorities of the group or individual they are deployed by. A performative and relational understanding of identity is predicated on the recognition of the intrinsic, if not ontological, heterogeneity of subjectivity. It acknowledges the ways in which subjectivities are always heterogeneous and contextual as they are ‘articulated in relation to specific problems and solutions concerning human conduct’ (Rose 1996: 28).

The post-structuralist understanding of subjectivities as intrinsically heterogeneous, constructed and contextual evokes the epistemological dilemma of how to understand the relation between the discursive interpellation of the subject and its autonomy. The scholarly conversation between Foucault and Butler on the existence of pre-discursive subjects that ‘disrupt the regulating practices of cultural coherence imposed by a regulatory regime’ (Butler 1999: 178) resumes this dilemma. The possibility of pre-discursive and pre-social subjects intersects with the founding epistemological enigma of all social sciences – the relation between individual autonomy and social normativity – as well as the foundational philosophical enigma of the relation between ontology and epistemology, between being and knowing. Following Clare Hemmings' (2012) re-appraisal of Elizabeth Probyn's theorisation of experience I introduce the concept of a ‘regime of experience’ as a strategic concept for understanding people's onto-epistemological apprehension of themselves and the

world they inhabit. An important implication of this conceptualisation is that our experience of objects, subjects and the kinds of affects and attachments linking them is intrinsically linked to epistemological representations.

The interplay between different regimes of experience is a strategic context within which to understand the agency and vulnerability of migrants working in the global sex industry. Joy's collective life history is an exemplary case study of the dynamic and contextual nature of agency. According to Joy's regime of experience, being free and agentic means being able to leave home and endure a higher but bounded degree of suffering in order to alleviate the suffering of her family, not the absolute absence of suffering promised by the sexual humanitarian neoliberal utopia. Her decision and ability to inscribe the betrayal of the bounded exploitation she agreed to endure – described as 'too much suffering' – within the trafficking epistemology shows how migrants' understandings of agency and exploitation are embedded within regimes of experience that evolve alongside their migratory projects and emerge from a dynamic evaluation of 'past experiences and a desire to achieve some improvement in the future' (Bastia & McGrath 2011: 11). In the process, what used to be a risk can become an opportunity, and vice versa, as migrants decide implicitly or explicitly to endure different regimes of protection, autonomy and exploitation according to where they are in relation to their desired (and possible) life trajectories. Joy's epistemological and migratory trajectories remind us powerfully that to make sense for migrants, academic and policymakers alike, agency has to be viewed as a socio-culturally situated capacity for action allowing people to differently inhabit and perform norms, or a capacity for people to act that is always created and enabled by specific relations of subordination rather than by abstract canons of freedom (Mahmood 2005: 18).

To analyse the regimes of experience framing migrants' understandings of agency, I have introduced my own concept of 'mobile orientations', which refers to how people move in order to inhabit a desired subjectivity by entering the alignment of objects, mobilities and discourses providing them with agency (Mai 2015). The concept draws on Sara Ahmed's phenomenological notion of 'orientation' in order to emphasise how specific socio-cultural alignments of objects, narratives, bodies, gender/sex roles and mobilities become 'the space for action of specific subjectivities' (Ahmed 2006). Mobile orientations are heterogeneous arrangements of objects, bodies and narratives that are oriented towards becoming specific socio-cultural subjects through agencing decisions. At the centre of the concept is the awareness that there is no agency preceding the agencing arrangement or vice versa. Rather, mobile orientations are heterogeneous alignments emerging socially as the agencing context for emerging migratory subjectivities.

It would be beyond the scope of this article to elaborate on the theorisation of migrant agency any further. Here I would like to emphasise how Joy's decisions to 'become migrant', sell sex abroad, endure exploitation and then 'become victim' in order to keep helping her family highlight the contextual nature of agency in relation to evolving mobile orientations and regimes of experience. The first phase of her life as a migrant is characterised by her mobile orientation towards traveling in order to alleviate her family's suffering in Nigeria by joining Blessing in Europe and remitting money home. At the beginning of her journey Joy experiences selling sex in Europe as agentic and liberating, notwithstanding the exploitative working conditions, because it still enables her to support her family, which is a powerful and hegemonic subjectifying script shaping her mobile orientation and regime of experience. As Joy's

life evolves and Blessing betrays the original agreement Joy still finds a sense of agency in being able to support her family, which she can now only do by reappraising her migration history as one of trafficking and denouncing the person who brought her to Europe. In the process, the 'etic' (subject-external) and sexual humanitarian notion of trafficking is subsumed within the 'emic' (subject-internal) notion of 'too much suffering', which allows her to translate her story according to the trafficking sexual humanitarian biographical border.

Conclusion: agency as bounded exploitation

While listening to Nigerian women's migration life histories in semi-structured interviews or during ethnofiction workshops competing regimes of experience and representation were evident to me. The narration of their lives in terms of migration (travel) often clashed with the humanitarian biographical borders according to which they try to have their suffering recognised in order to avoid deportation and obtain the right to live and work in Europe. More specifically, the emphasis given to specific aspects and details made me aware that that they were formulating their stories according to the affective and narrative tropes of the trafficking biographical border, a sexual humanitarian narrative potentially allowing irregular migrants to become documented as victims of trafficking.

The ethnofiction workshops were strategic moments in which we were able to challenge, together, the hegemony of the trafficking biographical border over the regime of experience and mobile orientations framing their lives in terms of migration (travel). By assembling together the life history of Joy, we were able to recast the trafficking humanitarian script in light of the hegemonic, socio-economically grounded and subjectifying necessity to reduce their own and their families' suffering. In the process, by eliciting, acknowledging and including the different understandings of exploitation and agency of ethnofiction participants within the collective story of Joy, we queered together the distinction between 'emic' concepts and the 'etic' theories of observers characterising ethnography (Boelstorff 2010).

Joy's understanding of exploitation as a situation of excessive ('too much') suffering shows us how, to make sense for migrants, agency cannot be separated from exploitation because their sense of agency is often achieved by consenting to bounded (both in terms of time and working conditions) exploitation (suffering), rather than in its absence. Sexual humanitarian interventions separating agency from exploitation risk becoming, and often are, complicit with migration controls and sex work repressive measures that actually exacerbate migrant sex workers' vulnerability to being exploited (Modupe-Oluwa Baye & Heumann 2013). These considerations are best expressed in the words of Joy, the 20-year-old Nigerian woman working in Paris whose words and understandings open this article and inspired the ethnofiction *Travel*:

No, I did not decide, what was I going to do? My family is suffering in Nigeria and I have no papers, what else can I do? They should give us papers instead of fining clients! It is only going to make things more difficult for us than they are already. They should give us work if they want us to stop doing this!

Nigerian women's dismissive responses to whether they decided or not to work in the sex industry and their understanding of exploitation as 'too much suffering' queer from a minority global South regime of experience (Connell 2007) the false dichotomy between free and forced instituted by sexual humanitarianism, which

reproduces and reinforces a North-centric abolitionist sensibility. They also highlight the increasingly constrained and ambivalent conditions of agency enforced globally by the convergence between neoliberalism and late modernity and their simultaneous reconfiguration and commodification of established livelihoods, social relations and subjectivities (Chimienti 2009: 352).

Joy was not the only person overriding the neoliberal false free/forced dilemma in the name of the necessity to support her family. In many cases, Nigerian women challenged the question by pointing to the ways in which the necessity to help themselves and their families made the question of choice or consent irrelevant. This, as I was going to find out during the ethnofiction workshops that led to the writing of *Travel*, is because their sense of agency is predicated on the possibility of enduring a bounded amount of exploitation (suffering) in the short term in the name of a migratory project (travel) providing them and their families with a better economic situation and social status in the long term. Joy's decision to sell sex independently as it is 'more better than before' after she is granted asylum, also highlights the key role played by working conditions in migrants' sense of agency and 'freedom', as well as the overarching importance of obtaining legal status in order to enjoy both.

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