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Abbatecola, Emanuela. *Trans-migrazioni. Lavoro, sfruttamento e violenza di genere nei mercati globali del sesso*. Torino: Rosenberg & Sellier, 2018. Pp. 174. ISBN 8878856118 and EAN9788878856110. € 14.50 (paperback).

Migration, sexuality, bodies, HIV, violence, market, mobility, feminism ... Emanuela Abbatecola's book presents the results of her sociological research on prostitution (Romanian and Brazilian above all, but also Nigerian) in Italy and Spain. Contributing to the impressive amount of documentation on prostitution and migration nexus in recent years, *Trans-migrazioni* singles out a dramatic reality of our times, that being immigrant *and* prostitute. Yet its structure, trajectories, and economies are only apparently known, as its changing characteristics remain difficult to classify, making the standard disciplinary borders implode, and revealing time all the limitations of categories that have been summarily imposed on phenomena that are culturally and historically heterogeneous.

The book analyzes in the first chapter the two contrasting perspectives that dominated the debate over the last decades on the migration/prostitution issue. The second chapter is devoted to the overlapping subjects of migration, exploitation and gender violence in Mediterranean area and Europe. The third and fourth chapter consider more particularly the case of Romanian and Brazilian prostitution. The reader finds here useful inputs on a profile scarcely analyzed by sociological research: the prostitution/transgender issue. The author considers the relationship between health and sex work (fifth chapter) and develops a further issue in the conclusion: are we facing a violation of human rights or a further expression of gender violence? This question is important given that social science vocabulary has generally put too many things under the "human rights" label.

The first challenge tackled by Abbatecola arises from the duty to rethink a problem that questions many different areas of knowledge and undermines central ideas in the field of the social sciences. In plain language, *Trans-migrazioni* is a work that takes a critical stance principally towards those sociologists who have long been studying the new globalized markets of migration and prostitution in Europe and in the world, and it shows what the methodology normally used in this kind of study can (*and what it cannot*) reveal: quantitative research, statistical data, embellished by the usual interviews with those involved in the phenomenon under analysis (prostitutes, transsexuals, social workers, police officers, etc.). A no less decisive challenge, however, arises from one characteristic aspect of migration: as Léca and Sayad already pointed out thirty years ago,<sup>1</sup> migration (in this case migration connected with people-trafficking and prostitution) brings out in its entirety the presumption of wanting to "define bureaucratically" a problem that is really *social*. As in a mirror, migration also reveals all the contradictions (political, epistemological, juridical, etc.) of the host societies, casting a pitiless light on their fragility and uncertain conceptual compromises on what a good family or a good mother is, a relation of love or interest, and how the body's power to decide (or *agency*) or its *use limit* can be decided when it becomes a means of production, a provider of income, a source of pleasure, and a field of violence at the same time.

The book has the value of setting out clearly, from the first chapter on, one of the themes that has dominated the debate on migration and prostitution in recent years: the conceptual, but also moral, opposition between the idea of "trafficking" and "victim" on the one hand, and "sex worker" on the other (often assumed as positive concept because synecdochically evoking social rights, wage, agency, and so on). The author finds this opposition dubious, which forces the reader to ask if these categories, generally used in the social sciences, in international law and in the vocabulary of humanitarian organizations, make sense. To quote from Abbatecola, "As I see it, it is impossible to take sides, as I

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<sup>1</sup> Abdelmalek Sayad, "Les maux-à-mots de l'immigration. Entretien avec Jean Leca," *Politix* 3, no. 12 (1990): 7-24.

believe there are points of view that can be shared at least partially in both positions” (25). Yet I would define the question differently: it is impossible to take sides because there are *confused points of view, badly phrased questions and inadequate categories* “in both positions.” And this is so because we as social scientists adopt models and definitions without first measuring their anthropological legitimacy (i.e., their value and their meaning) in other social contexts.

Consider, for example, the idea of *agency*, which is anchored in a precise tradition (philosophical, psychological and juridical), which cannot capture the complexity of other experiences of the self, other ontologies of the body and of the singular relations of dependence and influence connected to complex, historical objects and relations such as “fetish”, “debt,” and “coercion.”<sup>2</sup> The alternative between “passive victim” and – as Raymond writes – “independent migrants who have an active role in constructing their future, however difficult the conditions” (35) is therefore misleading in the end when it does not examine the obscure, ambiguous interstices of what Raymond refers to as “choices without a choice,”<sup>3</sup> a viewpoint that I fully share.

In any case, the assertion by the activist Norma Jean Almodovar that – quite apart from the economic advantages – there is an “erotic and emotional pleasure of prostitution” (23), cited by the author as witness of the unresolved cruxes in an often virulent debate, would be enough in itself to show how the question of the relation between prostitution, pleasure and work makes the confines between sex work, use of the body and individual choice incandescent. I personally consider the Jean Almodovar’s sentence without any value, and fully unable both to offer a generalized interpretative model and to differentiate between desire and pleasure. Only a careful and aware ethnographical and psychoanalytical hearing, circumscribed to a single individual, could give a valuable response to this question. But neither Almodovar nor Abbatecola take into consideration this issue.

Abbatecola’s research, which is also useful for those approaching the world of transnational mobility, migration, and prostitution for the first time (researchers, students), reminds us of the gaps in the existing data on prostitution (the male version of it, for example). Indeed, *Trans-migrazioni* highlights the need to explore the many different forms of subjugation that characterize this global economy of commodified bodies and desires, where it is often women – the *madam*, for example – that perpetrate acts of violence on other women (and the violence Nigerian women are subject to in the trafficking circuit is not, alas, only “symbolic” or “psychological,” as we have learnt from the ethnography carried out in Turin over the last twenty-five years).

The book analyzes in greater detail the relatively little studied phenomenon of Romanian and Brazilian prostitution (the latter of which is connected with transgenders), bringing out the correlation with specific social features of these countries. In any case, while Nigerian prostitution fascinates the media so much more than Brazilian and Romanian cases, this is not, in my view, simply because it is more exotic (*voodoo, juju*, etc.). It excites public opinion and media curiosity because it stages a sexuality that has been repressed: a racialized sexuality (it is perhaps the ghost of Saartjie Baartman), challenging the moral or religious systems of emancipation and the diagnostic psychological-psychiatric categories used to give a name to the unprecedented forms of suffering that often afflict those involved.

My own anthropological perspective on these processes, therefore, counsels prudence. We cannot ignore, for example, how the local character of this “consumption” is still generally ignored in the extensive existing literature on the growth of the phenomenon (a growth unanimously documented).<sup>4</sup> We do know, however, that relations of what we would call “sexual exchange” or

<sup>2</sup> Simona Taliani, “Coercion, Fetishes and Suffering in the Daily Lives of Young Nigerian Women in Italy,” *Africa: Journal of the International African Institute* 82, no. 4 (2012): 579-608.

<sup>3</sup> Janice G. Raymond, *Not a Choice, Not a Job: Exposing the Myths about Prostitution and the Global Sex Trade* (Washington, DC: Potomac, 2013).

<sup>4</sup> On South-East Asia see Laurence Husson, “The Need for a Multidisciplinary Approach to Prostitution in the

“prostitution” *tout court* are defined very differently in Africa, where there can be a seamless overlapping (as in Niger) of the questions of the consumption of goods, of femininity, of gender roles or of participation in a cult of possession: that of the *bori*.<sup>5</sup> And the mutations noted in the practices and representations of prostitution are no less complex.

Remaining with the case of Niger, a country affected by a widespread political, social, and economic crises, researchers remind us that the traditional or “community” form of the *karuwa* (the “free women” of Hausa origin who no longer live under family protection but under that of a *magajia*, a name given in the past to the sister of the prince responsible for collecting taxes from prostitute women and adepts of the *bori* cult) has been flanked more recently by the figure of the *koussou-koussou*. This term, which derives from the use of “scratching” lottery tickets, whose cost was about a third of a dollar, designates the young women not associated with any specific ethnic group, who are often accused of propagating HIV infection, and are free of any form of social control but also of the norms that regulated prostitution until recent times.<sup>6</sup> These changes suggest the importance of a historical-anthropological approach that seeks to consider critically both the phenomenon of prostitution and the very categories used each time to define its characteristics, economy, moral systems, logics, or social actors.

All in all, I don’t believe rigorous thinking about the phenomenon of prostitution (particularly, though not only, African prostitution) is possible unless it is combined with an equally rigorous analysis of its *colonial and racial genealogy*.<sup>7</sup> Only a historically based ethnography can save us from the risk of clichés and enable us to correct those prescriptive sociological models that are limited to quantitative data about prostitution (“How much? How long? How many?”—as Husson put it ironically).<sup>8</sup> And behind these questions there also emerge—for those who can recognize them—the complex changes that have taken place in family relations in Africa<sup>9</sup> and in what we might call, paraphrasing Bayart, the “*politique du (bas) ventre*” (the politics of underbelly). There are many questions a reader might ask after reading this research: to fully understand the ambivalence of the relations between a Nigerian prostitute and her *madam*, how can one not question the limitations of a (juridical, medical and economic) rationality and of a model of subjectivity that often capture only meager fragments of these experiences, when not actually deforming their sense?<sup>10</sup> What strategy can immunize us from the trivializing use that the media and the health institutions on the one hand, and trafficking victims themselves and Nigerian asylum-seekers on the other, make of terms borrowed from the vestiges of a complex religious lexicon?<sup>11</sup> How can we understand, today, the prostitution

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Southeast Asian Context,” *Moussons*, 2017 [Online, consulted on 9 January 2020], 29, 1: 7-17.

<sup>5</sup> Adeline Masquelier, “Consumption, Prostitution, and Reproduction: The Poetic of Sweetness in Bori,” *American Ethnologist* 22, no. 4 (1995): 883-906.

<sup>6</sup> Ouassa Tiékoura, “Forme communautaire et forme individuelle de la prostitution à Niamey,” in *L’Afrique des individus: Itinéraires citadins dans l’Afrique contemporaine* (Abidjan, Bamako, Dakar, Niamey), edited by in Alain Mairie, 331-65 (Paris: Karthala, 2000).

<sup>7</sup> Elsa Dorline, *La matrice de la race. Généalogie sexuelle et coloniale de la nation française*, (Paris: La Découverte, 2006); Ann Laura Stoler, *Carnal Knowledge and Imperial Power. Race and the Intimate in Colonial Rule* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2002); Ann Laura Stoler, *Race and the Education of Desire. Foucault History of Sexuality and the Colonial Order of Things* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1995).

<sup>8</sup> Husson, *The Need for a Multidisciplinary Approach to Prostitution*, 11.

<sup>9</sup> Patrice Yengo, *Les mutations sorcières dans le bassin du Congo. Du ventre et de sa politique* (Paris: Karthala, 2016).

<sup>10</sup> Simona Taliani, “Calembour de choses dans le vaudou italien Corps-fétiche et principes d’inégalité devant les dieux.” *Social Compass* (2016): 63:163-180; Simona Taliani, *Il tempo della disobbedienza. Per un’antropologia della parentela nella migrazione* (Verona: Ombre Corte, 2019).

<sup>11</sup> Rijk Van Dijk, “‘Voodoo’ on the Doorstep: Young Nigerian Prostitutes and Magic Policing in the Netherlands,” *Africa: Journal of the International African Institute* 71, no. 4 (2001): 558-586.

and experiences of Romanian women without having first understood the condition of women, the fragmentation of family ties and the collapse of economies in socialist and post-socialist states in Eastern Europe?<sup>12</sup> And, finally, how do we advance in the vortex of these particular forms of dependence and “voluntary servitude” without combining the thinking on subjectivity and subjugation by authors such as Foucault, Butler, Bourdieu, and Rancière (who would provide interesting interdisciplinary tie-ups for the reader) with an analysis of the illegal economies that govern our “dark present”?<sup>13</sup>

The book constitutes a useful tool for those scholars who want to re-imagine the multiple, often ambiguous profiles of a changing phenomenon, for which we are often lacking an adequate conceptual vocabulary.

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<sup>12</sup> Shana Penn S. and Jill Massino, eds., *Ambiguous Transitions. Gender, Politics, and Everyday Life in State Socialist Eastern and Central Europe* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2009); Leyla J. Keough, “Globalizing ‘Postsocialism’: Mobile Mothers and Neoliberalism on the Margins of Europe,” *Anthropological Quarterly* 79, no. 3 (2006): 431-461.

<sup>13</sup> Stephen Ellis, *The Present Darkness. A History of Organised Nigerian Crime* (London: Hurst & Co., 2016).