

Countering and mobilising invisibility: Sex workers' infrastructures of mutual aid and representation in Marseille

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Abstract

The field of geographies of sex work has analysed how different power dynamics play out in the production of the space of sex work. Mobilising the concept of ‘revanchism,’ it has analysed how ‘undesirables’ are removed from city space in the wake of gentrification and urban renewal to create ‘safe and sanitised’ inner cities. Writing from places that are marginalised in knowledge production, scholars from the Global South have applied an intersectional lens when studying sex workers’ experiences, looking at how they are impacted by race and citizenship. However, while highlighting agency, most of these studies have focused on individual narratives, omitting the infrastructures that sex worker communities build. These improvised infrastructures, made of spaces, persons and practices, are often invisible, while sex workers’ stereotypes, instrumentalised by dominant powers to foster political interests, are omnipresent. Subaltern urbanism has followed the project of disrupting and decolonising Eurocentric conceptions of ‘the Other’ and recuperating the ‘subaltern’ as a political agent. However, they have often conflated ‘subaltern’ with ‘popular,’ attaching modes of spatial production such as informality to the popular identity, rather than understanding the subaltern condition as the incapacity of making one’s insurgency recognised.

Thus, there is a need to examine how subalternity and intersecting factors of oppression play out in the production of sex workers’ infrastructures; how visibilities, invisibilities and agency are created. The site of Marseille is interesting to do this for it is the object of legal, spatial and discursive state interventions attempting to realign to the *République* a city perceived as ‘foreign within the country.’ The aim of this study is to understand how sex workers create infrastructures of mutual aid and access to city-space, knowledge and representation in a context that silences, represses and criminalises their communal strategies of support. The epistemological framework of this thesis draws on queer-feminist methodologies that argue for centring marginalised voices and valuing situatedness. Data was therefore collected through recorded in-depth conversations with sex workers who are also active in ally structures that improve sex workers’ access to health, rights and representation.

The result of this study shows that there is a threefold system that silences sex workers, through Manichean discourses that either victimise or demonise sex workers, strict conditions of access to social benefits, and the criminalisation of mutual aid and knowledge transmission. Invisibility is thus both a barrier and a tool for sex workers in Marseille. The conversations with my interlocutors show that the impossibility for sex workers to organise themselves and be heard lead to their isolation and marginalisation. In this vacuum of knowledge, the abolitionist government creates representations of sex workers that aim at legitimising the removal of undesirables such as migrant sex workers from public space. Despite this exclusionary and repressive context, sex workers manage to organise networks of support through ‘underground’ spaces such as chatgroups, squats or informal workshops for knowledge transmission and create opportunities for representation through self-managed art festivals and archival work.

There is a need for further community-based research that attempts centring voices of sex workers that are silenced because they are marginalised through their citizenship status, race, gender-identity, language, or other stigmas. Going forwards, the methods of this thesis that used podcasting as a way of making knowledge and research more accessible can inform further projects that focus on the possibilities of expanding these informal strategies and implementing sex workers’ imaginations of self-organised spaces.

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1. Introduction

“The city always (...) operates as a site of fantasy, desire, and imagination.”¹

The city centre of France’s second city, Marseille, is a contested space: it carries ambiguous and contradictory representations, dreams and imaginations. Once named a “colonial metropolis” with “international destiny,”² the Mediterranean port-city is today represented as “foreign within the Nation,”³ “home to migrants, workers and organised criminals” and associated with imaginations of “exoticism and illicit activity.”⁴ To push against the “dissidence” of Marseille and re-connect the city to the *République*, the French state and the local city-government pursue projects of city-marketing, urban renewal and gentrification.⁵ A double process of abandonment of parts of the city and urban renovation, led not by the local government but the national authority, is taking place in the “capital of the South.”⁶ The state legitimises its large-scale urban interventions through a discourse on urgency that is about “security, social issues and public health.”⁷ A closer look at discourses around urban planning and the demography of those being displaced shows that what is perceived as a threat to the top-down ‘dreamed’ image of Marseille is equated with people whose race, religion, gender-identity or class is othered, marginalised and oppressed. In this context, sex workers, while being invisibilised, stand in for a figure that represents all the wrongs in the city, from immorality to insecurity and being a threat to public health. Laws, representations and policing of sex workers’ activities in public spaces together form a revanchist landscape that aims at excluding or assimilating the Other. Sex work is, in the state’s view, not work but a form of sexist violence and sexual exploitation. The abolitionist stance that the government defends therefore aims at repressing the possibilities of doing sex work while providing (albeit very limited) support to accompany people in exiting prostitution. Whereas the *Loi 2016* set up various strategies to prevent sex work, an older entry in the Penal Code from 1994 defines procuring, punished with seven years’ imprisonment and a €150’000 fine, as the act of “helping, assisting or protecting the prostitution of others,” sharing the proceeds from a person engaging in prostitution and training a person with a view to prostitution.⁸ Sex workers’ collective infrastructures, made of a combination of spaces, persons and practices and aimed at building safety, enabling knowledge transmission and improving each other’s working conditions, are therefore all illegal. The state’s de-legitimisation of their networks of mutual aid operates through a discourse that posits all sex workers setting up or relying on these strategies of support as either victims or perpetrators.

In the face of this multilayered marginalisation that targets sex workers, this study asks: How do sex workers create infrastructures of mutual aid and access to city-space, knowledge and representation in a context that silences, represses and criminalises their communal strategies of support? The aim of this research project is to pay attention to sex workers’ role “in the making of the city’s many identities.”⁹ The study approaches sex workers’ collective “production of space, community, labour, subjectivities and agency” as a “source of alternative knowledge” by drawing on literature published by sex workers and allies and deploying methods that position sex workers as

¹ Mbembe and Nuttall, “Writing the World from an African Metropolis,” 355–56.

² Roncayolo, *L’imaginaire de Marseille*.

³ Biass and Fabiani, “Marseille, a City beyond Distinction.”

⁴ Hewitt, *Wicked City*.

⁵ Macron, “Discours du Président de la République « Marseille en Grand ».”

⁶ Collet, *Du Taudis Au Airbnb*.

⁷ Macron, “Discours du Président de la République « Marseille en Grand ».”

⁸ Code Pénal, Section 2 : Du proxénétisme et des infractions qui en résultent (Articles 225-5 à 225-12).

⁹ Mbembe and Nuttall, “Writing the World from an African Metropolis,” 357.

active voices and theorists in the research process.¹⁰ The study thus discusses the possibilities of creating resisting communal strategies of mutual aid and analyses power-relations around spatial dynamics of access and exclusion, theorising from sex workers' and allies' perspectives. It looks at imagination from the margins and how this interacts with fantasies that are projected onto sex workers and the city.

The inner city of Marseille is very densely populated and has a high concentration of low-income neighbourhoods. However, the city attracts more and more tourists and new wealthier residents looking for the potential of a declining (because abandoned) urban city centre, engendering a process of gentrification that reinforces the already pronounced socio-spatial segregation of the city.¹¹ This process is fostered by large scale urban planning projects such as Euroméditerranée or Marseille en Grand and undergirded by colonising ambitions that aim at replacing undesired populations through a "conquest."¹² Resistance movements as well as everyday small-scale practices oppose such displacement, claiming a right to the city and affirming an alternative, inclusive image of Marseille.¹³

Sex work has been treated as a form of sexual exploitation in the French law, criminalising clients and procurers since 2016, when sex workers' legal status shifted from "delinquents" to "victims of sexual violence and human trafficking."¹⁴ As the legal situation criminalises everything around sex work, from buying a sexual act to providing a space for the activity, sex workers' strategies are connected to autonomous places in Marseille and deploy informal modes of organising. The forms of exoticisation and othering imposed on the city's 'undesirables' are reappropriated, creating a bottom-up resistance that asserts the right of marginalised groups to produce their own representations, imaginaries and dreams.

The field of the study is situated in these contestations over representation, access to and production of city space in the context of sex work repression. The research looks at the visible and invisible network of infrastructures, understood as material, social, technical and political assemblages,¹⁵ that sex workers make, use and imagine for the organisation of mutual support. It is set in different places in Marseille that are created by sex workers or allies, namely the feminist association for access to sex education, sexual health services and abortion Planning Familial, the sex workers' community health organisation Autres Regards and the queer archive Mémoire des Sexualités. Its protagonists are sex workers active in these structures, creating a link between these formal places to more informal and 'underground' spaces.

It is important to specify that, other than the legal framework in France, this study makes a clear distinction between sex work and human trafficking. In the words of my interlocutor Rosario Veneno "human trafficking for sexual exploitation exists, like it exists in other fields. We condemn this exploitation and call on the state to deploy resources to combat trafficking networks, but this has nothing to do with the realities of independent sex workers."¹⁶ Drawing on sociologist Tabet, relations between people are here organised on a "continuum of economic-sexual exchanges" that

¹⁰ Peake and Rieker, *Rethinking Feminist Interventions into the Urban*, 2013, 17.

¹¹ Vignau and Grondeau, "Arts, Culture and Neoliberalism."

¹² Beschon, "Justification of Renewal as a Long and Winding Road."

¹³ Mahjoubi, "Une histoire contemporaine de Marseille."

¹⁴ Calderaro and Giometta, "The Problem of Prostitution."

¹⁵ Cirolia and Pollio, "Queer Infrastructures."

¹⁶ Rosario Veneno, Conversation with Rosario Veneno.

go from marriage to sex work.¹⁷ The specificity of sex workers, so Pheterson, is that they experience the “whore stigma” because they explicitly demand financial compensation in exchange for sexual services.¹⁸ In this study, I use the term ‘sex work,’ as suggested by my interlocutors. This is justified by the fact that it supports a political project aimed at recognising sex work as work.



NELLE on the different words used to designate sex workers

Contemporary scholarship of geographies of sex work has analysed economic, political and social dynamics that shape the spatialities of sex work in urban contexts.¹⁹ Gentrification and urban renewal pursue the creation of safe and sanitised inner cities, articulated through “revanchism” in which ‘undesirables,’ such as sex workers, are policed and eradicated from public space.²⁰ Centring sex workers’ perspectives, various studies have examined how these socially produced spatialities are navigated and contested.²¹ However, this body of literature has disproportionately focused on major cities in the Global North, invisibilising Global South and other marginalised contexts in research and paying little attention to how intersecting factors of oppression create heterogeneous experiences, subjectivities and access to city space amongst sex workers. Various studies conducted in collaboration with sex workers have shown how in France, migrant sex workers are faced with “counter-topographies” that marginalise them,²² linking repression of prostitution to anti-migration laws and racist stereotypes.²³ Writing from the Global South and a transnational feminist perspective, various studies have shown how policing sexuality can be a “whitening project” by looking at intersections between migration, race, class, and sex work.²⁴ These analyses have often approached sex workers’ agency as individual, thus detaching them from their networks of solidarity and support.²⁵ To (re)connect the individual to local and transnational communities of sex workers that allow them to “do and dream” the city and counter marginalisation,²⁶ this study further draws on Southern urbanism and the concept of “people as infrastructure,” meaning spaces, persons and practices that are combined in improvised ways to reproduce life in the city.²⁷

Situated at the intersection of these three bodies of literature, this study is significant because it centres the voice of a silenced group of people, sex workers, and looks at informal, collective and self-organised infrastructures that “make life livable” in a context that criminalises them.²⁸ It further proposes the mobilisation of theorisation from the South to look at marginalised communities and self-built spaces in a Global North context, which in turn allows for the recognition of connected dynamics across geographies and to think about decolonisation in new spaces. Through the discourse of abolitionist actors adopted by the government, sex workers are positioned as a subaltern group that cannot be heard, therefore forestalling their possibilities to assert

¹⁷ Tabet, 2005, in Bon, “Entre « protection des victimes » et contrôle social des travailleuses du sexe.”

¹⁸ Pheterson, 2001, in Bon.

¹⁹ Hubbard, “Chapter 35. Sex Work, Urban Governance and the Gendering of Cities.”

²⁰ Smith, *The New Urban Frontier: Gentrification and the Revanchist City*; P. and Kamath, *Urban Undesirables*.

²¹ Loopmans, “Chapter 34. Commercial Sexualities: Section Introduction.”

²² Katz, “On the Grounds of Globalization.”

²³ Giametta and Le Bail, “The National and Moral Borders of the 2016 French Law on Sex Work.”

²⁴ Yea, “Shades of Grey”; Walker and Oliveira, “Contested Spaces: Exploring the Intersections of Migration, Sex Work and Trafficking in South Africa”; Williams, “Sex Work and Exclusion in the Tourist Districts of Salvador, Brazil.”

²⁵ Koné, “Transnational Sex Worker Organizing in Latin America.”

²⁶ RedTraSex, *Un movimiento de tacones altos*.

²⁷ Simone, “People as Infrastructure.”

²⁸ Butler in Ghaziani and Brim, “Queer Methods.”

their class interests in their own name.²⁹ Countering these silencing strategies, this research project is an attempt to open up a space that allows for nuance and contradictions, giving sex workers a possibility to theorise and share their experience-based knowledge.

To achieve this, the methodology of this thesis takes on a collaborative approach aimed at deconstructing separations between ‘researcher’ and ‘researched’ and breaking up divisions between theory, method and analysis.³⁰ Knowledge is considered as situated and emerging contextually from experience and its production from the margins decentralises the power of dominant locations for theorisation.³¹ The primary mode of data collection was through in-depth conversations with sex workers that were recorded to create a podcast assembling their voices and other material into a sex workers’ sound archive. The podcast fulfils the purpose of being an accessible format to a larger community, while simultaneously creating a space for representation and knowledge sharing in which conversation is seen as “means of theory creation,” allowing sex workers to make their imaginations, experiences and philosophies heard. Further data was collected through immersion and personal involvement, as well as including sex workers’ productions in the form of books, social media posts and reports.

The thesis is structured into six chapters, progressing from the introduction (chapter 1) to the background (chapter 2), methodology (chapter 3), literature review (chapter 4), empirics and analysis (chapter 5), and concluding with final reflections and an outlook in chapter 6. Chapter 2 outlines the context in which the study is set, discussing the social geography of Marseille and past and present productions of space through urban planning, contested representations and bottom-up tactics to reclaim a right to the city. It then maps out the places, people, connections and interactions that form the field of the research. Chapter 3 introduces another tension, that around the multilayered silencing of sex workers that operates through victimising discourse, law and conditions to access social benefits. It goes on to explain how this and my own positionality influenced the focus and methodology of the study, providing the different methods and techniques of data analysis that were chosen and applied. Chapter 4 reviews relevant literature and concepts, drawing on geographies of sex work, transnational feminism and Southern urbanism that help analyse dynamics of contested urban space, intersectionality in sex work research, informal solidarity networks and struggles over representation and imagining cities’ futures. Chapter 5 presents empirical findings and analysis through the three main themes of representation, health and deviance, and autonomy and knowledge sharing. It discusses the ways in which my interlocutors perceive and analyse power dynamics present between authorities and sex workers as well as within sex workers’ communities and what strategies they find to counter silencing, marginalisation and the repression of self-organised mutual support.

²⁹ Spivak, “Scattered Speculations on the Subaltern and the Popular.”

³⁰ Smith, *Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples*.

³¹ Mohanty, “Under Western Eyes.”

2. Background and Field

Marseille is often talked about or addressed as a person. It impersonates so many things. It gets so many adjectives that, because they describe Marseille, they also describe its people. What does somebody mean when they say Marseille is dangerous? Which place do they mean? Where does that danger come from? Danger in Marseille has a face. That face is one of the city's faces, one of the faces that make up its image. What do Marseille's faces look like? The perspective changes everything. Outside of Marseille, one of the most ubiquitous ones is 'chaotic and criminal.' 'Sunny, warm, mediterranean, exotic' are attributes that attract tourists. Others go to Marseille for its queer community, for its activism, as migrants looking for a welcoming community. In all these depictions, the city, people and places overlap. Describing the city, giving it a face, reveals the person's relationship to it. And describing the city instead of a group of people permits stigmatisation in a dissimulated way.

Marseille's city-centre is home to a big immigrant community and its arrondissements are one of its poorest. The centre of Marseille is often described as unsafe and unhealthy (*insalubre*). These attributes serve as a legitimisation for local and national authorities to displace those "undesired populations" from a place that is undergoing gentrification and touristification. In a song named *Marseille Marécage* (Marseille Marshes), the lyrics address Marseille as a person. A person who is different, who is queer, who is a prisoner of its own image. Marseille with its coastline, its divisions. Marseille the untamed city.

Sex workers have been part of Marseille's image for a very long time. And since they have been part of it, their figure has stood in for insecurity, immorality, insalubrity, unlawfulness, difference. Thus, Marseille's image and sex workers' image are tied together, and their similar representations mean they are treated similarly. As such, there have been responses to both the untamed city and sex workers that aim at realigning them to a certain vision of the *République*.

Marseille's bad reputation

Marseille, situated in the South-East of France on the coast of the Mediterranean Sea is France's oldest and second most populated city. Marseille has had a reputation of being dangerous, foreign, "not French," queer or "wicked," informal and defiant for over a century.³² Representations of Marseille make a direct link between crime and prostitution, like this description of the city found in the Dollar-Wise Guide to France, published in 1981: "Throughout the world, Marseilles has a seamy reputation. It is considered dangerous, the centre of a rich crime empire, a seat of drug smuggling and prostitution."³³ Others have named Marseille "capital insalubrity," "untamed or too little valorised, too Maghrebi or Comorian."³⁴ A city of crisis and early deindustrialisation, of informal trafficking, ungovernable, clientelist, *mafieuse*.³⁵ A recent exhibition, named *Marseille 1900-1943: La mauvaise réputation* (Marseille 1900-1943: The bad reputation), presents the city's history as a symbol of "political and moral degeneration" with a "culture of rebellion."³⁶ Located

³² Roncayolo, *L'imaginaire de Marseille*; Le Dantec, *La Ville-sans-Nom*; Beschon, "Justification of Renewal as a Long and Winding Road"; Géa and Gasquet-Cyrus, "Approche sociolangagière des changements urbains et de la gentrification à Marseille"; Francis, "D'où Vient La Réputation Sulfureuse de Marseille ?"; Hewitt, *Wicked City*.

³³ Frommer, *Dollarwise Guide to France*.

³⁴ Collet, *Du Taudis Au Airbnb*.

³⁵ Collet.

³⁶ Attali, "Marseille : c'est quoi ces grosses caisses en bois sur le Vieux-Port ?"

at the edge of the country, some say Marseille is “foreign within the Nation”³⁷ or altogether on “a different planet.”³⁸ Whatever status the city is given, its alleged “legendary exceptionalism” makes Marseille stand out as the Other within the French *République*.³⁹

The social geography of Marseille

Today, the image of Marseille’s exceptionalism still stands and is fuelled by the fact that Marseille’s city-centre is predominantly immigrant and working-class, in contrast to most other important cities of the country.⁴⁰ The central *arrondissements* of Marseille have a poverty rate of around 40%, the 1st being at 38% in 2021, the 3rd at 52%.⁴¹ A “white flight” during the twentieth century transformed the city-centre into an area inhabited mainly by migrants, most of them of African descent.⁴² Marseille is a divided city that is becoming more and more unequal. While Marseille’s dense and dilapidated centre and industrial north house the city’s working-classes, the bourgeois and middle classes occupy the south along beaches and green hills.⁴³ The north of the city has the highest density of social housing. In the centre, where the city’s poorest neighbourhoods are found, most buildings are private, with only 6% social housing.⁴⁴ The coexistence of

very wealthy and very poor neighbourhoods has its origins in the role of the city’s port that brought riches from (former) colonies and immigrants from around the world and made the city an important node in networks of both legal and illegal international trade. The city’s segregation is undergirded by the enclosure of private residences; “two thirds of the apartment complexes built between 1993 and 2017 were conceived as enclosed.”⁴⁵

However, over the last two decades, a slow process of gentrification has been taking shape with an increase of housing prices in specific areas in the city-centre, creating a “juxtaposition of social extremes.”⁴⁶

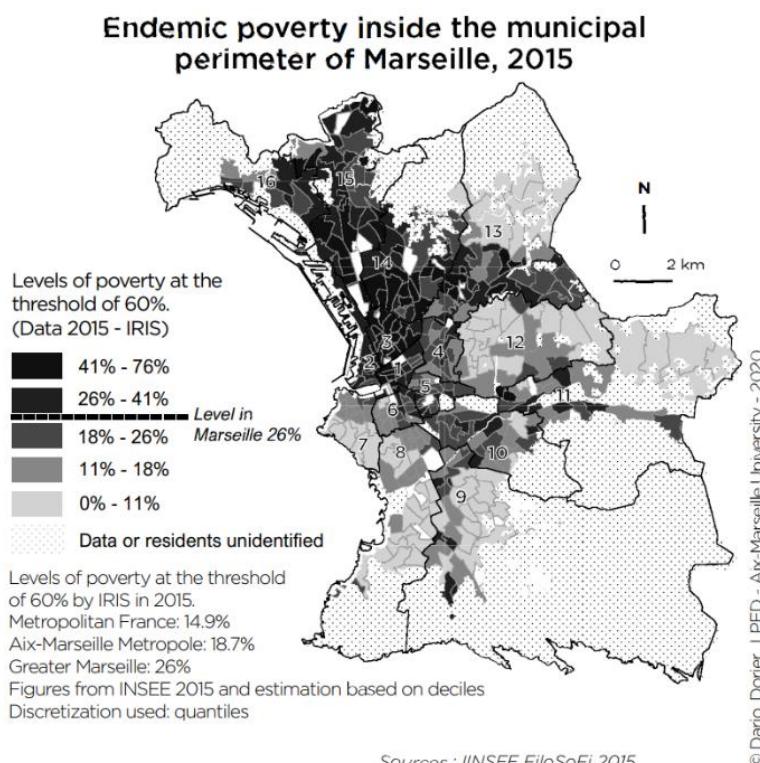


Figure 1: Endemic poverty inside the municipal perimeter of Marseille, 2015. Dorier, 2023: 223.

³⁷ Biass and Fabiani, “Marseille, a City beyond Distinction.”

³⁸ Francis, “D'où Vient La Réputation Sulfureuse de Marseille ?”

³⁹ Collet, *Du Taudis Au Airbnb*.

⁴⁰ Maisetti and Mattina, “The Pitfalls of ‘Marseillology’ and How to Avoid Them.”

⁴¹ INSEE, “Recensement de La Population.”

⁴² Dorier, “Marseille as Privatopia. The Collapsing City, the Gated City.”

⁴³ Dorier and Dario, “Gated Communities in Marseille, Urban Fragmentation Becoming the Norm?”; Dorier, “Marseille as Privatopia. The Collapsing City, the Gated City.”

⁴⁴ Dorier, “Marseille as Privatopia. The Collapsing City, the Gated City.”

⁴⁵ Dorier, 239.

⁴⁶ Collet, *Du Taudis Au Airbnb*.

Urban renovation projects

The rent increase in Marseille's inner-city is induced by several dynamics. These include the local government's disengagement from underprivileged central spaces and support of private investments, its neoliberal strategy creating space for speculation, an intense urban marketing policy and a number of urban renovation projects led by the state have led to rising real estate prices and rents.⁴⁷ These dynamics are not separate; they reinforce and profit from each other. Since 1995, the city-centre of Marseille has been the object of large-scale requalification and renovation projects, the three most important ones being Euroméditerranée, the *Opération Grand Centre-Ville de Marseille* (Operation Big City-Centre of Marseille) and the most recent *Plan Marseille en Grand* (Marseille in Big). Euroméditerranée, an "Operation of National Interest," was launched in 1995 as a "shock therapy" aimed at improving the city's attractiveness and making it a competitive metropolitan centre.⁴⁸ Responding to "local incompetence," the central state took over supervision of nearly 40 percent of the municipal territory.⁴⁹ With its 480 hectares, it is the biggest operation of urban renovation in Europe, financed by European Union, the state and regional and local governments.⁵⁰ Its aim is to create "a new imaginary of the city" and "reinvent its identity," to strengthen its influence in the Mediterranean region through economic and cultural development and urban restructuring.⁵¹ Euroméditerranée is at the origin of large-scale renovations, expropriating and displacing many people. For instance, in the case of the rue de la République in 2007, a big wave of evictions took place in one of the most central streets of Marseille. The documentary *Les Indésirables de la rue de la République* (The Undesirables of the rue de la République) compiles testimonies of people displaced during this event.⁵²

Similarly to Euroméditerranée, the main aims of the operation Grand Centre-Ville pertain to the city's image: restore the facades of buildings, especially on major streets that are the "vitrine of the city" and to requalify "anarchic public space."⁵³ Marseille en Grand is a strategy initiated in 2021 by President Emmanuel Macron that responds to a "security, social and health emergency," supported by a €5 billion budget.⁵⁴ In his inaugural speech, the President of France articulated the operation as a "dream" of making this "poor but vibrant city" the "Mediterranean capital."⁵⁵ In addition to improving Marseille's attractiveness, these projects also articulate the need to reconnect the city to the *République* and to catch up with "major delays" in the city's development and remedy its "malfunctions."⁵⁶

Gentrification with colonial traits: displacement of Marseille's 'undesirables'

Who, then, is this city being built for? The urban renewal projects presented above all seem to be addressed to a public outside of the city, to tourists, investors, and potential middle- and upper-class newcomers. Rather than addressing the needs of Marseille's residents, a new image of the city is being created, well-illustrated by the central skyline project of Euroméditerranée. The face

⁴⁷ Dorier, "Marseille as Privatopia. The Collapsing City, the Gated City"; Collet, *Du Taudis Au Airbnb*; Dorier and Dario, "Gated Communities in Marseille, Urban Fragmentation Becoming the Norm?"

⁴⁸ Beschon, "Justification of Renewal as a Long and Winding Road."

⁴⁹ Beschon.

⁵⁰ Euroméditerranée, "Partenaires."

⁵¹ Beschon, "Justification of Renewal as a Long and Winding Road," 213.

⁵² *Les Indésirables de La Rue de La République*.

⁵³ Ville de Marseille and Soleam, "Opération Grand Centre Ville. Concertation Publique 2011."

⁵⁴ Macron, "Discours du Président de la République « Marseille en Grand »"; Élysée, "Marseille en grand."

⁵⁵ Macron, "Discours du Président de la République « Marseille en Grand »."

⁵⁶ Services de l'État dans les Bouches du Rhône, "Marseille En Grand."

of Marseille is being changed. The chaos is being tidied up, the informal formalised, and the poor must either be transformed into a tourist attraction too or move to the margins and invisible corners of the city.

Indeed, an ethnographic study undertaken by Beschon during an internship in the Public Development Agency (EPAEM) responsible for the management of Euroméditerranée clearly showed the project's intention to replace a certain population by another,⁵⁷ mirroring local urban development strategies, "namely the city's renovation to be achieved through the eviction of its 'undesirable' populations. In 2001, then Mayor Jean-Claude Gaudin contrasted 'working-class... North African [and] Comorian Marseille' with 'residents who pay taxes,' and two years later, his deputy for urban planning Claude Valette outdid him: 'We need people who create wealth. We must get rid of half the city's residents. The heart of the city deserves something else.'"⁵⁸ The words used internally, revealed through Beschon's investigation, are directly inspired by a colonial vocabulary, showing the project's colonising ambitions. For instance, the EPAEM's president said describing the objective of the development project, "It is not a simple renovation but a conquest of new territory by new populations."⁵⁹ Thus, Le Dantec writes, "devitalise, destroy and reconquer are not just empty words here."⁶⁰ Sex worker and former secretary general of the French sex workers' union STRASS Morgane Merteuil explains that sex workers are part of the undesired residents that developers and politicians want to get rid of:

"The logic of gentrification calls for *putes*⁶¹ to be removed neighbourhood by neighbourhood in order to renovate them."⁶²

Behind the alleged intercultural and cosmopolitan character of Euroméditerranée promoting "social diversity," the urban renovation project has taken the form of a "conquest" with a high degree of social violence towards vulnerable people inhabiting the city-centre.⁶³ "We are going to the Indians; these are Indians, and we are bringing them twelve thousand settlers. Because that's the reality! The goal is also what to do so the project serves them." These were the words of the Urban Design director of Euroméditerranée during an internal meeting about the project's social strategy. The Public Relations director replied, "this project is not just for two thousand idiots [*pleu-pleu*]! We need to put the project back in the context of the broader *Métropole*."⁶⁴ The gentrification process in Marseille is created from the top, it is forced upon the city through these urban renewal projects. Rather than a slow process, Marseille has become the scene of a veritable "urban war against the poor."⁶⁵ But the people being displaced are not simply poor; for the developers they are part of the 'undesirable population' because of their race, their religion and their ways of getting by.

⁵⁷ Beschon, "Euroméditerranée ou la ville de papier."

⁵⁸ Beschon, "Justification of Renewal as a Long and Winding Road," 200.

⁵⁹ Beschon, 212.

⁶⁰ Le Dantec, *La Ville-sans-Nom*.

⁶¹ The word *putes*, a slur that has been politically reclaimed and is used amongst sex workers. An English equivalent could be "whore," as it is used for example in the "International Whores' Day" on the 2nd of June or in the title of sex worker Jill Nagle's book *Whores and Other Feminists*.

⁶² Merteuil in Ponticelli, Carle, and Guillibert, "Strass et stigma," 38.

⁶³ Géa and Gasquet-Cyrus, "Approche sociolangagière des changements urbains et de la gentrification à Marseille."

⁶⁴ Beschon, "Justification of Renewal as a Long and Winding Road," 202.

⁶⁵ Collet, *Du Taudis Au Airbnb*.

Renovating through abandonment

Alongside gentrification and urban renewal, there is a second, parallel process that leads to the displacement of poor and racialised people from central parts of the city. This process is known as the city's "system of passive government" that became internationally known when two buildings collapsed in the rue d'Aubagne, a street in the central working-class neighbourhood Noailles on 5 November 2018, killing eight people.⁶⁶ This event was followed by a wave of *arrêtés de peril* (orders of danger), following which occupants were evacuated from their homes based on "imminent danger" that they faced in their building. Thus, 1'300 people were evacuated from their homes in the ten days that followed the collapse in Noailles, and more than 5'000 have been displaced since.⁶⁷ Indeed, maps tracking the rehousing of these evacuated people show that there is a displacement taking place, a displacement away from the city-centre.

"Changing the population and renovating through abandonment," is the conclusion that Collet draws in his work *Du taudis au Airbnb: Petite histoire des luttes urbaines à Marseille (2018-2023)* (From dilapidated housing to Airbnb: A short history of urban struggles in Marseille (2018-2023)).⁶⁸ The collapse of buildings in one of Marseille's most central neighbourhoods, marked by its many Maghrebi and west-African shops and restaurants, served as an unexpected opportunity and offered exceptional resources to "realise the impossible or unthinkable";⁶⁹ to change the inner-city's population, justified by arguments of safe and sane housing conditions. Evictions from the city-centre thus served to modify the social composition of Marseille's central districts.⁷⁰ It is important to underline the fact that the abandonment strategy of the municipality could be so efficient only because it was inhabited by poor immigrant people, many of whom were undocumented (*Sans Papiers*): "Occupied by the poor, the *Sans Papiers* and the precarious, (...) the centre can be abandoned and collapse. You can disappear."⁷¹ A former executive of the metropolitan urban renewal agency Soleam explained that there is a link between the passive government system on the one hand, and the heavy urban renewal interventions taking place in other parts of the city on the other hand. Both these dynamics use sanitation and security to legitimise displacement, and neither take into account local problems and needs, but both impose a "fantasised vision of a sanitised, touristy city-centre with no 'deviant' uses."⁷²

Reinventing Marseille's identity from above

After over two decades of urban renewal projects, despite the 'tragedy of the rue d'Aubagne,' Marseille's image has changed significantly. What is perceived as dangerous has been pushed to the north of the city, where most of Marseille's social housing is located. The city-centre now attracts tourists and wealthier newcomers as a "poor but radiant" mediterranean city, loud and cheerful with a southern flair. This dynamic was supported by the project Marseille-Provence 2013 that made Marseille "European capital of culture," a status followed by that of "European capital of sport" acquired in 2017.⁷³ The arrival of the high-speed rail (the TGV) in 2001 and the establishment of the tramway in the city-centre in 2007 increased the city's accessibility to people coming from other parts of France or Europe. Marseille is now France's most important port for cruise

⁶⁶ Dorier, "Marseille as Privatopia. The Collapsing City, the Gated City."

⁶⁷ ibid., Dorier and Dario, "Gated Communities in Marseille, Urban Fragmentation Becoming the Norm?"

⁶⁸ Collet, *Du Taudis Au Airbnb*.

⁶⁹ Collet.

⁷⁰ Dorier and Dario, "Gated Communities in Marseille, Urban Fragmentation Becoming the Norm?"

⁷¹ Collet, *Du Taudis Au Airbnb*, 37.

⁷² Patris in Collet, 78.

⁷³ Géa and Gasquet-Cyrus, "Approche sociolangagière des changements urbains et de la gentrification à Marseille."

ships and fifth most important in the Mediterranean. It was the New York Times's second favourite destination and National Geographic's fifth most beautiful coastal city.⁷⁴ An article of The Times writes, "Marseille is the most irrepressible city in France. In recent times the country's second settlement has experienced a rush to respectability."⁷⁵ The intense urban marketing campaigns driven by Euroméditerranée and Marseille en Grand have managed to sell the city for the very things that they are destroying and the very people they are displacing by exoticising them. The requalification projects sell the exceptionality of Marseille, constituted of people's precarity in the city-centre, giving it names such as "the capital of the South," "a world-city," a creative core, "poor but vibrant," a city of migration that stands in for a welcoming France.⁷⁶ "Whether in the commercial, real estate, hospitality or sports sectors, each of these projects will contribute to enhancing the face of Marseille without obscuring the city's existing appeal," can be read on the official website of Marseille.⁷⁷ Marseille's history as the oldest city in France is also often mentioned in tourist guides, alongside its colonial past: "La Canebière, the city's main drag, is rediscovering its imperial dignity. Once again, there are glimpses of the grandeur created by colonial commerce that, from the 17th century through to the early 20th, made Marseille mighty."⁷⁸

Exoticisation and Marseille's colonial history

*"No one wants Marseille to be only on its best behaviour; that's not the point of the city at all. (...) Its DNA has equal parts of the seductive, the bombastic and the picaresque; (...) the gentrification is relative — there is far too much southern blood pumping through this city's veins."*⁷⁹

The city in these quotes is heavily personified, the writer draws on words such as "blood running through the city's veins" and "DNA." But who are these people with "seductive, bombastic and picaresque DNA," "southern blood," allegedly bad "behaviour?" The inspiration for this personality ascribed to Marseille, based on a language that others it, is drawn from people living in the city who usually don't get a voice to represent themselves. The image of the loud and cheerful *Marseillais.es* with migrant background is a stereotype that has nothing to do with people's realities who, as we have seen, are included in the urban restructuring processes merely as an asset to market the city. The mix of attributes such as exotic and seductive, of bad but attractive cannot be separated from the city's history as the gateway to the French colonial empire and as a hub of trade and prostitution, which in turn originated in the role of Marseille's port since the late sixteenth century when it was a penal colony and a military port. From the end of the eighteenth century to the end of the French colonial empire, Marseille was called the *Porte d'Orient*, Gateway

⁷⁴ Géa and Gasquet-Cyrus.

⁷⁵ Times Travel, "Marseilles Travel Guide. When to Go, What to Do, and Why You'll Love It."

⁷⁶ Macron, "Discours du Président de la République « Marseille en Grand »."

⁷⁷ Mairie de Marseille, "Welcome to Marseille. Marseille Provence: gateway to France."

⁷⁸ Times Travel, "Marseilles Travel Guide. When to Go, What to Do, and Why You'll Love It."

⁷⁹ Times Travel.

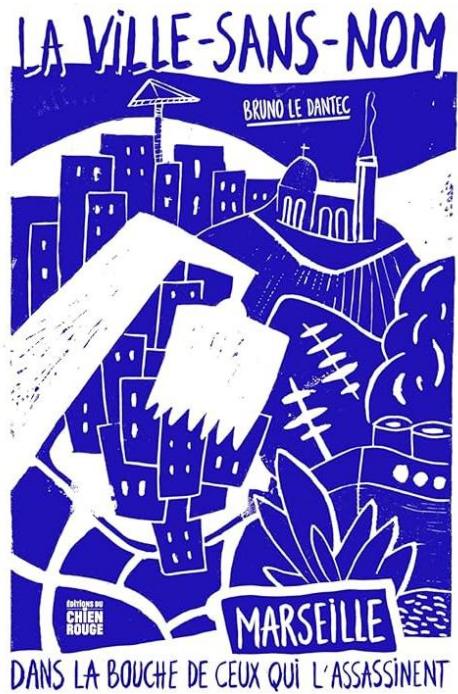


Figure 2: The cover of the book *La Ville-Sans-Nom*. *Marseille dans la bouche de ceux qui l'assassinent* (*The City-Without-a-Name. Marseille in the mouths of those who are killing it*), showing the city being repainted in white. Le Dantec, 2024.

to the Orient, an image that served as the inspiration for the first colonial exposition of Marseille in 1906, where a set of statues was inaugurated representing *Marseille*, *Colonie Grecque*, *Marseille Porte de l'Orient* and the *Colonies d'Afrique* and *Colonies d'Asie*. These statues are still where they were in 1906, on the stairs descending from the city's train station. Marseille's port was both France's most privileged colonial embarkation point and the place where goods arrived from the colonial empire and beyond.⁸⁰ Marseille was also said to be part of the Orient as "Metropole of the Empire." Writing about a painting by Joseph Vernet, 1754, the Marseille journalist Méry says, "many views of the port remind us that the Orient begins in Marseille."⁸¹ The port of Marseille, where the Greek first arrived and founded the city, where loots from the colonies arrived, also brought in sailors, merchants, soldiers, labourers, seasonal workers, travellers, refugees and migrants from Italy and the French Colonial Empire. This presence of a "floating population" contributed to the expansion of prostitution in the city. Sylvain Pattieu writes that by the end of the nineteenth century, about a fourth of the sex workers in Marseille were born abroad and highlights the central role that "geographical estrangement played in prostitution."⁸² In 1878, an area dedicated for prostitution was created to contain its most visible forms. In this neighbourhood, called *Quartier Réserve* (Reserved District), situated on

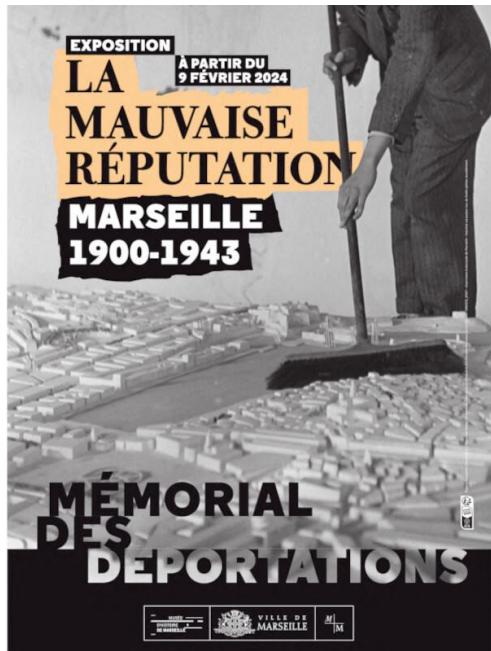


Figure 4: A poster for the exhibition *La Mauvaise Réputation. Marseille 1900-1943* (*The Bad Reputation. Marseille 1900-1943*) about the destruction of the *Quartier Réserve*, the evacuation of 20'000 people and the deportation of 1'500 people during the nazi occupation. Musée d'Histoire de Marseille, 2024.



Figure 3: A map showing the *Quartier Réserve* which existed from 1878 to 1943 in Marseille. Huc, 2021.

the north shore of the Old Harbour, about 90 brothels were found in fifteen narrow streets.⁸³ The *Quartier Réserve* was in line with the so-called *French System*, a system that tolerated prostitution and regulated it through the registration of sex workers, obligatory medical check-ups, controls by the *police des mœurs* (vice squad) and spatially containing it in brothels or apartments. This system is today referred to as "regulationism."⁸⁴ During World War II, the *Quartier Réserve* was qualified as Marseille's "criminal neighbourhood" and "Europe's canker" by the nazis and destroyed at Hitler's command in 1943, after deporting 800 "suspects" to concentration camps.⁸⁵ As our Times journalist writes, "for years the sea brought in trade, but also the plague

⁸⁰ Joutard, "Marseille, porte de l'Orient."

⁸¹ Méry in Joutard.

⁸² Pattieu, "Marseille," 135.

⁸³ Huc, *Marseille interdite 1878/1943. Histoire de l'ancien quartier rouge*.

⁸⁴ Ripa, "Regulating Prostitution"; Vann, "Desiring Whiteness."

⁸⁵ Huc, *Marseille interdite 1878/1943. Histoire de l'ancien quartier rouge*.

and a world-class collection of huddled masses.”⁸⁶ Thus, the past image of Marseille as a cosmopolitan colonial metropolis also had its other side, in which the city was perceived as a place of thugs (*nervis*), a “pimp-city” that “gives its sons to the sea and its daughters to sailors.”⁸⁷ Marseille’s status as a prosperous city holding France’s main port disappeared as its port was surpassed by others, the city started having financial problems and was placed under state tutelage. The independence of the French colonies from the 1950s on led Marseille into an economic crisis, along with deindustrialisation. The *Quartier Réservé* and the “French Connection,” the city’s economic decline, clientelism and xenophobic and racist ideologies made Marseille’s now famous “sulphurous reputation.”⁸⁸

Laws against the “Prostitution System”

However, as shown above, there was a shift in Marseille’s representation and image over the last two decades: from a negative reputation obsessed with Marseille’s insecurity to an image of an exciting because different, “poor but radiant” city. Although prostitution, drug dealing and other “illicit” activities that made Marseille “dangerous” and “immoral” have not disappeared, they have been erased from the mainstream discourse representing the city. As the urban renewal projects try to sanitise the city, the discourse has been polished too.

Along with the representation of Marseille, the politics regarding prostitution have seen a paradigm change over the last two decades, shifting from repressive to victimising. The position of France towards prostitution however has been abolitionist since the end of World War II.⁸⁹ Initiated with the law Marthe Richard of 1946, the abolitionist regime abolished the regulation of prostitution. In 2003, the Internal Security Act, known as the *Loi Sarkozy II*, reintroduced passive **soliciting** into French law. The article n°18 of this new law made active and passive **soliciting**⁹⁰ an offence punishable by two months' imprisonment and a €3’750 fine.⁹¹ In addition to addressing **soliciting**, the *Loi Sarkozy II* also created new offences and penalties relating to begging, gatherings in communal areas of collective housing complexes, squatting and the Travelling Community.⁹² This law thus singled out certain figures in the city as a threat, people to be removed from public space.

The *Loi Sarkozy II* aimed to do what urban development projects have been doing to Marseille’s central districts: change it into something more “respectable” by removing undesired people, views and places from its scene and image. Furthermore, the criminalisation of **soliciting** was used to fight against immigration, as the Minister of the Interior of the time explained.⁹³ A new law adopted in 2016, the *Loi n°2016-444 visant à renforcer la lutte contre le système prostitutionnel et accompagner les personnes prostituées*⁹⁴ (Law n°2016-444 aimed at strengthening the fight against the prostitution system and supporting prostitutes, hereafter called *Loi 2016*) shifted the subsequent governments’ approach to prostitution from repressive to victimising, abolishing the offence of **soliciting** and introducing the criminalisation of the purchase of a sexual act. This new

⁸⁶ Times Travel, “Marseilles Travel Guide. When to Go, What to Do, and Why You’ll Love It.”

⁸⁷ Brauquier 1926 in Huc, *Marseille interdite 1878/1943. Histoire de l’ancien quartier rouge*.

⁸⁸ Francis, “D'où Vient La Réputation Sulfureuse de Marseille ?”

⁸⁹ An overview of different state approaches to prostitution is provided in the box on page 18.

⁹⁰ By law, soliciting refers to a person publicly inciting someone, by active means or a passive attitude, to have a sexual interaction in exchange for remuneration.

⁹¹ Act Up-Paris, “*Loi Sarkozy: Journée de La Colère (2)*; Sarkozy, Projet de loi pour la sécurité intérieure.

⁹² Sarkozy, *Projet de loi pour la sécurité intérieure*.

⁹³ Schaffauser, *Les luttes des putres*, 31.

⁹⁴ Hollande, LOI n° 2016-444 du 13 avril 2016 visant à renforcer la lutte contre le système prostitutionnel et à accompagner les personnes prostituées.

law aims to “reinforce the fight against the prostitution system” based on four axes: “the fight against procuring, the decriminalisation of prostituted persons and support for those wishing to leave prostitution, the prevention of prostitution practices and the prohibition of the purchase of sexual acts.”⁹⁵ Aurore Bergé, the Minister for Equality between Women and Men and the Fight against Discrimination writes that the law is a result of a new awareness that prostitution is a direct violence for those who are its victims and an indirect violence against all women because of the stereotypes that it bears.⁹⁶ The aim of the law is “to make clients understand that they are taking part in a form of exploitation of the vulnerability of others” by the prohibition of purchasing sexual acts and “to reduce trafficking in human beings and sexual exploitation” by criminalising the prostitution of others.⁹⁷ A new strategy presented in 2024 focuses essentially on improving the implementation of the *Loi 2016* and is mainly about reaffirming France’s abolitionist values.⁹⁸ These laws resulted from lobbying of neo-abolitionist groups such as the association Amicale du Nid and other religious conservative organisations, redefining sex work through a repressive paradigm.⁹⁹ For the elaboration of the law, so-called “survivors of prostitution,” people who had exited sex work, were heard and three round tables were organised with abolitionist associations. Meanwhile, community health associations and sex worker rights defenders were granted only one meeting.¹⁰⁰

Both the measures against procuring and the measures to support sex workers wishing to leave prostitution have been criticised by an important number of associations working with sex workers. The only measure that the law provides to accompany “prostitutes” is the *Parcours de Sortie* (“Exit Path”). Its aim is to support people wanting to leave prostitution and is presented as one of the key initiatives of the *Loi 2016*.¹⁰¹ A person wishing to enter the *Parcours de Sortie* presents a file a departmental committee, which decides whether the request is transmitted to the prefect who then admits the applicant to the “path.” Being admitted to the *Parcours de Sortie* means obtaining a temporary residence permit for six months (renewable three times), a financial allowance “for social integration” of €330 per month for people not eligible for minimum welfare benefits, and support from an accredited association for access to social housing, training, healthcare and rights.¹⁰²

A few associations have the statal authorisation to assist people on this “path” but the most important one by far is the abolitionist movement L’Amicale du Nid. The rights obtained by this measure are very precarious and for some, contradictory: the allowance of €330 seems very low given that the poverty threshold in France is set at €1'026. The temporary residence permit, besides not allowing to plan for the future, prevents access to social housing and makes benefiting from other social services very difficult.¹⁰³ Moreover, whereas 500 to 1'000 sex workers were originally envisaged to integrate the program every year, only 341 had benefited from it three years after its implementation, corresponding to about 1% of France’s sex workers.¹⁰⁴ Between 2016 and 2019,

⁹⁵ Bergé, “Stratégie de Lutte Contre Le Système Prostitutionnel et l’exploitation Sexuelle,” 6.

⁹⁶ Bergé, “Stratégie de Lutte Contre Le Système Prostitutionnel et l’exploitation Sexuelle.”

⁹⁷ Lavaud-Legendre, “Quand le législateur se veut pédagogue...”

⁹⁸ Cordier, “Prostitution : le gouvernement réaffirme la position abolitionniste de la France”; Bergé, “Stratégie de Lutte Contre Le Système Prostitutionnel et l’exploitation Sexuelle.”

⁹⁹ Giametta and Le Bail, “The National and Moral Borders of the 2016 French Law on Sex Work.”

¹⁰⁰ Jacquemart and Jakšić, “Droits des femmes ou femmes sans droits ?”

¹⁰¹ Amicale du Nid, “Amicale Du Nid - Bilan 2020. Parcours de Sortie de Prostitution.”

¹⁰² Gaudy and Bail, “Synthèse comparative des rapports d’évaluation de la loi française sur la prostitution de 2016,” 18.

¹⁰³ ACCEPTESS-T et al., “Réponses à l’évaluation de La Loi 2016.”

¹⁰⁴ ACCEPTESS-T et al.

only five applications to integrate the *Parcours de Sortie* were approved in Marseille.¹⁰⁵

Apart from the *Parcours de Sortie*, the other measures of the *Loi 2016* affecting sex workers are all repressive or preventive. Community health organisations working with sex workers therefore denounce a “measure designed above all to support [the abolitionist] ideology rather than genuinely help people.”¹⁰⁶ Like for the urban renewal projects in Marseille, the main underlying interest of this measure is representation and image, driven by ideology, and supporting people is primarily a façade.¹⁰⁷

Regulationism

Regulationism is a system of state control of prostitution. Introduced in France around 1800, it was later adopted across Europe as the “French System.”¹⁰⁸ It relied on strict regulation through police surveillance and mandatory registration and medical examinations; those who refused (the *Insoumises*, “Rebellious” or “In-subordinate”) faced prison sentences. The key institution of regulationism was the brothel, which spatially delimited prostitution and made it always accessible to control. From the 1860s on, both puritan and progressive movements began campaigning against this system, making the abolition of regulationism their aim, inspired by the anti-slavery movement.¹⁰⁹

Abolitionism

Through the influence of these movements, regulationism was gradually abolished; in France, brothels were banned in 1946, and compulsory medical registration was ended in 1960. Puritan abolitionism criticises regulationism for formally organising immorality, whilst progressive abolitionism, led by Judith Butler and the “Federation for the Abolition of Government Regulation of Prostitution,” opposes the strict and often arbitrary policing and state control of sex workers.¹¹⁰

Contemporary abolitionism, or neo-abolitionism

Today, abolitionism no longer seeks to end regulationism but rather prostitution itself, viewing it as an affront to human dignity and a specifically gendered violence against women. The aim of this movement is to fight against human trafficking and the “exploitation of the prostitution” of others, removing the distinction between “free and forced prostitution” and defining sex workers as victims.¹¹¹ This contemporary form of abolitionism is being enforced in France based on the model adopted in Sweden.

Shared stigmatisations, parallel dynamics

There is a certain parallel between the representations of Marseille and representations of sex workers. Both have been othered, made synonymous with insecurity, immorality and insalubrity, both have been fetishised and exoticised. Indeed, sex workers are often part of what allegedly makes Marseille’s image of a criminal and dangerous city; they are part of the “urban undesirables.”¹¹² The discourse projected onto the city and its people is based on colonial, racist, patriarchal and neoliberal systems of thought that marginalise those who do not comply with the image of the ‘normal French person.’ Sex workers find themselves at a crossroad of these

¹⁰⁵ Le Bail and Giometta, “Loi contre le « système prostitutionnel ».”

¹⁰⁶ ACCEPTESS-T et al., “Réponses à l’évaluation de La Loi 2016,” 6.

¹⁰⁷ Papillon, “La dignité, nouveau masque de la moralité en droit pénal.”

¹⁰⁸ Ripa, “Regulating Prostitution.”

¹⁰⁹ Mathieu, “L'espace de la prostitution. Eléments empiriques et perspectives en sociologie de la déviance.”

¹¹⁰ Mathieu; Deschamps, “La figure de l’étrangère dans la prostitution.”

¹¹¹ Act Up-Paris, “L’abolitionnisme condamne les prostituées à la précarité”; Merteuil, “Le Travail Du Sexe Contre Le Travail.”

¹¹² P. and Kamath, *Urban Undesirables*.

marginalisations that the ideologies of capitalism, patriarchy, citizenship, race and ableism create.

The fact that Marseille and sex workers have been depicted as problematically different from the aspired image of the *République* means that sex workers in Marseille face an amalgam of measures that aim at displacing or realigning them. For instance, the allowance that people in the *Parcours de Sortie* obtain is called “Social Integration Allowance,” making clear the government’s idea of a socially integrated person. The *Loi Sarkozy II* and the following *Loi 2016* and the urban renewal projects complement each other in “cleaning” the city from its undesired populations.

It is difficult to obtain data on sex workers due to the stigma attached to the profession and because the space of sex work is “fluid and informal,” with boundaries blurred and numbers changing.¹¹³ However, the annual reports of the community health organisation Autres Regards indicate that over 80 percent of the sex workers whom the organisation supports are migrants who do not have French citizenship.¹¹⁴ Because of these factors, which are exacerbated by stereotypes of insalubrity and insecurity tied to their presence and activity, sex workers are part of the “undesired” that the urban renewal projects try to remove from the city-centre. As sex worker Thierry Schaffauser writes, “our very existence is seen as an offence (...). [Our existence] cannot be eliminated by taking our life, but we can be forbidden to exist and to circulate wherever we can be seen by others. We have the right to exist but only hidden.”¹¹⁵ The displacement that is happening in Marseille’s city-centre is reinforced for sex workers through the abolitionist laws. Reports published by associations that work with sex workers show that both the *Loi Sarkozy II* and the *Loi 2016* push them more and more to the city’s margins.¹¹⁶ The criminalisation of *soliciting* and the criminalisation of the purchase of a sexual act forces sex workers to seek isolated or invisible areas to work.¹¹⁷ Events such as the Olympic and Paralympic Games that were held in France in 2024 are used to justify social control and impose obligations to leave the country (*OQTF*) on sex workers based on the “myth of ‘increased prostitution’” linked to international sport events.¹¹⁸

Another similarity in the discourse about Marseille and sex workers is the absence of the people’s voices who are being represented. However, neither the sex workers nor other inhabitants of Marseille are without agency. Despite all these discriminating and marginalising factors, sex workers find ways to make life livable in this city between abandonment and urban renewal.



Figure 5: A protest banner held up at the Porte d’Aix in Marseille saying “Toustes les queers détestent l’État. Abolissez la police pas les putes,” “All queers hate the state. Abolish the police not the putes.” Mars Infos Autonomes.

¹¹³ Mathieu, “L’espace de la prostitution. Eléments empiriques et perspectives en sociologie de la déviance.”

¹¹⁴ Association Autres Regards, “Rapport d’activité 2019.”

¹¹⁵ Schaffauser, *Les luttes des putes*, 29.

¹¹⁶ ACCEPTESS-T et al., “Réponses à l’évaluation de La Loi 2016.”

¹¹⁷ Le Bail and Giametta, “Loi contre le « système prostitutionnel ».”

¹¹⁸ Fédération Parapluie Rouge, “Les Jeux Olympiques et Paralympiques : Un Confinement Social Pour Les Travailleuses Du Sexe.”

The counter-city from below



Marseille Mirage

*Marseille mirage, Marseille rivage,
Marseille ravage... Marseille marécage*

*Marseille tes filles tombent sous le soleil,
Cruelle dérision... Liberté factice
Tu rêves tes jours, tu maquilles tes nuits,
Regards croisés de femmes, ivresse de l'interdit*

*Prisonnière d'image de ton image,
Ni femme ni homme, étrange poids de différence
Voiler ton regard, masquer ton désir,
Tu te cherches au miroir, tel un ange maudit*

*Marseille clivage, Marseille sauvage,
Marseille tendue d'espoir au bord du naufrage*

*Les amazones lentement se découvrent,
Savourent leurs outrages, entre chaire et louve
La nuit s'habille en travestie, écran noir ci,
Reflet de tes lucides images¹¹⁹*

*Marseille mirages, Marseille shores,
Marseille ravages... Marseille marshes*

*Marseille your daughters fall under the sun,
Mocking cruelty... Phoney freedom
You dream your days, you paint your nights,
Women exchanging looks, intoxicating and forbidden*

*Prisoner of your own image
Neither woman nor man, strange weight of difference
Veil your gaze, mask your desire
You seek yourself in the mirror, like a cursed angel*

*Marseille divided, Marseille savage
Marseille full of hope on the verge of sinking*

*Amazons slowly discovering themselves,
Savouring their outrages, a she-wolf at dusk
The night dresses in drag, dark screen
A reflection of your lucid images*

The song above speaks from a place of marginalisation. It sounds like a love letter to Marseille, whilst also being a testimony of its stigmatisation and precarity. As in other representations of Marseille, the song personifies the city, but differently this time. It speaks of people who are othered and who carry the weight of their difference. It speaks of dreams and of being a prisoner of its own image, of being perceived as uncontrollable (*sauvage*). Of division (*clivage*) and devastation (*ravage*) but also of hope and being proud of who they are.

The city's image is not only dominated by those who paint it in demonising or exoticising ways. In groups marginalised by the government and mainstream conceptions of "France," Marseille is known for being a *terre d'accueil* ("land of hospitality").¹²⁰ People from African and South American countries, queer people and political activists from the autonomous scene come to Marseille because they can find a community and networks of solidarity there. The improvised, the rebellious stereotype is reappropriated and embraced and feeds into the organisation of resistance against the displacement taking place as a result of urban renewal, evictions, gentrification, and various stigmatising and marginalising laws. Marseille's alleged otherness within the *République* is reclaimed through giving the city the nickname "*Planète Mars*," conveying the idea that Marseille is a different planet.¹²¹ The urban space in Marseille and its image are thus contested: "The social diversity 'from above' has not succeeded in completely ousting the working classes."¹²² Who owns the image of a place? Even if there are very consistent attempts to sell Marseille in an exoticised and romanticised way to tourists, cruisers and wealthier newcomers, the imaginary of a city is also rooted in and (sub)culturally produced by its inhabitants. With determination, the people who

¹¹⁹ There Are No Direct Flights from New York to Marseille.

¹²⁰ Mahjoubi, "Une histoire contemporaine de Marseille"; Collet, *Du Taudis Au Airbnb*.

¹²¹ IAM, *Planète Mars*.

¹²² Géa and Gasquet-Cyrus, "Approche sociolangagière des changements urbains et de la gentrification à Marseille," 13.

resist eviction from their neighbourhoods leave their traces everywhere in the city's public spaces, through graffitiies, posters for self-organised events, political banners, songs and independent zines.



Figure 6: Messages in the streets of Marseille, put up by the feminist group Les Colleureuses de Marseille, saying “Sex work is work” and “Je ne suis pas exotique = tes fantasmes sont coloniaux,” “I am not exotic = your fantasies are colonial.” @collages_feministes_marseille.

The centre of Marseille is home to an impressive number of associations, self-managed spaces and various community organisation facilities. Marseille is known for a couple of autonomously managed places like the McDonalds that was occupied by its former workers when it closed its doors and left everyone unemployed or the PADA, *Plateforme d'Accueil des Demandeurs d'Asile* (Welcome Platform for Asylum Seekers), and its occupied building in the Chapitre, 1st arrondissement. The mobilisation against the spread of Airbnb's (that increased by 88% in the year after the collapse in Noailles) and the gentrification of Marseille's working-class centre is led by groups close to the institutional left and others that are more autonomous.¹²³ *Autogestion* (“self-management» or «self-governance») is central in the organisation of the “undesired people” of the city. This organisation is materialised in a number of places such as the autonomous social centre La Dar, the queer archive Mémoire des Sexualités, the autonomous bar and library Manifesten, the self-managed psycho-emotional care SPAAM, the [open-price](#) alternative cinema Vidéodrome 2 and the self-managed collectives El Manba and Mille Babords. All these places support people that are marginalised, queer people, [Sans Papiers](#), asylum seekers, drug users, people with little resources. What role they play as part of the spaces created by and for sex workers in Marseille is discussed in chapter five of this thesis and visualised in a map entitled Planet Mars (p. 76-78).

2.1. The Terrain

The *terrain* of this study is situated in the tension of contested urban space, representation and criminalisation of sex work. It focuses on how the visible and invisible structures for the organisation, representation and mutual support of sex workers can exist in Marseille in an abolitionist context, embedded in a city that is being renewed and restructured to attract new and different populations and investments that replace ‘undesirables.’ The research thus looks at what can be called the network of infrastructures that sex workers make, use and imagine in Marseille. Drawing on Cirolia and Pollio’s work on queer infrastructure as objects and orientations in urban research practice, infrastructure is understood “not just as pipes or cables, but as material, social, technical and political assemblages – as ambivalent technologies suspended between multiple

¹²³ Collet, *Du Taudis Au Airbnb.*

possibilities.”¹²⁴ This broadened ontological view on infrastructure helps see and discuss the network of people, places, online platforms, political ideas, movements, actions and cultural events that are important in sex workers’ lives.

Amongst the physical places that were identified as part of these infrastructures, this study focuses on the institutionalised association Planning Familial 13, situated in the 3rd arrondissement of Marseille, the association Autres Regards and the association Mémoire des Sexualités, both located in the 1st arrondissement. Other important nodes are the community health organisation Le Spot and the LGBTQIA+ Centre. However, this network is also constituted of ephemeral places through events, meetings, festivals and chatgroups, and autonomous and “underground”¹²⁵ spaces of life and organisation. For instance, while Mémoire des Sexualités is a queer archive that focuses mainly on collecting and making archives from the LGBTQIA+ community in Marseille, monthly archival sessions called *Permanences Putes* are organised specifically for sex workers.

Autres Regards is a community health organisation working with and for sex workers since 1995 when it was founded by students and a group of cross-dressers engaging in sex work fighting against AIDS. It is part of the Fédération Parapluie Rouge that unites community health organisations for sex workers in France. The community health model that the association bases its actions on originated from popular education initiatives in favelas of Brazil in the 1950s. The concept involves health and social professionals working together with a community to identify and resolve public health problems and was introduced in France through urban social development projects in the 1980s.¹²⁶ Autres Regards further uses peer workers, meaning that people who are or used to be sex workers sit on the association’s board of directors and are part of the staff team. Rosario Veneno, who is a peer counsellor at the association and a sex worker, explained the approach called *l’aller vers* (“going towards”) and how people get to know about the association:

“We give help on different levels, be it legal support, sexual health, but also administrative, it depends on the situation of the person, right? But yes, we do a lot of work of going to find people and we also do *maraudes*, we do three different *maraudes* around Marseille, in the industrial belt of Marseille. We do one during the day in the whole city centre and another round in the evening where we actually go meet people who work in the street as well.”¹²⁷

According to Rosario Veneno, Autres Regards tries to have a “neutral” position towards the public, in order to be welcoming for a bigger group of people with diverse experiences.¹²⁸ The association fights against human trafficking whilst also offering support for sex workers. The realities faced by the people benefiting from the organisation thus range from “modern slavery” and sexual exploitation to exercising sex work as a chosen activity, within the constraints of the current context that makes their work difficult.¹²⁹

The Planning Familial is a feminist movement for popular education that was born in 1956 with the objective of providing access to sex education and contraception, enabling fulfilment in

¹²⁴ Cirolia and Pollio, “Queer Infrastructures.”

¹²⁵ Rosario Veneno, Conversation with Rosario Veneno.

¹²⁶ Milliard, “Histoire.”

¹²⁷ Rosario Veneno, Conversation with Rosario Veneno.

¹²⁸ Rosario Veneno.

¹²⁹ Many sex workers argue that their occupation is as much of a “free” choice as it is for most other people who have other professions; in a capitalist world that bases access to employment on factors such as race, class, gender, citizenship status and mental and physical health, this choice can only be called “free” in a limited way (Merteuil, “Le Travail Du Sexe Contre Le Travail”; Orellano, *Puta Feminista*; Schaffauser, *Les luttes des putes*.)

motherhood and fighting for the right to abortion. Its first centre opened in 1961 and existed clandestinely until abortion was decriminalised in 1974.¹³⁰ The feminist movement went through a process of institutionalisation, now counting 75 associations in France that are approved and subsidised by the state.¹³¹ The Planning Familial focuses both on social and political action and offers “unconditional reception” for counselling and access to contraception and abortion, regardless of the person’s financial means, citizenship status, occupation, and so on.¹³² As counsellors at the Planning Familial 13 in Marseille explained, sex workers rely on the association for this inclusive approach, its feminist stance and the possibility of anonymity.

Mémoire des Sexualités is a primarily gay archive, originally put together by its founder Christian de Leusse and now managed by a *transpédeégouine*¹³³ group.¹³⁴ Once a month, sex workers come together at the archive to learn about and put together the local history of sex workers in Marseille, to write their own stories and to educate themselves at methods of creating archival material with and from their communities. Nelle, the organiser of these *Permanences Putes*, explains that

“[the *Permanences Putes*] are sessions for sex workers only, but open to any form of sex work and also people who used to be sex workers. (...) So, on one side, we look at what archives already exist about sex work, there is a desire to do some digging there and see if there are stories, narratives of that. There is another part, where we make our own archives and that is a big part of Mémoire des Sexualités: that there are more trans archives, more dyke archives, more sex workers’ archives, more people of colour archives.”¹³⁵

The protagonists of this study all work or have worked for associations that support sex workers, whilst also being sex workers themselves. Regardless of my interlocutors’ organisations, they are all anti-abolitionist and connected to autonomous and community-led ideas and ways of organising. Many informal community spaces that sex workers create and use exist within networks of people that my interlocutors call “*affinity groups*.¹³⁶ Talking about these groups, Suzanne, a counsellor at the Planning Familial and *BDSM* sex worker, explains that what connects people within her *affinity group* is “a political relationship to the practice [of sex work] and the way of talking about it.”¹³⁷ While my interlocutors do not belong to the same *affinity groups*, their shared or similar political orientation is a uniting factor for most of them. Other issues that bring sex workers together to form a community are common realities, created through interacting factors such as race, gender, sexual orientation or origin, as well as doing the same type of sex work.

“But regarding the political ideas that are shared? It is quite vague. I would say it is generally leftists, but it goes... the spectrum of leftism is broad, about as broad as the spectrum of sex work (laughs)... But in any case, it is rather people who are not abolitionist of sex work, but who can be abolitionist of work for example, which is my case. And people who are looking for mutual aid with, I don’t know, a

¹³⁰ Julia and Dervieux, “Planning Familial : 60 Ans de La Vie d’une Femme.”

¹³¹ Romerio, “Sociohistoire de la professionnalisation au Planning familial”; “Baisses de financements des établissements d’information, de conseil conjugal et familial.”

¹³² Personal notes after a conversation with counsellors at the Planning Familial, 27 September 2024.

¹³³ *Transpédeégouine* is a term that describes queer people or a queer community using the politically reclaimed words *pédé* (“fag”) and *gouine* (“dyke”). A translation could therefore be “transfagdyke.” The term is employed here because it is the terminology used by my interlocutor Nelle who organises the *Permanences Putes* and many other queer people in Marseille.

¹³⁴ Nelle, Conversation with Nelle.

¹³⁵ Nelle.

¹³⁶ Rosario Veneno, Conversation with Rosario Veneno.

¹³⁷ Suzanne, Conversation with Suzanne.

certain idea of solidarity.”¹³⁸

“Often, I was doing activism with sex workers who were roughly the same age as me, doing about the same style of work as I do and with the same political convictions.”¹³⁹

“[The festival *Porn sur Mars*] is also affinity-based, so it’s also queer people who are a bit in the margins, you know, who decided to do this. The festival has a Global South focus with a lot of emphasis on Latin America because we are, yes, quite a few people in the collective are from there.”¹⁴⁰

Some informally created spaces are not organised along affinity but frequented by sex workers with many different realities:

“In the groups that I got involved in, it is everyone. There are no [affinity groups](#). I am not only in a network of trans women, there are people... there are even guys eh, who do sex work and who are inside. And so, it is issues that are different but that we share.”¹⁴¹

Having these interlocutors who are simultaneously sex workers and active in sex worker supporting organisations as contributors of both theory and personal narratives allows for a bottom-up, more intimate perspective on city spaces that are often made invisible. The insights, ideas and philosophical contributions of my interlocutors make it possible to understand and portray a small-scale, fine-grained network of groups, community-based organisations, collectives and events created by and for sex workers that cannot be made out from a more distant point of view. Tucker argues that there is a “continued need to focus on the relationship between sexuality and space as ‘views from the margins.’”¹⁴² This study is situated at a marginal space in different ways: the sexuality and sexual orientation of the protagonists, their occupation, their political views, and their access to city-space are all marginalised. Beyond the more visible and institutional structures Autres Regards and Planning Familial, the informal queer infrastructures of sex workers are far more complex and varied. These networks form the field of this study; their ontology is what it attempts to understand.

¹³⁸ Suzanne.

¹³⁹ Rosario Veneno, Conversation with Rosario Veneno.

¹⁴⁰ Rosario Veneno.

¹⁴¹ Victoria, Conversation with Victoria.

¹⁴² Tucker, “Geographies of Gender and Sexuality I,” 462.

3. Methodology and Knowledge

While setting up the fieldwork for this study, another tension – beyond those discussed in the previous chapter around contested urban space and representation – became more and more evident. It is created through active silencing and the criminalisation of solidarity and knowledge sharing. This chapter explores this tension and how it changed the direction and methodology of this thesis.

Theoretical framework

Sex workers are heavily targeted with prejudices and moralising, normative discourses that portray their occupation as deviant and undignified.¹⁴³ Some sex workers have described the government's abolitionist laws and the *Parcours de Sortie* as a form of "moral domination."¹⁴⁴ Furthermore, as elaborated below, their perspectives are largely invalidated through victimising, paternalistic or demonising discourses. The neo-abolitionist view that prostitution is inherently violent is based on the construction of a universal "modern woman," an image that however assumes a white, upper- or middle-class, cis-gendered, heterosexual position as the norm.¹⁴⁵

Inspired by Browne et al., this study believes that a transnational feminist queer¹⁴⁶ approach has the power to question such normative structures through "queer thinking" and centre the belief that positionality and context matter.¹⁴⁷ Moreover, feminist and queer scholarship not only interrogate normative regimes of truth but also methodological normativities.¹⁴⁸ This framework is founded on the assumption that there are no universal, objective truths and realities but situated, subjective knowledge. The transnational allows to consider the different effects of colonialisms, neoliberalisms and nationalisms in the Global South and the Global North and on different scales, "thinking about women in similar contexts across the world," while acknowledging "difference and asymmetrical power."¹⁴⁹ This framework can also be helpful to think about women* in the same place that come from different parts of the world. Transnational, feminist and queer methodologies are anchored in a political commitment to transform racialised, imperial and heterosexist power relations. This approach challenges categories such as 'researcher' and 'researched,' 'subject' and 'object' of a study, 'activist' and 'academic,' and counters the hierarchies of different places of knowledge production. Whereas usually, knowledge produced by a white man in a university of a metropole in the Global North has the most authority, this approach decentralises this power by producing knowledge from marginalised places and communities. The methodology of this research enters the field of silencing and marginalisation in a way that takes personal, situated experience seriously and that offers a queer and non-binary way of making

¹⁴³ Papillon, "La dignité, nouveau masque de la moralité en droit pénal"; Merteuil and Simonin, "Les travailleuses du sexe peuvent-elles penser leur émancipation ?"; Agustín, "The (Crying) Need for Different Kinds of Research."

¹⁴⁴ Giametta and Le Bail, "The National and Moral Borders of the 2016 French Law on Sex Work"; Aurora in Le Bail, Giametta, and Rassouw, "Que pensent les travailleur.se.s du sexe de la loi prostitution," 2018, 69.

¹⁴⁵ Jacquemart and Jakšić, "Droits des femmes ou femmes sans droits ?"

¹⁴⁶ As Jean Bessette argues, queer should not be seen as a synonym for LGBT but as "an orientation against normativity; someone, or something, is queer when s/he or it challenges the social processes that consolidate and normalise gendered, sexual, raced, and classed identities" (Bessette, "An Archive of Anecdotes: Raising Lesbian Consciousness after the Daughters of Bilitis.")

¹⁴⁷ Browne et al., "Towards Transnational Feminist Queer Methodologies," 9; Kivunja and Kuyini, "Understanding and Applying Research Paradigms in Educational Contexts."

¹⁴⁸ Browne et al., "Towards Transnational Feminist Queer Methodologies," 9.

¹⁴⁹ Alexander and Mohanty, "Cartographies of Knowledge and Power," 24–25.

sense of things, with the aim of creating a space where complexity and contradiction can be expressed. Queer, trans and queer of colour scholarship argues that knowledge is constructed in “resistant, mobile, and intimate practices.”¹⁵⁰ Therefore, communities must be positioned as “central to the solution of social problems” through a collaborative research praxis.¹⁵¹ Knowledge making is a collaborative process, which is why interlocutors are included in the research processes of planning methodology, theorising and analysis, with the aim to change the usual hierarchical roles of the ‘researcher’ and the ‘researched’.¹⁵² This follows Elena Jeffreys’ stance, a sex worker and political scientist, writing about best practice ethics when doing research into sex work: “We no longer want to be simply ‘subjects’ or ‘outsiders’ to the academic process of the study of our work – we want ‘in,’ or else we don’t believe it should happen.”¹⁵³ The constructivist lens that grounds the approach of this study interprets people’s positionalities as shaping their ways of seeing and analysing and of being perceived. This means that the researcher’s positionality too has an important influence on the research process, the chosen methodology and the interpretation of data in this project, and must therefore be subject to critical reflection.¹⁵⁴

Encountering a “vacuum of knowledge”

The original research design for this study was planned as a focus group project bringing a small group of sex workers together to discuss different themes related to the research question. Qualitative, participatory and collaborative methods were to be used to answer what alternative spatial representations and subjectivities are produced through the practices and imaginations of migrant sex workers and the association Autres Regards.¹⁵⁵ The first plan for this research project thus focused on one organisation, Autres Regards, a community health organisation founded by sex workers in 1995 that brings health and social professionals together to respond to needs of sex workers and trans people in Marseille. The methodology was envisaged as being framed by an internship or voluntary work within this organisation. With the slogan “*Nothing about us without us*”¹⁵⁶ in mind, the intention was to get involved in this association to earn trust, give back to the community and gain a better understanding of the daily life and struggles of sex workers. Different methods such as collaborative podcasting, participant observation and critical countermapping combined with go-along interviews were to be embedded in different programmes of Autres Regards.¹⁵⁷ The go-along interviews were to be conducted during the *tournées* (rounds) organised twice a week where peer social workers meet sex workers at their work-places to distribute prevention material and provide an opportunity to share personal concerns.¹⁵⁸ With these methods, the study was supposed to showcase different forms of individual and collective subjectivities and spatial imaginations that are created through practices of migrant sex workers and the organisation Autres Regards in Marseille.

¹⁵⁰ Ghaziani and Brim, “Queer Methods,” 6.

¹⁵¹ Browne et al., “Towards Transnational Feminist Queer Methodologies,” 8.

¹⁵² Jeffreys, “Sex Worker-Driven Research: Best Practice Ethics”; Williams, “Sex Work and Exclusion in the Tourist Districts of Salvador, Brazil”; Lam, “The Birth of Butterfly. Bringing Migrant Sex Workers’ Voices into the Sex Workers’ Rights Movement”; Dahl, “Femme on Femme.”

¹⁵³ Jeffreys, “Sex Worker-Driven Research: Best Practice Ethics,” 7.

¹⁵⁴ Kivunja and Kuyini, “Understanding and Applying Research Paradigms in Educational Contexts.”

¹⁵⁵ Vermathen, “Research Proposal. Autres Regards: Contesting Migrant Sex Workers’ Criminalisation, Re-Imagining Safe City Space.”

¹⁵⁶ Best Practices Policy Project and Desiree Alliance, “Nothing About Us Without Us: Sex Work HIV Policy Organizing.”

¹⁵⁷ Kusenbach, “Mitgehen als Methode Der »Go-Along« in der phänomenologischen Forschungspraxis.”

¹⁵⁸ Association Autres Regards, “Rapport d’activité 2019.”

Conducting this fieldwork turned out to be far more complex and challenging than anticipated. For a number of reasons, sex workers – especially those without legal residence permits – are difficult to reach. While this had been considered in the initial research proposal, the strategy of gaining access and trust through Autres Regards was unsuccessful. A key reason was that the association was unwilling to involve me as an intern. Although two social workers I connected with in person showed interest in my project, I was repeatedly referred to Roberta Derosas, the manager of Autres Regards. After numerous attempts to contact her, I finally received an email stating that the association did not have the interest or capacity to support my study. This made talking to sex workers increasingly difficult, as no other organisation in Marseille openly identifies as a space created for and by sex workers. Even if the internship had worked out, a focus group study would have been nearly impossible. Many sex workers benefiting from the association do so irregularly due to unstable work and living conditions and the absence of legal residency. I fully understood this challenge during my conversation with Rosario Veneno, a sex worker and peer educator at Autres Regards, who, despite being both part of the association and a sex worker herself, faced difficulties in carrying out her own project on sex workers' safe spaces called *Refuges*:

“We found ourselves with the problem of getting people together all at the same time. One time one person came, then another time two people came, and it was very difficult to hold a group actually and the idea at the beginning was a super dance workshop, work with the body, bla bla bla; it didn’t work at all. So, we said, okay, it is true that they are people who are in situations of precarity which means that they can’t come every x time to do this. So, we said to ourselves that the idea of personal stories wasn’t too bad in the end and that we could work with one person at a time doing a kind of a filmed interview in which the people talk about what they want. Like, we ask some questions, but the questions are never in relation to their life trajectories. It is always, where do you feel comfortable, what do you do to feel better and who can you count on, and which are your refuges in your everyday life. And so, from there people start to tell stories or not, depending on how they want to present themselves.”¹⁵⁹

This example shows that setting up a project that involves marginalised people is messy and often doesn't go as originally planned. The initial research design would have required much more time and resources to build relations of trust with sex workers, find moments where they are available for collaborative work, and be able to give back to research participants.

Research projects working with “subaltern groups” must “examine the degree and operation of surveillance and exclusion” that they are faced with. It was only after my first conversation for this study that I started to get an idea of the extent of these.¹⁶⁰ Arguing for a “messy approach,” Law calls for acknowledging the “profound unknowability of many phenomena that we attempt to study.”¹⁶¹ Besides the context of moralising laws such as the *Loi 2016* and urban planning projects trying to cleanse the city of ‘undesired’ populations, sex workers are actively silenced through a web of interrelated factors. Three key mechanisms not only prevent individuals from sharing experiences and participating in the elaboration of policies but also hinder solidarity and knowledge exchange amongst sex workers. These mechanisms are: 1) the requirements for obtaining social assistance through the *Parcours de Sortie*, 2) victimising discourses and, most importantly, 3) the broad definition of procuring in the Penal Code that criminalises solidarity with sex workers.¹⁶²

¹⁵⁹ Rosario Veneno, Conversation with Rosario Veneno trans. by Vermathen.

¹⁶⁰ P. and Kamath, *Urban Undesirables*, 186.

¹⁶¹ Law in Dadas, “Messy Methods,” 63.

¹⁶² Le Bail, Giametta, and Rassouw, “Que pensent les travailleur.se.s du sexe de la loi prostitution,” 2018; Merteuil and Simonin, “Les travailleuses du sexe peuvent-elles penser leur émancipation ?”; Ponticelli, Carle, and Guillibert, “Strass et stigma”; Rosario Veneno, Conversation with Rosario Veneno.

The *Parcours de Sortie*

As explained in the previous chapter, the only funds the state reserves to support sex workers are directed toward the program *Parcours de Sortie de la Prostitution* (Path to Exit Prostitution). All other means provided by the government related to prostitution are channelled into repressive policies and educational programmes for the prevention of the “system of prostitution.” While attempting to work with Autres Regards, Kadira,¹⁶³ a French teacher at the association, implied that obtaining information about sex worker organising would be particularly difficult because of this programme. She was referring to the most widely criticised aspect of the *Parcours*: sex workers can only apply to enter the *Parcours de Sortie* under the condition that they have ceased sex work at the moment of submitting their application file.¹⁶⁴ Yet, as the monthly allowance of €330 is not enough to survive, many continue sex work secretly, leading what Kadira called “parallel lives.”¹⁶⁵ This requirement – ceasing sex work even before obtaining the rights that the *Parcours* gives access to – places those hoping to enter the programme in the position of an *omerta*. Continuing to work as sex workers, they risk being refused to benefit from the *Parcours de Sortie* or dropping out of it if they are already recipients.

The obligation to cease sex work to be able to apply for social aid only concerns people without legal residence status. The other sex workers are eligible for minimum welfare benefits (around €600 per month) and do not need regularisation of their residence status, which is a component of the *Parcours de Sortie*.¹⁶⁶ This discrimination specifically targets *Sans Papiers* sex workers and, as Mathieu argues, is based on the “ideal figure of the victim of human trafficking,” meaning a young black or brown woman whose naivety has led her to be coerced into prostitution.¹⁶⁷ The victimisation and paternalising treatment of foreign sex workers entirely disregards their lived realities, particularly their need for a source of income, which is restricted to the informal sector as they do not have the right to work.¹⁶⁸

Victimisation

“There’s really no such thing as the ‘voiceless.’ There are only the deliberately silenced, or the preferably unheard.”¹⁶⁹

The discourse that victimises and paternalises migrant sex workers is based on racial and gendered stereotypes that deny sex workers’ agency and on normative ideas about sexuality and people’s roles in society that create moral borders.¹⁷⁰ These normative conceptions of sexuality are the root of the idea that prostitution is inherently violent, and all ‘prostitutes’ are victims. In the French law, this view translates into defining prostitution as a violation of human dignity, a way, as argues Papillon, to dissimulate moral motivations behind abolitionist legislation. In this process, individuals are infantilised, the state and criminal law determining what is dignified and what is undignified.¹⁷¹ Merteuil and Damien Simonin explain that essentialising prostitution as gender-based violence leads to the invalidation of sex workers’ voices. They identify three forms of invalidation. The first one is based on the concept of “decorporalisation” and argues that the

¹⁶³ Kadira is a pseudonym.

¹⁶⁴ Le Bail, Giometta, and Rassouw, “Que pensent les travailleur.se.s du sexe de la loi prostitution,” 2018.

¹⁶⁵ Kadira, Conversation with Kadira.

¹⁶⁶ Mathieu, “16. Invisibiliser et éloigner.”

¹⁶⁷ Mathieu, 298.

¹⁶⁸ Deschamps, “La figure de l’étrangère dans la prostitution”; Orellano, *Puta Feminista*.

¹⁶⁹ Roy, “Peace & The New Corporate Liberation Theology.”

¹⁷⁰ Giometta and Le Bail, “The National and Moral Borders of the 2016 French Law on Sex Work.”

¹⁷¹ Papillon, “La dignité, nouveau masque de la moralité en droit pénal.”

psychological effects of prostitution create traumas that result in “the production of extremely ambivalent discourse.” The second form asserts that sex workers are often forced to falsify the truth, whilst the third invalidation claims that people stating they do sex work without coercion are a minority that cannot represent the “silent majority” of sex workers. From this perspective it appears that the person who is “representative of prostitutes” is by definition the one that does not have access to speech.¹⁷²

Thus, sex workers whose voices would theoretically count as valid are constituted as a subaltern group that cannot speak and whose insurgency is not recognised.¹⁷³ The only speech that can be heard is created for them; if sex workers don’t say that they want to exit prostitution, their truths are invalidated. Government authorities and other abolitionist actors use “false consciousness” to discredit sex workers speaking about their experience, sharing their perspective or demanding rights.¹⁷⁴

“No prostituted person, while working as a prostitute, will ever say that they are forced, ever. Everyone actually says, ‘I’m doing it voluntarily.’ It’s only when the prostitution ends that people say: in fact, that wasn’t what I was saying.”¹⁷⁵

“The argument (...) that we should distinguish between imposed and chosen prostitution is unacceptable. How can we imagine for even a second that prostitution, which is nothing more than a repetition of unwanted sexual acts imposed by financial constraint, can be a choice?”¹⁷⁶

“Prostitution is a violence that dehumanises by altering the alterity of the other. Prostitutes do not have a choice.”¹⁷⁷



NELLE talks about how tough it is “to be up against abolitionists with so many resources”

However, many sex workers claim that doing sex work is indeed their choice, but that choices are always impacted by factors such as a limited access to formal jobs because of their gender, race or citizenship status. Some of these factors in turn are the result of increasingly strict border control and anti-immigrant policies implemented by member states of the EU and the Schengen area. Despite sex workers’ assertion of agency, they are said to unconsciously “consent to oppression” and unknowingly accept “the traditional exploitation of women,” or to be alienated to the “masculine culture” by playing the game of the oppressor that objectivises and commodifies their bodies.¹⁷⁸ Such a demonising view on sex workers is clearly articulated by former deputy Henriette Zoughebi who described protesting sex workers as “procurers, disguised as prostitutes or allies of prostitutes.”¹⁷⁹ This dichotomic representation of sex workers as either victims or exploiters is reflected in the law, in the articles 225-5 to 22-12 on procuring in the French Penal Code.¹⁸⁰

¹⁷² Merteuil and Simonin, “Les travailleuses du sexe peuvent-elles penser leur émancipation ?,” 5.

¹⁷³ Spivak, “Scattered Speculations on the Subaltern and the Popular.”

¹⁷⁴ Jacquemart and Jakšić, “Droits des femmes ou femmes sans droits ?”; Jeffreys, “Sex Worker-Driven Research: Best Practice Ethics.”

¹⁷⁵ Former deputy Danielle Bousquet in Schaffauser, *Les luttes des putés*, 39.

¹⁷⁶ Former deputy Sylvie Tolmont in Jacquemart and Jakšić, “Droits des femmes ou femmes sans droits ?”

¹⁷⁷ Abolitionist activist Malka Markovitch in Taïbi, “Du corps des personnes prostituées.”

¹⁷⁸ Comte, “Decriminalization of Sex Work.”

¹⁷⁹ Former deputy Henriette Zoughebi in Merteuil and Simonin, “Les travailleuses du sexe peuvent-elles penser leur émancipation ?,” 6.

¹⁸⁰ Code Pénal, Section 2 : Du proxénétisme et des infractions qui en résultent (Articles 225-5 à 225-12).

Solidarity is illegal



ROSARIO VENENO on her “criminal activities”

While the *Loi 2016* and the *Parcours de Sortie* results from a paradigm-change towards victimisation of sex workers, the legal definition of procuring has barely changed over the last 30 years and turns most forms of solidarity with sex workers into a criminal act.¹⁸¹ Since 1994, procuring is defined as

- “The act by any person, in any manner whatsoever, of:
- 1° Helping, assisting or protecting the prostitution of others;
 - 2° Profiting from the prostitution of others, sharing the proceeds or receiving subsidies from a person who habitually engages in prostitution;
 - 3° Hiring, training or diverting a person with a view to prostitution or putting pressure on them to prostitute themselves or continue to do so.”¹⁸²

Procuring is punished with a minimum of seven years of imprisonment and a €150'000 fine. As we can see, this law makes no difference between a situation of coercive constraint and one of mutual support between sex workers or between a sex worker and their social surrounding.¹⁸³ In my first conversation for this study, sex worker Rosario Veneno said that currently, this article creates a situation where the fight against exploitation and human trafficking is not efficient and solidarity between sex workers is made illegal:

“Any kind of association or partnership or mutual aid between people who practice sex work is prohibited. So, even colleagues who both work for themselves and who share a flat for example, (...) one of them could be considered as the pimp of the other. But that's not the case at all. In the real world, without these ties of support, it is unbearable actually.”¹⁸⁴

Similarly, sex worker and spokesperson of the French sex work union STRASS Merteuil explains,

“The law makes it difficult for sex workers to self-organise. Working together in the same place is considered procuring. Indeed, most cases of procuring investigated by the police involve sex workers working together, for example in a massage parlour! As the lease is in the name of one of them, she is the one who falls, and the others are considered to be victims.”¹⁸⁵

Other examples of criminalised activities through this broad definition of procuring are the sharing of money earned through sex work, repairing a car that is used for this occupation, providing a space for sex work, or tolerating that a space is being used for this purpose.¹⁸⁶ Considering every form of assistance for the “prostitution of others” as a violence and therefore a criminal act is far from the lived realities of sex workers and tends to socially isolate them.¹⁸⁷ Despite the fact that “any act of solidarity is forbidden,” associations’ reports show that mutual aid and self-organisation is taking place.¹⁸⁸ As the social networks of sex workers are always potential suspects in the

¹⁸¹ Rosario Veneno, Conversation with Rosario Veneno; ACCEPTESS-T et al., “Réponses à l’évaluation de La Loi 2016”; Geoffroy, Bail, and Mercat-Brun, “L’incrimination large du proxénétisme en France pose-t-elle problème ?”; Ponticelli, Carle, and Guillibert, “Strass et stigma.”

¹⁸² Code Pénal, Section 2 : Du proxénétisme et des infractions qui en résultent (Articles 225-5 à 225-12).

¹⁸³ ACCEPTESS-T et al., “Réponses à l’évaluation de La Loi 2016.”

¹⁸⁴ Rosario Veneno, Conversation with Rosario Veneno.

¹⁸⁵ Merteuil in Ponticelli, Carle, and Guillibert, “Strass et stigma,” 33.

¹⁸⁶ Papillon, “La dignité, nouveau masque de la moralité en droit pénal”; Clément, “Les hésitations du droit français sur la prostitution des majeurs.”

¹⁸⁷ Victoria, Conversation with Victoria.

¹⁸⁸ Schaffauser, *Les luttes des putes*, 27; Le Bail and Giametta, “Loi contre le « système prostitutionnel ».”

eyes of the law, this solidarity has to be informal, autonomous and “underground:”

Rosario Veneno: The autonomous and self-managed places, I can't mention. Because they really are safe spaces that actually exist a little bit super underground, so they are places where we will not really invite people who are not concerned or keep them updated about our criminal activities (laughs).

Rosario Veneno: As a professional [at Autres Regards] I can't touch on certain subjects with the concerned people, precisely because of this.

Maria Vermathen: So, how are you restricted in your work? In relation to this law? What are the things that you can't touch upon?

Rosario Veneno: Well, I can't touch anything that could be considered as help. So, I can't talk about how to price a service, how to advertise, how to take pictures for more publicity, all that stuff.”¹⁸⁹

In order to protect themselves and the people they live and work with, sex workers cannot talk in detail about the things they put in place to make their lives more livable and community health organisations are not allowed to share information that would support sex workers in their work.

A change of direction

The criminalisation of solidarity and the obligation to cease sex work to be eligible for the *Parcours de Sortie* create a situation where knowledge needs to be protected. The system that silences sex workers insulates the scene by rendering access to information very difficult. New questions thus emerge: How do people and associations organise despite this net that tries to annihilate the possibility to do sex work? What counter-securities and alternative solutions are created? How can research be done in a context where sharing this knowledge can incriminate the interlocutor or put others at risk? What should the role of ally research be in this situation? And what possibilities are being found to circumvent these conditions of silencing?

Being a queer and politically active person influences how and with whom I inhabit the world and therefore creates an informal network of access to data gathering and orally transmitted knowledge.¹⁹⁰ When looking for alternative ways of access I thus realised that I was already associated with a network of organisations, groups and structures that sex workers also rely on. This included places for political organising, queer-feminist health facilities, politically committed cultural venues, Signal chatgroups and Instagram pages. Through my friends, I was indirectly connected to an even larger web of groups, associations and people. This network of “queer infrastructure,” made of digital worlds, political events and community-based organisations thus operated as an orientation in my work, while at the same time becoming the object of my research.¹⁹¹ This is in line with queer thinking that challenges normative approaches to methodology and research focus.¹⁹² The new direction that my supervisor and I decided upon therefore was to explore networks of ally structures and how they see their role in this context of criminalised support for sex workers. As accessing Autres Regards had been impossible, I decided to enter the field through my personal queer networks and focus on organisations and groups that, whilst not specifically addressing sex workers’ issues, work with them due to their queer-feminist commitments. People were thus contacted through “purposive sampling,” which also meant that the final number of respondents was very limited.¹⁹³ The research design was adapted to this through a

¹⁸⁹ Rosario Veneno, Conversation with Rosario Veneno.

¹⁹⁰ Ahmed, “Orientations”; Cirolia and Pollio, “Queer Infrastructures.”

¹⁹¹ Ahmed, “Orientations”; Cirolia and Pollio, “Queer Infrastructures.”

¹⁹² Cirolia and Pollio, “Queer Infrastructures,” 236.

¹⁹³ P. and Kamath, *Urban Undesirables*, 187.

case-study focus that uses in-depth interviews and immersion to collect data.

When I reoriented my work towards ally structures, the people through whom I was accessing the organisation all coincidentally turned out to be sex workers. In the end, all the people who agreed to talk to me were sex workers who also had or used to have a job in one of the structures I had planned to look at. Before reorienting my study, aside from attempting to contact the director of Autres Regards, I tried to find other ways to get into touch with the association. On their Instagram page that I was checking regularly for open events or other useful information, I saw a post that was calling for contributions for a project called *Refuges* (see p. 27). The caption caught my attention, for it outlined a project that was very close to my original research question: “We are working on the project of a documentary around sex work and the possible safe spaces inside and outside. Don’t hesitate to contact us for more information, we are looking for personal stories until the end of June.”¹⁹⁴ When I contacted them asking if I could attend one of the filming sessions or support the project as part of my research project, I got a reply by Rosario Veneno, responsible for the project, saying that while attending the sessions wasn’t going to be possible, she would be happy to meet and exchange about our project and her experiences as a sex worker.

When contacting the queer archive Mémoire des Sexualités, the person

answering my message on Instagram said that he himself was a sex worker and would be interested in talking about my topic. The same thing happened when I went to the feminist association Planning Familial to enquire whether someone would like to talk about the role of the organisation with regards to sex workers; the person I was talking to said she was a sex worker and open to having a conversation about my study. My fourth interlocutor I met through the trans rights activist group TransVNR13 that was constituted in spring 2024 and that I was part of. A friend from the same group put us in touch. It turned out that she too had been working in an organisation that supports sex workers: Médecins du Monde. My four main interlocutors for this project are:

Rosario Veneno, who chose to use her artistic name. She is from Argentina and came to Europe eight years ago. She is a performer who accessed sex work through exploring sexuality. In 2017 or 2018, she began producing independent queer pornography with friends and, in 2019, she started sex work as a parallel occupation. More recently, she has also been co-directing the independent queer porn-festival *Porn Sur Mars*, that had its twelfth edition last year in 2024. In 2023, Rosario Veneno started a job as a peer prevention worker at the community health organisation Autres Regards.¹⁹⁵

Nelle, who is a trans man and 29 years old. He studied fine arts and works in different associations. He started doing sex work at the age of 17 before his transition. Nelle is from Belgium and has worked in Marseille, Brussels, London and Nizza when he stayed there. Sex work is “his most consistent career,” and he works online on gay websites such as Hunks. Once per month, he organises *Permanences Putes* at the queer community archive Mémoire des Sexualités, a workshop



Figure 7: Instagram post calling for sex workers' testimonies for the project *Refuges*, organised by Rosario Veneno at Autres Regards. @autresregards13, 2024.

¹⁹⁴ autresregards13, “Projet Refuges.”

¹⁹⁵ Rosario Veneno, Conversation with Rosario Veneno.

where sex workers come together to look for past stories, narratives and accounts of sex workers and create their own archives. He also participates in organising *La Vénale*, an annual sex workers' art festival.¹⁹⁶

Victoria, who chose to use a pseudonym, is a bisexual trans woman and 37 years old. She specifies that she is white, her parents are middle class, and she is a consumer of psychoactive products. She lives in Marseille since about a decade, after completing a master's degree in law in Paris. Victoria worked as a coordinator in the association Médecins du Monde who has been working with and for sex workers since 1999. In September 2024, she began to study for a new degree and to finance her studies, she started to do sex work. She is a trans rights activist and part of TransVNR13 with which organises trans rights protests.¹⁹⁷

Suzanne, who also chose to use a pseudonym, is 30 years old and has been working as a dominatrix for six or seven years. She has always had several sources of income, be it employment, unemployment, or "active solidarity income" (RSA). Suzanne is currently training to become a counsellor for the Planning Familial, a militant and associative network that has been offering sexual health services across the country for more than 60 years.¹⁹⁸

Talking about the limits and possibilities of representation, organisation and sharing knowledge, there was always a negotiation of lines of illegality that were constantly being re-made in our conversations. This study is set at this blurry and ever so slightly shifting line between what cannot be said and the need to share realities, thoughts, perspectives and ideas from a marginalised place. We thus seek to understand in this research the tensions created through the current legal situation, urban marginalisation processes, and the silencing discourses regarding sex work. What are the collective structures that manage to organise support by and for sex workers within this context? What can knowledge sharing and fighting against silencing look like?

Data collection methods

Following Dadas' and Browne and Nash's argument on methods and methodology, this study does not only have a queer theoretical framework but seeks to use queer and decolonial epistemology in the methods used to gather data.¹⁹⁹ As Jeffreys, Williams and Lam have argued, sex workers must be positioned as active voices in research processes.²⁰⁰ Their contributions have to be considered "as having the same research status and validity" as other data.²⁰¹ Nascimento writes that beyond having first concerned people as interlocutors, it is crucial to invite them into the research process as "epistemological agents," rather than mere sources for first-hand narratives.²⁰² This contributes to doing research *with* sex workers instead of *about* them and means also to use their texts as an important part of the bibliography and to valorise other productions such as films, podcasts, arts and zines.

¹⁹⁶ Nelle, Conversation with Nelle.

¹⁹⁷ Victoria, Conversation with Victoria.

¹⁹⁸ Suzanne, Conversation with Suzanne.

¹⁹⁹ Dadas, "Messy Methods."

²⁰⁰ Jeffreys, "Sex Worker-Driven Research: Best Practice Ethics"; Williams, "Sex Work and Exclusion in the Tourist Districts of Salvador, Brazil"; Lam, "The Birth of Butterfly. Bringing Migrant Sex Workers' Voices into the Sex Workers' Rights Movement."

²⁰¹ Jeffreys, "Sex Worker-Driven Research: Best Practice Ethics," 2.

²⁰² Nascimento, *Transfeminismo*.

Conversations for knowledge production

As discussed above, immersing myself further in the queer network that I was already part of was a way of accessing my field and gathering data. Personal involvement and familiarity with some of the infrastructures that are the object of this study were therefore an important source of knowledge. While I was able to use my positionality as a resource to connect with and earn trust from my interlocutors, being an outsider to sex workers' communities was also one of the most important limits in my research process. The creation of spaces to which only sex workers have access is crucial in the current context of criminalisation of solidarity. This however will be discussed in more detail in chapter 5.

The central source for collecting data were in-depth conversations with the above-mentioned people. Ulrika Dahl states that "the central value of queer studies resides in collaborations and conversations that aim to produce knowledge collectively."²⁰³ P. and Kamath suggest that the method of oral histories creates a "rich and textured tapestry of social processes" by including more voices that all contribute their situated and personal perspective to a larger picture.²⁰⁴ Taking these views on methods and Nascimento's argumentation on epistemology as an inspiration, our conversations were thought to be "means of theory creation," as well as an occasion for each interlocutor to share personal narratives and perspectives.²⁰⁵ The aim was to create a space for storytelling, through a method that is accessible and a powerful medium to convey meaning, knowledge and lived experience.²⁰⁶ The conversations were thus left to unfold relatively freely to give the interlocutors room for expression and the ability to influence their direction.²⁰⁷ They were, however, structured along 16 theme-cards that served as a guideline and stimulation for the narrator. In preparation of the conversations, I created topics such as representation, spaces in the city, or sharing and transmission of knowledge that were each written on a card. Connected to every topic was one main question that could clarify what I was interested in, in case my interlocutor would enquire for more information. I memorised these questions to make the conversations more fluid and give my full attention to my interlocutors. The cards served the purpose of giving my research partners the opportunity to lead the conversation and choose its trajectory. Empty cards were provided to add new themes or issues, and it was communicated to each narrator that topics could also be removed and left out. My main role was to make follow-up enquiries and to encourage my interlocutors to give a more personal account of things. The 16 themes were: Introduce yourself?, Affinity groups, Resources & inspirations,

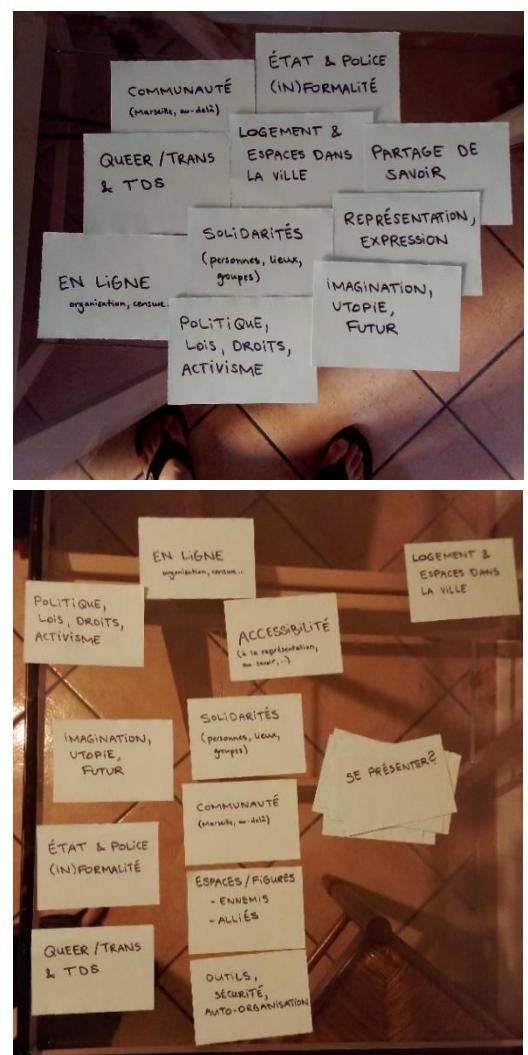


Figure 8: Arrangements of the theme-cards by my interlocutors.

²⁰³ Dahl, "Femme on Femme," 145.

²⁰⁴ P. and Kamath, *Urban Undesirables*, 188.

²⁰⁵ Browne et al., "Towards Transnational Feminist Queer Methodologies," 10.

²⁰⁶ Day et al., "The Expanding Digital Media Landscape of Qualitative and Decolonizing Research."

²⁰⁷ Sadeghipouya, "Des femmes trans sans domicile fixe à Téhéran engagées dans le travail du sexe."

Queer/trans & sex work, Online (organisation, censorship...), Solidarities (people, places, groups), Accessibility (to representation, knowledge), Politics, laws, rights & activism, State & (in)formality, Housing & spaces in the city, Enemy & ally spaces/figures, Community (Marseille & beyond), Sharing and transmitting knowledge, Tools, safety & self-organisation, Representation & expression, and Imagination, utopia & future.

The podcast project



VICTORIA on fighting against the “omerta”

“Before our conversation, we called over video call to chat about the ideas behind my project, and what it is aimed at. We both agreed that it is important to reach beyond the academic bubble, to do research that does not take information from the people to feed into a debate that they are not part of eventually. I told her that I see the writing of a thesis as an opportunity to make something I have always wanted to make: a podcast, one that creates space and freedom for people to speak clearly about their thoughts, perspectives, philosophies, stories and fantasies. Working on something that will talk to people in her situation was a condition for Rosario Veneno to accept the interview.”²⁰⁸

These conversations, each over an hour long, were preceded and followed by smaller, more informal interactions and discussions with the narrators. These moments served the purpose of making the research process both more transparent and more collaborative. Thus, before meeting in person for the conversation, the focus and intention of the research project was discussed with each interlocutor. For my research partners and me, making the outcome of this study accessible to a broad audience was crucial. Having a product that we could distribute easily and that could be used beyond the academic realm and within sex worker communities was a condition for my interlocutors. We therefore agreed on recording our conversations with the aim of creating a podcast that assembles their voices and other sound material collected during the writing process, to create something akin to a queer sound archive.²⁰⁹ With podcasting, giving people a voice is very literal: the podcast is, in my eyes, a beautiful tool that allows for a degree of anonymity whilst keeping a personal trait. When being able to *listen* to someone talking about their own experiences, philosophies and ideas, their narrative gains many dimensions. Ambience, interactions with the interlocutor, silences and emotional expressions in the voice are an important part of a conversation and can be more easily communicated through sound than through text.

Day et al. argue that collaborative podcasting as a method has a decolonial, feminist potential for it allows for different knowledges to be equally valued, thus shifting power-relations between “researcher” and “researched” and questioning hegemonic modes of theorising, as well as communicating affective data that is often undervalued.²¹⁰ Podcasting offers an opportunity for “scholar-activism” and “polyvocality.”²¹¹ This method is also interesting for this study because it opens up a “space of representation,” while addressing precisely the issue of representation. In this space, alternative imaginations can be de- and reconstructed, thus countermapping the landscape of representations of sex workers in Marseille.²¹²

²⁰⁸ Personal notes after my conversation with Rosario Veneno, 08 July 2024.

²⁰⁹ Dahl, “Femme on Femme.”

²¹⁰ Day et al., “The Expanding Digital Media Landscape of Qualitative and Decolonizing Research.”

²¹¹ Day et al.; Kinkaid, Brain, and Senanayake, “The Podcast-as-Method?”

²¹² Lefebvre, *La Production de l’Espace*; Omotoso, “What We Make to Unmake: The Imagination in Feminist Struggles.”

Other methods

Instagram posts published by sex worker-led or ally organisations were another source of data collection, as they are an important way of communication for many groups and accessible to someone who is not a sex worker themselves. On Instagram, followers, shared posts and stories reveal connections between organisations and actors, making it possible to identify a network of like-minded structures. This method involved following Instagram pages and regularly looking for new publications and stories. To further expand the database for this study and include more voices that speak based on experience, I used written and recorded interviews with sex workers as well as articles, books and other productions written by sex workers. Finally, I drew on reports and articles published by organisations supporting sex workers such as the Fédération Parapluie Rouge or the Global Network of Sex Work Projects. Complementing primary with secondary data allows to triangulate and expand a database that is difficult to access and creates a more richly textured account of the possible support strategies that exist in Marseille. Moreover, websites, Instagram posts and leaflets are an important way of transmitting information from associations to sex workers, and it is therefore important to investigate these texts to answer this study's research question more thoroughly.

Data analysis techniques

For the analysis of the gathered data, thematic and spatial analysis was used alongside each other. Whereas the thematic analysis aimed at putting together ‘a bigger picture’ by assembling different individual accounts, the spatial analysis attempts to visualise the landscape of events, actions and places that make life livable for sex workers.

To conduct the thematic analysis of the data collected for this project, the first step was to transcribe the recorded conversations, including affective qualities such as laughter, sighs and silences.²¹³ Manually transcribing these conversations meant listening and re-listening to them very attentively, giving me an intimate knowledge of the material. I then sectioned the transcripts into topics, giving the sections adapted titles such drawing on the interlocutors' choice of words. Colour-coding was used to highlight important points, arguments, facts and ideas related to broader themes and put the four conversations together. Combining the different individual accounts this way makes it possible to recognise collective narratives but also different or divergent perspective of the same processes.²¹⁴ Moreover, a narrative analysis was undertaken, based on the model used by P. and Kamath in their research with sex workers in Bangalore. This mode of analysis, which comes from ethnography,

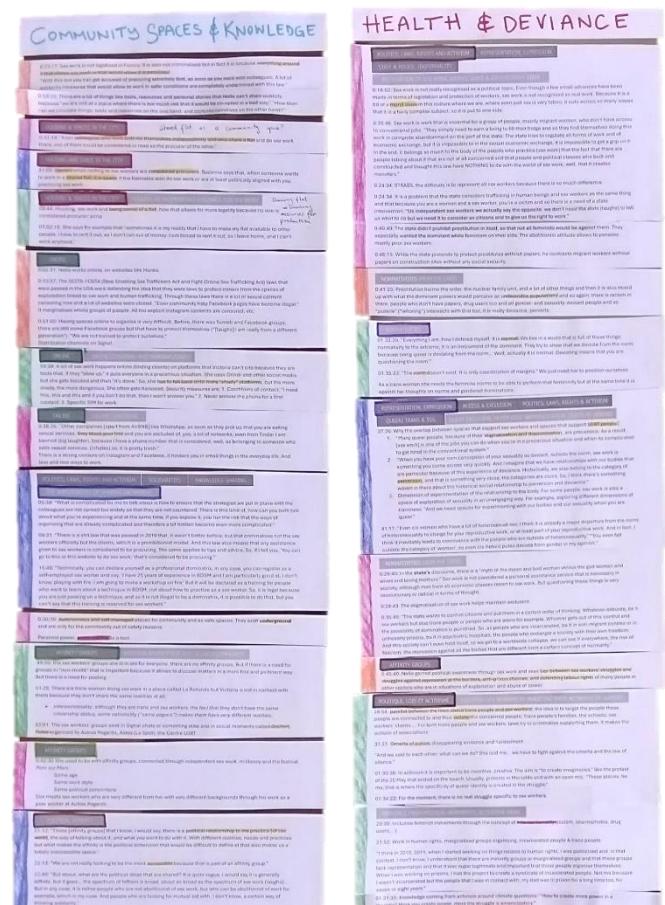


Figure 9: The process of thematic data analysis and use of colour-coding

²¹³ Day et al., "The Expanding Digital Media Landscape of Qualitative and Decolonizing Research."

214 P. and Kamath, *Urban Undesirables*

looks at interactive and spatial dimensions as well as strategies that can be found in the narrative of a person, in order to gain a better understanding of the social landscape my interlocutors are part of.

Narrative analysis

Dimensions <i>(Interactive and Spatial)</i>	Strategies <i>(Retaliatory)</i>
<i>On the nature of life, work and opinion</i>	<i>On the nature of response</i>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Expression of power relation • Who is the “other”? • Personal and social interactions • Existential conditions • Social attitudes • Political attitudes and opinions • Actions, feelings, happenings • Intimacies 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Individual • Collective • Collaborative • Legal • Political • Fictive/ imaginary/ future

²¹⁵

Through personal experiences, gained through everyday life in Marseille as a queer and politically active student, conversations with my interlocutors and other informal discussions with friends and acquaintances, I collected a lot of spatial knowledge, knowledge about how the city is lived, used, transformed and made by sex workers, about their network of (queer) infrastructures. To understand this network, I created a map inspired by social, mental, and sensorial maps such as those made by Olmédo, Mekdjian and Szary and the political group Geoide en Revolución.²¹⁶ These mapping techniques offer the possibility for spatial representation that does not geo-locate and expose information in a way that would harm sex worker communities. Visualising this information has the purpose to question dominant imaginations that exist around urban space and sex workers and can be seen as a process of critical counter-mapping and a political practice of reclaiming power and ontology.²¹⁷ Finally, the creation of a podcast is not only a means for data collection but also a way of analysis. The work process is comparable to a collage that puts together different voices gathered around various themes, thus creating a queer archive. While the final podcast is a project that has some autonomy in relation to this research project, the collage process is made visible through audio clips integrated at different places throughout text.

²¹⁵ Adapted from P. and Kamath.

²¹⁶ kollektiv orangotango+, *This Is Not an Atlas. A Global Collection of Counter-Cartographies*.

²¹⁷ Halder and Michel, “Editorial – This Is Not an Atlas.”

4. Literature Review

The fields of research that this study is situated in are the geographies of sexuality, transnational feminism and Southern urbanism. The combination of these bodies of literature is significant because of the context in which the research is situated, dominated by processes of gentrification and urban marketing, the premise to see space as produced through discursive and practical articulations, and the endeavour of shifting the location of knowledge production to marginalised places and people. Drawing on this literature, the study attempts to understand sex workers' informal, collective ways of organising.

The existing scholarship on geographies of sexuality is useful for this study as it helps analyse how the urban space of sex work is produced in a context of unequal power relations and how moral conceptions create a disciplinary landscape in the city. However, there are certain omissions in the geographies of sex work: they overlook intersections between forms of oppression targeting sex workers and others based on factors such as race or religion, with few exceptions they ignore theorisations and experiences from the Global South and they fall short in recognising sex workers' capacity, although heavily countered, to produce representations of space. Transnational feminism and Southern urbanism respond to this by offering an intersectional reading of oppression while centring agency and discussing subalternity. Focusing on everyday (improvised) organising in marginalised city space, Southern urbanism provides concepts for understanding sex work as informal labour that is tied to informal systems helping people get by. Reading the South as "a socio-political, not geographic, reference (...) to all communities adversely affected by colonialism" makes it possible to apply Southern approaches to a case situated in the Global North, rendering usually obscured micro-practices that improvise and self-organise access to work, housing and community visible.²¹⁸ While sex workers, particularly migrant sex workers, are affected by the presence of the colonial past and ongoing neo-colonial projects giving shape to policies and urban renovation, the future cityscape of Marseille is also a contested site. This study therefore explores theoretical contributions that analyse the power dynamics around and interactions between the production of space, imagination and desire and view the future as a place where decolonial struggles take place.

The revanchist city: contested productions of space and representation

Contemporary studies of the geographies of sex work have analysed the ways in which red-light districts are produced through top-down disciplining strategies and heteronormativity and bottom-up through tactical responses by sex workers.²¹⁹ Urban studies on sex work have discussed the different determinants of sex work's locations, arguing that they are part of larger neoliberal urban transformation processes such as gentrification and "regeneration."²²⁰ The quest for safe and sanitised inner cities that is articulated in a "revanchist discourse" positions sex workers as "illiberal subjects" that stand in the way of gentrification, thus legitimising militarised policing of sex work.²²¹ Revanchism is a mode of maintaining a "purified, decontaminated" image of the city through "eradicating 'undesirables' in [its] human composition."²²² The concept of revanchism

²¹⁸ Mirafat, "Southern Theories Centre on Practices and Experiences of Subordinate Groups Wherever They Are," 103.

²¹⁹ Symanski, *The Immoral Landscape: Female Prostitution in Western Societies*.

²²⁰ Hubbard, "Chapter 35. Sex Work, Urban Governance and the Gendering of Cities."

²²¹ Hubbard, 316.

²²² P. and Kamath, *Urban Undesirables*, 9–11.

was first theorised by Smith based on analyses of processes of economic and social exclusion in New York City.²²³

Symanski argues that the location of sex work within cities reveals “moral geographies,”²²⁴ a result of social productions of space through biopolitical regulation that deems sex work as “incompatible with family occupation.”²²⁵ The city operates not only as the context of this normative regulation but as a “disciplinary site for the making of modern citizens.”²²⁶ Social spaces are constructed through the “triplicity” of localised spatial practices, representations of space linked to a certain order that “scholars, planners, urbanists, technocrats” dictate, and spaces of representation, lived through the images and symbols that accompany them.²²⁷ Using this framework of Lefebvre’s production of space to analyse the geographies of sex work, the work of Hubbard and Sanders has been influential. They argue that “the [everyday] spatial practices played out in red-light districts result from a conflict between representations of space (which seek to impose order on urban space) and spaces of representation (which emerge ‘organically’ from the bodily practices and behaviours of sex workers).”²²⁸ In the authors’ reading, “representations of space (...) overcode lived spaces of representation,” meaning that sex workers’ power to turn space to their own advantage is restricted by the boundaries of the repressive “spaces of capitalism” set by the authorities.²²⁹

Intersectionality against homogenising analyses of sex workers’ diverse realities

While these contributions are helpful in analysing the exclusionary processes of “privatisation, commercialisation and aestheticization”²³⁰ that happen in the context of urban neoliberalism and understanding ways in which sex workers produce space, they have primarily theorised from major cities of the Global North. This has led to an invisibilisation of migrant sex workers and of spaces of sex work in Global South and marginalised contexts, representing sex workers and their practices in homogenising ways that pay little attention to how race, class, gender, citizenship status, religion, sexuality, and language barriers can influence their formation of subjectivities, access to city space and experiences of legal, social, and political oppression.²³¹

Research conducted in France in collaboration with sex workers and anti-abolitionist community health organisations such as Grisélidis (Toulouse) and Les Roses d’Acier (Paris) notes that, despite the alleged decriminalisation of sex work introduced through the *Loi 2016*, sex workers witness an increasing precariousness of their working and living conditions and a strong presence of police repression.²³² This observation leads researchers to ask what other functions, besides

²²³ Smith, *The New Urban Frontier: Gentrification and the Revanchist City*.

²²⁴ Symanski, *The Immoral Landscape: Female Prostitution in Western Societies*.

²²⁵ Hubbard and Prior, 2013, in Loopmans, “Chapter 34. Commercial Sexualities: Section Introduction,” 309.

²²⁶ Ghannam, 2002, in Peake and Rieker, “Rethinking Feminist Interventions into the Urban,” 2013.

²²⁷ Lefebvre, *La production de l'espace*, 48–49.

²²⁸ Hubbard and Sanders, “Making Space for Sex Work,” 87.

²²⁹ Hubbard and Sanders, 87–88.

²³⁰ P. and Kamath, *Urban Undesirables*, 10.

²³¹ Lam, “The Birth of Butterfly. Bringing Migrant Sex Workers’ Voices into the Sex Workers’ Rights Movement.”

²³² Bon, “Entre « protection des victimes » et contrôle social des travailleuses du sexe”; Chen and Le Bail, “Mobilisation de femmes chinoises migrantes se prostituant à Paris”; Calderaro and Giometta, “The

protecting women from sexual exploitation, the French abolitionist politics fulfil.²³³ They find that sex work is situated at the intersection of multiple systems of domination in terms of gender, class and race and that the control of prostitution is linked to repression against migration from the Global South: “The aim of moralising public spaces is coupled with the fight against illegal immigration through the use of repressive instruments.”²³⁴ Cirolia and Pollio write about queer infrastructures that “even in cities that appear to have supportive legal frameworks and social discourses (...) such infrastructures are often caught between the legacies of racialised exclusion and (...) neoliberal normalization.”²³⁵ Anti-abolitionist, community-based studies, taking on an intersectional approach, notice that these same legacies determine sex workers’ experiences of policing and social and spatial marginalisation.²³⁶ “Counter-topographies” emerge when looking at neoliberalism and racialised exclusion from the perspective of marginalised everyday life across the Global South and the Global North.²³⁷ While abolitionist discourses legitimate their approach through victimisation of sex workers, the experience of black and brown sex workers shows that institutions harbour suspicion towards them based on racial stereotypes.²³⁸ To protect the *République*, allegedly under threat by those seen as ‘the Other’ and their values and principles deemed incompatible with the republic, sex workers, along with other *othered* groups, are spatially contained or excluded.²³⁹

Reading repression against sex work in connection with anti-migrant motives uncovers that sex workers whom abolitionists represent as victims of sexual and sexist violence from procurers are in fact more often victims of the Schengen area border regime, which is becoming more and more difficult to penetrate.²⁴⁰ This makes migrant sex workers dependent due to indebtedness, and the status of *Sans Papiers* impedes their access to social benefits and formal jobs.²⁴¹ The representation that all sex workers are victims of patriarchal violence and human trafficking is rooted in the idea of (migrant) women as passive, which invisibilises their stories, decisions and power.²⁴²

Agency of sex workers in marginalised spaces

When writing about sex workers from the Global South or Southeast, an important endeavour has been to counter these victimising and othering discourses that construct people as “Third World trafficked women.”²⁴³ As Agustín, Doezena, Yea, and Walker and Oliveira argue, internal and cross-border migrant sex workers have agency in shaping their life stories, blurring the lines

Problem of Prostitution”; Giometta and Le Bail, “The National and Moral Borders of the 2016 French Law on Sex Work”; Le Bail, Giometta, and Rassouw, “Que pensent les travailleur.se.s du sexe de la loi prostitution,” 2018; Mathieu, “16. Invisibiliser et éloigner”; Merteuil and Simonin, “Les travailleuses du sexe peuvent-elles penser leur émancipation ?”; Merteuil and Diallo, “Un tournant réactionnaire et nationaliste.”

²³³ Bon, “Entre « protection des victimes » et contrôle social des travailleuses du sexe.”

²³⁴ Mathieu, “16. Invisibiliser et éloigner,” 295.

²³⁵ Cirolia and Pollio, “Queer Infrastructures,” 236.

²³⁶ Le Bail and Giometta, “Loi contre le « système prostitutionnel ».”

²³⁷ Kern and Mullings, “Urban Neoliberalism, Urban Insecurity and Urban Violence: Exploring the Gender Dimensions.”

²³⁸ Giometta and Le Bail, “The National and Moral Borders of the 2016 French Law on Sex Work.”

²³⁹ Dikec, *Badlands of the Republic*; Merteuil and Diallo, “Un tournant réactionnaire et nationaliste.”

²⁴⁰ Mathieu, “16. Invisibiliser et éloigner.”

²⁴¹ Guillemaut, “Victimes de traffic ou actrices d’un processus migratoire ?”; Gil, “La prostitution entre débats et lois.”

²⁴² Escoffier, “Communautés d’itinérance et Savoir-Circuler Des Transmigrant-e-s Au Maghreb.”

²⁴³ Doezena, “Ouch!: Western Feminists’ ‘Wounded Attachment’ to the ‘Third World Prostitute.’”

between dichotomous representations of “coerced victim” and “consensual sex worker.”²⁴⁴ Doezenma analyses the lobbying of the feminist anti-trafficking NGO Coalition Against Trafficking in Women (CATW) in the UN Centre for International Crime Prevention.²⁴⁵ Using the concept of the “injured body” that she borrows from Brown, she argues that modern feminists construct the “Third World prostitute” as a “damaged ‘Other’” to advance their own political agenda.²⁴⁶ Because the modern politicised identity of Western feminists is formed on the bases of historical suffering, they turn towards the state for protection instead of attempting to subvert the power of such structures of domination. Doezenma sets Western feminists’ campaigns against trafficking within the broader history of imperialism and colonialism and examines the ways in which these legacies are incorporated into the imagined identity of the “Third World trafficking victim.”²⁴⁷

Drawing on queer and postcolonial theory allows for approaching the spatialities of sex work from the perspective of sex workers, deconstructing normativities and binary representations of domination and resistance and victimisation and empowerment projected onto them.²⁴⁸ Writing from the Global South and looking at how migration, race, class, and sex work interact in sex workers’ everyday lives, Yea, Williams, Walker and Oliveira and P. and Kamath have aimed at nuancing the homogenising pictures drawn by institutional discourses and scholarship from the North.²⁴⁹ Thus, Williams shows in her analysis located in Salvador, Brazil, how Black sex workers’ spatialities are not only informed by their occupation but also their race and sexuality; and how being black *and* a sex worker means that they can be perceived as “in place by being out of place” by forming part of the exoticized “site of desire” that Salvador is sold as.²⁵⁰ However, they reclaim their agency through “creative strategies and bodily practices in order to be treated with respect as they navigate through the touristic spaces of their native city.”²⁵¹ P. and Kamath similarly frame Bangalore, India, as a “theatre” in which sex workers are denied their perceptions and definitions of the city and are unacknowledged as an “integral part of the city’s human tapestry as a subaltern informal workforce.”²⁵² Although sexual commerce is part of the informal labour force, sex workers are unrecognised as such because of the “immoral nature of their activities.”²⁵³

Southern urban studies pay attention to agency among communities from the South, focusing on everyday urban processes and informality, informed by uncertainty and creativity.²⁵⁴ Miraftab reads the Global South or Global Southeast as “a socio-political, not geographic, reference (...) to all communities adversely affected by colonialism.”²⁵⁵ Tucker also emphasises that the Global

²⁴⁴ Agustín, “The (Crying) Need for Different Kinds of Research”; Doezenma, *Sex Slaves and Discourse Masters: The Construction of Trafficking*; Doezenma, “Ouch!: Western Feminists’ ‘Wounded Attachment’ to the ‘Third World Prostitute’”; Yea, “Shades of Grey”; Walker and Oliveira, “Contested Spaces: Exploring the Intersections of Migration, Sex Work and Trafficking in South Africa.”

²⁴⁵ Doezenma, “Ouch!: Western Feminists’ ‘Wounded Attachment’ to the ‘Third World Prostitute.’”

²⁴⁶ Brown, *States of Injury: Power and Freedom in Late Modernity*; Doezenma, “Ouch!: Western Feminists’ ‘Wounded Attachment’ to the ‘Third World Prostitute.’”

²⁴⁷ Doezenma, “Ouch!: Western Feminists’ ‘Wounded Attachment’ to the ‘Third World Prostitute.’”

²⁴⁸ Silva and Ornat, “Sexualities, Tropicalizations and the Transnational Sex Trade”; Yea, “Shades of Grey.”

²⁴⁹ Yea, “Shades of Grey”; Williams, “Sex Work and Exclusion in the Tourist Districts of Salvador, Brazil”; Walker and Oliveira, “Contested Spaces: Exploring the Intersections of Migration, Sex Work and Trafficking in South Africa”; P. and Kamath, *Urban Undesirables*.

²⁵⁰ Williams, “Sex Work and Exclusion in the Tourist Districts of Salvador, Brazil,” 458 & 464.

²⁵¹ Williams, 464.

²⁵² P. and Kamath, *Urban Undesirables*, 2.

²⁵³ P. and Kamath, 19.

²⁵⁴ Tucker, “Geographies of Gender and Sexuality I.”

²⁵⁵ Miraftab, “Southern Theories Centre on Practices and Experiences of Subordinate Groups Wherever They Are,” 103.

South is a concept describing unequal geopolitical relations and a collective marginalisation of the South in knowledge production.²⁵⁶ He criticises this imbalance in the places from where knowledge is produced through the concept of “metronormativity” and calls to “look beyond the existing geographies of sexualities” and move to other locations away from “global cities” such as New York or London.²⁵⁷

To counter this metronormativity, Peake and Rieker engage in feminist analyses, through which, so they argue, alternative knowledge on “production of space, community, labour, subjectivities and agency” can be found “in the interstices of neoliberal urban life-worlds.”²⁵⁸ Similarly, subaltern studies have aimed at producing knowledge from marginalised spaces to shift power-relations. Roy explains that the turn in subaltern studies toward political agency pursues the recuperation the colonised Other as a political agent to disrupt and decolonise Eurocentric conceptions of modernity.²⁵⁹ However, she argues, subaltern urbanism often conflates the ‘popular identity’ and subalternity, and defends the point of view that while make-do strategies employed to identify “the subaltern” can be performed by different social classes, the subaltern is where “the limits of archival and ethnographic recognition” lie.²⁶⁰ Southern urbanism, in turn, cannot be confined to metonymic categories such as “the slum”; instead, Roy proposes the four concepts periphery, urban informality, zones of exception and grey spaces to break with ontological and topological understandings of subalternity. For Roy, urban informality is not restricted to specific locations but represents a “mode of the production of space that connects seemingly separated geographies,” whose legitimacy is commanded by class power.²⁶¹

Informal networks of solidarity

“They learned how to organise themselves, fight and defend their rights; to valorise themselves and that, despite being from different countries and cultures, they were of one mind.”²⁶²

Given the informality of sex work and the creativity that sex workers must present to claim their right to the city and navigate the revanchist urban landscape, applying a Southern lens is essential when studying the geographies of sex workers. Looking at sex work as part of the informal labour force and recognising the strategies sex workers deploy to get by shows an omission in many analyses of geographies of sex work from the Global North: sex workers exist within communities that often constitute formal or informal networks of solidarity and support. Publications by researchers who are part of the sex worker community such as Jeffreys, Lam, Koné, and sex worker organisations such as RedTraSex (Transnational Network of Sex Workers) have highlighted how sex workers create local and transnational communities using different creative strategies to respond to different vulnerabilities and exclusions and improve access to rights.²⁶³

As the discourses on and the regulation of sex work have entered global processes that

²⁵⁶ Tucker, “Geographies of Gender and Sexuality I.”

²⁵⁷ Tucker.

²⁵⁸ Peake and Rieker, “Rethinking Feminist Interventions into the Urban,” 2013, 17.

²⁵⁹ Roy, “Slumdog Cities.”

²⁶⁰ Roy, 231.

²⁶¹ Roy, 233.

²⁶² RedTraSex, *Un movimiento de tacones altos*, 238.

²⁶³ Jeffreys, “Sex Worker-Driven Research: Best Practice Ethics”; Lam, “The Birth of Butterfly. Bringing Migrant Sex Workers’ Voices into the Sex Workers’ Rights Movement”; Koné, “Transnational Sex Worker Organizing in Latin America.”

materialise in local urban policies,²⁶⁴ sex workers themselves are also creating transnational networks that influence policy-making and the shaping of discourse.²⁶⁵ *Un Movimiento de Tacones Altos* (A High Heels Movement), a text published by RedTraSex, clearly affirms sex workers' agency and autonomy: "We, the people who live the problems, decide to be protagonists of our destiny, taking it in our hands to transform it. We form the organisation, and we direct it. (...) Only in base organisations²⁶⁶ is the voice really ours."²⁶⁷ Whereas organisations such as Scarlet Alliance in Australia, Aprosba (Association of Prostitutes of Bahia) in Brazil, or STRASS (Syndicate of Sex Work) in France and networks such as RedTraSex in Latin America, the pan-African ASWA (African Sex Workers Alliance) or nswp (Global Network for Sex Work Projects) are structures that have a rights-based approach and are in conversation with national, regional and international legal and human rights institutions,²⁶⁸ support can also come informally from fellow sex workers and other people who form part of the human landscape of the city.²⁶⁹

Drawing on Kempadoo and Doezenma, Shimei takes note that there is much more research that has been done on "trauma, drug addiction, or HIV" of sex workers than on sex workers' struggle to survive, resist and act for their rights in a communal way.²⁷⁰ Many studies centring the voice of sex workers and emphasising their agency focus on individual narratives. Conversely, the concept of "people as infrastructure" looks at people's activities in the city, the combination of spaces, persons and practices, as becoming urban infrastructures.²⁷¹ Analysed through the lens of mutual aid,²⁷² networks of solidarity,²⁷³ or community alliances,²⁷⁴ people as infrastructure are, in Simone's understanding, everyday collaborative practices that exist both in regularity and provisionality, creating a platform providing for and reproducing life in the city.²⁷⁵ While research on sex workers' infrastructures has primarily looked into rather organised ways of collaboration, the notion of people as infrastructures has a more urban everyday approach that makes improvised yet regular and coherent interactions anchoring ways of livelihood visible. Although Simone argues that support happens across different communities, networks of solidarity amongst sex workers can be "sites for establishing identity."²⁷⁶ This aligns with Foucault's argument that subjectification does not only happen through being "subject to someone else by control and dependence," but also through "dividing practices." This subjectification through division can be reappropriated

²⁶⁴ Loopmans, "Chapter 34. Commercial Sexualities: Section Introduction."

²⁶⁵ Doezenma, "Ouch!: Western Feminists' 'Wounded Attachment' to the 'Third World Prostitute"'; Jeffreys, "Sex Worker-Driven Research: Best Practice Ethics"; Koné, "Transnational Sex Worker Organizing in Latin America."

²⁶⁶ An *organización de base* ("base organization") is an organisation whose base and direction is formed by sex workers.

²⁶⁷ RedTraSex, *Un movimiento de tacones altos*, 180.

²⁶⁸ Koné, "Transnational Sex Worker Organizing in Latin America"; nswp, "Global Network of Sex Work Projects: Promoting Health and Human Rights."

²⁶⁹ P. and Kamath, *Urban Undesirables*, 68–74; Musso, "Les paradoxes de l'invisibilité. Le travail de rue d'une association marseillaise auprès de prostituées maghrébines," 16–17.

²⁷⁰ Shimei, "Though We Are Often Invisible, We Are Always Taking Care of Each Other," 291.

²⁷¹ Simone, "People as Infrastructure."

²⁷² Shimei, "Though We Are Often Invisible, We Are Always Taking Care of Each Other"; Herrera, "How Sex Workers Are Using Mutual Aid to Respond to the Coronavirus."

²⁷³ Blanchard and Derosas, "Les travailleuses et travailleurs du sexe à Marseille aux temps du premier confinement."

²⁷⁴ Chen and Le Bail, "Mobilisation de femmes chinoises migrantes se prostituant à Paris."

²⁷⁵ Simone, "People as Infrastructure."

²⁷⁶ P. and Kamath, *Urban Undesirables*, 30.

by the subjects as “self-knowledge,” claiming a right to individuality whilst using identity to constitute (resisting) communities.²⁷⁷ As members of RedTraSex put it: “By organising ourselves, us sex workers began to be the authors of our own growth. We started to make people aware of our problems. And we started to show ourselves as we really are.”²⁷⁸

Who imagines the city’s futures?

In Hubbard and Sanders’ analysis, there is a binary notion between “pre-inscribed” spaces on the one hand and bodies navigating it on the other hand. Taking on a decolonial feminist lens, different studies have thought about how “the city always (...) operates as a site of fantasy, desire, and imagination.”²⁷⁹ The authors of *Un Movimiento de Tacones Altos* show that the spaces they create allow them to “dream” and to imagine.²⁸⁰ P. and Kamath speak of the city as a “theatre” in which sex workers are “integral actors among the *dramatis personae*,”²⁸¹ participating in creating what Peake and Rieker call “geographical imaginaries.”²⁸² Representations and imaginations of spaces and futures are not only created top-down through institutional discourse but also “bottom up” by sex workers themselves. As P. and Kamath say, “they too very much define the city through their eyes” and through their spatial tactics and social networks, they take part in “envisioning and unravelling the realization of the city.”²⁸³ Omotoso argues that imagination is an important feminist process of making to unmake.²⁸⁴ Taking this idea of “unmaking” even further, Miraftab discusses imagination as “the last colony” and the future as a site of political contestation, which must be decolonised by imagining alternative futures through an “upside-down’ look at the world” and the invention of new spaces of action.²⁸⁵

This chapter has reviewed bodies of literature and concepts relevant to this study, drawing on geographies of sexuality, transnational feminism and Southern urbanism. Focusing on the collective production of spaces for representation and solidarity networks, sex workers’ agency is shaped by the circumstance that mutual aid is criminalised. Most studies that specifically focus on this legal situation are written from a legal perspective.²⁸⁶ Scholars have only marginally investigated everyday local productions of space and representations through informal community strategies thus far. Attending to these margins, the following chapter discusses my research findings, centring conversations with sex workers in which personal narratives and experiences of urban politics emerge from discussions around the possibilities of organising access to city space, mutual support and representation.

²⁷⁷ Foucault, “The Subject and Power.”

²⁷⁸ RedTraSex, *Un movimiento de tacones altos*, 9.

²⁷⁹ Mbembe and Nuttall, “Writing the World from an African Metropolis,” 355–56.

²⁸⁰ RedTraSex, *Un movimiento de tacones altos*, 9.

²⁸¹ P. and Kamath, *Urban Undesirables*, 1–2.

²⁸² Peake and Rieker, “Rethinking Feminist Interventions into the Urban,” 2013.

²⁸³ P. and Kamath, *Urban Undesirables*, 3 & 30.

²⁸⁴ Omotoso, “What We Make to Unmake: The Imagination in Feminist Struggles.”

²⁸⁵ Miraftab, “Southern Theories Centre on Practices and Experiences of Subordinate Groups Wherever They Are”; Miraftab, “Insurgent Practices and Decolonization of Future(s).”

²⁸⁶ Geoffroy, Bail, and Mercat-Brun, “L’incrimination large du proxénétisme en France pose-t-elle problème ?”; Papillon, “La dignité, nouveau masque de la moralité en droit pénal”; Clément, “Les hésitations du droit français sur la prostitution des majeurs.”

5. Marginalisations, resistance and care

When talking about networks of support in Marseille with my interlocutors Rosario Veneno, Victora, Suzanne and Nelle, it became clear that these networks are shaped by a landscape that marginalises sex workers. There are about as many different realities of sex workers as there are facets of oppression facing them. These forms of oppression are heterogenous and differently experienced because they depend on each individual's constellation of marginalising factors such as race, gender identity, sexuality, citizenship status, class or disability. However, the different realities of sex workers are, at the same time, connected through transnational economic structures, political ideologies and histories. A common thread throughout the four conversations was how victimisation, normative discourses and criminalisation of support and mutual aid marginalise and silence sex workers in different, yet related ways. These are tied to a larger fabric, woven with threads of colonialism, capitalism and an ideology of control over the bodies of minorities. Different tools are used for operating the exclusion and repression against sex workers: some are discursive, some are legal, and some are spatial such as borders, hospitals, prisons and urban renewal projects. Everyday structures that sex worker communities build exist in resistance to these "counter-topographies"²⁸⁷ and outline imaginations of alternative ways of organisation in cities, ways that are inclusive of differences and promote community-based self-determination. The following sections discuss how sex workers and ally structures build infrastructures of mutual aid, care and community and the challenges they face through the lens of three dimensions of marginalisation and counter-organisation: Representation, Health and Deviance, and City-Space and Knowledge. Altogether, this chapter thus attempts to sketch what the topography of sex workers in Marseille looks like; how access to voice and memory, to care and safety, to knowledge, housing and community-space is made possible in a context where accessing these things is actively countered by punitive legislations that criminalise solidarity, different strategies of silencing and normative policing.

5.1. Representation



SUZANNE about the administrative dimension of sex work

Representations of sex work are highly loaded. Caught between victimising and moralising discourses, it is a topic that divides feminist movements and carries centuries old stereotypes. Many public actors take great interest in depicting sex workers, however in ways that do not aim at amplifying sex workers' voices but follow political and ideological agendas or feed into the realm of fantasy in art and culture. The representational space around sex work is disputed but, while everyone seems to have clear ideas about sex workers' realities and needs, their accounts of their everyday lives are considerably absent in politics, culture and popular beliefs. This section explores sex workers' perspectives on these (mis-)representations as well as different spaces, events and resources they create and draw upon to represent themselves and make their own and their colleagues' voices heard. It tries to grapple with the contradiction of victimisation and moralisation both directed at silenced sex workers and attempts to understand their material effects as well as the contestations they engender.²⁸⁸

²⁸⁷ Katz, "On the Grounds of Globalization."

²⁸⁸ DelCasino, Dorn, and Gallaher, "Interview," 53.

Archetypical narratives and stereotypes

Speaking and being heard from the position of a sex worker is difficult because sex workers' voices are categorised into the dichotomy victim – villain. Nelle explains that in the rare moments where sex workers have a platform to express themselves, there is a pressure to portray their lived realities in overly positive ways to avoid feeding into abolitionist discourses that depict sex work as an inherent violence against women.

"Today, it is difficult to say how complicated sex work is and how there are a lot of really hard things because very fast, this can be co-opted by abolitionist movements."²⁸⁹

Sex workers adapt their narratives to avoid instrumentalisation. Thus, the only discourses on sex work that can exist on mainstream media platforms with a broad audience are formatted into "two archetypical narratives," that of victimisation and a desire to exit prostitution on the one hand and one of "full empowerment and sex positivity" on the other.²⁹⁰ Sex worker Amar Protesta writes, "We are forced into binary systems of experience: absolute empowerment or total victimisation."²⁹¹ Because representations of sex work are dominated by abolitionists, sex workers getting an opportunity to talk about their work feel a political imperative to counter the victim-narrative. Complex representations of sex workers are thus hard to find and not easily expressed. Suzanne and Rosario Veneno mention that stereotypes of the "prostitute" are very common. When asked about possibilities of expression for her and her colleagues, Suzanne's response begins by outlining various "hyper stereotypical" representations:

"Socially, the most classic argumentation about 'the prostitute' is that they are people who suffer exploitation and human trafficking and who are real victims of systems that are often traps. That they are victims of a network and that they are forced into prostitution to survive. After that come very precarious women or very precarious transvestites or gay men who see this as a rare opportunity to share their sexuality and it is presented as people who work in the street, globally with the idea of getting out. Then the one around online sex work as an easy job where you are very protected because of the screen. I would say there is also the representation of luxury *putes*, like the footballers' escorts. Or the dominatrix of the bosses of large companies (laughs)."²⁹²

The enumeration of these stereotypes illustrates that common (fictive) representations of sex workers categorise them as either without agency, as people with a sexuality that is perceived as deviant, or as a morally reprehensible way of making 'easy money.' While being othered however, these stereotypes are also expressions of exoticisation and fetishisation. Similarly aware of the idea that sex workers are inherently "different," Victoria says that it is an important challenge for her to show that trans sex workers' realities and lives are normal:

"The real objective for me in representation is to show that the lived experiences are normal and that, basically, it is Madam Michu who does sex work and is trans; it is everybody." To achieve this, there is a need for visibility because "it is only when [other representations] have passed into the collective consciousness that we'll be less vulnerable."²⁹³

It is for the same reason that Suzanne talks about the "administrative dimension" of her work when she has the opportunity to tell someone about her job. The imaginary representations of sex work omit "normal" tasks such as making appointments, creating questionnaires to set rules and

²⁸⁹ Nelle, Conversation with Nelle.

²⁹⁰ Nelle.

²⁹¹ Tan, *TDS. Testimonies of Sex Workers*.

²⁹² Suzanne, Conversation with Suzanne.

²⁹³ Victoria, Conversation with Victoria.

limits for a session, putting up ads and the dimension of preparing the body and the space and procuring material such as fetish accessories and lingerie that are all part of this job.

Victims or villains?



ROSARIO VENENO: “Just consider us as citizens and give us the right to work!”

The image behind the government’s laws on prostitution is that of a person without agency; either because they are minors, or because they are trafficked. Nelle explains that, with the *Loi 2016*, human trafficking was legally linked to prostitution, thus creating a fictive situation in which all human trafficking is for prostitution and all prostitution is forced and thus the only support that sex workers need is saving them from it. The *Loi 2016* is a result of heavy lobbying from abolitionist groups who come from a current of feminism dominated by white middle- to upper-class women who construct migrant sex workers as a “damaged ‘other’” to pursue their own agenda.²⁹⁴ In my conversation with Rosario Veneno, we talked about why sharing testimonies and personal stories of sex workers is so important today in her eyes.

“Sex work is still a topic that is really not recognised. Sex work is not at all framed or considered as work. So, it’s really difficult because it... it kind of falls within the moral framework of society actually. I think that sex in itself, even beyond sex work, sex in itself is really taboo, in fact. At least in this culture, here where we are. And so, it intersects with so many things and it’s quite a complex subject that it is completely put to one side.”²⁹⁵

This non-recognition of sex work as work makes it impossible for the community to form real workers’ unions and make their voices heard:²⁹⁶

“I can’t think of any other area of work where workers don’t have a... a voice, in fact.”²⁹⁷

For sex worker Morgane Merteuil, the interest of abolitionists is not to end gender-based violence and sexual exploitation but to end prostitution out of moral ideas on sexuality:

“I criticise abolitionists for not being abolitionist enough: they just want to abolish prostitution, not exploitation. We criticise them for essentializing the condition of prostitutes and making our condition as workers invisible.”²⁹⁸

Suzanne ironically argues that, if abolition of exploitation was their aim and criminalising clients the means, abolitionists would also have to abolish nurses and hospitals.²⁹⁹ My interlocutors agree however that the voice that is least heard is that of migrant sex workers:

“There is the imaginary of the migrant woman who is in networks and who is never listened to. These voices are never, never, never listened to.”³⁰⁰

Yet, the only narrative that can be heard by state authorities and abolitionists is that of a person forced into prostitution. Why, if these actors are so convinced that every “prostitute” is a victim, are their voices not included in political decision making? My research partners observe that,

²⁹⁴ Mathieu, “16. Invisibiliser et éloigner”; Doezenma, “Ouch!: Western Feminists’ ‘Wounded Attachment’ to the ‘Third World Prostitute.’”

²⁹⁵ Rosario Veneno, Conversation with Rosario Veneno.

²⁹⁶ The STRASS, the French sex workers’ union, is not perceived representative by many foreign and non-white sex workers.

²⁹⁷ Rosario Veneno, Conversation with Rosario Veneno.

²⁹⁸ Ponticelli, Carle, and Guillibert, “Strass et stigma,” 39.

²⁹⁹ Suzanne, Conversation with Suzanne.

³⁰⁰ Nelle, Conversation with Nelle.

despite the figure of the victim that must be saved from prostitution networks that is so central to policies and discourses, sex workers are largely abandoned by the state. In chapter 3, we saw that the only current measure that offers support for sex workers is the *Parcours de Sortie* which does not provide them with enough resources to live in dignity and forces them to stop prostitution even before getting access to the program. Rosario Veneno explains that the extent of abandonment of sex workers and even more the people who actually are victims of prostitution networks, is even bigger:

“The real victims are offered nothing: not even psychiatric or psychological care, no shelter, protection of their family, nothing at all.”³⁰¹

There are no means to support people who are being sexually exploited in accessing housing, education, or jobs. Nelle says that there are even more factors that come into play in marginalising people who would need support from the state:

“These laws make it even more difficult for these people to express themselves because they are already stigmatised and on top of that, they often don’t have access to legal services, to justice, to housing, to health, and so on. Because in addition, you are criminalised for not having papers. So you really don’t have any freedom and possibility to act.”³⁰²

The abandonment of sex workers through these measures stands in contrast to the no-agency and need-of-saving narrative that is placed upon them. Nelle and Rosario Veneno link the silencing of migrant sex workers to racist imaginaries and interests: “disguised as moral intentions of protection of minors, of trafficking, of victims, with very precise and also mostly completely fictional imaginaries of victims (...) [the state] creates a moral panic to then pass laws which actually have other aims.”³⁰³ Rosario Veneno interprets these aims: “The state really exercises an anti-migration and anti-prostitution control.”³⁰⁴ Moreover, Nelle questions “conceptions of innocence” and argues that migrant sex workers cannot be heard because the only way they could be is for them to assume a victim-position, yet, black and brown women do not have access to innocence due to racist stereotypes and structures.³⁰⁵ There is thus an interesting tension between Doezenma’s analysis of Western feminist constructions of “Third World prostitutes” as a “suffering body” with no agency³⁰⁶; yet, when women from the Global South speak for themselves and try to access rights, they are demonised. For instance, the commissions deciding if a person is accepted to enter the *Parcours de Sortie* stipulate that migrant women are prone to instrumentalising the measure to legalise their citizenship status. The association ALC from Nizza witnesses thus:

“These 15 files were presented to the first departmental commission set up in France, in April 2017. (...) The files were predominantly for Nigerian women. We did this work with great precision. The social workers who worked on it were really thorough. We presented our files on 7 April. And on 7 April, we were told that, in any case, given that the majority of the applications were from Nigerians (...) the prefecture’s premise was to say: ‘We believe that this system will be instrumentalised, and since migration control is an extremely sensitive issue, we will examine cases through that lens. Therefore, all individuals who are under an OQTF (obligation to leave French territory) or subject to the Dublin

³⁰¹ Rosario Veneno, Conversation with Rosario Veneno.

³⁰² Nelle, Conversation with Nelle.

³⁰³ Nelle.

³⁰⁴ Rosario Veneno, Conversation with Rosario Veneno.

³⁰⁵ Nelle, Conversation with Nelle.

³⁰⁶ Doezenma, “Ouch!: Western Feminists’ ‘Wounded Attachment’ to the ‘Third World Prostitute.’”

Regulation (which applied to all the cases we were presenting) will not be viewed favourably.”³⁰⁷

Behind the victim rhetoric, migrant sex workers are thus demonised and blamed for society’s ills. Katz explains that this demonisation “enables and is propelled by the wholesale abandonment of certain parts of the city” and much more money is spent to build prisons and detention centres than on proactive and supportive structures.³⁰⁸ Even closer to migrant sex workers’ experiences is Gilmore’s observation that there is not only an abandonment of welfare and a reinforcement of repressive structures, but that social welfare is more and more subjected to a kind of self-policing for people to qualify for social goods and benefits.³⁰⁹

The laws around prostitution are built around the idea of a victim. Accessing rights as a sex worker is thus based on one’s identity being able to fit to the victim narrative. However, being ‘eligible’ for innocence is based on race, age, gender, cis-identity, and so on and so forth. Being a victim is equated to being without agency: to excuse a sex workers’ immoral activity, the blame must be found somewhere else. There is therefore a new dichotomy: the victim who is vulnerable and without agency because she is young, pure and innocent, and the perpetrator on whom all the immorality, criminality and (violent) agency is put upon. The reality, of course, is much more complex than that and only a few people manage to fit into these two stereotypes. They are constructed as opposites. The victim is female, the exploiter male. The victim is young, a girl, the exploiter a man, an adult. The victim is white, the exploiter a foreigner. It is because of this construct, because of these representations, that despite a law that doesn’t criminalise sex workers, most of them are treated as malignant.

Representation in and inspiration from culture

The absence of voices of sex workers in the making of the common opinion creates space for fiction. Told by people who do not have their experiences, sex workers’ stories in cultural productions serve the purpose of fantasies rather than that of sharing nuanced narratives:

“When [stories] are told by other people, it’s people who haven’t experienced these things, who don’t know what [trans sex workers] have been through. As a result, these people fantasise about a reality whose complexity they are completely unaware of.”³¹⁰

Rosario Veneno thus describes how the “*pute*” is a “feminine archetype”:

“There are a lot of men who speak about it and who make this their muse, a lot of movies and literary productions speak about *putes* but always as an object rather than a subject. It is interesting to see this because the *pute* understands herself as a political subject. (...) There are a lot of representations of *putes* in the cinema, on television, but the only ones that I am interested in are those made by *putes* themselves.”³¹¹

My interlocutors enter this “soft power aspect of culture,” as Victoria identifies it,³¹² by setting up strategies to produce and share their own and their friends’ and colleagues’ personal accounts, representations and inspirations. One of these is participating in this research project: as discussed in chapter 3, my research partners accepted the conversations for this study because they

³⁰⁷ ACL in Le Bail, Giametta, and Rassouw, “Que pensent les travailleur.se.s du sexe de la loi prostitution,” 2018.

³⁰⁸ DelCasino, Dorn, and Gallaher, “Interview,” 43.

³⁰⁹ Gilmore, *Golden Gulag*.

³¹⁰ Victoria, Conversation with Victoria.

³¹¹ Rosario Veneno, Conversation with Rosario Veneno.

³¹² Victoria, Conversation with Victoria.

were thought as a space of expression and planned as a podcast that can be made accessible to a broader public. Beyond opening this space that allows for nuance and that focuses not only on individual trajectories but also on collective efforts of care and mutual aid, the aim of the podcast is also to amplify other sex workers' voices by assembling situated stories and narratives. For my interlocutors, books are spaces of representations that manage to escape the binary discursive space of the 'all positive' and the 'all negative.' I thus asked my interlocutors to share books, shows, movies and other cultural productions in which they found representations of sex workers that inspired them, which in turn also became part of this study's bibliography. During our first meeting, which took place before our recorded conversation, Suzanne recommended the collection of sex workers' stories *TDS. Testimonies of sex workers* to me, gathered by a colleague, Tan. On the back cover, a text says, "This book opens up a whole new space for sex workers to express themselves, far removed from Manichean narratives, distorting caricatures and unquestionable judgements. It's a space in which they can tell their stories and affirm the reality of their lives in all their complexity."³¹³ Rosario Veneno shared an important political resource with me: the book *Puta Feminista: Historias de una trabajadora sexual* written by Argentinian street sex worker, activist and National General Secretary of AMMAR³¹⁴ Georgina Orellano.³¹⁵ Both Nelle and Victoria mentioned *Les Vilaines* written by the Argentinian trans woman Camila Sosa Vilada as impactful for them because it tells the story of trans women, most of whom are sex workers, in a way that portrays both violence and community and mutual help in a very sincere way.³¹⁶



VICTORIA recounting *Les Vilaines*

Besides these books, resources that were shared were in the form of plays, shows and podcasts like *La Veneno*, a show that focuses on the life and death of the famous Spanish singer, actress and sex worker Cristina Ortiz Rodríguez, known as La Veneno and the *Putains de Portraits*, a podcast in which each episode is dedicated to the personal account of a sex worker, allowing for diverse and situated narratives to be expressed. The ancient Greek comedy *Lysistrata*, based on the story of how a group of women stopped a war through sex strike, illustrates for Rosario Veneno how sexuality has been and can be mobilised as a tool for power by women.

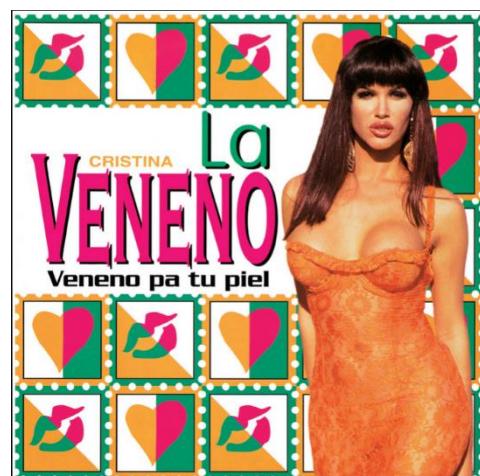


Figure 10: Album cover by Cristina La Veneno.

Expression through autonomous art

Finding identifiers common to one's own reflected in stories is important for recognising oneself in representations. Thus, Nelle and Victoria, who are both trans, named resources in which other trans sex workers get to share their lived experiences and perspectives. Rosario Veneno, who is from Argentina and has an education in theatre, sees her ideas represented in feminist political writing from Latin America and performance. My interlocutors are entangled in the power relations surrounding representation. While they have the common aim to amplify sex workers' voices and create opportunities for expressing complex narratives, their strategies, perspectives and ways of positioning themselves vary due to their different realities. Within the larger sex workers' community in Marseille, my interlocutors are privileged by having formal jobs besides their activity

³¹³ Tan, *TDS. Testimonies of Sex Workers*.

³¹⁴ AMMAR, short for *Asociación de Mujeres Meretrices de Argentina*, is Argentina's sex workers' union.

³¹⁵ Orellano, *Puta Feminista*.

³¹⁶ *Las Malas* in the original Spanish version, *Bad Girls* in the English translation.

as sex workers, legal citizenship status and education, and by being fluent in French.

Rosario Veneno uses her position as a counsellor at Autres Regards and her experience in performance and film to amplify sex workers' voices. Through her work in the association, she has connected with sex workers who have very different realities from hers and who have less power to make their voices heard.³¹⁷ The film project *Refuges* carves out a possibility for sex workers benefiting from Autres Regards to talk about their everyday strategies of creating safe spaces and to share personal stories. The individual focus of this project was decided upon due to the fact that many sex workers are precarious and do not have the time or stability in their lives to attend a group project with regular meetings over a longer period of time. It becomes thus visible that the precariousness that many sex workers experience makes their access to expression more difficult.

The original plan of *Refuges*, inspired by the *Théâtre de l'Opprimé* ("Theatre of the Oppressed), a tool that aims at enabling people "to speak out about sex work and the issues involved (...) without exposing themselves" through theatrical performance and under the guise of characters, could not be carried out.³¹⁸ However, the individual witness approach maintains the possibility for sex workers to share their perspective and the project is therefore (perhaps even more) important:

"It really values people. I think in situations like this, people feel good, feel good to be able to express themselves, to be able to share their lives, or their vision."³¹⁹

Rosario Veneno and Nelle both participate in the organisation of sex workers' festivals: *La Vénale*, a sex workers' art festival, and *Porn sur Mars*, a film festival around sex work. The last festival *La Vénale* was held in September 2024 over two days, the first day being open to everyone, while the second one was reserved for sex workers only. The festival opened with a *Goûter Putes*, a 'sex workers' tea party' (see chapter 5.3.) and over the weekend, art was exhibited, films were projected, sex workers performed to collect money for their community, and a discussion circle and workshops were offered for sex workers to share their experiences and knowledge. The place that hosted this event is the autonomously managed and financed social centre La Dar; a place of "collective autonomy" and conviviality, run by its users, that provides a space for workshops, struggles and assemblies of "*Sans Papiers*, the precarious and social movements."³²⁰

Porn sur Mars, the sex workers' film festival, had its 12th edition in June 2024. It is a self-managed, independent festival organised by an affinity group that is defined by being queer, in the margins and mainly from Latin America, where also most of the films come from.³²¹ As *La Vénale*, the festival *Porn sur Mars* is also held in a space that is managed by a group of marginalised people for marginalised people. The Vidéodrome 2 is an independent cinema where most employees are



Figure 11: Poster for the sex workers' art festival *La Vénale*. @la_dar_csa.

³¹⁷ Rosario Veneno, Conversation with Rosario Veneno.

³¹⁸ "Autres Regards - Association de Santé Communautaire."

³¹⁹ Rosario Veneno, Conversation with Rosario Veneno.

³²⁰ La Dar centre social autogéré, "La Dar."

³²¹ Rosario Veneno, Conversation with Rosario Veneno.

trans, spectators decide on the price they can pay for a ticket, and people and groups can propose their own cinema cycles.

The examples of these two festivals illustrate that the only places in the city where relatively free expression is made possible for sex workers are autonomously run and exist in precarious ways because they are funded by a marginalised community with little resources that, what is more, is under pressure in Marseille's context of gentrification. In order to make these spaces accessible, people invest their time and energy, whilst often not being able to make a living out of these activities. This in turn creates hierarchies in self-managed spaces because many people do not have access to these resources and can thus not participate in such autonomous spaces of expression.

Victoria and Nelle both thematise this issue around privilege within the sex workers' community in Marseille in relation to the podcast for which the conversations for this study were recorded. Victoria says that she seized the opportunity to speak in the podcast because she sees herself in a duty to speak up due to the privileges that she has compared to other colleagues. Within the marginalised group of trans sex workers and drug consumers, Victoria explains that her privileges linked to her race, education and having safety network of friends make it easier for her to take the risk of being visible:

"So, it's this reality that we need to be visible, but there's a risk involved. I have my privileges, and I'm prepared to take that risk for myself. I don't want to sacrifice myself because I also have a personal balance to maintain, but I can do it because I have people around me who accept my activity, who support me in it, with whom I can talk about the problems it raises, and so forth."³²²

Both Victoria and Nelle say that sex workers' voices are so rarely heard that there is a lot of pressure on the ones who get to speak and be listened to because they have the burden of representing a largely silenced and very diverse community.

"When you're a social group that's listened to so little, there's enormous pressure on the few voices that are heard to become representatives of the whole community, and that erases a lot of very complex things. We also forget that the people who can express themselves today are often people who are better off than others and who therefore have the opportunity to express themselves, to whom platforms are given because, I don't know, they know how to express themselves in a certain way, in a certain language, or they have the time to develop and make their point."³²³

Nelle critically questions the differential access to voice within the larger sex workers' community:

"Not a lot of things can circulate around sex work, for a thousand reasons. I know that for me, it is possible to speak about it because I have time, and I am out everywhere, because I have many privileges that make it possible for me to speak. And professionally, I don't have much at stake (...). So, that poses the question: which interviews can we make? And also, how can these interviews become community resources that can be consulted?"³²⁴

³²² Victoria, Conversation with Victoria.

³²³ Nelle, Conversation with Nelle.

³²⁴ Nelle.

“No one but us is going to make that archive”³²⁵



NELLE on sex workers writing their own histories

“We are the ones they tried to sweep under the rug. We are the ones on whom all miseries have been placed. We are that insult. We are that word that provokes shame and embarrassment. We are what you didn’t imagine and so much more.”³²⁶

Nelle has been grappling with these issues of making sex workers’ accounts accessible to the community for some time and as a result, he organises monthly *Permanences Putes* with a friend and colleague. As described in chapter 2, these workshops are connected to the queer archive Mémoire des Sexualités and have the purpose of sex workers getting together, looking through archives and producing their own personal and collective traces. History-making is subjective and dependent on the perspective and interests of the person archiving and interpreting the archives. Silence in history results from uneven power-dynamics at different moments in its production: “the moment of fact creation (the making of sources); the moment of fact assembly (the making of archives); the moment of fact retrieval (the making of narratives); and the moment of retrospective significance (the making of history in the final instance).”³²⁷

In the *Permanences Putes*, the first three moments are all part of the workshops and every sex worker attempts to find out about their own personal heritage depending on their identity, intimacies and personal narratives. Taking history-making into their own hands is a very powerful tool that fights against sex workers’ isolation and makes learning from colleagues who organised, fought and lived before them possible:

“The archives are important to show the continuity of things, that people have existed, lived, asked themselves so many questions, have put things in place. There were tools too, and this is also part of the archives, sharing tools and understanding how people organised themselves, what worked and what didn’t work. (...) It also helps say that we are part of something shared which is important because of the presence of stigmatisation and secrecy.”³²⁸

Victoria says about the importance of creating and archiving traces that

“there is a need for archival work to know where what we do comes from. (...) We have a duty to remember. We have things to share. We have people who die and who commit suicide. We have a history that is tragic, and we make it exist for us because it brings us out of isolation.”³²⁹

“No one but us is going to make that archive; because these histories disappear into oblivion in a blink of an eye,” says Nelle when explaining the necessity of archiving.³³⁰ The duty to remember and the need to contest secrecy, isolation and oblivion: all this effort of history-making and the struggles around access to representation happen in and because of a context of what Selma James calls a “counter-insurrectional strategy” of making mobilisations of marginalised people forgotten and ignored.³³¹

Sex workers are depicted through fictional stereotypes that other them. This othering is based on

³²⁵ Nelle.

³²⁶ Orellano, *Puta Feminista*.

³²⁷ Trouillot in Ghaddar and Caswell, “To Go Beyond,” 76.

³²⁸ Nelle, Conversation with Nelle.

³²⁹ Victoria, Conversation with Victoria.

³³⁰ Nelle, Conversation with Nelle.

³³¹ James, *Sexe, Race et Classe. La Stratégie de l'autonomie*.

victimisation and simultaneous demonisation; constructs that are closely linked to the mobilisation of stereotypes based on factors such as race or trans-identity. Sex workers, especially those falling into multiply marginalised categories, struggle to access innocence, which is a prerequisite for being eligible to social benefits. Stereotypical representations of sex workers and moralising discourses have both material and psychological effects on the ordering of space and on subjectivities. Sex workers therefore attempt to challenge these misrepresentations and the pressure of fitting into all-positive or all-negative accounts of their experiences by creating their own spaces and strategies for representation. Archival work as one example is a crucial “liberatory praxis” that centres the oppressed and goes beyond “liberal and normative understandings of diversity and social justice” by being committed to uncovering genealogies of power-relations, assuming positionality in producing and sharing knowledge and dismantling systems of domination and oppression.³³²

5.2. Norms, health, deviance

“Within the state sphere, there is a punitive view as the only response to conflicts. The intricate networks and survival strategies that the poor create are completely disregarded.”³³³

Sex workers are not only represented as victims without agency but also depicted and treated as deviant. Their ways of being and getting by are marginalised through a normative system that treats otherness as something to exclude or to tailor to a certain norm. Difference is perceived as deviance based on oppressive constructs such as racism, heterosexism, ableism and classism. In the previous chapter, I discussed that my interlocutors and social workers supporting sex workers highlight a demonisation happening behind victimising representations and state measures. This chapter focuses on the grounds on which this demonisation of marginalised people operates. It discusses how public health and security discourses legitimise repressive policies and exclusion from urban spaces and what the landscape of structures responding to sex workers’ needs in their marginalisation looks like in Marseille.

Sex workers’ deviance and how it threatens “the order”



SUZANNE: “As a pute, you fall outside the category of ‘woman’”

As sex workers, Nelle, Victoria, Rosario Veneno and Suzanne all share the experience of being considered outside ‘the norm.’ Rosario Veneno explains that the state aspires towards the possibility of controlling people’s bodies and minds to align them to a normative way of thinking and being. Those who do not adapt to this domination and elude the control are repressed and punished:

“The state wants to control citizens and put them in a certain order of thinking. Whatever overflows,³³⁴ be it sex workers but also trans people or people who are alone for example, whoever gets out of this control and the possibility of domination is punished. So, as people who are incarcerated, be it in anti-migrant centres, unhealthy prisons or psychiatric hospitals, they are people who endanger a society with their own freedom. We can see it everywhere, the rise of fascism, the repression against all the bodies that are different from a certain concept of normality.”³³⁵

³³² Ghaddar and Caswell, “To Go Beyond.”

³³³ Orellano, *Puta Feminista*, 39.

³³⁴ Rosario Veneno uses the word *déborde* which literally means exceeding a border.

³³⁵ Rosario Veneno, Conversation with Rosario Veneno.

Nelle highlights that sex workers are perceived as deviant and thus represent a threat to a certain order of society. As Rosario Veneno, he argues that this normative structure is entangled with other conceptions of deviance around race, citizenship status, drug use, sexuality and gender-identity:

“[Prostitution] harms the order, the nuclear family unit, and a lot of other things and then it is also mixed up with what the dominant powers would perceive as undesirable populations and so again, there is racism in there, people who don’t have papers, drug users too and all gender- and sexuality-deviant people and so *puterie*³³⁶ intersects with that too, it is really deviance, perverts.”³³⁷

Similar to this intersectional reading of oppression, Suzanne explains that queer people are connected to the sex worker community through historical categorisations of perversion and through marginalisation based on normative conceptions of sexuality:

“When you have your own conception of your sexuality [as a queer person] as deviant, outside the norm, sex work is something you come across very quickly. And I imagine that we have relationships with our bodies that are particular because of this experience of deviance. Historically, we also belong to the category of perversion, and that is something very close, the categories are close. So, I think there’s something woven in there about the historical social relationship to perversion and deviance.”³³⁸

Like other colleagues, and in line with Rosario Veneno’s reading of deviance from the norm as a form of personal freedom, Victoria politicises the fact that she, as a trans woman sex worker, is perceived as defying the rules of normativity. She questions the concept of “normal” and says,

“Everything I am, how I have defined myself, is normal. We live in a world that is full of these things: normativity to the extreme, it is an instrument of the dominant. They try to show that we deviate from the norm because being queer is deviating from the norm... Well, actually, it is normal. Deviating means that you are questioning the norm.”³³⁹

My interlocutors’ marginalisation within society is lived as an oppression emanating from “the dominant,” “the dominant powers” or “the state.” These normative structures operate in an intersecting way, connecting different marginalised groups to each other, but also creating hierarchies through the accumulation of discriminating factors. The groups that they mentioned as being excluded through the ideas of norm and deviance include racialised people and migrants, drug users, trans and queer people, the mentally ill and the imprisoned. Sex worker and member of the STRASS Schaffauser writes that the state’s concerns regarding sex work generally fall into three categories. The first one is related to prostitution representing a social and moral problem that requires “reintegration” of “prostituted persons.” Secondly, it seeks to maintain public order and tranquillity by preventing (migrant) women from carrying out sex work in public spaces which is regarded as a “nuisance.” Finally, there is a historical preoccupation around public health, which is dealt with by regulating sex workers who are seen as transmitters of STIs.³⁴⁰ These analyses that see the state’s primary preoccupation regarding sex workers as one of containment, assimilation or exclusion have direct consequences for sex workers’ rights, possibilities of action and access to good living conditions. As we will see in the next two sections, the three categories described

³³⁶ *Puterie* can be translated to “whoring” and is used by sex workers as a reclaimed term to defy a discourse that considers their work an immoral activity.

³³⁷ Nelle, Conversation with Nelle.

³³⁸ Suzanne, Conversation with Suzanne.

³³⁹ Victoria, Conversation with Victoria.

³⁴⁰ Schaffauser, *Les luttes des putes*.

by Schaffauser are closely intertwined and build one cohesive ideological structure.

Confinement and isolation



MARSACTU: “These scenes which they would rather not see”³⁴¹

Understanding the normative structures and interest around restraining deviance and assuring public order and health offers an explanation as to why nearly all state measures regarding sex work are repressive. There is, as Rosario Veneno says, a total disregard of sex workers’ realities in the elaboration of these laws, despite the fact that for sex workers, being able to do their job is often vital:

“Sex work is essential for a group of people, mainly migrant women, who don’t have access to conventional jobs. They simply need to earn a living to fill their fridge and so they find themselves doing this work in complete abandonment on the part of the state. The state tries to regulate all forms of work and of economic exchange but in the sexual economic exchange, it is impossible to get a grip on it. In the end, it belongs so much to the body of the people who practice [sex work] that the fact that there are people talking about it that are not at all concerned, and that people and political classes who built and constructed and thought of this law [*Loi 2016*] have NOTHING to do with the world of sex work, well, that creates monsters.”³⁴²

There is indeed, as Simonin writes, a criminalisation of migrant sex workers’ means of survival, legitimised through the reduction of nuisances in public space and the fight against sexual and sexist violence.³⁴³ This is also reflected in what Lam writes in *The Birth of Butterfly*: For migrant women, accessing jobs and rights, but also networks and protection, is made difficult due to language barriers, race, gender, class, and immigration status. They must thus rely on work they can do independently and informally;³⁴⁴ yet, laws like the *Loi 2016* significantly reduces their freedom to do so. Moreover, the criminalisation of solidarity with sex workers further deteriorates their access to (mutual) aid networks. Suzanne explains that queer people encounter similar difficulties:

“Many queer people, because of their stigmatisation and discrimination, are precarious. As a result, [sex work] is one of the jobs you can do when you’re in a precarious situation and when it is complicated to get hired in the conventional system.”³⁴⁵

Madness, a trans sex worker from the USA similarly observes that “there are sex workers who can’t go and work other jobs, because they’re disabled, or because they’re undocumented, or because they’re black and trans and people treat them like shit.”³⁴⁶ These observations show that, in the state’s ambition to prevent sex work from harming norms and order, its response disregards and actively counters people’s ways of getting by. The creation of marginalisation through constructions of normativity leads to a limited access to conventional or formal jobs for “deviant” people. Instead of decriminalising the ways that precarious people find to make a living, be it informal jobs, begging or sex work, the state represses their activities without rendering their access to formalised jobs easier. The state cannot benefit from sex workers’ work and therefore applies repressive measures, as Rosario Veneno states, unlike other *Sans Papiers* on which it heavily relies to build its cities and clean the cities’ houses. This is an example for what Roy means when she

³⁴¹ Artaud, “La place de la prostitution.”

³⁴² Rosario Veneno, Conversation with Rosario Veneno.

³⁴³ Simonin, “Le « travail du sexe ». Genèses et usages d’une catégorie politique.”

³⁴⁴ Lam, “The Birth of Butterfly. Bringing Migrant Sex Workers’ Voices into the Sex Workers’ Rights Movement.”

³⁴⁵ Suzanne, Conversation with Suzanne.

³⁴⁶ Madness in Herrera, “How Sex Workers Are Using Mutual Aid to Respond to the Coronavirus.”

writes that urban informality is a strategy employed by different actors, whose legitimacy however depends on “class power.”³⁴⁷ When the state sees the need to rely on informal labour, informality becomes legitimate, which creates a perception of these activities as normal:

“In the neighbourhood, [the illegal job market where undocumented workers wait to be hired by tradesmen] no longer shocks anyone, not even the police cars that have driven by several times without ever stopping. Yet, hiring undocumented workers is punishable by law with five years’ imprisonment for the employer and a €75'000€ fine for the company.”³⁴⁸

This exemplifies that “informality has to be understood as a regime of rule,”³⁴⁹ as a mode of practice, rather than an identifier of the Other. Yiftachel writes that as the state has the power to “whiten” informal activities and spaces to serve dominant interests, it also creates “grey spaces” through top-down processes that maintain the undesired in a pseudo-permanent marginality in which they are neither integrated nor eliminated: “In most cases, (...) grey space will not be eliminated, but maintained by a ‘politics of un-recognition’ accompanied by marginalizing indifference. It will be typically ‘flanked’ by contradictory discursive movements. On the one hand, professional and political denial (of its very existence, as well as the denial of services, status or legitimacy), while on the other a persistent discourse of ‘othering,’ and an occasional ‘performance’ of punitive threat.”³⁵⁰ Sex workers, especially those who are also migrants and/or poor and/or trans, are not legitimised by authorities and are therefore othered and abandoned, as explored in section 5.1., and simultaneously subjected to policing and removal from public space through spatial confinement, exclusion and marginalisation.

The un-recognition and othering of sex workers serves dominant political and identity interests.³⁵¹ “The norm,” Victoria explains, “doesn’t exist. It is only the coordination of margins.”³⁵² Indeed, deviance from the norm is used in most of these cases as a legitimisation of these processes. The spatial marginalisation happening in Marseille is explained by many sex workers as a result of the *Loi 2016*:

“The fact that the criminalisation is put on the side of clients pushes sex workers more and more out of the city because clients could be sanctioned if they are caught.”³⁵³

“For example, before, I wanted to work with the men next to where I work—in the parking lot nearby. But now, that’s not possible. They say, ‘no, no, no.’ They are afraid, so we have to go far.”³⁵⁴

Although **soliciting** is not criminalised anymore and the police can therefore not legally stop sex workers from working in the street, Rosario Veneno tells me that her colleagues are targeted by the police through an informal form of repression:

“What comrades who work on the street point out is that, for example, when they get harassed by the police, the police don’t do anything to them directly. They simply park a police car next to where they are, which makes it impossible for clients to approach. So, they have to leave – and if the police feel like it, they can repeat this over and over until they force them out of a neighbourhood or push them really far from the city. Just by their presence alone. Because in the end, what can you say? They’re

³⁴⁷ Roy, “Slumdog Cities.”

³⁴⁸ Tilliez, “A Marseille, les sans-papiers se tournent vers le travail illégal.”

³⁴⁹ Bhan, “Notes on a Southern Urban Practice.”

³⁵⁰ Yiftachel, “Theoretical Notes On ‘Gray Cities’,” 92.

³⁵¹ Yiftachel, “Theoretical Notes On ‘Gray Cities’.”

³⁵² Victoria, Conversation with Victoria.

³⁵³ Rosario Veneno, Conversation with Rosario Veneno.

³⁵⁴ Grace in Le Bail, Giometta, and Rassouw, “Que pensent les travailleur.se.s du sexe de la loi prostitution,” 2018, 46.

not doing anything to you, they're not talking to you, they're not even looking at you. They're just *there*. It's a form of control that is incredibly powerful."

The criminalisation of buying a sexual service is thus instrumentalised to chase sex workers from public spaces in central parts of the city, exposing them more to risk, as they now have to work in unfamiliar places that are sometimes far removed from their colleagues' workplaces. This is also problematic because sharing a space with colleagues provides a safety network and makes mutual aid possible, structures that are harmed or destroyed through the police's strategies.³⁵⁵ Similarly, the work of associations is complicated, as they constantly have to identify the new places where sex workers practice.³⁵⁶ Suzanne describes that, besides the police, there are other actors who contribute to reducing sex workers' access to central public spaces:

"A lot of [sex workers] use Airbnb for example, but Airbnb is very suspicious now with certain profiles. And there is also a lot of neighbours of Airbnbs who are wary about it and then they report them. (...) There is also hotel rooms but the same, there is a vigilance that sometimes means they don't accept it. Then there are also a lot of hotels that 'don't see anything' because, well, it benefits them too. (...) And so, a lot of people make the compromise of going to the clients' place, which can be very exposing."³⁵⁷

Rosario Veneno argues that in addition to chasing sex workers from public spaces in the city-centre, there is a dynamic of locking undesired people up through different institutions such as prisons, *CHRS* (*Centres d'Hébergement et de Réinsertion Sociale*, Centres for Shelter and Social Re-integration) or psychiatric hospitals. Taïbi writes about the repression against sex workers that targets primarily *Sans Papiers*,

"Each organization has a discourse on prostitution that aligns with its specific area of advocacy (medical, social, humanitarian, etc.). This incoherence is also found within state services; for instance, the Ministry of the Interior, which oversees the Central Office for the Suppression of Human Trafficking, carries out valuable work to support women. However, it also maintains a repressive dimension that is entirely counterproductive, particularly concerning *Sans-Papiers*."³⁵⁸

My interlocutors have an analysis of these dynamics that is almost the opposite of Taïbi's. The repression against trafficking, as we have seen, has received only very limited state resources that are, what is more, difficult to access. As shown above, being under an *OQTF* has been grounds for denying migrant sex workers to benefit from the *Parcours de Sortie*. Rather than viewing these processes as incoherent, my interlocutors interpret them as interconnected and as the product of related systems of oppression against black and brown women. Laws passed by the Ministry of the Interior making it easier to expel migrants from French territory are linked, and not in contradiction to, laws on prostitution. Indeed, it has been made clear by former minister of interior Nicolas Sarkozy that expelling migrants is a component of the fight against prostitution and human trafficking:

"The second element of the measure (...) consists of allowing the repatriation of a person who, holding a residence permit valid for less than a year, commits a crime. It is hardly a tragedy to return to her home country a person who is being exploited by a pimp on the streets of Paris or Deauville."³⁵⁹

Another example of systems of oppression targeting different yet connected groups of people is

³⁵⁵ More on these self-organised safety networks in chapter 5.3.

³⁵⁶ ACCEPTESS-T et al., "Réponses à l'évaluation de La Loi 2016."

³⁵⁷ Suzanne, Conversation with Suzanne.

³⁵⁸ Taïbi, "Du corps des personnes prostituées."

³⁵⁹ Sarkozy in Schaffauser, *Les luttes des putés*, 31.

the parallel between laws targeting trans people and sex workers that, in Victoria's view, aim at socially isolating the individuals of these groups:

"In the trans community, a law was proposed to prohibit transitions for minors, incriminating and condemning people who facilitate transitions. Since the *Loi 2016*, clients of sex workers have been penalised. And for me, this is the same mechanism. We often talk about mechanisms that target the concerned people. For me, it's a bit more subtle than that, in that it's a mechanism that targets people who are in contact with the concerned people, the parents, the school, if we're ever going to support a child in their trans-identity, or the clients. So, it's not a mechanism that targets trans people directly, but one that aims to isolate them."

James writes that different laws on prostitution, whether they incriminate sex workers themselves or their clients, result in the isolation of sex workers. Even when sex work in itself is not illegal, everything surrounding it is, making it "virtually impossible for a prostitute to live with women or men without infringing the law."³⁶⁰

Hygienism

To legitimise social and spatial marginalisations, the state's discourse is based on a hygienist approach to people in the city space: people considered harming the hygiene and safety of a place have to be removed from public space, isolated, or confined to hide them from the view of the other, desired, inhabitants of the city. There is thus a "spatial dimension" to the interactions between ideas around "dirt" and specific groups of people.³⁶¹ The image of social categories becomes intertwined with perceptions of parts of the city. In the case of Marseille, explains Nelle, the city was both exoticised and seen as indecent in the past, with imaginaries of maladies, putrefaction and dirtiness linked to sex workers and their ways of life.³⁶² The wish to "clean" the city from its undesired populations is an ongoing dynamic in the city-centre of Marseille, linked to processes of gentrification and urban marketing discussed in chapter 2.

"*Putes* are considered dirty and that is not new; There is histories of that, during the second world war there was a lot of posters of *putes* as double agents that supposedly were spreading illnesses."³⁶³

This continuity is underlined by Rosario Veneno who connects today's forms of repression against deviant bodies to the fascist ideologies of past regimes, ideologies which she sees on the rise again.³⁶⁴ Merteuil explains that the repression against sex workers stems from a hygienist approach, which also targets poor and migrant women and more broadly those who are unwanted in the city. She argues that this further aligns with "the hunt for Roma people and the exclusion of women who wear the headscarf in public spaces," and other intersections of race, class and sex.³⁶⁵ Hygienism, understood as a current of thought seeking to impose health regulations in the social and urban spheres, was born in the eighteenth century and popularised through the interventions of Baron Haussmann in nineteenth-century France. In contemporary hygienism, urban planning, renovation and the demolishing of substandard housing, to be replaced by modern, sanitised buildings, are seen as tools to control bodies and a means of inculcating normative habits on the city's inhabitants.³⁶⁶ Despite its insistence on the moral reform of society however, in

³⁶⁰ James, *Sexe, Race et Classe. La Stratégie de l'autonomie*, 90.

³⁶¹ Séchet, "Le populaire et la saleté."

³⁶² Nelle, Conversation with Nelle.

³⁶³ Nelle.

³⁶⁴ Rosario Veneno, Conversation with Rosario Veneno.

³⁶⁵ Ponticelli, Carle, and Guillibert, "Strass et stigma," 37.

³⁶⁶ Séchet, "Le populaire et la saleté."

the “neo-hygienist” point of view, clean is now associated with order and beauty rather than health as such.³⁶⁷

“People like drug users and sex workers are the object of fantasies of people who threaten the health (sanitation) of the city. Sanitary for who and how? But often it just means to throw people out and have them out of our sight. (...) This notion of ‘disturbance of public order,’ ‘sanitarism,’ they are super intertwined, and it creates undesirable populations who then don’t have access to health, who don’t have access to dignified living spaces.”³⁶⁸

Swanson’s analysis of the “sanitation syndrome,” an important strand in apartheid South Africa’s segregationist ideology, shows how race and sanitation were combined in the past to advance fascist organisations of urban space. In this colonial ideology, urban race relations were largely administered through the imagery of infection as a societal metaphor. The equation between black residents and disease offered a compelling opportunity for colonial governments to rationalise the promotion of urban segregation policies, represented as an urgent solution to threats to public health and security.³⁶⁹ According to Rosario Veneno, similar dynamics are on the rise again in the context of a contemporary reinforcement of fascist forces.

Rosario Veneno criticises that in the institutional health system, there is a clear separation between the mental, the physical, the social, and the economic. Moreover, the sexual is not taken into account in its social dimension. She explains that institutions attending to the physical and mental health of people also operate under a hygienist approach, making the health system exclusionary for vulnerable people through normative rules, stigmatisation and moral judgement.

“So, if there is a person who smokes and who finds themselves in a hospital, well they will have a setting that will eventually push them outside, to end their treatment and the same in a CHRS, in a shelter for homeless people who consume, for example. If the person consumes but finds themselves in a structure that gives them a shelter or gives them to eat but they are not allowed to consume [drugs] there, well, the person will end up getting out of the system.”³⁷⁰

Community health organisations working with sex workers attempt a different model that they find more efficient; one that is based on principles such as “non-judgement, de-stigmatisation, access to rights, participation of the people concerned and thus respect for their self-determination.”³⁷¹ What does this community health approach to risk-reduction look like? How is community health related to matters of intersectionality discussed in this chapter so far?

Intersecting struggles



VICTORIA on why she never had a negative image of sex workers

“The more we manage to take into account, among ourselves and in our work with others, the divisions related to race, nationality, income, the Global South or the Global North, urban or rural environments, age, gender, sexuality, disabilities, (il)legality, and all their intersections, the less

³⁶⁷ Espinosa, “Les vertus de la violence. La légitimation d’un projet de rénovation urbaine par le néo-hygienisme.”

³⁶⁸ Nelle, Conversation with Nelle.

³⁶⁹ Swanson, “The Sanitation Syndrome.”

³⁷⁰ Rosario Veneno, Conversation with Rosario Veneno.

³⁷¹ Schaffauser, *Les luttes des putés*, 22.

they divide us. The power of each sector can then become a power for all.”³⁷²

My interlocutors build a certain counter-discourse against the systems of domination discussed above by recognising their experiences of oppression as interconnected with those of other people. Speaking from their situated lived realities and acknowledging how their identities are embedded in relations of power, they are in solidarity with people and groups who, while different, face similar forms of marginalisation. In practice, this materialises through the sharing of knowledge and tools from strategies across different sectors, including drug users, incarcerated people, the mentally ill, trans people and political activists. For Nelle, this includes a rhetoric that does not speak out for sex workers’ rights alone but also for those who experience forms of repression in other places:

“Sex work has made me aware of a lot of other things, and so for me today, for example, it’s impossible to talk about sex work without talking about repression at the borders, without being involved in anti-carceral struggles, against prisons, for me these are super linked. And also defending the labour rights of lots of people in other sectors who are in situations of real exploitation and abuse of power at work.”³⁷³

Like Nelle, Victoria links prison-abolitionist struggles to anti-sex work-abolitionism and says that, as for incarcerated people, there is a need to organise ways for sex workers to represent themselves:

“I think in 2010, 2011, when I started working on things related to human rights, I was politicised and, in that context, I understood that there are minority groups or marginalised groups and that these groups lack representation and that it was super legitimate and important that those people organise themselves. When I was working on prisons, I had the project to create a syndicate of incarcerated people. Not me because I wasn’t incarcerated but the people that I was in contact with, my dad was in prison for a long time too, for seven or eight years.”³⁷⁴

From climate movements, Victoria gained important knowledge around the question of “how to create more power in a struggle,” because “the more power you create, the more emancipatory the struggle will be.” She applies the knowledge that creativity is important in activism to trans and sex workers’ political organising. The aim for her is to “create imaginaries” and claim city-space through creative actions, such as the pro-trans rights protest of 25 May 2024, which ended in a temporary, joyful and political occupation of the central beach Plage des Catalans in Marseille. Open mics at the end of other protests are for her places “where the specificity of queer identity is created in the struggle.”³⁷⁵

Power is also very present in Rosario Veneno’s discourse. She mobilises the concept of “erotic capital,” coined by Hakim,³⁷⁶ that “is so powerful that it allows a social mobility that other forms capital [economic, cultural and social] don’t.”³⁷⁷ She explains that attraction is a capital that can give access to power, but women are judged when they mobilise this capital for themselves. At the same time, beauty is instrumentalised in the capitalist system as a way of making money through the cosmetic and clothing industries that impose beauty-standards on the bodies of women and gender minorities. Therefore, she calls for women to use aesthetics to their advantage

³⁷² James, Sexe, Race et Classe. *La Stratégie de l’autonomie*, 125.

³⁷³ Nelle, Conversation with Nelle.

³⁷⁴ Victoria, Conversation with Victoria.

³⁷⁵ Victoria.

³⁷⁶ Hakim, “Erotic Capital.”

³⁷⁷ Rosario Veneno, Conversation with Rosario Veneno.

and to reconnect to their erotic power:

“A person can empower herself through this aesthetic that is harshly criticized, even by feminism and others, but ultimately that allows many people to survive and get by. (...) What is clear is how women are dispossessed of their sexuality, be it through forms of pleasure, of self-fulfilment or of personal realisation in work for instance. And I think that recovering this contact with the power of our eroticism, of our pleasure, is one of the first steps towards ourselves, and I think that this is when things will start to change, when everyone recognises that we have personal powers to make choices about our bodies and minds.”³⁷⁸

The judgement towards women mobilising their erotic capital comes mainly from Western feminists who see sex workers as women who “prefer to play according to men’s rules by identifying with the desires of the latter and positioning themselves as sex objects.”³⁷⁹ Yet, they do not realise or acknowledge that for women and gender minorities who have less economic, social, and cultural capital than them, erotic capital can be an important means to get by.

How community health organises risk reduction

Looking at the associations that my interlocutors mentioned as places that sex workers can rely on, we can see that they respond to the same groups of people that are marginalised through normative discourse, hygienism and racist politics: they support queer and trans people, migrants, victims of gender-based violence and exploitation, drug users, disabled people and sex workers. The places that my interlocutors mentioned that give access to health and rights for sex workers are: Autres Regards, Le Spot, the Planning Familial, the LGBTQIA+ Centre and Médecins du Monde. Because all these organisations work with vulnerable people and have the common aim of facilitating access to the exclusionary healthcare system, they have similar models and organise common meetings where strategies are shared. When I met Rosario Veneno for our recorded conversation, she had just come back from such a meeting: A congress was organised for the Psychiatric Hospital in Lyon around risk prevention for drug users and she, as a peer prevention worker at Autres Regards, was invited to share the associations’ experiences with sex workers. For Rosario Veneno, the most interesting discussion at the conference was that around the concept of peer workers, which is one of Autres Regards’ strategies. Victoria explains that peer workers are important because they are “the interface between the medicine that is violent and the people because there is this relation of trust.”³⁸⁰ Rosario Veneno describes this as “diplomacy work” between sex workers and the exclusionary health system. This diplomacy works through contacts of safe health professionals that the association refers sex workers to and through informing them that the people they send are vulnerable:

“In the healthcare treatment, there is a great deal of moral judgment attached to it, which means that we end up with a very, very short list of safe professionals, those we know we can trust with a person. We also have to play a significant role in bridging that gap because, personally, I have no medical expertise. So, when someone comes to me, I can provide prevention guidance, but if it’s something more serious, I need to refer them to a trusted professional who can provide proper care.”³⁸¹

Peer workers have a knowledge of the dangers and a better contact to concerned people because they are part of the same community and share some of their lived realities. Peer support is important because it creates knowledge from the community for the community, for creating

³⁷⁸ Rosario Veneno.

³⁷⁹ Comte, “Decriminalization of Sex Work,” 2014.

³⁸⁰ Victoria, Conversation with Victoria.

³⁸¹ Rosario Veneno, Conversation with Rosario Veneno.

conditions of safety.³⁸² However, Rosario Veneno also shares serious critiques that she has towards this concept of which she has first-hand experience. While she sees in peer work an important connection with communities that are not easily reachable by the healthcare system, setting up this strategy is difficult:

“So, it’s a good concept, but then in practice it’s difficult to put these actions in place because peer workers, whether they’re sex workers or drug users, I’m talking about my own community which is sex workers, they are not necessarily people who can cope with a work schedule of 35 hours a week, I don’t know, sometimes it’s mainly the risks associated with the empathy you can feel for users when you’re in the same position as them.”³⁸³

What is more, Rosario Veneno says, peer workers are badly paid, and their work is not valorised. Amidst the abandonment of the state, whose only financial support goes into helping sex workers to apply for the *Parcours de Sortie*, it is the very people it marginalises that do most of the prevention and care work.

Other actions put in place by community health organisations are *maraudes*, during which social workers and peer educators distribute coffee and condoms, do HIV and other screenings, and meet sex workers who work on the street to know how they are doing. This model is a more inclusive approach to health, where the care for sexual health is combined with psychological support and the creation of social and community moments. However, due to the criminalisation of solidarity discussed in chapter 3, peer workers cannot offer help to colleagues that would be considered assistance to doing sex work. Moreover, because of the tensions around sex work and human trafficking described in section 5.1., associations like Autres Regards do not allow its employees to address political matters:

“It is really sad not being able to speak about politics in my association because even if I understand the need to continue being a safe space for all the different experiences (...), the fact of not being able to share political ideas and that the people can’t think themselves as political subjects creates a lot of harm.”³⁸⁴

In the next section I discuss which alternative infrastructures sex workers create to counter this silencing and create possibilities for political expression and the organisation of mutual aid.



ROSARIO VENENO: “I have seen people come in and whisper ‘I want condoms’”

5.3. Autonomy, city-space and knowledge

*“Even when our institutions inevitably fail us we are there for each other, moving in shadows and secrecy, providing the compassion and care that no one else seems prepared to offer. Though we are often invisible, we are always taking care of each other. And chances are, we’re taking care of you too.”*³⁸⁵ – Molly Simmons, sex worker and activist with SWOP³⁸⁶ Brooklyn.

Through the legal definition of procuring in the French Penal Code, assisting “the prostitution of others” in any form is illegal.³⁸⁷ This criminalisation of support joins victimisation and moralising

³⁸² Victoria, Conversation with Victoria.

³⁸³ Rosario Veneno, Conversation with Rosario Veneno.

³⁸⁴ Rosario Veneno.

³⁸⁵ Simmons, “Invisible: Sex Work and Mutual Aid During COVID-19.”

³⁸⁶ SWOP stands for Sex Workers Outreach Project.

³⁸⁷ Code Pénal, Section 2 : Du proxénétisme et des infractions qui en résultent (Articles 225-5 à 225-12).

discourses to form a system that aims at annihilating the possibilities to do sex work. Yet, despite these measures, sex workers exist and not only that: they organise mutual aid networks, albeit in the “underground.”³⁸⁸ Sex workers find themselves caught between the need to share knowledge around safety, expertise and accessing resources with colleagues and the necessity to keep their networks of mutual aid “in the shadows” to ensure they can continue to function. This chapter looks at this tension and explores the spaces and strategies that sex workers create to organise mutual aid, based on “autonomy” in the “underground,” two concepts central to my interlocutors’ networks’ organisation. The difficulties met and ways created to circumvent them will be discussed through the realms of housing and city-space, online, community spaces, and community tools.

Autonomy, underground, mutual aid

Chapter 3 examined the Articles 225-5 to 225-12 of the French penal code that prohibit any kind of help, assistance or protection of sex workers. All my interlocutors mentioned this law in relation to solidarity and collective organising, saying that it pushes these actions into the underground, into secrecy.

“With this law you can get accused of procuring extremely fast, as soon as you work with colleagues. A lot of solidarity measures that would allow to work in safer conditions are completely undermined with this law.”³⁸⁹

Nelle explains that this law makes sex work practically illegal, as every structure that makes it possible is penalised. Even things as trivial as small tips amongst colleagues could be considered procuring:

“This law also means that any assistance given to sex workers is considered to be procuring. The same applies to tips and advice. So, if I tell you, ‘You can go to this or this website to do sex work,’ that’s considered to be procuring.”³⁹⁰

The mutual aid networks that exist despite this context need to be protected from being discovered, in order not to put organisers at risk and to prevent the network from being dismantled. Yet, my interlocutors also state that there is a need to share these experiences of collective organisation, especially for knowledge transmission for generations of sex workers to come. Suzanne thematised this tension right at the beginning of our conversation:

“What is complicated for me to talk about is how to ensure that the strategies we put in place with the colleagues are not spread too widely so that they are not challenged. There is this limit of, how you can both talk about what you’re experiencing and, at the same time, if you expose it, you run the risk that the ways of organising that are already complicated, and therefore a bit hidden, become even more complicated.”³⁹¹

During our conversations, we thus talked about sex workers’ ways of organising in Marseille without mentioning any concrete spaces or groups. My interlocutors described the forms that this organisation takes, the political ideas behind it and what tools have been possible to be set up. The realm however in which they were most free to talk is that of imagination as ideas that have not materialised yet cannot be countered as easily. Although these “utopias” do not (yet) exist in Marseille, they inspire current mutual aid networks in their ideology based on autonomy and no

³⁸⁸ Rosario Veneno, Conversation with Rosario Veneno.

³⁸⁹ Nelle, Conversation with Nelle.

³⁹⁰ Suzanne, Conversation with Suzanne.

³⁹¹ Suzanne.

hierarchies.

“We are the ones who build, and we are the ones who have the potential to think about a collective life and with just conditions, no? With social justice but also a lot of *personal auto-power*.³⁹²”

Autonomy, as Dorlin writes, refers to a specific way of organising. The organisation of autonomous struggles and mutual aid networks are an applied ethic of what they are fighting for. This ethic comprises collective organisation, solidarity from below, material arrangements for mobilisation, the care given to alliances between collectives and the recognition of the political and theoretical power of struggles.³⁹³

“A friend said to me, ‘There is a need of a sex workers’ community, and there is [a community].’ There are important differences within the sex worker community. There are people like me who are trans and people like me who are trans and white with papers. There are people who, well people who are not francophone. There are people who don’t have a [citizenship] status. There are women, there are men, there is a whole reality. There are escorts, those who are outside, in the street. And one of the big challenges for the community is to develop a consciousness of a certain form of power. And that is a monumental task and one of the most important tools: it is for workers to own the means of production. Basically, that means setting up cooperatives.”³⁹⁴

“It is hard to imagine what a post-revolutionary world would look like, but for sure a lot of us fantasise about self-managed brothels, where we’re our own bosses and things work more or less horizontally. (...) The material is really expensive. And to share a space, skills and services so that we can work together in the best possible way, that sounds like a dream to me. Having spaces dedicated to this that we manage ourselves would be ideal.”³⁹⁵

“The solution is born from self-managed initiatives, from people organising amongst themselves to cover their needs and to take care of their community and their collective.”³⁹⁶

All these points of views on future possibilities mention the community’s autonomy as a central mode of organisation and have the aim of setting up mutual aid, care and sharing of knowledge in a horizontal way. Because sex workers are often left out of formal safety nets, formal and informal networks of mutual aid and redistribution making up the gaps have a deep history in the sex workers community.³⁹⁷ Mutual aid is an anarchist concept, defined by Shimeï as bottom-up actions in which people sharing similar realities come together as equals to give and receive help based on knowledge that is gained through lived experience, in situations where the state is absent.³⁹⁸

“The thing about mutual aid, because it’s not institutionalized, is that we have the freedom to take care of each other in really radical ways.”³⁹⁹

My interlocutors argue that recognising themselves as political subjects is crucial for empowerment in the sex workers’ community. As described above in section 5.2., Rosario Veneno explains that this is not possible in formal and institutional organisations such as Autres Regards. Informal mutual aid networks are a political tool for this empowerment because their horizontal organisation makes everyone participate in and take responsibility for caring for other people and changing

³⁹² Rosario Veneno, Conversation with Rosario Veneno.

³⁹³ Dorlin in James, *Sexe, Race et Classe. La Stratégie de l’autonomie*.

³⁹⁴ Victoria, Conversation with Victoria.

³⁹⁵ Suzanne, Conversation with Suzanne.

³⁹⁶ Rosario Veneno, Conversation with Rosario Veneno.

³⁹⁷ Herrera, “How Sex Workers Are Using Mutual Aid to Respond to the Coronavirus.”

³⁹⁸ Shimeï, “Though We Are Often Invisible, We Are Always Taking Care of Each Other.”

³⁹⁹ Simmons in Herrera, “How Sex Workers Are Using Mutual Aid to Respond to the Coronavirus.”

current conditions. It is also meaningful on an individual level, because, as RedTraSex put it, there is a lot of “auto-discrimination” in the sex workers’ community: Many sex workers internalise stigmatisations and censor themselves, which can be addressed through mutual aid networks that counter the isolation of sex workers.⁴⁰⁰ Mutual aid is thus a “political action and organising strategy that resists capitalist and colonialist forces through networks of radical community care,”⁴⁰¹ existing despite the state’s attempts of preventing the possibility of its organisation.

Although there is no collective that sets up mutual aid on a very organised level, the conversations with my interlocutors show that there are a big number of small-scale, informal underground networks that exist in Marseille, making “everyday non-organised practice of caring for one another” possible.⁴⁰² These spaces are created by and belong to sex workers and are a sign of the resistance and resilience of the community, existing against and despite the state. In the next section, I will analyse what my interlocutors were able to share about the “material pressures and working conditions of violence, and social and political dimensions of marginalisation” they face and what strategies they find to counter them.⁴⁰³

Housing and city space for sex workers

Housing is a resource that is very hard to access for sex workers who do not have other, formal sources of income. Negative stereotypes around sex work, fuelled by state abolitionist discourses fabricating a “moral panic” create a barrier for sex workers wanting to rent a room or apartment. Moreover, many sex workers’ income is precarious, with a housing market that sees its prices rising due to large scale urban renovation projects and gentrification.⁴⁰⁴ Beyond these difficulties that complicate access to housing, the definition of procuring in the Penal Code excludes sex workers even further. For instance, if a person uses their home to do sex work, the owner of the space is legally a procurer. Receiving rent from a person who “habitually engages in prostitution” also falls under procuring, which deters proprietors from renting to sex workers and people to house sex worker friends.⁴⁰⁵ This shows again what my interlocutors say about the legality of sex work in France: criminalising everything that surrounds sex work resembles a “prohibitionist” model, rather than one where sex workers are decriminalised, as abolitionists argue to defend and legitimise the *Loi 2016*.⁴⁰⁶

Access to housing depends on many factors: While being documented, having a formal job and a declared income and sufficient means to pay rent are the officially stated requirements, people are also favoured or disadvantaged through their race, religion, origin, language, family name, or type of occupation. Sex workers are thus marginalised on many levels, some on all of them at once. The exclusion from access to housing is visible in the collection of sex workers’ and allies’ accounts collated and analysed by Le Bail *et al.*:

“Housing, we notice, is the first demand before papers. The people tell us: ‘I want to stop; the problem is that I can’t pay my rent, and I don’t know where I will sleep. The people of my community only want to house me if I pay my rent.’ And so, actually, before the question of papers, there is the problem of

⁴⁰⁰ RedTraSex, *Un movimiento de tacones altos*, 113; Rosario Veneno, Conversation with Rosario Veneno.

⁴⁰¹ Shimei, “Though We Are Often Invisible, We Are Always Taking Care of Each Other.”

⁴⁰² Mather, “Informal Workers’ Organizing.”

⁴⁰³ Shimei, “Though We Are Often Invisible, We Are Always Taking Care of Each Other.”

⁴⁰⁴ Dorier, “Marseille as Privatopia. The Collapsing City, the Gated City.”

⁴⁰⁵ Code Pénal, Section 2 : Du proxénétisme et des infractions qui en résultent (Articles 225-5 à 225-12).

⁴⁰⁶ Suzanne, Conversation with Suzanne.

housing, a place to rest, to have one's belongings.”⁴⁰⁷

The community is indeed important to access housing because it can reduce the discrimination factor. For instance, Suzanne explains that “when someone wants to work in a shared flat, it is easier if the flatmates also do sex work or are at least politically aligned with you practicing sex work.”⁴⁰⁸ However, community housing puts an already vulnerable group of people at risk; the state both abandons sex workers and simultaneously criminalises mutual aid. What then do sex workers do to house themselves and to access city space?

Apart from Victoria, my interlocutors did not feel free to talk about this topic without taking too much risk. Victoria was able to address her housing situation because she is the owner of her place, which is an important resource for her work:

“I have a flat, I am the owner. I bought it and I pay [mortgage] every month. That was the advantage of being employed, and it allows me to work from home in a way that I consider to be legal because under the law. If you are a tenant and you practice sex work, landlords can be considered as pimps because they facilitate the practice of sex work.”⁴⁰⁹

Property can thus be a solution for autonomy over housing and therefore access to more legality when doing sex work. This however is only possible for people who have sufficient resources; a privilege that is not given to many sex workers. Community spaces exist, Rosario Veneno explains, but autonomously and underground.⁴¹⁰ Suzanne also confides that, despite being illegal, there are some local attempts of self-managed spaces where people organise themselves “on a micro-scale” to share a place, material and practices.⁴¹¹

Many *Sans Papiers* and people from the autonomous scene in Marseille access housing through squatting. Under the initiative *Fassets*⁴¹² the abolitionist organisation The Truth and the research unit SESSTIM⁴¹³ conducted a study with 132 migrant sex workers, showing that 80% “live in precarious housing conditions: 27% in hotels, 25% in apartments, 20% in squats, 15% in emergency accommodation.”⁴¹⁴ Being mainly a quantitative study that, while claiming to be a community-based participatory research project, it falls short in directly citing sex workers and does not provide further significant information for this thesis. I could not locate other publications on squatting in Marseille; however, I learned about different networks of informal occupations of buildings through friends and my own experience of living in a squat in 2024. The abandonment of parts of the city centre creates an opportunity for these occupations, while also putting the people who are squatting at risk, because most abandoned buildings are in a bad state and not very safe to live in. For instance, the building in which Rosario Veneno stays and where we had our conversation is officially ‘at risk’ and its former inhabitants were evacuated. The building is now illegally inhabited by other people who cannot access housing through legal ways and/ or who have a political project of contesting socio-spatial exclusion and reclaiming a right to the city. However,

⁴⁰⁷ Paloma in Le Bail, Giometta, and Rassouw, “Que pensent les travailleur.se.s du sexe de la loi prostitution,” 2018, 59.

⁴⁰⁸ Suzanne, Conversation with Suzanne.

⁴⁰⁹ Victoria, Conversation with Victoria.

⁴¹⁰ Rosario Veneno, Conversation with Rosario Veneno.

⁴¹¹ Suzanne, Conversation with Suzanne.

⁴¹² *Fassets* stands for *Favoriser l'Accès à la Santé SExuelle chez les Travailleuses du Sexe migrantes*, “Promoting Access to Sexual Health for Migrant Sex Workers” in English.

⁴¹³ *SESSTIM* is short for *Sciences Économiques et Sociales de la Santé et Traitement de l'Information Médicale*, “Social and Economic Health Sciences and Medical Information Processing” in English.

⁴¹⁴ Mosnier et al., “Enhancing Sexual Health and Empowerment among Migrant Women Sex Workers”; Bonnefoy, “Une étude dévoile les réalités de la prostitution des femmes migrantes à Marseille.”

opening new squats and maintaining occupations has become very difficult since a new law named *Loi Anti-Squat* has been passed on 27 July 2023, aimed at improving protection of landlords: “Penalties for squatting have been tripled. New offences have been created, in particular for tenants with unpaid rent who remain in the property after eviction proceedings have been completed. (...) To punish the squatting of all property, not just homes, the deputies have created a new offence of ‘fraudulent occupation of premises used for residential, commercial, agricultural or professional purposes.’”⁴¹⁵

Many sex workers work in the street to find clients and access working space through hotels, squats, the street or Airbnbs.⁴¹⁶ My interlocutors mainly receive their clients at their homes or, less frequently, at the clients’ place, except for Nelle, who works at his clients’ homes in most of the cases. All of them work online; a space that, just like the city space, is becoming more and more surveyed and restricted.

Online



VICTORIA: “I do sex work on social media, but I get strucked and it’s over.”

The online space represents an opportunity for sex workers to organise, build communities, share knowledge and work while preserving some anonymity. Yet, at the same time, the online realm also serves as a way of surveying people, collecting data and censoring voices. Online presence can thus be seen as an opportunity, a risk, and a barrier at the same time. Talking about their work, my interlocutors all share experiences of online censoring. Nelle works on websites such as *Hunks*, that sell gay sex. Victoria explains that a lot of work happens online but that she can’t cite where:

“A lot of the activity is done, mostly on platforms that I don’t cite because they are tools and if it blows up, it makes us all more precarious. There is a place that... it poses a lot of ethical and moral questions but it’s the only place where it is easy to do sex work.”⁴¹⁷

Besides platforms that are specifically for sex work, Victoria and Rosario Veneno say that they also use social media platforms such as Grindr, Tinder or WhatsApp for their work. They tell me however that this is difficult because their numbers and profiles get blocked when they are suspected of selling sexual services:

“Me, I try to do sex work in other spaces like Grindr, on social networks and all that, but I get *strucked*⁴¹⁸ and it’s over.”⁴¹⁹

“Other companies like WhatsApp, as soon as they pick up that you are selling sexual services, they block your line and you are excluded of, yes, a lot of networks, even from Tinder I am banned (big laughter), because I have a phone number that is considered, well, as belonging to someone who sells sexual services. (Sighs) So, it is pretty trash.”⁴²⁰

Rosario Veneno says that although this might resemble only minor problems, all these little things make her daily life very complicated.

“Everything that is on Instagram, Facebook, etc., the censure is actually really powerful, and it gives

⁴¹⁵ Vie Publique, “Loi du 27 juillet 2023 visant à protéger les logements contre l’occupation illicite.”

⁴¹⁶ Suzanne, Conversation with Suzanne.

⁴¹⁷ Victoria, Conversation with Victoria.

⁴¹⁸ Victoria uses the colloquial English word *strike*, meaning to get blocked from a social media platform.

⁴¹⁹ Victoria, Conversation with Victoria.

⁴²⁰ Rosario Veneno, Conversation with Rosario Veneno.

you fewer and fewer ways of doing your job properly and earning a living from it.”⁴²¹

The censorship that Rosario Veneno and Victoria witness is, as Nelle explains, the result of a law that was passed in the USA in April 2018, named **FOSTA-SESTA**.⁴²² **FOSTA-SESTA** stands for Fight Online Sex Trafficking Act and Stop Enabling Sex Traffickers Act and aimed at holding Internet platforms accountable for contents posted by their users.

“[**FOSTA-SESTA**] is a series of laws that was passed in the United States (...). The idea that was promulgated was that it’s laws that protect minors from sexual violence, places of exploitation linked to sex work etc., people in situations of trafficking. And this has led to a lot of censorship and a lot of sites have been closed, even Facebook pages that in fact are mutual aid community pages have become illegal and that’s when there was really a lot of online content that was censored. And then it affected all sorts of groups of people who were already marginalised in other ways, all the Instagram content that was too explicit, it’s a right to censor any content that is of sexual nature.”⁴²³

Victoria says that, because of this censorship and websites being shut down, she has to fall back onto more “shady” platforms that are more dangerous. She therefore developed a number of security measures such as specific conditions of contact, never answering the phone for a first contact and having a specific SIM card for work. Victoria also has an idea of creating a cooperative website owned by sex workers, where “there is an individual production but where the means of production are collectively managed. But there is a risk of it being seen as facilitating sex work and thus a form of procuring.”⁴²⁴

Nelle mentions in the extract above that **FOSTA-SESTA** not only made content selling sexual services illegal but also sex workers’ online mutual help groups. “Having spaces online to organise is very difficult,” he explains. “We are not trained to protect ourselves.”⁴²⁵ Instagram pages of sex workers’ organisations and allies still share content; this content is mainly used for representation, political statements and sharing information about events for sex workers. Some posts however advertise meetings where sex workers can learn about how to better work online, like on the Instagram page of the *Fédération Parapluie Rouge* that posted content about a virtual meeting for sex workers to answer their questions about online sex work. There are however some messenger applications that do not fall under the **FOSTA-SESTA** law and that therefore allow sex workers to create mutual aid groups. Signal is one of them, which was mentioned to me by a friend and Suzanne. There are others that my interlocutors did not want to name in order to protect them. In the next two sections, I will discuss how these networks of support are organised and what they manage to set up.

⁴²¹ Rosario Veneno.

⁴²² Nelle, Conversation with Nelle; Blunt and Wolf, “Erased.”

⁴²³ Nelle, Conversation with Nelle.

⁴²⁴ Victoria, Conversation with Victoria.

⁴²⁵ Nelle, Conversation with Nelle.



Visio

Comptabilité et déclaration des chiffres d'affaires sur les plateformes de TDS virtuel

* Réservez aux TDS

Vendredi 20 décembre à 20h

Lien de la visio à demander en DM ou à coordination@parapluierouge.org

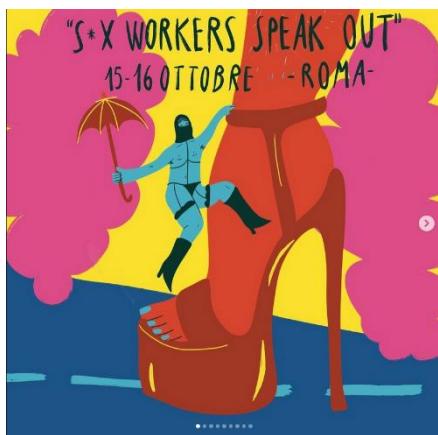




Figure 12: Instagram posts sharing information about a meeting to learn about accounting as an online sex worker, political messages and a protest in Lyon, a sex workers' congress in Rome and a discourse of sex workers in Lyon. @federationparapluierouge; @tds_contre_les_guerres; @movimento.identita.trans; @escortespresents.

Community spaces, mutual aid groups



ROSARIO VENENO: mutual aid against isolation

The underground mutual aid groups that sex workers create exist mostly online or informally in the city. As outlined in chapter 2, many of these communities are constituted through affinity, while other groups are frequented by many different people but all of whom are sex workers. These **affinity groups** are created to provide safe spaces and a community, thus countering isolation and creating an opportunity to exchange knowledge. Suzanne notes that her mutual aid groups are “quite inaccessible” because they are based on political affinity. However, she argues, total accessibility is not the aim of an affinity group, in which people find safety by being amongst themselves. Suzanne thus explains that there are rules to accessing these community spaces, not only to preserve the safe space but also to protect them from the law on procuring:

“They are community affinity spaces because people knew each other who knew others who knew others. As a result, we found ourselves talking to people whom we didn’t necessarily know, but there is always at least one person of the base who did know them. And so that is part of the rules. To join these community groups, the person must already be working as a sex worker, it can’t be their first time, or they’ve never done it and they want to do it, because then you’re less likely to fall under the law,

and you must always know at least one person who is in the group.”⁴²⁶

These groups, as Suzanne says, exist on messaging apps or “through word of mouth in the space of a city.” The same rules of access were used by the *S*x Workers Speak Out* congress organised in Rome in October 2024. I tried to participate on the second day open for allies, however, I did not know any sex worker who was going to attend the congress. Working with trans sex workers in Teheran, Sadeghipouya writes that sex workers’ **affinity groups** help people who often consider themselves outsiders due to multidimensional exclusions construct an identity as insiders within a community.⁴²⁷ This also speaks back to what Rosario Veneno says about underground mutual aid groups: they offer the possibility for sex workers to understand themselves as political subjects which empowers the community and marginalised people who are part of it. Organising around identity, argues Mather, can be important to build confidence and agency of excluded informal workers.⁴²⁸ As elaborated in chapter 4, Foucault argues that subjectification imposed through dividing practices can be reappropriated by subjects as “self-knowledge,” which is then used to form resistant communities.⁴²⁹

Victoria also sees **affinity groups** as an important tool for discussing issues “in a more fine-grained and pertinent way.”⁴³⁰ For instance, as part of informal discussion groups of drug users, she gained important knowledge on risk reduction. She thus cites the four pillars of mutual aid amongst drug users, which she wants to apply to sex workers’ cooperatives: active listening, no judgement, pragmatism and fighting for the communities’ rights. For her, pragmatism is central to the coherence of mutual aid groups because it allows to see beyond the differences between the people in order to be empowered to put things in place, even if it’s only on a very small scale. Nelle questions the accessibility of mutual aid groups existing on Signal:

“For isolated people, it is really difficult, you have to already know people, be part of a network, you have to have access to distribution channels on Signal.”⁴³¹

Meeting in person to organise community meetings for mutual knowledge exchange is also difficult:

“It is very hard even to have access to premises or to have a mini-budget to be able to cover the costs of transport, to have food for two days, to say, ‘let’s make ourselves comfortable and teach each other things,’ or to give a bit of money if a colleague is struggling and she can’t lose two days of work to come and train. There are lots of things that could be imagined, but all that can only happen through real self-management.”⁴³²

One example for in-person community meetings that was mentioned by Suzanne and Victoria are the *Goûters Putes*. These “tea parties” are social moments organised by sex workers in different community health spaces such as Autres Regards, Aides (Le Spot), and the LGBTQIA+ Centre. For Nelle, these occasions where sex workers get together are where he was able to learn a lot from his colleagues through informal conversations:

“I’ve learned a lot from people whom I met who are sex workers, just talking, telling each other about our experiences, what were our points of view, people who could talk sincerely about all that, that’s

⁴²⁶ Suzanne, Conversation with Suzanne.

⁴²⁷ Sadeghipouya, “Des femmes trans sans domicile fixe à Téhéran engagées dans le travail du sexe.”

⁴²⁸ Mather, “Informal Workers’ Organizing.”

⁴²⁹ Foucault, “The Subject and Power.”

⁴³⁰ Victoria, Conversation with Victoria.

⁴³¹ Nelle, Conversation with Nelle.

⁴³² Nelle.

really what has helped me the most. To have discussions with colleagues just like that in a living room or at an *Apéro Putes* or between lovers because we are both *putes*.⁴³³

Meeting other sex workers is thus an opportunity to learn from each other's lived experiences and find a community of peers, but not only that: community spaces are also used to develop and share tools to exchange knowledge and organise self-defence for sex workers, finding ways to circumvent the prohibition of "training a person in view to prostitution."⁴³⁴

Community tools



SUZANNE: "It is legal to pass on techniques but not to sex workers."

Nelle explains that due to the mutual objectification between clients and sex workers that happens "in our Western capitalist society, people sometimes don't have a lot of consideration for the limits of others, or they have the impression they are buying you, which is due to the stigma attached sex work."⁴³⁵ Therefore, Nelle had to learn how to set limits, defend and protect himself. Ally organisations like Médecins du Monde and sex workers' groups, formal and informal, create community-based strategies for more safety. Beyond safety measures, some sex workers also manage to organise trainings for colleagues. These however, have to be in disguise in order to protect the organisers from the law, especially from line 3 of the Penal Code on prostitution which bans "hiring, training or diverting a person with a view to prostitution or putting pressure on them to prostitute themselves or continue to do so."⁴³⁶

Médecins du Monde developed an online tool called Jasmine aimed at fighting violence against sex workers. Jasmine is a website and an application where sex workers can report and check phone numbers, email addresses and number plates of problematic or violent clients. Sex workers can consult the contact details of flagged clients upon inscription, which only requires a pseudonym and a phone number. However, Jasmine also requires them to be referred by another colleague or a community health organisation, similarly to the conditions of inclusion of *affinity groups* described by Suzanne. On the website, Jasmine shares other tools such as the self-defence technique S.W.A.G. developed by sex worker Pesha Shatte, who organises workshops in different cities in France and abroad. S.W.A.G. stands for "Sex Work Autodefensia Groupe" and is "a feminist self-defence method developed since 2015 by and for sex workers. It is a solidary community tool" that enables sex workers "to continue to live and work safely and according to our own conditions."⁴³⁷ Victoria shares some concerns that she has with the Jasmine tool:



Figure 13: Presentation of the Method S.W.A.G. (Sex Work Autodefensa Groupe). Techniques S W A G, 2019.

⁴³³ Nelle.

⁴³⁴ Code Pénal, Section 2 : Du proxénétisme et des infractions qui en résultent (Articles 225-5 à 225-12).

⁴³⁵ Nelle, Conversation with Nelle.

⁴³⁶ Code Pénal, Section 2 : Du proxénétisme et des infractions qui en résultent (Articles 225-5 à 225-12).

⁴³⁷ Techniques S W A G.

“Actually, Jasmine, I think it is a super important and interesting tool, we need to largely share it, and the community associations talk about it even if it isn’t their product, their tool. But for me, it is a tool that is difficult to use for people who are removed from their rights and who don’t necessarily know about the organisations if they don’t come across them during one of their *maraudes*. Also, it is a tool for cis women and so, us trans women we don’t have the same clientele, which means that we have less resources because we have less numbers. But it has already happened to me to have a flagged number and so it allows me to know if I am potentially putting myself in a dangerous situation or not.”⁴³⁸

For Victoria, these safety tools should be more embedded in affinity-organised mutual aid groups to have more power over protection strategies. However, through her pragmatic approach she does not criticise Jasmine; she rather wants to take inspiration from it and develop her own community-based tools. Some of these strategies are already used in mutual aid groups. Suzanne thus explains:

“And then there’s what we do amongst ourselves to pass on knowledge. How do we identify a call or an exchange of messages, or if we go to a client’s home, what do we do to protect our money, to have an escape route, to be sure that someone knows where we are? And if we receive [clients], what do we have at hand and what not? What do we do with the money? These are things that are passed on by word of mouth, peer to peer.”⁴³⁹

Victoria argues that these networks of mutual aid, enabling an exchange of tips and strategies, create a protection against the criminalisation of solidarity, through the power of being together in a horizontal structure where it is difficult to make out a leader or main organiser. Suzanne and Nelle describe a concrete tool that sex workers set up to provide security for each other:

“In London, there were breakfasts organised by sex workers and that was really good because there were so many things that I didn’t know. For example, just the fact that you can have people who look after you while you’re in a session or who know, to whom you send the address. They are back-ups and it’s super reassuring. And it’s something that is really proposed on a frequent, recurring basis by colleagues among themselves.”⁴⁴⁰

In addition to these self-organised safety strategies, Suzanne and Victoria tell me that there are also trainings for sex workers to learn about techniques, especially in the realm of **BDSM** and domination. These happen either in informal, underground ways or in disguised manner. Suzanne for instance started doing sex work as a double with a friend and colleague sex worker. Through this way of sharing knowledge, she was able to benefit from her friends’ experience and learn about techniques and safety measures. Victoria says that there are trainings specifically for trans women sex workers and Suzanne explains that within her **affinity groups**, colleagues organise workshops where each of them shares a knowledge such as how to make your own **BDSM** material. More officially announced trainings that exist in France are announced as workshops where people can learn about specific **BDSM** practices. Although these trainings are not targeted at sex workers, which would be illegal, Suzanne says that “actually, several sex workers are also instructors, and the participants in the trainings are sex workers (...) but that isn’t mentioned anywhere.”⁴⁴¹ In trainings, spaces that are exclusively for sex workers can thus only be set up underground.

Nelle points out that what is difficult about this is that it is almost impossible to keep traces of the

⁴³⁸ Victoria, Conversation with Victoria.

⁴³⁹ Suzanne, Conversation with Suzanne.

⁴⁴⁰ Nelle, Conversation with Nelle.

⁴⁴¹ Suzanne, Conversation with Suzanne.

strategies sex workers put in place to self-organise safety and knowledge transmission. “It’s huge and largely untraceable labour that we’re always providing for each other,’ Simmons, a sex worker of SWOP Brooklyn, says.”⁴⁴² Although there are many tools and strategies created by sex worker communities that my interlocutors were not able to share, spaces are being carved out and re-claimed to leave some traces of sex workers’ organising in Marseille. The podcast and paper related to this research project, and events organised by Nelle, Victoria, Rosario Veneno and Suzanne, such as *La Vénale*, *Porn sur Mars* or protests are part of these spaces, which exist despite and against stigmatisations of sex workers and the criminalisation of mutual aid.

Discussing possibilities for sex workers to create safe spaces and organise knowledge transmission in Marseille, a resistant topography emerges, made of underground strategies such as [affinity groups](#), mutual aid and squatting, pervaded by inequalities within the community. The protections and strategies set up by sex workers and allies also shed light on what operates against them: sex workers are excluded on many different levels, from the health system, over housing to voice and representation, through stigmatisation, victimisation, moralisation and normativities. A closer look at these marginalisations reveal that the state’s interests linked to governance, identity and capital are promoted through the exclusion of the racial, gendered Other because they are undergirded by normative, racist ideologies. Sex workers counter these marginalisations in autonomous, intimate, informal and political ways through self-representation, queering sexualities, reclaiming language and access to city-space, creating self-managed tools for safety and organising mutual aid. While this chapter centres my interlocutors’ voices, lived experiences, ideas and opinions, there are still many other sex workers who cannot be heard: those who are without papers, without access to housing, health and solidarity networks remain largely silenced in Marseille’s context of urban renovation and city-marketing, shaped by France’s neoliberal, neocolonial policies based on racist and patriarchal ideologies.

⁴⁴² Simmons in Herrera, “How Sex Workers Are Using Mutual Aid to Respond to the Coronavirus.”

The image shows a large, hand-drawn title "PLANET MARS" in bold, yellow letters with black outlines, centered on a light blue background. Below the title, a portion of a newspaper clipping is visible, featuring French text about Jean-Michel Cousteau and Mars. To the right, there's a small illustration of a person in a space suit and a red tool.

LEGEND

COMMUNITY HEALTH

- 1 Autres Regards
 - 2 Le Spot
 - 3 Centre LGBTQIA+
 - 4 Planning Familial 13
 - 5 Médecins du Monde

REVANCHIST CITY

- 1 Borders
 - 2 Prisons
 - 3 Amicale du Nid
 - 4 Hospitals
 - 5 state & Police

SELF-ORGANISED SPACES

- | | |
|---------------------|-----------------------|
| 1 Goûtes Putes | 5 Affinity Groups |
| 2 Permanences Putes | 6 Protests |
| 3 Porn sur Mars | 7 Self-managed spaces |
| 4 La Vénale | 8 Informal workshops |

LARGER CONTEXT

- Representations in newspapers
 - Laws
 - Urban planning projects.



5.4 Planet Mars

The map inserted above is the result of a spatial analysis of the conversations with my four interlocutors. During the transcription process, mentions of places and spaces were entered in a table along with the narrators' definition and relevance. These places and spaces were both specific and abstract, comprising things like 'brothels' or 'prisons' as well as 'open mics during protests' or 'affinity groups,' also named as 'spaces' by my interlocutors. The four tables were then compared to each other, noting similarities and differences to create categories. Four categories of places and spaces were very present in all four conversations: community health organisations, places of work, counter-topography and self-organised spaces.

At the same time, my interlocutors often referenced resources such as books and Instagram posts and addressed the impact of stigmatising representations on sex workers. These resources are tools both for sex workers to communicate, organise and express themselves and for the state and organisations to foster their abolitionist interests. Therefore, I used examples of these resources as the material to make the map. The making of a public opinion is visible in newspaper articles that often treat prostitution as a moral problem or a nuisance in public spaces, suffered by "the residents" (sex workers are often not considered residents).⁴⁴³ Articles from local Newspapers such as Marsactu or La Provence were also turned into material for the map. These texts and visuals were printed and while the ones produced by sex workers and allies were used to represent the spaces they make and use, the rest served to depict the context and the "revanchist" city.

The different points on the map are not placed arbitrarily; yet, their location is abstract, they are not geolocated. The Vieux Port (Old Harbour) serves as a reference point, like it also does for orientation in the city. Some places, mainly the community health organisations, have formal premises, and their location is therefore accessible and representable without risk. Other spaces however exist in the online sphere, while the location of some, such as borders, is dependent on each individual person's identity. My interlocutors also shared spatial information in the form of distance and centrality. Thus, the state was seen as very central, albeit mainly through police surveillance. Sex workers' places of work, especially those of the people working on the street were said to be pushed to the fringes of the city.

Arranging the different spaces on the map shows a certain proximity between some self-organised spaces and community health organisations. While the isolation and marginalisation of some self-organised spaces and workplaces becomes visible, the map also visualises the presence of many spaces created by sex workers that exist despite their illegality, thus representing the resilience and agency of their community. This map intends to find a way of visibilising information and knowledge while also protecting it. It is an attempt of visually representing my interlocutors' landscape of solidarity, care and everyday experiences without putting their infrastructures at risk. However, the map needs to be read as a part of this work because on its own, it cannot represent certain power relations such as those between different sex workers.

⁴⁴³ Artaud, "La place de la prostitution."

6. Conclusion

This thesis set out to examine ways in which sex workers create infrastructures for mutual aid, knowledge transmission and access to urban space, health, community and representation in Marseille. Looking at counter-topographies from their perspective, various forms of spatial exclusion and social isolation have been highlighted, and silencing and criminalising strategies have been confirmed. The study has shown that, despite attempts to annihilate possibilities of doing sex work and organising life around it, sex workers find ways to create a great number of spaces, connections, and events to sustain their communities. While sex workers are pushed into aligning their personal narratives to stereotypical victim-discourses, the only one that can be heard by institutions, my interlocutors build their own spaces for representation through queer archiving and art projects such as *Refuges*, *La Vénale* and *Porn sur Mars*. These happen in collaboration with the community health organisation Autres Regards, the autonomously managed social centre La Dar and the independent cinema Vidéodrome 2.

Despite being portrayed as victims, sex workers are treated as threats to public health and order in the city. As a result, sex workers, especially those working on the street and further othered through their race, class or trans-identity, are pushed to the margins of the city or all together excluded from public life through prisons, psychiatric hospitals or OQTFs. To facilitate access to the health system, community health organisations rely on peer workers to connect with marginalised sex workers. Acknowledging that experiences of oppression are intersectional and related, my interlocutors build political solidarity with people who face similar, yet different forms of marginalisation, including *Sans Papiers*, trans people and drug users. Article 225-5 of the Penal Code equates “aiding, assisting or protecting the prostitution of others” and “training a person with a view to prostitution” with procuring.⁴⁴⁴ In conversation with my research partners, it became clear that mutual aid, self-organised safety measures, knowledge exchange and trainings exist but in autonomous and underground ways. The tools that sex workers deploy are conceptual, political and material. Horizontally organised communities of support help sex workers understand themselves as political subjects and counter auto-discrimination. Chatgroups on Signal and other platforms serve as online spaces for mutual aid. In-person social moments offer an opportunity to informally share safety techniques and experiences. Trainings for sex workers are disguised as open workshops for anyone interested.

To circumvent the repressive legal and discursive tools deployed by the state, sex workers mobilise invisibility to build infrastructures of mutual support. In these informal, self-managed spaces, sex workers imagine and implement communal ways of organising that are radically different from the state’s responses to prostitution. In the strategies deployed by sex workers and ally community health structures, experience is recognised as a highly valuable source of knowledge which, although putting pressure on already precarious people, creates the conditions to provide relevant help for fellow sex workers. Mutual aid, organised in affinity groups, is a tool for empowerment of these marginalised communities because it enables the reproduction of life despite the abandonment from public authorities. Because the stigma sex workers experience excludes them from and makes them critical of conventional labour markets, the most important aims of sex workers’ auto-organised strategies are to create safe working conditions and fight stereotypes and social, spatial and economic marginalisation. Here, invisibility becomes the enemy of sex workers because it creates space for fictional representations and aggravates the risks involved in their work. The inequalities amongst sex workers are also reflected in who is visible and who is invisible:

⁴⁴⁴ Code Pénal, Section 2 : Du proxénétisme et des infractions qui en résultent (Articles 225-5 à 225-12).

those who are more privileged manage to gain access to platforms where they can speak for themselves. On the contrary, those who are amongst the most precarious are never directly heard. Due to the fact that they can't express themselves safely, they are the *figure* that is most visible in external representations of sex workers. Inventing sex workers as victims or as a threat to heteronormativity, morals and public health and safety and creating a hypervisibility, these fictive representations serve specific interests such as legitimising the removal of undesired people from parts of the city (or even the country), protecting a specific image of 'the French woman,' 'normal sexuality,' or 'values of the *République*' and pushing people, mainly migrant women, into jobs that serve employers more than the workers themselves.⁴⁴⁵ Therefore, visibilising and destigmatising sex workers' realities is extremely important to counter these racist, transphobic and classist dynamics of spatial marginalisation and exclusion that are operated through repressive laws on prostitution, trans-identity and immigration, police harassment, surveillance and casualisation.

The questions that were asked in this research created a "still extremely rare"⁴⁴⁶ space for my interlocutors Nelle, Rosario Veneno, Suzanne and Victoria to share their experiences, perspectives, ideas and knowledge as sex workers, published both in the form of academic writing and a podcast to keep a trace of it. Moreover, the focus of our conversations was not only on individual narratives, but on informal, collective forms of support, which is a topic not often discussed in the Marseille context. My research partners were an active part of the planning of my methods, an endeavour that was important in the eyes of all those involved in the making of this study. What is more, I attempted to use what my interlocutors shared with me as theoretical contributions and let them guide me towards concepts such as 'mutual aid,' 'erotic capital,' 'intersectionality,' 'deviance' and 'normativity as the coordination of margins.' The employed methods for this study were designed to acknowledge my interlocutors as experts on my research questions and to consider our conversations as spaces for theorisation. By opening the planning of my methods to their inputs and crafting methods that allow them to determine the direction and topics of our discussions, I attempted to counter hierarchies and divisions between 'researcher' and 'researched.' Positioning interlocutors as theorists and active participants and planners in research processes is an undertaking that needs to be applied to future studies, especially when working with people and communities that have little access to self-representation and are subjected to stereotypes.

Throughout the conversations, intersectionality was an important lens, showing different power relations amongst sex workers. My interlocutors' respective positionality, being sex workers, trans, from Latin America, or drug users, creates a political consciousness of the mutual reinforcement of different discriminations. They all addressed the diversity within the large group of sex workers, highlighting hierarchies and different privileges. The study is situated in this heterogeneous context marked by power dynamics and amongst the sex workers in Marseille, my research partners are socially close to my own position. Although we do not have the same realities nor do we share the same stigmatisations, we are connected through a common network of places and people in Marseille, characterised by its queerness and autonomous mode of organisation. The sex workers who are able to make their voices heard are those with privileges such as citizenship and education. In contrast, the voices of many more marginalised or more isolated people remain unheard. Thus, while my interlocutors spoke of realities of other sex workers, many cannot represent themselves and share their strategies, lived experiences and perspectives on power-dynamics. Research projects could participate in creating more spaces for sex workers to express themselves and create traces of this; this however requires a long implication in and close connection with

⁴⁴⁵ Whereas for migrant men, construction is the main example here, migrant women often do informal domestic and care work (Moujoud, "Les sans-papiers et le service domestique en France.").

⁴⁴⁶ Nelle, Conversation with Nelle.

sex workers' communities or ally organisations, as it has been done by Le Bail, Giometta and Rassouw.⁴⁴⁷

Miraftab writes about the future as the last colony and imagination as a territory that can be occupied and must therefore be decolonised.⁴⁴⁸ I have argued in this study that the mutual aid networks that sex workers create are the materialisation of imaginations of alternative ways of organising communities in the city in a restrictive context. These infrastructures open spaces to invent and develop ideas of self-management and mutual aid. Although, as my interlocutors said, imagining is made difficult in the current context, my research partners shared ideas with me about things they would like to set up. Victoria and Suzanne imagine self-managed brothels and envision sex worker-managed websites that collectivise means of production. Nelle says that he doesn't really think in terms of utopia in his everyday life but lists things that he imagines:

"The things that would be good, it's personal, is the decriminalisation of sex work, a world where people aren't criminalised for that, a place where people wouldn't be criminalised for passing from one country to another, for having crossed a border. Where every person has the right to a decent life, housing. Where every person can look after their family, be with their children without being afraid to be separated from them and freely dispose of their body. Where everyone has access to social security, health care, a form of social security for food, but also a place where people aren't forced to leave their homes... But really about sex work, give less power to the police, I am for the abolition of the police and that they be replaced by a lot of things that bring people together and by people who take care of others and really protect them rather than projecting a dominant political order that is *bourgeois*, white and supremacist. And well I would like that *putes* no longer have to deal with the police, that they have the right to organise themselves, to create syndicates to put pressure on bosses. A world where *putes* aren't easy victims. And it would be nice also to change our relationship to our exoticised bodies that are objectified and always sexualised and that people think they have a right to. People who would like to stop doing sex work should have unemployment and access to other jobs. And *putes* should be venerated instead of being stigmatised and shamed and their skills and knowledges and power should be recognised."⁴⁴⁹

Rosario Veneno says about her future or utopian imaginations:

"What is clear is how women are dispossessed of their sexuality, be it through forms of pleasure, of self-fulfilment or of personal realisation in work for instance. And I think that recovering this contact with the power of our eroticism, of our pleasure, is one of the first steps towards ourselves, and I think that this is when things will start to change, when everyone recognises that we have personal powers to make choices about our bodies and minds."⁴⁵⁰

Nelle also asks: "How do we strive towards this? And make it more approachable step by step?" These are questions that research must also ask: how can research projects accompany and support sex workers' imaginations to collectively work on possibilities of implementing them and to reinforce radical hope for a just future and for caring and humane urbanism.

To reaffirm the epistemological and methodological ethos of this research, I want to end with the words Rosario Veneno used to conclude our conversation, giving people advice on how to support sex workers on an everyday, small-scale basis:



A "prevention message" from Rosario Veneno

⁴⁴⁷ Le Bail, Giometta, and Rassouw, "Que pensent les travailleur.se.s du sexe de la loi prostitution," 2018.

⁴⁴⁸ Miraftab, "Insurgent Practices and Decolonization of Future(s)."

⁴⁴⁹ Nelle, Conversation with Nelle.

⁴⁵⁰ Rosario Veneno, Conversation with Rosario Veneno.

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Transcription and translation of audio clips

NELLE on the different words used to designate sex workers (p. 7)

« Même maintenant je pense qu'il y a pas du tout d'unanimité et pleins de personnes utilisent des mots très différents. Et puis aussi je pense qu'on utilise pas du tout les mêmes mots quand t'es dans un entre-soi. Aussi en fonction de, avec quelle autre TDS tu es et c'est quoi la différence de taf que vous avez. Et puis dans les rapports plus politiques genre, écrire un communiqué, on utilise d'autres mots ou parler aux institutions t'utilisés d'autres mots. Enfin c'est vrai que là il y a le mot travailleur.euse du sexe il est quand-même plutôt employé dans les milieux dans lesquels je suis. Mais parce que il y a aussi un message politique derrière de genre faire reconnaître que c'est un travail, se positionner en tant que travailleureuses et puis ça enlève un peu enfin voilà dans le mot < prostitué.e> moi j'aime bien ce mot mais c'est un truc voilà, tu es une personne prostituée enfin il y a moins quelque chose de actif dans voilà donc ça peut puis c'est souvent, il y a tellement de narrations de la prostitution comme ça comme quelque chose qui est subi et qui peut complètement l'être d'ailleurs mais du coup je pense ce mot il questionne à cet endroit-là. Il y a < en situation de prostitution > mais (rires) ça c'est vraiment c'est le langage un peut étatique machin en même temps c'est factuel à pleins d'endroits. Puis il y a le mot < pute > qui est vraiment beaucoup utilisé enfin dans des entre-soi. Mais il y a pleins de collègues qui aiment pas ce mot-là non plus parce qu'il y a encore une stigmatisation aussi autour de ça et donc voilà, il y a pleins de gens qui se réapproprient ce mot d'une certaine façon, il y a pleins de personnes pour lesquelles ça le fait pas du tout. »

“Even now, I think there is no unanimity at all, and many people use very different words. I then I also think that we don’t use the same words at all when we are amongst each other. It also depends on which other sex worker you are, what is the difference between your jobs. And then then in more political reports, like writing a press release, we use different words to speak to the institutions you use different words. Well, it’s true that now there is the word sex worker, it is rather used in the circles I am in. But because there is also a political message behind it, like getting people to recognise it as a job, positioning ourselves as workers et then it also takes away a bit, well, like in the word ‘prostitute,’ it like this word but there is a thing like, you are a prostituted person, like there is less something active in it, and then it is often, there are so many narrations of prostitution like this, like something that happens to you, which can totally be the case by the way, but I think the word questions this. There is ‘in situation of prostitution’ but (laughs) that is really the language a bit from the state, at the same time it is factual in many cases. Then there is the word ‘whore’ that is really a lot used amongst us. But there are a lot of colleagues who don’t like this word either because there is still a stigmatisation around that so well, there are a lot of people who reclaim this word in a certain way, and there is a lot of people for whom that doesn’t work at all.”

NELLE talks about how tough it is “to be up against abolitionist with so many resources” (p. 29)

« Ah, le travail d'archives. Bah moi je pense c'est trop ma passion (rire). Mais du coup je pense c'est nécessaire pour moi pour comprendre un peu mieux les choses. Pour aussi développer des argumentaires parce que j'ai que mon vécu mais en fait c'est vraiment dur je trouve quand t'es face à des abolitionnistes qui ont quand-même pas mal de moyens, qui ont du temps en fait aussi pour se rémunérer, pour faire du taf de militantisme abolitionniste (rire ironique) en fait. Et qui ont accès à des façons de formuler les choses, de s'exprimer, qui sont quand-même, qui sont situés à un certain niveau de langage, de classe, etc. Enfin voilà, je trouve ça pas si évident de se

fabriquer vraiment des bons argumentaires et moi j'en avais besoin aussi pour comprendre un peu les choses et pour pouvoir me sentir un peu solide là-dessus. »

“Ah the archival work. Well, I think it really is my passion (laughs). But so, I think it is necessary for me to understand the things better. Also to develop arguments because I only have my own experience but actually, I feel like it is really tough to be up against abolitionists who have quite a lot of resources, who also actually have time and get paid for doing abolitionist militant work (laughs incredulously). And who have access to certain ways of formulating things, of expressing themselves, that are situated at a certain level of language, of class, etc. So you know, it’s feel like it’s not that easy to build really good arguments and I needed them, also to understand things a bit better and to be able to feel confident about it.”

ROSARIO VENENO on her “criminal activities” (p. 30)

Maria : « Et du coup précisément dans Marseille il y a quoi comme lieu ou comme endroit où les gens vont ? »

Rosario Veneno : « Alors le lieu officiel, c'est mon association. C'est Autres Regards, qui accueille tout le monde qui aille passer, soit pour le travail du sexe soit pour l'exploitation. Mais les lieux autonomes et autogérés je peux pas les mentionner (rires). Parce que c'est vraiment des espaces de sécurité qui existent en fait un peu super underground et que voilà des endroits où on va pas inviter forcément des personnes qui sont pas concernées ou tenir au courant de nos activités criminelles (rire). Parce que je rappelle pourquoi j'ai dit le mot criminel, je rappelle que la loi 2016 interdit toute sorte de association ou de société ou de entraide entre des personnes qui pratiquent le travail du sexe. »

Maria: “And so precisely in Marseille, what places are there where people can go?”

Rosario Veneno: “So, official place is my association. That is Autres Regards who welcomes everyone who stops by, be it for sex work or for exploitation. But the autonomous and self-managed places, I can't mention (laughs). Because they really are safe spaces that actually exist a little bit super underground, so they are places where we will not really invite people who are not concerned or keep them updated about our criminal activities (laughs). Because I remind you why I said the word criminal, I remind you that the Loi 2016 prohibits any kind of association or society or mutual aid between people who practice sex work.”

VICTORIA on fighting against the “omerta” (p. 35)

« Et je discutais avec une amie trans que j'estime beaucoup et dont je ne vais pas donner le nom, mais qui me disait... Elle a vécu, elle est passée dans plein d'endroits différents en Europe. Elle est arrivée ici de manière clandestine ; elle est beaucoup plus âgée que moi. Et elle disait moi dans les pays où j'ai pu... que j'ai traversés en fait le plus difficile, c'était l'omerta de la police. La disparition de preuves, le harcèlement. Et en fait, il n'y a que par la représentation et que par la visibilité qu'on peut arriver à lutter contre l'omerta. »

“And I was talking to a trans friend whom I really appreciate and whose name I won’t mention, but who was telling me... She has lived, she has passed through many different places in Europe. She arrived here clandestinely; she is much older than me. And she was telling me, ‘In the countries where I was... that I’ve crossed, the most difficult was the omerta of the police. The disappearance of evidence, the harassment. And in fact, it is only through representation and visibility that we can manage to fight against the omerta.’”

SUZANNE about the administrative dimension of sex work (p. 45)

« Moi, je sais que quand je peux raconter mon boulot, les gens sont souvent hyper surpris de la

dimension secrétariat hyper présente dans ce travail. C'est quand-même prendre des rendez-vous avec des clients, établir un questionnaire ou un fonctionnement qui permettre de t'assurer de tout un tas de points sur comment va se passer la séance. Qu'est ce qui va être possible ? Pas possible. Qu'est-ce que tu vas poser comme règles comme limite ? »

"I know that when I talk about my job, people are often very surprised by the secretarial dimension that is so present in it. After all, it involves making appointments with clients, drawing up a questionnaire or a procedure that will enable you to be sure of a whole bunch of points about how the session is going to go. What's going to be doable, what not? What rules and what limits are you going to set?"

ROSARIO VENENO: "Just consider us as citizens and give us the right to work!" (p. 47)

« Là où c'est difficile c'est que les travailleuses du sexe du coup comme collectif, il y a énormément de réalités différentes. Donc suivant ce qui se passe aussi en parlant de lois ou de droit en fait ces personnes-là c'est que les gens très vite ils vont confondre l'exploitation sexuelle ou la traite des êtres humains avec le travail du sexe. Ça c'est encore vachement complexe en fait pour les gens de comprendre la différence (rire) et de comprendre à quel point c'est pas la même chose et à quel point on nie pas en fait l'exploitation qui existe. Comme ça existe l'exploitation de l'être humain dans beaucoup des autres domaines, donc c'est pas que sexuel mais c'est une exploitation qui existe et que bien sûr on condamne et que on demande à l'Etat en fait de l'arrêter et de vraiment se dédier à mettre des ressources en fait dans des recherches (tchip) des réseaux de traite mais qui n'a rien à voir avec la réalité travailleuses du sexe indépendantes quoi. Et voilà, qui n'a vraiment rien à voir. Donc là où la morale en fait vient à trancher est à croire que c'est tout la même chose et que parce que t'es une femme et t'es travailleuse du sexe bah t'es victime donc il faut te sortir de là et la seule façon dont on doit te sortir c'est avec une intervention *estatal*. En fait les travailleuses du sexe indépendantes, on dit plutôt tout le contraire quoi. On n'a pas besoin de l'État (rire) pour nous dire quoi faire mais par contre pour (briquet) pour nous considérer en fait comme citoyennes et pour donner le droit du travail quoi. »

"Where it gets difficult is that sex workers, as a collective, have extremely different realities. So, when it comes to laws and rights, people often easily confuse sexual exploitation or human trafficking with sex work. That's something that remains really complex for people to understand the difference (laughs) and how these are not the same at all and how we're not denying the exploitation that exist. Just like there's exploitation of human beings in many other fields, it's not just about sex work but is an exploitation that exist, and of course, we condemn it and we call on the state to take real action, to dedicate resources to investigating (tchip) trafficking networks but that has nothing to do with the reality of independent sex workers. Absolutely nothing. And this is where morality steps in, assuming it's all the same thing, that because you're a woman and a sex worker, you must be a victim, so the only solution is for the state to intervene and get you out of there. But us independent sex workers, we actually say the opposite. We don't need the state (laughs) to tell us what to do. What we do need (lighter), however, is to be recognized as citizens and to be granted the right to work."

VICTORIA recounting Les Vilaines (p. 50)

« Elle vit dans cette espèce de maison-communauté qui est un peu en poncif de l'imagerie trans qui est en gros, chaque meuf trans a un peu un truc magique en elle, celles qui vont prendre soin, celles qui vont être exubérantes, celles qui vont être dans la confrontation, dans la défense, celles qui vont être un peu les mères qui vont transmettre les savoirs, puis après celles qui arrivent, qui

sont peu paumés tout ça. Donc c'est en plus une poétique je trouve très, très belle qu'on retrouve dans pas mal de récits de trans, mais plutôt au sud-américains, moins occidentaux et qui est vachement intéressant. »

“She lives in this sort of community-house, which is a bit of a cliché in trans imagery, which is basically that every trans woman has a bit of magic in her, the ones who take care, the ones who are exuberant, the ones who are confrontational, defensive, the ones who are a bit like mothers who pass on knowledge, and then the ones who arrive, who are a bit lost. So, it's also a poetic style that I think is very, very beautiful and that you find in a lot of stories of trans people, but more in South America, less in the West, and that's really interesting.”

NELLE on sex workers writing their own histories (p. 53)

« Juste personnellement je pense ça me fait trop du bien de lire d'autres histoires de TDS, ça me touche trop, ça m'aide à comprendre ce que je vis, ça m'aide à pas essayer de non plus formater ma propre histoire à quelque chose qui serait lisse ou linéaire ou, j'ai l'impression d'avoir fait genre trois mil TDS différents, j'exagère mais au moins quatre (rires) et qui, et y'a des moments, enfin j'ai vécu vraiment des choses, y'a des moments où j'ai pas du tout aimé faire ça et des moments c'était super, fin, y'a vraiment pleins de choses et du coup ça m'aide de lire des choses un peu complexes là-dessus. »

“Just personally, I think reading other sex workers' stories does me so much good, it really moves me, it helps me understand what I'm experiencing, it helps me not try to shape my own story into something too smooth or linear. I feel like I've done, like, three thousand different kinds of sex work, I'm exaggerating but at least four (laughs) and there were times, like, I've really experienced some things, there were moments when I really didn't enjoy it at all, and other times when it was great, like, there's just so much to it and so, it really helps me to read more complex things on it.”

SUZANNE: “As a pute, you fall outside the category of ‘woman’” (p. 54)

« Et j'ai envie de dire, même pour les femmes cis qui ont beaucoup de rapports hétéro, je pense que c'est déjà fortement dévié de la norme de l'hétérosexualité que de faire payer ton travail reproductif, en tout cas, une partie de ton travail reproductif. Et de fait, je pense que ça fait forcément de la connivence avec les personnes qui sont en dehors de l'hétérosexualité pour d'autres raisons. Il y a un truc de lien qui se fait à cet endroit-là, quoi. Quand on... d'une certaine manière tu sors même de la catégorie femme telle qu'elle devraient l'être, quoi. Il y a quelque chose qui dévie du genre même pour les *putes cis-hétéro*, pour moi en tout cas, mon analyse. »

“And I want to say, even for cis women who have a lot of hetero sex, I think it already significantly deviates from the norm of heterosexuality to make someone pay for your reproductive labour, at least a part of your reproductive labour. And in that sense, I think there's necessarily a kind of connection with people who are outside of heterosexuality for other reasons. There's a bond that forms at that level. When you... in a way, you are even outside the category of what a woman is supposed to be. There's something that deviates from gender, even for cis-hetero putas, at least for me, my analysis.”

MARSACTU: “These scenes which they would rather not see” (p. 56)

« C'est une réalité qui est pour le coup à toute heure. C'est-à-dire que, parfois elles arrivent dès 8h du matin, moi ça m'est arrivé d'aller, avant d'aller travailler de passer par la place Labadié et de constater des jeunes femmes qui vont courir derrière le client entre 7h et 8h du matin. Ou qui sont en train de finir leur nuit. Et donc ça, pour les riverains, c'est insupportable. Parce que, ils ont l'impression que ces scènes qu'ils voudraient pas voir, ils les voient constamment. »

"It's a reality that exists at all hours. That is to say, sometimes they arrive as early as 8 a.m. I've personally passed through Place Labadié before going to work and seen young women running after clients between 7 and 8 in the morning. Or they are finishing their night. And for local residents, this is unbearable. Because they feel like these scenes, which they would rather not see, are constantly in front of them."

VICTORIA on why she never had a negative image of sex workers (p. 60)

« De ce dont je me rappelle j'ai jamais eu un truc de rejet, mépris, dégoût, juste un truc un peu imperceptible et un peu... Je pense que c'est arrivé par là en disant en gros, si jamais pour moi, je considère que des personnes trans et des femmes trans, parce que je n'avais pas de représentation de mecs trans à l'époque, c'est normal, ça devrait l'être pour tout le monde. Et du coup, je pense que c'est arrivé par là. Voilà, puis après assez vite, je pense que j'ai été aussi pas mal socialisée dans des mouvements féministes, un peu assez inclusifs, notamment je pense que j'ai été familiarisée avec les questions d'intersectionnalité dès 2011 où il était question plutôt de racisme, plus tard d'islamophobie, etc., mais voilà. Et un apprentissage autour de ce que c'est que le stigmate, notamment des personnes qui sont usagères de produits stup. »

"As far as I can remember, I've never had a thing like rejection, contempt, disgust, just a bit of an imperceptible thing a bit... I think it arrived through saying to myself, if for me, I consider that trans people and trans women, because I didn't have representations of trans men at that time, if that is normal for me, it should be so for everyone. And so I think it came from there. And then, quite fast, I think I was socialised a lot in feminist movements that were quite inclusive, specifically I think I was familiarised with questions of intersectionality in 2011 around questions of racism, later of islamophobia, etc. But voilà. A learning around what stigma is, especially of people who use drugs."

ROSARIO VENENO: "I have seen people come in and whisper 'I want condoms'" (p. 63)

« C'est vraiment dommage pour moi de pas pouvoir parler de politique dans mon association parce que même si je comprends le besoin de rester un endroit safe pour pleins d'expériences différentes et donc les plus neutre possible entre guillemets, le fait de pas pouvoir répandre en fait des idées politiques et que les personnes elles-mêmes ne se pensent pas comme sujet politique ça crée énormément de mal d'un côté la autoacceptation de ce stigmate envers elles-mêmes, et de porter des trucs très lourds en termes de se sentir mal avec soi-même, avec son activité, comme la situation de se sentir de se cacher un peu et de pas dire certaines choses. J'ai vu des personnes dans l'association qui franchissent la porte en disant (chuchoté :) « je veux des capotes. » Et ok, des capotes, tu peux le dire toi en fait juste rien que ça c'est intéressant en fait. »

"It is really a pity for me not being able to speak about politics in my association because even if I understand the need of remaining a safe space for a lot of different experiences and being as neutral as possible in quotation marks, the fact that you can't spread political ideas and that the people don't think themselves as political subjects, that creates a lot of harm, like the auto-acceptation of this stigmatisation against themselves, carrying very heavy things like feeling bad with yourself, with your activity, like the situation of hiding and not saying certain things. I've seen people in the association who step though the door and say (whispered): 'I want condoms.' And okay, condoms, you can say it actually, just that is really interesting."

VICTORIA: “I do sex work on social media, but I get strucked and it’s over.”

(p. 68)

« Moi, j'essaie de faire du TDS dans d'autres espaces genre je sais pas, sur Grindr sur des réseaux sociaux et tout ça, mais je me fais strike et c'est fini quoi. Il y a des plateformes qui ont été obligé de faire attention à ça et plus c'est shady, plus c'est dangereux. Donc j'essaie aussi de faire attention à moi et de pas mettre dans des situations dangereuses. Je me fais souvent harceler. Ça peut être des dizaines de messages, des trucs comme ça, des insultes et des choses comme ça. Donc c'est bien d'avoir des interfaces entre les gens et moi et moi, je pose mes conditions de contact, c'est genre, j'ai besoin de ça, ça, ça et ça. Si tu fais pas ça, je ne te réponds pas. »

“Me, I try to do sex work in other spaces, like on Grindr, on social media platforms and all that, but I get strucked and its over. There are platforms that were forced to start paying attention to this, and the more it is shady, the more dangerous it is. So, I also try to be careful and not put myself in dangerous situations. I get harassed a lot. It can be dozens of messages, things like that, insults and so on. So it's good to have interfaces between people and me, and I set my own conditions of contact, like, I need this, this, this and that. If you don't do this, I won't respond.”

ROSARIO VENENO: mutual aid against isolation (p. 70)

« Oui bah oui, c'est vachement important en fait les liens d'entraide qu'on peut construire entre nous. Après encore je suis une nouvelle génération. Donc cette pensée un peu profonde féministe sur le travail du sexe, je dis pas que c'est nouveau mais ça nous permet d'avoir un peu d'espaces en fait même si, donc je te disais, je viens d'Argentine donc là-bas il y a des luttes vraiment approfondies dedans, c'est pas le cas ici en France, c'est vachement mis à côté mais on vient des années et des générations précédentes où en fait c'est un énorme stigmate. Et que ça aide à maintenir à conduire à l'exclusion en fait énormément et à la isolation des personnes. Donc là je trouve ça vraiment important de faire le taf de retisser des liens entre nous, même si c'est des liens temporaires non ? Un peu des choses qui nous permettent de parler de construire en fait aussi des politiques dedans quoi. »

“Well yes, it is super important actually the mutual aid connections that we can build amongst us. And still, I am from a new generation. So this profound feminist thought on sex work, I'm not saying it is new but it allows us to have a few spaces, even if, so I was saying, I'm from Argentina where there are really deep struggles, that's not the case here in France, it is really pushed to the side but we come from years and earlier generations where actually there is an enormous stigmatisation. And that helps maintain and lead to exclusion a lot and to the isolation of people. So, I think it is really important to do this work of creating connections between us, even if they are only temporary no? Things that allow us to speak about constructing politics in there too.”

SUZANNE: “It is legal to pass on techniques but not to sex workers.” (p. 72)

« On peut se déclarer en micro-entreprise en tant que travailleuse du sexe et dire, voilà moi, je suis forte d'une expérience de 25 ans dans le BDSM, notamment je suis super forte, je sais pas, à jouer avec le feu. Je vais faire un atelier sur le feu. Mais par contre, ça va être déclaré que c'est pour des personnes qui veulent apprendre et se former sur une technique dans le BDSM, pas sur comment pratiquer ça en tant que travailleuse du sexe. Et du coup, c'est légal parce que tu transmets juste une pratique et comme c'est pas illégal d'être dominatrice, c'est possible de faire ça comme ça, mais tu ne peux pas dire cette formation est réservée aux travailleuses du sexe. »

“Technically, you can declare yourself as a professional dominatrix, in any case, you can register

as a self-employed sex worker and say, ‘I have 25 years of experience in BDSM and I am particularly good at, I don’t know, playing with fire. I am going to make a workshop on fire.’ But it will be declared as a training for people who want to learn about a technique in BDSM, not about how to practice as a sex worker. So, it is legal because you are just passing on a technique, and as it is not illegal to be a dominatrix, it is possible to do that, but you can’t say that this training is reserved for sex workers.”

A “prevention message” from Rosario Veneno (p. 80)

« Message de prévention (rires) : soutenir les travailleuses du sexe quoi. Vraiment soutenir des personnes concrète et pratique et ça veut dire les permettre de travailler dans ta rue, être au courant en fait si elles sont en sécurité ou pas ; on sait que si les travailleuses du sexe se font agresser dans la rue, la police elle vient pas. Du coup des voisins voisines qui appellent la police sans leur dire que c'est ça simplement de signaler une agression pour que la police elle arrive. Voilà, donc il y a des actions très concrètes en fait qu'on peut faire pour soutenir les personnes qui vivent de ce travail-là sans les juger. Et bueno une travailleuse du sexe, soutenez-là parce que c'est assez difficile et c'est pas du tout de l'argent facile au contraire. C'est bien dur de gagner sa vie dedans donc voilà. »

“Prevention message (laughs): support sex workers. Really support people in concrete and practical terms and that means, allow them to work in your street, know if they are safe or not; We know that if sex workers are assaulted in the street, the police don’t come. So, the neighbours should call the police without telling them that it is this, simply report an assault so that the police come. So, there are very concrete actions actually that you can do to support the people who live from this work without judging them. And bueno, support sex workers because it is quite difficult and not at all easy money, on the contrary. It’s real hard to make a living in it, so there you go.”

Glossary

AFFINITY GROUPS: Communities brought together through shared or similar political ideas, realities based on factors such as race, gender-identity and sexual orientation, or type of sex work.

BDSM: Bondage and Discipline, Dominance and Submission, Sadism and Masochism

CHRS: *Centre d'Hébergement et de Réinsertion Sociale* (Accommodation and Social Reintegration Center).

FOSTA-SESTA: Fight Online Sex Trafficking Act and Stop Enabling Sex Traffickers Act and aimed at holding Internet platforms accountable for contents posted by their users.

GOÛTERS PUTES: “Sex workers’ tea parties,” social moments for sex workers only where they can meet colleagues and informally learn from each other’s experiences and knowledges.

LOI 2016: Law n°2016-444 aimed at strengthening the fight against the prostitution system and supporting prostitutes.

MARAUDES: Rounds during which (peer) social workers meet street sex workers at their place of work to see how they are doing, distribute coffee and condoms and offer to do HIV and other screenings.

OPEN-PRICE MODEL: some places like the alternative cinema Vidéodrome 2 use a ticket model where people decide how much they pay in order to make events accessible.

OQTF: *Obligation de Quitter le Territoire Français* (Obligation to Leave French Territory), the primary deportation measure of foreign nationals.⁴⁵¹

PARCOURS DE SORTIE: The “Exit Path,” the only measure of the *Loi 2016* designed to accompany sex workers. Aimed at helping people exiting prostitution, the *Parcours* gives beneficiaries a temporary residence permit of six months, a financial allowance for social integration of €330 per month and support from an accredited association to access social housing, training and healthcare. Admission to the *Parcours de Sortie* is based on the condition that sex work has been halted by the time of the application and other prerequisites that vary from one department to another.⁴⁵²

PUTES, PUTERIE: *Putes* (the English equivalent being “whore”) and *Puterie*, translatable to “whoring,” are slurs that have been politically reclaimed and are used by and amongst sex workers. Reclaiming these insults has the purpose of challenging discourses that consider sex work an immoral activity and defiantly affirming this oppressed identity or activity.

SANS PAPIERS: Undocumented migrants, people who do not have a legal citizenship status where they currently stay.

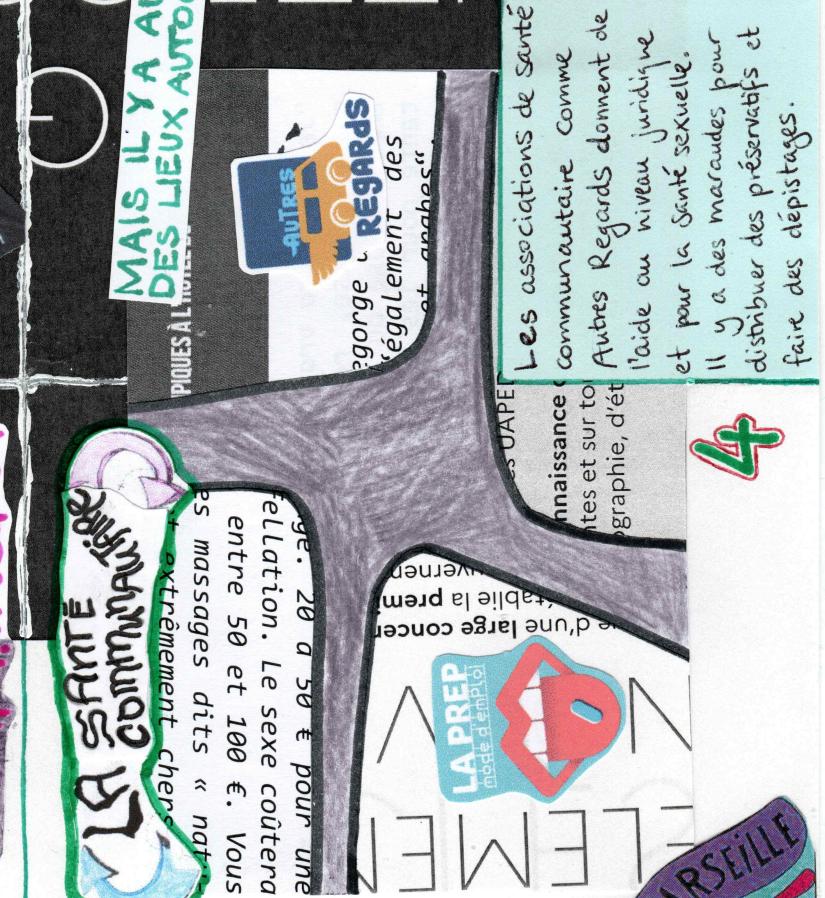
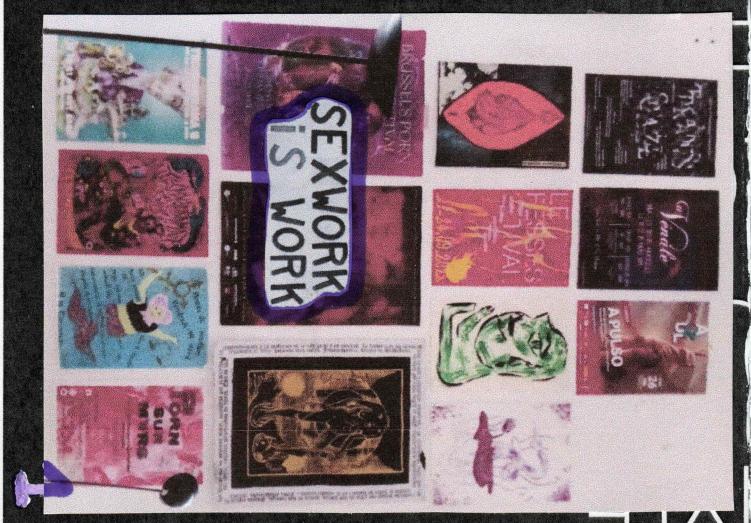
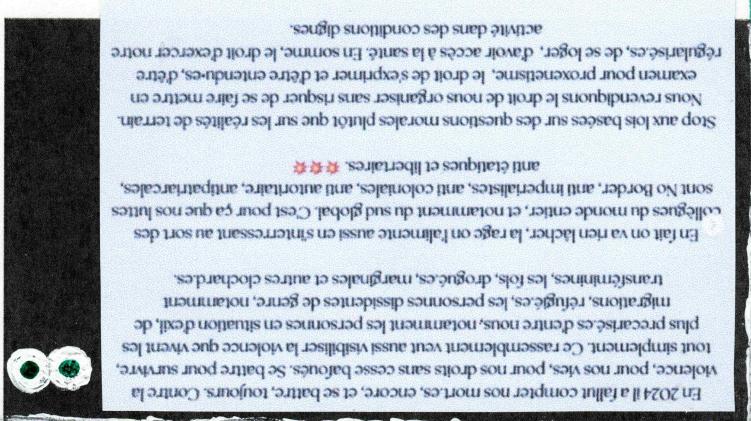
SOLICITING, ACTIVE/PASSIVE~: By law, soliciting refers to a person publicly inciting someone, by active means or a passive attitude, to have a sexual interaction in exchange for remuneration.

STI: Sexually Transmissible Infections

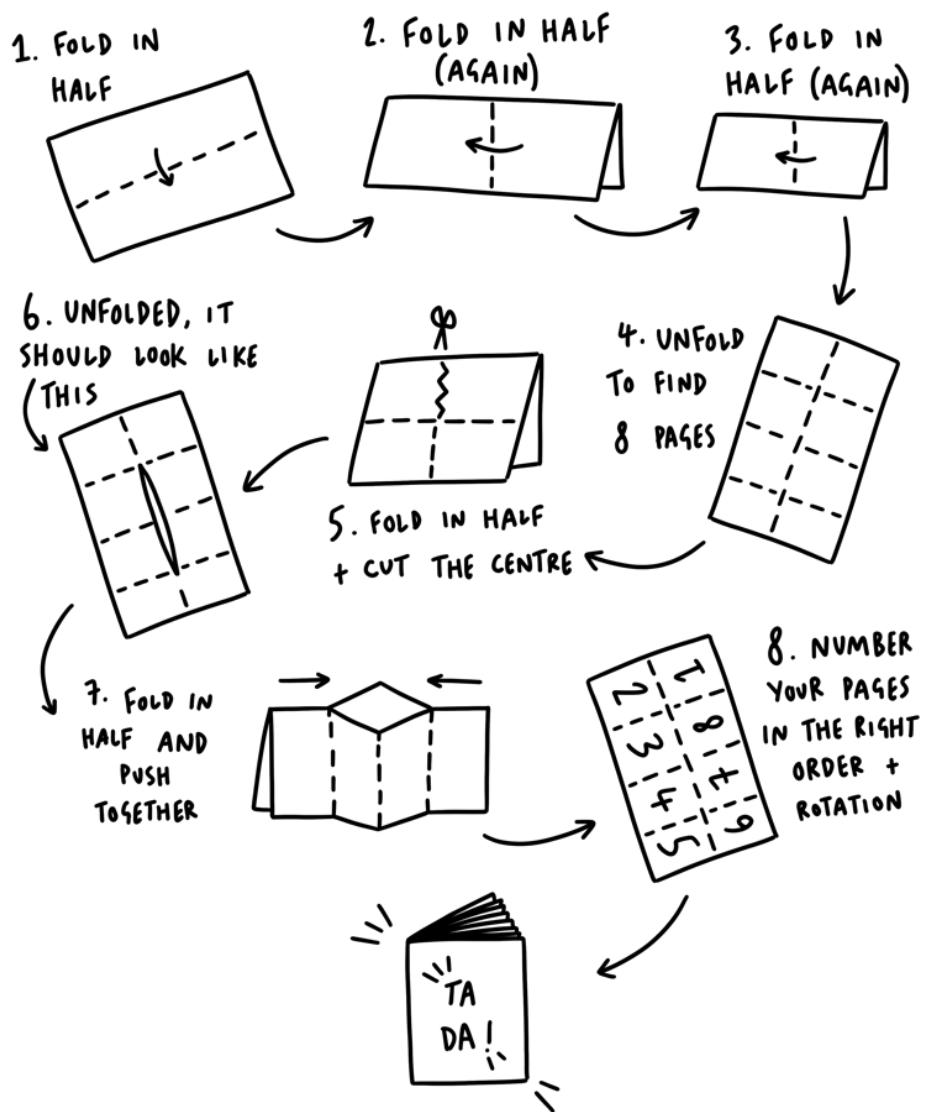
TRANSPÉDÉGOUINE: This is a term that describes queer people or a queer community using the politically reclaimed words *pédé* (“fag”) and *gouine* (“dyke”). A translation, however only rarely used, could be “transfagdyke.” The term is employed here because it is the terminology used by my interlocutor Nelle and many other queer people in Marseille.

⁴⁵¹ OFPRA, “Glossary.”

⁴⁵² Gaudy and Bail, “Synthèse comparative des rapports d’évaluation de la loi française sur la prostitution de 2016,” 18.



HOW TO MAKE A ZINE





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Datum: 07. April 2025

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