

Reflections on travesti prostitution in Madrid: urban complexities and gender identities

Abstract

The research offers a detailed reflection based on ethnographic experiences in Madrid, focusing on the intricate contexts of prostitution and the relationships established with travesti. Madrid emerges as a city where prostitution is particularly conspicuous, especially in locations deemed tourist attractions. In contrast, Portugal is mentioned as a place where this practice is more discreet. The study recounts attempts to engage with travesti in Madrid, highlighting the challenges in comprehending their expressions and slang. Additionally, the research examines the close association between prostitution and drug consumption, while also discussing the stereotypes faced by Brazilian travesti in Madrid. Overall, this investigation sheds light on the cultural and social complexities inherent in these contexts, prompting reflection on the realm of prostitution and the gender identity process within European urban settings, specifically Madrid.

Keywords: travestis, prostitution, madrid, body, gender identity

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João Dantas dos Anjos Neto,¹ Rubens Pinto dos Santos Filho²

¹Professor in the Graduate Program in Art and Visual Culture and in the School of Information and Communication, Federal University of Goiás, Brazil

²Undergraduate student in Education at the Federal University of Goiás, Brazil

Correspondence: João Dantas dos Anjos Neto, Professor at the Faculty of Information and Communication, Universidade Federal de Goiás, Goiânia, Goiás, Brasil, Email joaodanta@ufg.br

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Introduction

This article aims to understand the complexities of prostitution contexts in a European city: Madrid. The research is part of a reflection carried out by one of the authors during their doctoral studies, involving an ethnographically¹ immersed process that explored diverse urban scenarios. Thus, at one point in the research, Madrid emerges as a central point where prostitution manifests more prominently, contrasting with observations made in Portugal. The notable presence of travesti individuals in these environments reveals additional layers of complexity, highlighting the challenge of understanding their expressions and slang, as well as the way travesti individuals are stigmatized and marginalized.

Madrid, known for its bustling nightlife and scenic green spaces, emerges as a space where interactions between passersby and sex workers occur within a socially and culturally rich setting.² However, in another European setting, Paris emerges as a context where drug trade and prostitution share closer spaces, showcasing unique confrontations with reality in European urban environments. This reflection, although grounded in the author's specific experiences, highlights broader situations regarding gender identities, the process of social marginalization, and the present resistance emerging from these specific environments.

Madrid

Complexities of prostitution scenarios

It was in Madrid that I encountered the largest universe of prostitution within a city, from the region of the Royal Botanical Garden of Madrid, to the Retiro Park, and other green areas near Calle Gran Vía. During the day, there were explicit displays of people offering their sexual services. These green spaces are located near the interesting Reina Sofia National Art Museum, in the city center. It contrasted with the prostitution in Portugal, where practices mostly occurred discreetly, in the dark. I had reserved a week, and being aware, after the experience in Lisbon, that time would be limited. Thus, from the outset, I focused on the spaces of travesti prostitution in Madrid, conducted visits, and made some contacts to interact and coexist. However, the complexity of the scenarios, the difficulty

in decoding expressions and slang, prevented me from making analyses; they would be preconceived and/or stereotyped. Despite having mastery of the Spanish language, in Madrid there are other expressions, gestures, and patterns of bodies and beauty, even if subtle. Like in any researched city, there are changes. Some moments smooth, others sharp.

In the prostitution areas I know, there is always a sharpening in the construction of slang and expressions, in the ages of the travesti individuals, and in the region of work and its proximity to middle or upper-class regions and peripheral territories, there are always meanings. If I were working with documentary ethnography or with other audiences, perhaps I would feel confident in discussing. Perhaps I would find these scenarios less mutable than the universe of sex in Madrid.

On one occasion, in the field, with the travesti individuals in the Atalaia neighborhood, Aracaju, the capital of the State of Sergipe, I faced a police approach. The police searched the travesti individuals and me, as there is consumption and sale of illicit substances in the region. At that moment, a silence ensued among glances, and gradually I decoded that it was a form of communication and resistance. The silence spoke.

Along Calle Gran Vía, a wide avenue with expensive and bustling shops in Madrid, there are streets with nightclubs and Brazilian travesti individuals on the corners. However, there is a multicultural universe, where people from various nationalities meet. Travesti individuals from countries colonized by Spain, such as Argentina, Peru, Ecuador, are present. There are also African travesti individuals. It was my first contact with this universe, and defining them as Africans is something generic, considering the dimension of the continent. However, I did not delve into origins, as that was not the objective. In the field, we have to make choices and be aware that some possibilities will be lost. Even though the concept of travesti does not apply to other nationalities/cultures, it is ultimately a Brazilian construction, and, aware of my redundancy, by saying "Brazilian travesti individuals," I will use the same terminology for other nationalities, since in Madrid the term "trans" usually applies to a larger universe than the one researched here.

When I reached the Calle de Fuencarral area, I was surprised by the close proximity between the sex workers. It was summer, December. Initially, I couldn't understand the way space was occupied, because in Brazil (Aracaju, Rio de Janeiro, Salvador, São Paulo), in Porto, and Lisbon, I was not attentive to female prostitution, women of different nationalities organized by spaces. Very rarely, I found travesti individuals and men, who, under my judgment, were male prostitutes, occupying different spaces. However, that space was reserved for cisgender female prostitutes.

I realize, then, that Calle de Fuencarral is a territory with some particularities. A street with beautiful and old buildings. Through Gran Vía, one arrives at a street where cocaine is offered, 1.0 g for 100 euros; ecstasy, 50 euros per unit. Women and drug dealers, as I passed by the street, offered me their services and spoke their price. The closer a new day approached, the more the offers were.

A young cisgender woman, in English: "100 euros for one hour." Like in Brazil, prostitutes avoid kissing their clients. So, I am taken by curiosity. I stop and ask, "Do you kiss?" Quickly, as if realizing the great supply of bodies. She responds, "Yes, I can kiss." I understand that the use of the verb "can" implies more money. I thank her and explain what I am doing in her workspace.

As I continued walking, I left the area of female prostitution. I felt as if I were in a kind of "body market." Two travesti individuals passed by, conversing among themselves. So, I ask for permission, we stop and talk.

The contact was rough. Immediately, too, I was recognized as Brazilian, I believe as a potential client to refuse the proposal to choose one or both for 50 euros half an hour, or 100 euros both, and I should also bear the costs of the hotel. I became an obstacle.

I quickly explained the motivation for the research and one of them said:

"**Travesti 1:** I have nothing to do with this [or something similar in Spanish]" (Verbal information). The other moved from side to side, clearly uncomfortable.

Truly, at that moment, I was a "persona non grata." They were working or on their way to work. Then, another travesti individual aggressively said:

Travesti 2: You don't want to know? Then pay up! That's how it works here, we charge by time and no photos. **Me:** Fair enough! What do you want or how much? **Travesti 2:** The price of a session I would do with you. **Me:** Alright! (Verbal information)

Their body posture quickly shifted from a more aggressive gesture to a more sensual expression. I offered a cigarette, as usual, and had passed by bars during this walk. We returned and sat down. **Travesti 1:** The euros! [extending their hand]. **Me:** Relax, I know how it works. Money first, let's choose something to drink first! (Verbal information).

I spoke confidently and tried to be polite. Soon after, the waiter brought two drinks. She chose a shot of liqueur, unknown to my limited knowledge, and I had a glass of wine. I was sitting with someone aggressive, purposeful, and therefore, I needed to establish a secure relationship, because what could happen if we left from there otherwise? Her friend stayed. I knew the greatest danger occurs when I have no data about the place. In the streets of Madrid, information must have passed by me like waves, imperceptible. I tried to be quick in observation, decoding the body and way of speaking. However, only time could teach me about their symbols and codes.

Travesti 1: So?

Me: There's your money!

Travesti 1: Wow, I didn't even see it.

Me: [trying to break the tension] What if it had been a snake?

Travesti: [laughter, then drank] (Verbal information)

She had chosen to sit in a position where she had a view of the entire surroundings of the bar, me facing her, and in the background, the scene was the street.

Me: I think I mentioned it, but you must have forgotten: my name is João, I'm from Bahia, now I'm in Porto, but I live in São Paulo, the capital. Where are you from?

Travesti 1: I'm also from São Paulo. (Verbal information)

I felt it wasn't true, however, I will never know. She was quick and wouldn't give in. We hadn't built a relationship of complicity. I noticed that she manipulated what she said with great ease. Even in the sentence where I asked where she was from, I preceded it with my own details: name, my origin, and where I am currently living. However, as if by intuition, she had decoded it, positioning herself as a difficult informant. How to understand this "place" if she remains resistant?

Me: We already know where we're from and I don't remember your name! [laughter]

Travesti 1: You can call me whatever you want.

Me: [laughter] I arrived in Madrid recently, I've been enjoying it, it's not only a beautiful city, but also with a lively nightlife.

Travesti 1: There are several streets here that have everything. Street San Cesareo, Marconi, La Calle Montera, and La Casa de Campo.

Me: Is there much here in Madrid?

Travesti 1: I don't even remember how long ago I arrived, I think it's been about 12 years.

Me: Hmm! You must know and have worked in many countries.

Travesti 1: Oh! I know a lot, the ones I wanted! Portugal, of course, Spain, Paris and France, Switzerland.

Me: Have you always spent a lot of time in these places, in these countries?

Travesti 1: More here, because here men like and value Brazilian travestis.

Me: Here in Spain or do you mean here in Madrid?

Travesti 1: More in Madrid, Barcelona has many [travesti].

Me: I think I'll go to Paris. Do you like it there?

Travesti 1: I like the city, but without papers [legal documentation in the country] it's difficult.

Travesti 1: They are handsome or, as they say there, *mec*, they pay better, now: and the danger, *cat*? No, I love Madrid.

Me: Wow, there's a lot to understand, all of this, the travesti I've talked to want to go back, others don't, and you?

Travesti 1: [laughter] For what, to give a blowjob for 15 reais and die without being able to use what I want or to be beaten. No, thank you!

Me: I understand. (Verbal information)

We continued our conversation, and I suggested another round of drinks. Then, she asked if I wanted anything else, as we had been together for almost half an hour. I replied that I would accompany her back to where I met her. Upon reaching the prostitution spot, I noticed it was empty, and the friend I had tried to establish contact with was not there; she had possibly found a client. Finally, I gave her a kiss and left without knowing her name, aware that I possessed a very rational demeanor and was experiencing, without fantasies, the world of prostitution in that moment.

Two days later, on Gran Avenida, I encountered a group eating and chatting at McDonald's. As I walked through the door, bothered by the smell of frying and feeling a certain rejection in the space, I looked and noticed a group of five travesti. I entered and walked slowly past their table; one of them was speaking in Spanish. I bought a coffee and sat at a nearby table, aiming to gather some information and discreetly observe. I contemplated how to approach them. Then, I stood up and said:

Me: Hello. Someone responded with a smile:

- Hello.

Me: Can I sit with you?

- Yes! Why not? Yes! (Verbal information)

I was succinct and direct, not pushy, didn't take up too much time, listened, built a relationship of empathy, spoke while looking at everyone, and explained my purpose in approaching the table. Thus, I offered the coffee, some thanked me, and I mentioned my work and asked if they could help me. They laughed and in a game of seduction and acceptance, we talked about Brazil, Carnival, Brazilian men, and the price of services. Despite the wealth of information collected, it would be a deviation. However, they showed some conflict with Brazilian travesti. Below, I transcribe the excerpt that deals with the acceptance of Brazilian travesti in Madrid. After all, the relationship with other groups of travesti influences the existence or survival of any community living under these conditions.

So: Gabi (Did not reveal age); Kari, 22 years old; Tiffani, 23 years old; Quendra, 25 years old, Ericka, 21 years old (when writing, I did not use the letter "K," and Erika exclaimed: "You don't know how to write. It has a 'K'!")

Gabi: Brazilian trans women are very aggressive and have no problem showing their intimate parts in the street. You know because you are Brazilian, they have sex anywhere, even sucking through the glass. I don't think that's necessary. The police know that when there's a problem with trans people, it's the Brazilians. (Verbal information)

Several reflections on this statement emerged: The reality of travesti in Brazil is built upon a culture of violence.³ We have large metropolises, big cities, where there are spaces for various behavior profiles and market segmentation. The travesti in São Paulo who work near the Jockey Club of São Paulo, in the Butantã neighborhood, have different attire from those who work in the motel areas in Barra Funda. Some expose their breasts and "dicks". When I went to this area for the first time, I remembered the title of the movie, inspired by the play by playwright Nelson Rodrigues, starring actress Darlene Glória, "All Nakedness Will Be Punished".

Stigma, marginalization and resistance

Experiences of Brazilian travestis

In Brazil, only the act of killing women as special passive subjects of the crime is classified as femicide by article 1 of Law No.

8,072, dated July 25, 1990, to include femicide in the list of heinous crimes. Therefore, there is no specific legislation for the LGBTQI+ community. The violence perpetrated against the LGBTQI+ group places us in a prominent position, considering the number of murders of individuals in this community, 44% of whom are trans and travestis. I suppose that these data do not represent reality. After all, the body belongs to the State, and the memory of a name that is not listed on the birth certificate is forgotten, with the deceased's documentation prevailing with the male name. Thus, the work of the Gay Group of Bahia, the oldest Gay Group in Brazil, conducted this count of deaths in the country.

Other variables must imply Gabi's discourse, such as the sex market. After all, there is a stereotype about Brazilians, linking beauty and a sensual stereotype (FREYER, p. 100, 2009), a fact that affects not only travestis. Thus, I speculate, in this discourse, there is a struggle for space, market, and identities. As Paula mentioned: "here everything has an owner."

Following Gran Vía, heading south, I reach the well-known Chueca neighborhood. The architecture and the quantity of Rainbow Flags, the work of designer Gilbert Baker, blend together, creating a colorful environment with the movement of flags and in the background, architecture that harks back to the past, with its balconies and symmetrical floors. Chueca is also known as the location for Madrid's gay pride parade.

Previously, I decided to visit a nightclub where there were shows by drag queens and travestis. "El Black and White" is known for its audiences located at Calle de La Libertad 34, Chueca.

Despite establishing contact with Brazilian travestis, two friends, the environment did not provide conditions for a deeper conversation. I could arrange another time. However, it was the eve of my trip to Paris. I casually said, "Me: I'm going to Brazil in January, wanna join?" (The response, even without anything to build an assertion, indicates satisfaction with being in Madrid). Travesti: No way! (Verbal information).

Final considerations

As this research concludes this reflection, it also makes evident that the complexities of the contexts in which travesti prostitution in Madrid is deeply rooted in broader social, cultural, and economic dynamics.⁴ The interactions established between the authors and the travesti highlight not only the challenges of understanding and communication but also the emergence of stigma⁵ and marginalization surrounding these urban scenarios. Thus, the research emphasizes the urgency of more inclusive and gender-sensitive⁶ policies and actions, aiming to create safer urban environments. Ultimately, the research presented here aimed to contribute to a more immersive understanding of the diversity and complexities that contemporary urban life presents, as well as the process of marginalization and resistance faced by Brazilian travesti outside their home country.

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Conflicts of interest

The authors declare that there are no conflicts of interest.

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