

TONIGHT WE'RE NOT WHORES. TONIGHT WE'RE PRINCESSES.
SEX WORK AND MIGRATION IN SPAIN: FERNANDO LEÓN DE ARANOA'S *PRINCESAS*

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In Spain, despite a remarkably high unemployment rate, currently above twenty percent, the sex industry has been unaffected by the economic downturn and in fact, has flourished in recent years. A 2008 article in *El País*, by M. Antonia Sánchez Vallejo, cites The National Institute of Statistics, which states almost 30 percent of Spanish men admitted to using a prostitute at least once. To further demonstrate Spain's relationship with the sex industry, Spain boasts Europe's largest brothel, Club Paradise, which opened October 2010 in La Jonquera Girona, and employs close to 150 workers. With such a high demand for sex across the country, reports such as the one published in 2009 by TAMPEP (European Network for HIV/STI Prevention and Health Promotion among Migrant Sex Workers) estimate that of the 300,000-500,000 female prostitutes working in Spain, close to ninety percent of them are immigrants. Many of these women come from countries in Latin America, primarily Ecuador and The Dominican Republic, as well as parts of West Africa. Interestingly, in the last ten years, these countries have experienced significant changes in the rights granted to prostitutes (Kempadoo 1998). There has been an effort to define what they do in terms of work, since they generate significant amounts of income to support themselves and their families. These types of changes have not gone into effect in Spain. In fact, when Parliament passed La Ley de Extranjería, 8/2000 of December 22, prostitution was defined, as a "notrabajo" or not actual work, and thus, these women were unable to obtain the necessary documents to remain in the country legally. The criminalization of sex work has inevitably pushed many of these women underground, where their voices and stories are silenced. From this marginalized position, it becomes difficult to gain access and insight into their lives, especially because official discourse and the media typically deny their existence.

While recent documentaries such as *Extranjeras* (Helen Taberna 2005) explore the issue of women migrants in Spain, they neglect to mention that sex work is one of the most popular choice of employment for migrant women who reside in Spain. It seems that when sex work in Spain is discussed, the argument is made that all sex workers are reduced to passive victims in need of being rescued. Lidia Falcón, one of Spain's most outspoken feminists, argues the following:

Lo cierto es que la inmensa mayoría de las mujeres se encuentran forzadas para la prostitución y que esa manera de ser forzadas puede tener muy diversos métodos. Desde luego, no hay nada que fuerce más que la miseria, y sabemos todos que las dificultades económicas, la necesidad de emigración, la de mantener a una familia que está con ellas o en otro país, son los principales motivos que pueden impulsar a una mujer a ello, pero, además, tenemos ya una información suficientemente amplia, y que está contrastada por el trabajo que están haciendo tanto la policía como organizaciones de diverso tipo, de que la extorsión, el maltrato, la violencia, la violación y hasta el secuestro son las condiciones en que se desarrolla la vida de la mayoría de estas mujeres.

(1)

This moralist position refuses to recognize that women sex workers exhibit any level of agency and autonomy over their lives. This stance also forecloses any possibility that these women willfully choose to enter the industry and instead classifies them as part of a sex trafficking ring. In contrast to the position taken by Falcón and others in the media, this paper contributes to a growing body of scholarly work published by researchers in the social sciences who are rethinking traditional categories of how we define prostitution and how we understand women sex workers in relation to the migratory phenomenon. In particular, I am speaking about the work done by Laura Agustín (2010), that questions normative discourse surrounding the experience of prostitutes.

My paper justifies the inclusion of the humanities into this vein of research by arguing that fiction, particularly film, has the transformative power to explore and fill in the gaps that social science research cannot address. I contend that cultural productions offer us a glimpse into the interior world of the migrant; an

opportunity to get inside the head of the immigrant and explore the cognitive processes that are so important in shaping the experience. While the migratory experience may appear to be straightforward, there is an ambivalence that fiction helps to illustrate. My argument will be framed around a cinematic portrayal of sex work and migration: the 2005 film, *Princesas*, directed by Fernando León de Aranoa. This film follows two women, one Spanish—Cayetana and one Dominican—Zulema, as they navigate the streets of Madrid. León de Aranoa made *Princesas* in order to highlight the issue of sex work and migration cinematically and allow the sex worker to tell her own story. He states in a 2005 interview with Begoña Zabala: “Las mujeres invisibles carecen además de voz. Oiréis a muchos hablar en su nombre, nunca a ellas. Cuando las quieren salvar, cuando las quieren proteger, cuando las quieren esconder, cuando las quieren echar, tampoco podréis escucharlas porque nadie les pregunta nada.” (1). This film is a different approach to understanding sex work and migration by challenging some of the assumptions presented by the mass media related to what it means to be a migrant prostitute. In this paper, I will delve into some of these traditional beliefs about prostitution and demonstrate how *Princesas* forces the viewer to consider a more nuanced understanding of the migratory experience.

It is useful to understand Aranoa’s work through the lens of Third Cinema. This theoretical framework allows the viewer to understand cinematic representations of reality that focus on the experience of those who occupy the margins. Parvati Nair summarizes the concept as “an attempt to stage the post-colonial experience, not as new nation building, but as one of displacement, mobility, and marginality. It is a cinema of the dissonant, the diasporic, the transnational” (107). This definition not only applies to *Princesas*, but also his earlier work, like the films *Los lunes al sol* (2002) and *Barrio* (1998), both of which feature peripheral members of Spanish society. In one film we get a glimpse of the unemployed and in the other we view marginalized Madrid youth; neither film however, explores the experience of being a migrant in Spain. For this reason, I would argue that *Princesas* is more representative of what Third Cinema seeks to establish, which is, according to Nair, “[To] explore the spaces of poverty on the underside of Western hegemony and follow the ravages of globalization’s unremorseful sweep” (107). Aranoa uses a combination of fictive and documentary techniques to heighten the viewer’s senses of the migratory sex worker experience. By deploying a hand-held camera for many of the scenes, the viewer gets the sense of the gritty and bleak landscape of the protagonist’s experience. Aranoa eschews traditional and fixed genres of filmmaking, preferring instead to focus on innovative and subversive styles of cinema. Therefore, his work could reflect the hybridity that characterizes Third Cinema. Instead of defining identity in binary terms, Third Cinema seeks to problematize it through the ambivalent struggle between self and other, or as it relates to this film, between native and migrant. Thus, identity becomes a question that can be understood as a both/and construct, rather than in either/or terms. Furthermore, as Nair argues: “Questions of power thus become hard to isolate, as apparent acts of surrender can also denote strategies of resistance” (107). Within this theoretical context, Aranoa’s work is an important filmic representation that forces the viewer to engage with questions of power and identity that have historically plagued Spain.

Since the Franco dictatorship, prostitution has been repressed by Spanish society. In *Buying and Selling Power: Anthropological Reflections on Prostitution in Spain*, Angie Hart suggests that with the reinstatement of the Society for Protection of Women in 1941, state resources were spent on reducing prostitution in Spain. This conservative legislation led to the official abolishment of prostitution in 1956, although the practice continued clandestinely. In her research, Hart references a conversation with one client who used to frequent sex workers during the regime and admitted that he was never worried about getting arrested. Today, the focus is in apprehending the sex workers themselves. In the 1970’s, as Franco’s reign came to an end, there was not a reprieve given to those working in the sex industry, but instead an increase in the sexual repression. In her book *Queer Transitions in Contemporary Spanish Culture: From Franco to La Movida*, Gema Pérez-Sánchez takes up the issue of sexuality during Francoism and suggests that Franco sought to establish a new version of the ideal Spaniard. Anybody outside this heteronormative delineation was considered dangerous and subject to imprisonment. Just as homosexuals or prostitutes were not considered “true” Spaniards during the Franco regime, in contemporary Spain, it is the immigrants who struggle for a sense of national belonging. As Judith Butler argues in *Bodies that Matter*:

It seems crucial to resist the model of power that would set up racism and homophobia and misogyny as parallel or analogical relations. The assertion of their abstract or structural equivalence not only misses the histories of their construction and elaboration, but also delays the important work of thinking through the ways in which these vectors of power require and deploy each other for the purpose of their own articulation (18).

Aranoa's fictional representation of contemporary Spanish society proves that the anxieties once stirred by putatively one group's deviant sexuality can always be redirected towards another group.

In contemporary Spain, as I mentioned earlier, the fundamental piece of legislation that strips migrant sex workers of their autonomy is la Ley Orgánica 8/2000, de 22. By defining prostitution as "notrabajo," lawmakers force these sex workers to live in fear of being deported. Although what these men and women do is not considered a legitimate job, it is a lucrative industry that employs a half a million workers. While it may not be officially stated, I contend that it is the stigma attached to sex work that inevitably contributes to its status as a "notrabajo." There is a tendency to view sex work through a moral lens, which often obfuscates the issue. Consequently, migrant sex workers are forced to lie about their form of employment in order to conceal the shame that is associated with the job. By taking legislative action in 2000 to classify prostitution as "notrabajo," Spanish lawmakers have fostered these negative and shameful attitudes in relation to sex work. Since many migrant women choose to use their bodies as a way to generate income, it seems logical that it be considered an actual job that would allow sex workers an opportunity to emerge from the shadows and be eligible to legally remain in the country. In Fernando León de Aranoa's film *Princesas*, we see how difficult and demoralizing it can be for migrant sex workers to obtain legal documentation to stay in the country. While the film sheds light on this issue, it also brings to the surface the shame Spanish prostitutes, evident through the character of Cayetana, feel regarding their profession. Both Spanish and foreign sex workers are forced to deploy different identities across time and space. The theoretical work of Stuart Hall is helpful in understanding how changes in identity occur because of sex work and migration:

Identity, far from the simple thing that we think it is (ourselves always in the same place) understood properly is always a structure that is split. It always has ambivalence within it. We now have to reconceptualize identity as a process of identification, it is something that happens over time, that is never stable, that is subject to the play of history and the play of difference (222).

The ambivalence that Hall describes manifests itself in the life experiences of both Cayetana and Zulema.

Caye, as she is often referred to in the film, struggles to maintain an image of "normalcy" with her family. In one of the initial scenes, after returning to her apartment, she attempts to clean the house so as to give off the impression that the occupant of the space lives a routine life. Her motives are revealed when her family arrives for dinner. With her widowed mother, brother, and sister-in-law joining Caye for dinner, one gets the impression of a united, cohesive family unit. This familial image shatters the myth of the downtrodden woman who chooses prostitution out of desperation. We realize that sex work is an industry Caye has chosen and instead of interrogating her about how she earns a living, her family simply plays along in the charade. As they sit around the table, her widowed mother watches helplessly as client after client calls Caye to schedule meetings. Her mother embodies the misogynist ideology inculcated by the Franco regime that sought to confine women to the domestic sphere. Having lost her husband, Caye's mother is restricted to her home and left to mourn his loss. Her only appearances in the film are restricted to this space, where she feels secure. However, when Caye invades this space, her mother appears out of place. With this juxtaposition of the Caye and her mother, Aranoa illustrates how the antiquated model of Franco is out of place in modern Spain. Caye's unwillingness to admit that she is a prostitute only creates a heavier burden of shame for her to carry. Her only sense of solace and support comes from her fellow prostitutes, many of whom gather at the local salon to discuss their lives and the changing nature of the sex industry in Spain.

The hair salon becomes a private space that only Spanish prostitutes are able to occupy. Immediately, the viewer detects a hierarchy that exists not only between the migrant prostitutes and the natives, but within the migrants as well. At the top of the chain sits Rosa, one of the older women, who has established a clientele of high-powered Spanish businessmen and politicians. At the bottom resides the drug-addicted woman who is not allowed to enter into the salon's restroom. In the middle are women like Ángela who insists that what they do is a job and nothing more, and Caren who cannot accept that the immigrant sex workers are taking potential clients away from her when she states: "Gloria, yo trabajo la mitad. Desde que éstas están el barrio, la mitad." When some of the other women accuse her of being a racist, her reply underscores the complexity of the issue: "Esto es un problema del mercado; de las leyes y las cosas del mercado. De la demanda y la competencia." Any understanding of the connection between sex work and migration needs to consider her argument. Women migrants clearly understand the earning potential available to them as prostitutes and have seized the opportunity. In the film, it is the Dominican sex worker, Zulema, who best exemplifies how migrant women shrewdly navigate in this dangerous world. There is a tendency in popular discourse to dismiss the resourcefulness and savvy that migrants possess. Caye's friends are guilty of this assumption when Caren claims that they are unable to get the necessary papers because they don't even know what paper is. By categorizing them on a subhuman level, she is contributing to the racialized discourse that divides black and white, native and migrant. However, through Zulema, we begin to see how this image of the migrant sex worker requires revision. We must recognize that migrant sex workers possess a high level of knowledge related to their profession and cannot be simply categorized as passive victims who are oblivious to the inner workings of the industry. While the other Spanish prostitutes are reluctant to do this, Caye slowly begins to alter her perception of Zulema and the other migrant prostitutes.

Although Caye and Zulema eventually develop a friendship, their initial encounter is anything but pleasant after Zulema seizes the opportunity to sleep with a client intended for Caye. We quickly realize that despite having only been in Spain for ten months, Zulema has successfully tapped into the sex industry and established herself amongst the clientele. She has capitalized on her "otherness" that makes her attractive to Spanish men. For her part, Caye understands that if she is to compete with the migrant sex workers, she needs to change her approach. After another chance encounter brings the two together, Caye wastes no time in asking Zulema where she buys her provocative clothing. This moment marks a shift in the power structure between Spanish and migrant prostitute. Instead of Zulema relying on Caye for information, the traditional roles have been reversed. Zulema agrees to take Caye under her wing and show her a side of the city populated almost exclusively by immigrants. During their outing, Caye is exposed to the many different layers of the immigrant community. She not only buys lingerie and other items of clothing, but also tries new food and meets new people. This excursion is significant because it allows the viewer to see the migrant sex worker in a position of autonomy and power. Instead of conjuring up images of the prostitute held out of sight and against her will, León de Aranoa shows Zulema confidently navigating the streets of Madrid, in areas largely occupied by immigrants where she feels comfortable.

What is more revealing is how León de Aranoa presents Zulema in restrictive and official environments. In one particularly important scene, we continue to see how the image of the migrant sex worker as the passive victim is again challenged. While at dinner with Caye's family, the conversation shifts to sex education that Caye's sister-in-law must broach with her adolescent students. She expresses shame and timidity at the thought of explaining such graphic details to the young boys. Zulema breaks the awkward silence that follows by informing her that she would be willing to lead the conversation with the class. Caye is taken aback by the directness of her friend and remains unwilling to admit to her family that she is a sex worker. As the scene shifts to the classroom, we see Zulema confidently explaining to the students the details of sex education. During this brief moment, being a sex worker is no longer a shameful position, but is instead one of value. Although we get a glimpse of Zulema in this light, there is a darker side to her story that comes to the surface.

It quickly becomes apparent that what complicates Zulema's ability to reside in Spain is her illegal status. Her desire to stay in Spain is so strong that she sleeps with a client in exchange for his help in obtaining the necessary legal documents. This agreement proves to be a violent one, when he repeatedly beats her if she refuses

to have sex with him. It is after one of these beatings that Caye finds Zulema all alone in the bathroom. After Zulema explains what has happened, Caye is enraged to find Zulema and encourages her to press charges: “Tú tienes que demandarle porque tenemos derechos, no lo he dicho, el ministro lo dijo.” She is oblivious to the differences that exist between Spanish and migrant prostitutes. While prostitution is permitted in Spain, sex workers have no labor rights. Although other countries such as The Netherlands have legalized prostitution and subjected it to the same labor regulations and oversight as any other industry, migrant sex workers have not benefited from this legislation. What legislation like this accomplishes is extending the line between European and non-EU migrant sex workers. Zulema reveals to Caye that she cannot press charges because as an undocumented migrant, she has no papers. She explains to Caye that she applied for residency; but was denied and continues to overstay her travel visa. Her motives are simple: she must earn money to send back to her mother who is raising her five-year old son. Just as Caye’s family is unaware of how she makes her money, Zulema’s mother thinks her daughter works in a bar. Although her family benefits from her decision to sell her body, the moral stigma remains intact. Zulema seeks to preserve the image her mother has of her by assuming a different identity. She even has Caye take pictures of her behind a bar serving drinks. While perhaps Zulema came to Spain thinking she would find this type of work, she quickly realized that prostitution was one of the only options available. However, in order for her to stay, she needs proper identification. For this reason, she decides to place her faith in a client to get the necessary paperwork.

Early on, the viewer has restricted access to this particular client, and never learns his name or profession. Although this character is shrouded in mystery, Caye’s colleagues at the salon do not hesitate to offer their interpretation of the relationship. Caren opines that the beating most likely occurred because Zulema owed money to the mafia. This sentiment is reflected in some academic reports that discuss migrant sex workers. Chema Castiello argues that the presence of female immigrants is increasing, due in large part to the presence of mafias who traffic these women into the country. “Los datos sociológicos desvelan la feminización creciente de la inmigración. Los flujos migratorios de mujeres en situación irregular favorecen la existencia de redes mafiosas dedicadas al tráfico de personas y a su extorsión. Las que se dedican a la prostitución proceden, en su mayoría, del ámbito latinoamericano, en segundo lugar de África” (103). The film has a different take: after the veil is finally lifted, Zulema’s client is far from a member of the mafia. Instead he is portrayed as an isolated, desperate loner who works for the state. Our first glimpse of him comes at a local restaurant where Zulema hopes to finally get the documents. During the meeting Zulema takes control of the conversation by demanding that she see the paperwork. When he refuses to do so because of their precarious location, she questions his integrity and asks why she should trust him. His reply reveals the cold, hard reality that so many migrant women like Zulema face: “Porque no tienes otra opción.” When the conversation becomes more heated, Caye abruptly arrives at their table in an attempt to prevent further escalation. The client is startled by her presence and decides to foil the plan, leaving Zulema alone to wonder if the documents were legitimate or not. Left without an answer, she returns to the street to the world of prostitution in solitude.

While Caye is able to establish a strong social network of Spanish sex workers, Zulema struggles to discover a sense of unity among the other migrant women. As we follow her out on the streets, she is always by herself attempting to find a client. Upon her arrival in Spain, she first found work in a club, but has since left that scene to find work on her own. Her decision to work as a street walker demonstrates that some sex workers prefer that environment to other forms. However, her days are devoid of any sense of camaraderie with the other sex workers. Only once does she mention another migrant companion, Marta, a Colombian, who introduced her to the abusive male client. Even her fellow Dominican roommates keep their distance because of her profession. As she prepares for work, she happens to cross paths with the Dominican family that rents the room during the evening hours. Before leaving the apartment, she is told to change the sheets. When Zulema insists that they should do the same, he replies that they don’t have sex with multiple men. She is left speechless and once again, alone. Unable to confide in other migrant workers, she places all of her energy in making money. During the day she spends her time at the park—the public space where a majority of migrant sex workers reside. As Zulema sits

in solitude, Caye and her companions gaze from the protected confines of the salon where they scrutinize their every move, and on one occasion call the authorities because they continue to take work from them. After Ángela places the call, her friends ask her how she could have done it. Her reply of “Yo defiendo lo mío,” demonstrates how this issue resonates with nativist discourse about protecting one’s borders from outsiders. For her part, Caye is reluctant to admit to her friends that she and Zulema have forged a friendship. It is not until another beating at the hands of the same man, that she realizes how much Zulema needs her and how much she needs Zulema.

No longer ashamed of calling Zulema her friend, Caye takes her into the salon. Once she has transgressed this once rigid boundary, she is able to gain the trust of the other women. What facilitates Zulema’s acceptance is her ability to braid hair in a style that attracts male clients. Caye claims that the new exotic style significantly increases the amount of work she receives, thereby making Zulema a hot commodity. The other women are left in amazement at how easily she is able to style hair. Once again, we see how the migrant sex worker has inverted the traditional power structure. In addition to the exotic braids, they also request that Zulema teach them how to walk like her, Zulema appears to be amused by the interest they take in her background. She smiles at Caye, surprised that anyone would ask such trivial questions. One woman, Caren, even goes as far to ask her to describe the journey on the raft from the Dominican Republic to Spain. This brings Zulema to smirk in amazement, and respond that she entered Spain like a majority of immigrants—on airplane via another European nation. Caren’s ignorance highlights the myth that all migrants cross into Spain on life rafts. The numbers suggest that legally entering the country on a tourist visa—like Zulema—is much more common. One of the other women is so dumbfounded by her comments that she takes issue with her ignorance and states: “Sabes lo que les pasa? Ellas no han viajado como nosotras.” Her comments suggest an unexpected solidarity with Zulema. The contact zone that the two women occupy brings them together not as “local” or “foreigner,” but instead on a much more human level. The perceived differences that created a divide between the native and the migrant disappear when they realize they are more alike than different. Zulema is even invited to join the other women on a joy ride through the city, debunking the rigid hierarchy that seemingly divides the sex workers.

Zulema’s stint enjoying life alongside Caye and her friends is brief, after she returns to the hospital for the results of a routine exam for sexually transmitted diseases. Although the viewer is not privy to the conversation Zulema has with her doctor, one can infer a devastating outcome. It is implied that her results came back positive, leaving her on the brink of collapsing. This result is not surprising when the viewer recalls the conversation she shared with Caye about her sexual habits. When Caye asks if she always makes her clients use protection, she glances away and proceeds to abruptly change the topic. Her decision to participate in risky sexual behavior proves to be costly. Although Zulema falls victim to one of these diseases, qualitative research about migrant sex workers in Europe suggests that they are more likely to use protection. While she is initially overwhelmed with grief, she refuses to become a victim; instead, she exerts her authority by contacting the abusive client for one last meeting. Zulema decides that the only way she can settle the score is to expose him to the same disease that has forever altered the course of her life. Her decision to use her body as a weapon demonstrates how the migrant sex worker can occupy both ends of the spectrum: she can be both the oppressed and the oppressor. This coincides with Robert Stam’s comments about the hybridity that defines Third World Cinema as being “power-laden and asymmetrical” (33). While Zulema has faced tremendous adversity in Spain, she is able to retaliate against the state agent that takes advantage of her illegal status and abuses her.

Shortly after her rendezvous with the client, Zulema makes the decision to return to the Dominican Republic. Because of the current policy in place by the government, it becomes difficult for migrant sex workers like Zulema to remain in the country owing to their illegal status. Sadly, had she been a part of a trafficking ring or held against her will as a sex slave, she would have had a better chance of legally remaining in the country. Article 59 of the Ley de Extranjería states the following:

El extranjero que se encuentre irregularmente en España y sea víctima, perjudicado o testigo de un acto de tráfico ilícito de seres humanos, inmigración ilegal, explotación laboral o de tráfico ilícito

de mano de obra o de explotación en la prostitución abusando de su situación de necesidad, podrá quedar exento de responsabilidad administrativa y no será expulsado si denuncia a los autores o cooperadores de dicho tráfico, o coopera y colabora con las autoridades competentes, proporcionando datos esenciales o testificando, en su caso, en el proceso correspondiente contra aquellos autores.

This article of the law essentially perpetuates the discourse of dependency by forcing migrant women to accept being a victim. Instead of taking this route, Zulema decides that she will leave on her terms. Although she entered by herself, she departs alongside someone: Caye.

Over time, Zulema and Caye have developed a lasting friendship built on similarities and difference. As Zulema boards the plane to return to her family, Caye approaches two Spanish law enforcement officials, to inform them that her “mi amiga que se va porque quiere.” Taken out of its proper context, this statement comes across awkwardly, and the two officials certainly appear dumbfounded. However, the meaning of this comment lies at the heart of the migratory experience for the sex worker, Zulema. While her experience was certainly fraught with disappointment, marginalization, and grief, she was able to overcome. The migratory space becomes one of extreme ambivalence for Zulema, as she struggles to assert her autonomy against a system that provides her little rights. At the end of her journey, she was able to exercise a level of agency to leave the country on her terms. This is certainly a significant moment, because it allows the viewer to see the sex worker in a different light. No longer do we exclusively associate migrant sex workers with slavery and trafficking, but are now forced to consider alternative images of what the experience entails. Fictional representations help us to see how a binary understanding of sex work and migration does not satisfy the array of experiences migrant sex workers endure in Spain. Instead, this film offers a much more nuanced version of the experience where migrant sex workers can be both victims and actors of their own destiny.

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