

Two Stories of Migrant Sex Work, Cross-Border Movement and Violence

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Dans cet article, deux jeunes femmes impliquées dans le trafic sexuel et la prostitution se racontent. L'auteure argumente autour du paradoxe qu'elles vivent, à savoir la violence régulière dans leur vie d'une part, et d'autre part, la possibilité de défier cette violence.

By Way of Introduction: Violence, Sex and Movement

Oh man, moving around just sucks. It hurts as much as being hit, you know? But Indian people have always taken hits, you know? Us Métis, it's bad for us 'cause, like, I don't think nobody sees how bad we got it with all the moving here and there ... it's like we've been the country's whore for a long time. I'm just no different.

—“Ashley-Mika,” 16-year old Métis woman, Canada

Island to island is just the way we live, but we always know where we come from, where our [umbilical] cord be buried [when we were born]. I can dress up however the johns want me to dress, and I move whenever [my pimp] wants me to move.... I can be at home anywhere, so long as I be feeling like I belong there. Even when I'm back where my cord is, I can be off-shore if I don't feel right. But when I'm off-shore, the heart ache

*is fierce, just fierce.*¹

—Charlene, 17-year-old woman, Barbados

Violence has long been recognized as taking many intersecting forms—physical to psychological, emotional to economic, sexual to spiritual—and within each classification there is a great deal of variation in manifestation, severity, intensity and frequency. Common to all these forms of violence is an abuse of power that is wielded in ways that exacerbate existing social hierarchies and that exact corrosive and often long-standing repercussions (Berman and Jiwani 5). Women and girls engaged in sex work and mired in systems of prostitution are particularly vulnerable to virtually all types of violence because of the criminalized contexts in which they live and work, their restricted agency and limited economic resources, and a host of other structural factors (Farley). Among those scholars who see prostitution as synonymous with oppression and violence (Barry; Raymond) as well as those who view the exchange of sex for money as a form of legitimate labour and a site of agency (Brock), the topic of violence and abuse is certainly a central and contested one.²

For the women and girls involved in migrant sex work, and those caught in currents of sex trafficking, violence figures just as frequently, cen-

trally and complexly in their representations of cross-border movement. Indeed, the collective and individual uprootedness resulting from community disruption, dislocation and relocation has been shown to exert itself in often violent ways, exacerbating (as the description of violence above suggests) the social hierarchies that characterize the lives of the displaced (Apfelbaum; Aymer; Colson). Moreover, physical, sexual and psychological trauma is made all the worse by the uprootedness of frequent travel because of the limited social and health related resources that temporary and isolated residents in given communities tend to have (Brennan). There are situations, however, in which the uprootedness resulting from frequent cross-border travel offers moments of empowerment and allows the mostly young women involved in migrant sex work and prostitution to challenge, rather than succumb to, the violence in their lives.

This paper presents the narratives of Ashley-Mika and Charlene,³ two young women involved in cross-border prostitution and sex work, who experience uprootedness vis-à-vis the violence in their lives. Both of these young women discuss the ways in which their repeated dislocation from one place to another aggravates their vulnerabilities to violence because the precariousness of their temporary

residency offers them little or no legal protection, few opportunities for recourse after episodes of violence, and extremely limited access to health or other formal and informal systems for support. However, both of the young women also acknowledge that the displacement wrought by their frequent travels provides moments—sometimes brief, but other times protracted—when they can challenge

it really is what was the best for me,” said Ashley-Mika) but is more frequently at the behest of a manager or pimp who uses various forms of coercion (“If I don’t be going with him, he turn me in to the authorities as the runaway *jaggabat* [whore] I am and then there be no hope,” said Charlene).

The first of the two narratives is constituted by a series of four inter-

As Jyothi Sanghera persuasively argues, a better understanding of the whole phenomena of prostitution and sex work can be best achieved through an exploration of the proverbial shades of grey:

The reality of prostitution and sex trade today is extremely complex and contains a multiplicity of forces, dimensions and players. If anything, this reality can least be understood by casting it simplistically in dichotomous frames — black or white; right or wrong; good or evil, forced or free; victimised or empowered; abolish or support; pro-prostitution or anti-prostitution. For most women who are plugged into the sex trade locally or internationally, the reality of their choices and compulsions, of their actual lived experience is adumbrated through the multitudinous shades of grey which stretch out extensively between the black and the white. It can safely be said that those who seek to grasp the totality of a complex social phenomena such as prostitution by viewing it only from the two is peripheral to the reality of women in prostitution. (46)

Ashley-Mika

One woman contributing to Dorothy Field and Jannit Rabinovitch’s collection of sex workers’ writings eloquently states that the abusive objectification she encountered in her life did not begin with her entry into prostitution:

I feel like I was in the sex trade years before I ever entered. I was always treated as a sexual being, more like an object really. Men would take freely of me not only sexually by rape or molestation, but also by the way I was treated verbally and emotionally. (14)

In the quote at the beginning of the article, Ashley-Mika refers to her-

“I feel like I was in the sex trade years before I ever entered. I was always treated ... like an object really. Men would take freely of me not only sexually by rape or molestation, but also by the way I was treated verbally and emotionally.”

the violence in their lives. As Ashley-Mika describes it:

It’s like, you know, I can reach through a window and grab some fruit, you know? It’s just, like, so great that I can feel myself doing something that doesn’t feel good, it feels great. And, you know, it’s like then that I know I’ll be ok. I can do something.

The narratives presented here are taken from my multi-site research investigating the health repercussions of women’s involvement in prostitution and sex work. Through the course of this larger project, I came to know Ashley-Mika, a 16-year-old Métis woman from a mid-sized Canadian prairie city, and Charlene, a 17-year-old Jamaican woman who seasonally resides in Barbados to work the lucrative tourist-based sex trade. These are smart and articulate young women who have far-reaching interests, who eagerly share their acute critiques of the worlds in which they inhabit, and who were fundamental to the framing and unfolding of this research. Since their early teens, both have been involved in cross-border prostitution and sex work, which at times is described as a voluntary endeavour (“Like, sometimes I travel ‘cause, like,

view excerpts taken from the eleven interviews conducted with Ashley-Mika between 1998 and 2000. It is preceded with my own contextualizing of the themes that emerged in our conversations. The second narrative is a series of excerpts taken from three of the eight interviews conducted with Charlene between 1999 and 2003. It, like the first, is preceded with my own brief analysis of the context that frames Charlene’s perspectives. Both sets of interviews were open-ended and participant-driven. The topics and phrasings were selected freely, based on interest and inclination, of the women themselves.

My hope is that these young women’s stories will shed light on the contested presence of violence in the lives of women and girls involved in prostitution and sex trades. My intent is certainly not to argue that the studies of the violence that sex workers routinely face overstate the problem, nor is my intent to argue that all violence in these situations can be overcome. Rather, my aim here is to join those who disrupt the taken-for-granted assumptions that circulate in most scholarly and advocacy-based engagements with the subject about the uniformity and totalitarianism of the violence experienced by all those involved in prostitution and sex work.

self, and all Métis peoples in Canada, as “the country’s whore” and, like the contributor to the Field and Rabinovitch volume, she sees her own sexual objectification and uprooted-ness as being tied to a longer history of events that, in the case of Aboriginal peoples, was experienced collectively and now constitutes a collective memory of attempted cultural genocide, continual relocation and displacement.

Ashley-Mika has traveled quite extensively—across five countries and many intra-nation regions—through her involvement in prostitution. While in these diverse communities, she finds that she makes more money with, and her pimp often insists on, the wearing of stereotypical First National apparel. More so than other styles of clothing, this “squaw gear” or “Pocahontas dress” (as Ashley-Mika and her friends refer to it) attracts higher-paying clients, the majority of whom are tourists seeking out an “exotic” international adventure. In the assembled narrative below, Ashley-Mika begins by describing how this disparaging portrayal of Aboriginality relates to her own search for an identity as a young Métis woman. As many scholars (such as Bonita Lawrence) have noted, the racialized experiences of mixed heritage peoples in Canada are complex, in large part because they have been made so by the *Indian Act of Canada* and other colonial legislation that marginalized the Métis in very particular ways by denying them First Nations status as well as full enfranchisement in Euro-Canadian society. As a result, Métis peoples are often subjected to discrimination within dominant Canadian society as well as some in First Nations communities where individuals, but perhaps women in particular, feel as though they are neither Aboriginal nor White enough. Ashley-Mika’s struggle with her own mixed heritage is mired within the context of frequent cross-border movement, the dislocated and sexualized performance of Aboriginality that she reluctantly performs, and the individual

violence that she experiences as an extension of the collectively experienced racist violence to which most, perhaps all, Aboriginal people have been subjected.

Alongside Ashley-Mika’s efforts to situate her own Aboriginal identity are her attempts to redefine the boundaries of childhood and youth. Although at times she still sees herself as a child, her involvement in the sex

fet and the johns get to choose, like, who gets to be dinner and dessert.... It’s just ultra-weird being squawed out so much because I’m not really an Indian, but I have played one so much that I feel it’s kinda’ a part of me, too But when I’m back in [the city] it’s, like, the Indians think I’m this little White [girl] working on their stroll, you know? I guess I’m both.

“I’m 15 now. Sometimes, you know, I forget how old I am! I’ve been shipped around so much and I feel like I’ve been beaten down a lot, you know? So, like, I’m real old in lots of ways, maybe even, like 40 or something, like 40-year-old cargo.”

trade and systems of prostitution ages her. In this narrative, Ashley-Mika struggles to bring together her sense of childhood with the violence that carries her too quickly into the realm of adulthood where, as “forty-year-old cargo” she disconnects from one local environment to try to reconnect with others, all the while “taking a punch like an old whore.” However, amidst this description of physical uprootedness, cultural dislocation, exploitive sexualization and violence is a hopeful moment when she speaks positively of her temporary connection with a group of young women in Mexico. With this newly forged friendship Ashley-Mika crafts for herself the opportunity—of which she temporarily avails herself—to walk away from the abuse. Had that moment lasted longer or presented itself more frequently, her narrative might have ended differently.

It feels, you know, strange and normal to be somewhere else but have these Canadian guys, like, getting off on me when I’m squawed out, you know? They’re, like, doing me and then they’re off to do some other girl who’s, like, just as laid out in stupid clothes, like a sari or Chinese dresses.... It really is like an international buf-

I guess all Métis are in some way both [First Nations and White] and so it’s ok for me to play that I’m Indian.... But I guess it’s like not so ok because, like, how I’m playing it, with the sex and all, it’s got nothing to do with being an Indian. It’s just squaw sex, you know? Even though it sells, that’s not what my Native part, or whatever, means to me.... My Native part is the part most White people don’t like ‘cause they’re racist [and] it’s the part that most Indians don’t like either because I’m not the right kind of Indian kid, you know? To me, though, I’m just this girl who likes to be Native because, like, I look Native, you know, and I play one so I guess I’m it.... But I’m kinda’ in the middle.... I guess being in the middle means that someday I feel all, like, “Aboriginal” but other days I’m, like, whatever.

...
I’m 15 now. Sometimes, you know, I forget how old I am! I know that happens a lot to older people, so, like, I guess that means in some ways.... I’m older, too. I think that is true because I’ve moved around so much, I’ve been shipped around so much, and I feel like I’ve been beaten down a lot, you

know? So, like, I'm real old in lots of ways, maybe even, like 40 or something, like 40-year-old cargo. One guy, like, for what I thought was no reason, just back-handed me [she makes a sweeping motion of her arm and a clenched fist], BOOM! I just looked at him, you know? I was, like, "Dude! What did you do that for?" And he just goes, "Woh, you take a punch like an old whore." That hurt way more, you know? Like, what he said. But I guess that was true. He was just some guy, just a john. But it still really hurt That was in Caracas but the guy, he was, like, Australian or something, you know? Ok, so, I just feel real old. But some days I wake up and I see this little Indian girl in the mirror and, like, I want to skip rope. For real, I want to jump and laugh, and so I do. I find these other girls who live [in the next apartment block] and I hang with them. We listen to music, and I think about them when I'm getting bashed by guys like the "you're-an-old-whore" guy.

...

So, like, today is my 16th birthday! How old do I look? . . . I think I look at least 21, you know? I never get carded anymore. Never. This scar [from being cut with a knife by another young woman] makes me look older. . . . My skin's darker too, eh, because I just got back [from Mexico]. It's ok there, you know? There are girls there who dress like Indians. I mean, like, Indians from Canada. But they're not from here or nothing. They just, like, dress like they are. I go, like, "do you guys know what you're doing?" And they're all like, "hell yeah! We're making some good money!" I laughed and so it was all good. They're really cool. They showed me stuff, like, how to make it look like I was taking birth control pills all the time when really I was, like, stopping for the week so I could get my period. It's not good for you to take

the pills without even a break, you know? They were pretty cool. . . . One night this guy comes, like, all macho man shit over to us and I thought, oh here we go again, another rough night, you know? So he goes up to me but [one of the other girls] steps in and just shakes her head. Like, "that not happening here." I went back to the hotel that night, no johns. And I felt great. Just great. It was my decision and I felt like I could get some sleep, you know? So I did. I could have kept walking, but I felt good enough to make some money the next night, and I did. It was good to plug in with some new girls, you know? I plugged in and walked away, for the night at least.

...

My arm's broke. I haven't been to the doctor but I know it's broke, you know? Does it look broke? I hate that guy. I only get in his car when I know I don't got the money I need, you know? I hate that guy. His car is nasty. I mean nasty. I feel like there's no way out of that nasty car.

I last spoke with Ashley-Mika in 2001. Since then, no one in her regular circle of friends has heard from nor seen her, neither have the police. She is estranged from her family. Her real name now circulates on a list of missing Aboriginal women.

Charlene

Similar to the experiences of Aboriginal women in Canada, women in the Caribbean draw on a long history of diasporic movement and community disruption to situate themselves as global citizens. Paula Aymer posits that the Caribbean is defined by the history of slavery and the community disruption brought by the circulation, selling and buying of slaves. Cross-border movement, community displacement and subsequent emigration have therefore become expected ways of life and popular metaphors for understanding the

world. For Charlene, as her quote at the beginning of this article suggests, references to "at home" and "off shore" refer to emotions and feelings of comfort rather than to physical location. And yet, her heart "aches fiercely" for a connection that extends beyond the period of her temporary residency. Charlene travels island to island on what is commonly referred to as the "carnival track" in order to work the sex trades that accompany the cultural festivals of each nation.

Charlene's narrative begins with a playful performance of her travel and the adoption of various island identities. Like Ashley-Mika, Charlene describes the exoticization involved in her work as something that attracts clients and keeps them "happy," but she extends this further by suggesting it keeps her safe: "After all, happy boys don't hit." Charlene also extends her critique to the religious- and feminist- aligned social workers who routinely try to "save" her and yet in doing so they alienate her and push her "off shore." This echoes Jo Doezema's arguments that organizations, such as the Coalition Against Trafficking in Women (CATW), and writings like that of CATW's founder, Kathleen Barry, promote an image of "third world prostitutes" as a damaged "other" in order to justify western feminism's interventionist impulses. Doezema asserts that "The 'injured body' of the 'third world trafficking victim' in international feminist debates around trafficking in women serves as a powerful metaphor for advancing certain feminist interests, which cannot be assumed to be those of third world *sex workers* themselves" (16). Challenging the structural as well as individual forms of violence is made possible, at least temporarily, in Charlene's life through her own advocacy for others which is based in part on her desire and ability to appreciate that violence is made meaningful and harmful in different ways.

[In her Jamaican accent] *Be sure*

that I am a Caribbean treasure. That is what [my pimp] always says because the tourists come to these celebrations to taste the Caribbean sun, and I am it.... When I talk to you now I am Barbados and [mimicking a British Barbadian accent] I can be of the class that the British want or [mimicking a local Bajan dialect] I can be the Bajan spice that the Ameri-

You know Paulette? The other night she was hurting real bad. And she was crying and saying she wanted it all to stop. Ok, I thought. And I took her down to the fish market and I talked to one of the guys there. He got a friend with a safe place for her to sleep and I pick her up in the morning. "Let's go," I say, and I come 'round to the police, the Church, the clinic, the

tation and abuse. For Charlene, the violence of uprootedness is not inherent to the cross-border movement per se; she is, after all, capable of feeling at "home" in her various destinations. Instead, the violence of uprootedness is found when the attempts of religious and social workers (many of whom may be very well intentioned) to help her end up pushing her "off-shore," leaving her, like

"I can be the poor little slave island girl that makes the men think that they're doing good for. I do what I be told to do. I be whatever I need to be to get the money and to keep them boys happy. After all, happy boys don't hit."

cans want. Next I'm off to Trinidad for Carnival and [mimicking an East Indian Trinidadian accent] and I can hit the Hindi hard or [mimicking a rural Tobagan accent] I can be the poor little slave island girl that makes the men think that they're doing good for. [Returning to her usual Jamaican accent] Not only can I be all of those girls, I am all of those girls.... When I get older, I'll sound it [mimicking an older Jamaican woman] and I'll be talking only one way, but until then, I do what I be told to do. I be whatever I need to be to get the money and to keep them boys happy. After all, happy boys don't hit.

...
I like to talk different because that shows the different places I've been to and because that makes me feel that I belong in these places, like I have many homes... and I'm not really homeless. I try to do that, to be at home, but I often get pushed off shore. Bad drugs, bad dates, priests wanting to save me, feminists wanting to scold me then save me, they all be pushing me hard off shore.... And I got the scars of being off-shore. I was hit real bad last night.

...

family planning centre, and I be there with her the whole way.... She's doing fine now. She's back in her parish, where her cord is, and she's home. If I can do that for her, I can do that for me.

By Way of Conclusion: Making the Most of Moments of Emplacement

Both of the narratives offered here tell stories of fear, exploitation and violence. The experiences of these two young women are firmly embedded in the histories of uprootedness that have shaped—and continue to shape—the communities with which they identify. Although Ashley-Mika and Charlene speak frequently and significantly about the violence they face through their work and their involvement in systems of cross-border prostitution, the young women also speak about the violence that this uprootedness has wrought. For Ashley-Mika this violence is race-based and reveals the marginalization faced by Aboriginal women of mixed heritage in Canada. Feeling as if she has no home, and searching for a cultural identity that is under-represented in the public cultures of western Canada, Ashley-Mika feels adrift and is therefore vulnerable to exploi-

Ashley-Mika, adrift. Attending to the multiple forms of violence that young women like Ashley-Mika and Charlene face not only in the intimate encounters in sex work and systems of prostitution but in the broader contexts where that work occurs offers a more complex and nuanced depiction of the hardships and challenges that are faced by these young women.

Amidst their stories of uprootedness and violence, Ashley-Mika and Charlene spoke of other girls who highlighted their own sense of agency and resilience. A moment, albeit temporary, of empowerment emerges in Ashley-Mika's encounter with the girls in Mexico just as a similar moment emerges through Charlene's friendship with Paulette. In their recollections of these encounters, Ashley-Mika and Charlene describe a sense of emplacement that contrasts with their stories of displacement. Their descriptions of emplacement are not as elaborate as those of displacement but they are nonetheless significant.

We know from the existing literature that the responses to violence are almost as diverse as the forms of violence. Some women respond to violence and harassment as many people in a workplace would; they

seek assistance for law enforcement and local advocacy groups to seek legal and social reprimand against the aggressor. Other women routinize the violence, defining most threats and assaults not necessarily as abuse but as a taken-for-granted hardship that is “just part of life.” Other women are overwhelmed by it, turning inward and dissociating, carrying a heavy psychological and physical burden of fear, pain and joyless despair. Still others respond in a combination of these and other ways.

For those of us working in this field as scholars and advocates, we search for ways to ensure that responses to violence can be effective and long-lasting. This is indisputably a daunting task. However, as forms of violence fold in upon themselves, exacerbating social hierarchies and colliding with the traumas of uprootedness, it is important to look for those moments when violent displacement allows for momentary emplacement and social connection.

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¹Burying a baby's umbilical cord after birth is a common cultural practice on many Caribbean islands to signify the grounding of that individual to a local community.

²It is important to deal with the thorny issue of language and representation. For the purposes of this paper, I am using the phrase “systems of prostitution” to refer to the intersecting forces of poverty, racism, and patriarchy that perpetuate the sexually exploitive situations that the participating women recognize as restrictive and harmful. I distinguish this phrase from “sex work” which I use to refer to those situations where participants define themselves pri-

marily as workers and who reject victim status. I use the phrase “sex trafficking” to mean the coercive and exploitive relocation and brokering of humans for sexual activities from which the brokers profit materially. And I differentiate it from “cross-border sex work” based on the degree of influence that those involved feel they have over their own material circumstances.

³Ashley-Mika” and “Charlene” are both pseudonyms chosen by the young women themselves.

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LE FIL DE LUMIÈRE

Claudine Bertrand

Femme du lointain
bouche nomade
cherche un visage
pour évoquer
son jardin des vertiges

Se jette sur l'ombre
ivre du silence
garni de paroles

La nuque en sueur
je vis sa poitrine nue
le premier instant

préfère se taire
ou se cacher
derrière le rideau
pour épier
faire des gestes

La main les repousse
pour panser l'obscurité

Ne laisse pas la terre
se tordre de douleur
mâche le fil de lumière