

Making Space for Sex Work: Female Street Prostitution and the Production of Urban Space

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Introduction

It has been widely asserted that the female prostitute constitutes a central figure in the social imagination, playing an important symbolic role in the definition of moral standards. For example, many commentators have noted that the street prostitute has been stereotypically depicted as a motif of degeneracy, contagion and sexual lasciviousness, and hence a threat to male bourgeois values (Walkowitz, 1992; O'Neill, 2001). Similarly, the idea that the criminalization of street prostitution has been a means of establishing wider notions of what is socially and morally acceptable has also been widely documented (Duncan, 1996). Yet there have been few studies that have related these general ideas to specific spaces, detailing how female prostitution is implicated in the making of urban orders. Exceptions note that prostitution tends to be concentrated in particular areas, but say little of the processes by which these spaces are produced. For example, while Symanski (1981) provided an extensive mapping of the varied 'immoral landscapes' existing in different historical and geographical contexts, his work made little mention of the appropriation, occupation and use of these landscapes, particularly the way they are shaped by female sex workers. Equally, Ashworth *et al.* (1988) sought to extend Symanski's analysis, theorizing the location of vice in the city as the outcome of consumer choice within socio-legal constraints, but ignored the way that sex workers create red-light districts through their distinctive spatial practices (which change according to legislative climate, levels of mutual support, client demand and so on — see Brewis and Linstead, 2000).

This article intends to go some way toward redressing this omission by theorizing red-light landscapes as emerging from (and produced by) an ongoing and recursive relationship between the 'everyday' spatial behaviour of sex workers and the spatial strategies enacted by the state, law and, latterly, community protest groups. Consequently, the article adopts some of the key ideas spelt out in Michel de Certeau's (1984) remarkable analysis of everyday life in the city, particularly his distinction between tactics and strategies. Here, the latter is deemed to refer to the ordering and disciplining processes that make distinctions between the normal and deviant (hence, between 'moral' and 'immoral' spaces), while the former refers to the embodied actions of those who seek to escape these processes, using space to their own ends. Deploying this distinction between strategies and tactics, the article simultaneously engages with Henri Lefebvre's (1991) notion that space is a socially-produced phenomena, with each society (and each epoch) producing a space suited to its own reproduction. Relating Lefebvre's ideas to spaces of prostitution, we contend that the geography of sex work is the outcome of an unfolding relationship between different types of space — the ordered spaces of the capitalist state on the one hand, and the 'lived' spaces of prostitutes on the other. These spaces are not mutually exclusive, however, and the task

of this article is to show that they fold onto one another in particular ways, bequeathing distinctive geographies of sex work. In so doing, the article dismisses accounts that suggest that the location of prostitution in the contemporary city can be explained simply in terms of choice and constraint; the reality is that sex work is subject to moments of territorialization and deterritorialization as the relationship between different types of space unfolds.

To elaborate these ideas, this article focuses on changing geographies of prostitution in Birmingham (UK). While this city (like most large towns and cities in the urban West) has a significant amount of off-street sex work (located in saunas, massage parlours, hotels and private residences), in this article we focus on the more public manifestation of sex work — street prostitution. In the case of Birmingham, this mainly involves women soliciting in public space to car-borne clients (kerb-crawlers). As we relate, some of these women use sex work to supplement another income; for others it is their only source of income. Most work on the street for a short period only, ultimately moving to other forms of sex work or leaving the profession entirely (O'Neill, 2001). Given this 'occupational mobility', it is notoriously difficult to gain reliable information surrounding the working practices of this group. Further, given the stigmatized and criminalized nature of sex work, it is often difficult to gain access to sex workers or clients. This means that researching geographies of sex work is fraught with moral and logistical problems. In this case, we report on research conducted since 1994 that has utilized a variety of modes of investigation. Foremost here were interviews with 55 sex workers recruited with the help of a sexual health project (see also McKeganey and Barnard, 1996; Cusick, 1999; O'Neill, 2001 on the usefulness of this approach). These interviews took the approach of a 'guided conversation', focusing on the women's experiences of violence, policing, community protests and working practices. All were asked to detail the strategies they used to manage the occupational hazards that were part of their everyday negotiations. These interviews provide the source of the anonymous quotes incorporated in this article.

In addition, one researcher (Teela Sanders) accompanied 'outreach' project workers on their nightly patrols of the street while the other (Phil Hubbard) completed interviews and observational work with local residents involved in an anti-prostitution protest. It is not possible in the confines of the current article to explore the ethical issues that these fieldwork strategies raised, nor the limitations of these methods for tracing the spatial movements of sex workers (but see Hubbard, 1999, on these issues, and Barnard, 1992, on the more general problems associated with researching sex work).

Red-light districts as marginal spaces

As in many cities in Britain, street prostitution in Birmingham has principally been limited to one area, which becomes notorious as the city's 'red-light district'. In the early 1990s, this area was Balsall Heath, an inner-city area located one mile south of Birmingham city centre (see Figure 1). Significantly, Balsall Heath was characterized by a high proportion of South Asian residents (of mainly Pakistani and Syhlet Bengali origin) associated with successive phases of immigration from the 1950s, and it is this factor that features in many anecdotal accounts which describe the beginnings of prostitution in Balsall Heath as corresponding with the influx of young Asian immigrants. However, this may be a reflection of the way that white fantasies often externalize the causes of 'social problems' to 'Other' groups, and contrary evidence suggests that prostitution was probably present in Balsall Heath in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century (Bartley, 2000). However, the reputation of Balsall Heath as a red-light district did grow substantially in the 1970s, as the police and authorities turned a blind eye to public manifestations of sex work in the area and instead focused on closing down sex cinemas and clubs in the city centre (Hubbard, 1999). In many

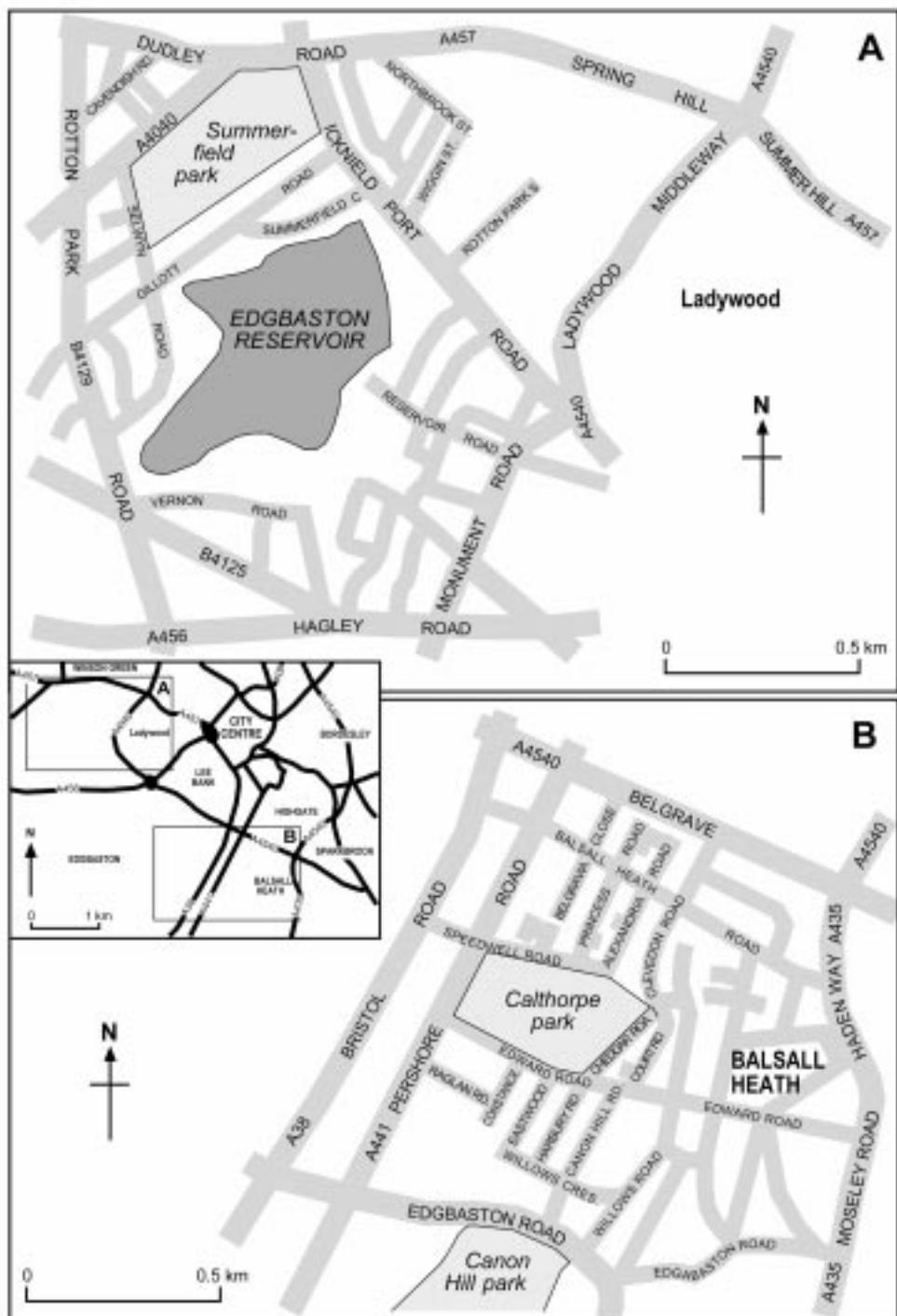


Figure 1 Location of areas referred to in text (Birmingham, UK)

ways, it seems that the authorities tolerated prostitution in Balsall Heath because there was little community opposition to it — the area being characterized by a relatively transient population, low levels of house ownership and minimal political involvement. Interviews with local police suggest the authorities were happy to see street prostitution contained in an area where it could be effectively monitored in a relatively small number of streets between the Moseley Road and Pershore Road (Figure 1). Moreover, with the powers of the 1959 Street Offences Act (later enhanced by the 1985 Sexual Offences Act, which allowed for the arrest and prosecution of kerb-crawlers as well as prostitutes), it became easier for the police to isolate street prostitution in Balsall Heath and to prevent it from 'spilling over' into more affluent neighbouring suburbs.

This process of spatial isolation and informal tolerance is not atypical of the strategies which have been used to regulate prostitution in post-war Britain (see Benson and Matthews, 1995). Nonetheless, although relationships between police and prostitutes were often amiable in Balsall Heath, periodic 'crackdowns' on street prostitution were carried out in response to complaints from residents who objected to the nuisance caused by conspicuous sex work — most notably the noise caused by kerb-crawlers at night. Such crackdowns were primarily understood to result in the short-term displacement of sex workers to other cities on the so-called 'Midlands circuit' (Coventry-Wolverhampton-Walsall), returning to work their established 'beats' or 'patches' once police activity had subsided. As a result, while the police declared a 'victory over vice' on several occasions (e.g. *Birmingham Evening Mail*, 2 March 1989; 27 October 1990), it was apparent that within a few weeks of each operation, prostitutes were to be found back on 'the Heath'.

With police campaigns increasing in regularity, one tactic adopted by sex workers to escape regular arrests and fines (which they could only pay off by returning to the streets) was to seek a more secure working environment, renting houses to work from on a more permanent basis. Although many of these properties were in Court Road, Mary Street and other residential streets throughout the area, it was Cheddar Road which became known as the focus of Balsall Heath's street prostitution trade, with around 24 of its 50 terraced properties used for 'window working' by the late 1980s. Sitting in the bay windows of these houses, mainly rented by their pimps or 'boyfriends', sex workers were immune from the threat of arrest for soliciting, as a single woman operating from private premises did not constitute an offence under vice laws at the time (see Benson and Matthews, 1995). This very visible manifestation of commercial sex work, albeit legally regarded as off-street, undoubtedly contributed to a gradual rise in the notoriety of Balsall Heath as a centre for street prostitution. Press reports began to focus attention on the 'vice-plagued suburb of Balsall Heath' with its 'Amsterdam-style brothel row', Cheddar Road (*Birmingham Evening Mail*, 2 March 1989), and traffic in Balsall Heath was seen to increase significantly as inquisitive and voyeuristic drivers took an emerging 'scenic route' through the red-light district. Cheddar Road itself became 'Britain's busiest cul-de-sac', with 2,500 cars recorded in one 24-hour period (*Express and Star*, 13 March 1992). Such notoriety is widely understood to have led to a gradual increase in the number of prostitutes working in the area, both on and off-street. Unpublished police surveys of cautioned kerb-crawlers suggested that only 45% came from Birmingham, with 28% coming from beyond the Midlands, suggesting that street prostitution was proving a considerable 'tourist attraction'. According to police figures, prostitution peaked in 1989, when 890 individual women were arrested for prostitution offences over the course of the year (Kinnell, 1989).

This association of prostitution with an inner-city area — an area of 'tower-block vice dens, crumbling garages and drying areas that are degradation's rat-runs' (*Birmingham Evening Mail*, 17 September 1990) — did much to reproduce a long-established 'whore stigma'. Corbin (1990) suggests this stigma has traditionally involved the entwining of five key myths: that prostitutes smell bad; that prostitutes are socially dead; that prostitutes are diseased; that prostitutes are a submissive sex object; and are a necessary outlet for 'natural' male excess. In Balsall Heath these motifs were inflected by more contemporary concerns, with the local and national media

persuasively (though not always intentionally) combining metaphors of sexual immorality, environmental degradation, criminality and disease in their descriptions of the area's sex trade. For example, an association was made between the presence of prostitutes in Balsall Heath and the occurrence of drug-related crimes, with one report highlighting the 'strong and volatile link between vice and drugs as dealers sell to their customers, the prostitutes' (*Birmingham Evening Mail*, 27 July 1995). Others, like Dame Gill Knight (at the time, Conservative MP for neighbouring Edgbaston), reinforced this link by claiming that 'all prostitutes are heroin users on £500-a-day habits' (*Birmingham Evening Mail*, 24 August 1994). Broader notions of disease and public health were alluded to in many other reports, where sex workers were portrayed as a high-risk group in terms of their sexual behaviour. The medicalization of sex workers as an alleged vector for HIV was certainly evident in interviews conducted with the residents of Balsall Heath (Hubbard, 1999), while the media's description of prostitutes as 'the human scavengers polluting our streets' and 'street scum' (*Birmingham Evening Mail*, 27 July 1995) indicates how the identities of sex workers are constructed through discourses of pollution and defilement.

Significantly, Pile contends that the narrative construction of the prostitute as a *spoiled* identity involves discourses of desire and disgust which are 'spoken' through different symbolic and material domains, including the body and city:

Associations are made through figures of speech, such as metaphor and metonymy ... The interactions of these associations produce intricate and dense matrices of meaning that are 'topographical' in the sense not only that difference is produced 'spatially', but also that matrices are played out in specific sites (Pile, 1996: 177).

Pile proposes that the city provides key sites (and sights) for the intensification of disgust, identifying the red-light district as a key location where spoiled sexual categories are discursively constructed. Accordingly, the identification of Balsall Heath as the red-light district in Birmingham — and, hence, an immoral space — appeared crucial in shaping wider conceptions of the place of sex workers in both social and spatial terms. This process, whereby the social hierarchy is mapped onto the spatial hierarchy, occurs through chains of signification which imaginatively placed the immorality of prostitution in a landscape psychically and physically distanced from the city's more affluent suburbs. This is a message conveyed in many media articles, such as 'Sex for Sale', which painted a vivid picture of 'the vice-plagued suburb synonymous with sex' (*Birmingham Evening Mail*, 20 October 1990).

As can be discerned from other reviews of sex work (Ashworth *et al.*, 1988; Larsen, 1992; Brewis and Linstead, 2000), the placement of prostitution in an apparently marginal landscape of danger and display has cemented the association between heterosexual immorality, violence, disease and poverty. This marginalization of prostitutes, not only in moral discourse, but also geographically in 'streets of shame' thus creates a *moral geography* that implies that some behaviours are acceptable only in certain places:

Order is inscribed through and in space and place — the landscape is the truth already established, through the imposition of brick walls, green fields and barbed wire fences. Through the division of space, 'truth' is established and order maintained. Boundaries and areas carry with them expectations of good and appropriate behaviour. To act out of place is to fail to recognise the truth already established (Cresswell, 1996: 55).

Cresswell argues that the arrangement of space is a powerful ordering device in society, with ideas about what belongs where reinforcing dominant moral codes (and power relations). A key idea here is that spatial order naturalizes distinctions between normality and deviance, making them appear common sense. By separating what is in place (expected) and what is out of place (abnormal), common sense is spatialized, given a material and embodied form.

Similar ideas about the importance of space in maintaining social order are offered in the work of Henri Lefebvre. Renowned as a philosopher of the everyday, Lefebvre

endeavoured to develop a Marxist critique of society that emphasized the emancipatory potential of everyday life. This was manifest in a remarkable series of publications that explored the way that the lived worlds of people (and their sensual and sexual desires) had been gradually colonized ('papered over') by the forces of capitalism (see Lefebvre, 1972). In his final works, Lefebvre argued that capitalism had survived and flourished by producing and occupying space, suggesting that each society produces a space suited to its own perpetuation. In effect, this superseded Marx's historical materialism (where class conflict is theorized as the basis of social change) with a geographical materialism that focused on spatial conflict. Lefebvre accordingly outlined the importance of urban space in effecting the transition from classical and feudal society (typified by 'historical space') to a capitalist society (characterized by abstract space) by routinizing and legitimating the rhythms of everyday life:

What space signifies is dos and don'ts — and this brings us back to power. Space lays down the law because it implies a certain order — and hence also a certain disorder. Space commands bodies. This is its *raison d'être* (Lefebvre, 1991: 121).

Lefebvre thus sought to deconstruct the idea that space simply exists, emphasizing its social production by distinguishing between three forms of space: spatial practices (the routines that constitute the everyday); representations of space (the knowledges, images and discourses that order space); and spaces of representation (which are created bodily). He suggested the perceived world of spatial practice (life) was held in a dialectic relation with representations of space (concepts), but that this dialectic could be transcended via creative bodily acts ('life without concepts'). Outlining the interplay between these forms of space, Lefebvre thus described a trialectic in which all three are held in tension (Merrifield, 1995).

McCann (1999) suggests that Lefebvre's attention to everyday life makes his work particularly relevant to analysis of public spaces, including streets, parking lots, shopping malls and parks. To this list, we might add the red-light district. For while the practices played out in areas of prostitution may create the impression that this is the 'natural' environment for sex work (and cement common-sense assumptions that prostitution is immoral and deviant), Lefebvre stresses that all spaces are made and remade through a complex folding of real, imagined and represented space. This stresses that red-light districts, like other sites of the city, are created through a relationship between different understandings, occupations and uses of space. Hence, we can conceptualize red-light districts as the outcome of an ongoing relationship between the ordering enacted by the state, law and citizenry (manifest in dominant representations of space) and the negotiation of this ordering enacted by those who make their living in the red-light district. This identifies the red-light district as always *becoming*, a complex assemblage made and remade through the folding together of these different types of space. Hence, in the remainder of our article, we explore the making of space for sex work by adopting Lefebvre's distinction between representations of space and spaces of representation.

Representations of space and strategies of control

The fact that the red-light district is the complex outcome of negotiations between different social groups (and different types of space) is usually far from obvious. However, the nature of this relationship became more apparent in Birmingham in the mid-1990s, as new forms of spatial ordering began to emerge. Crucial here was the introduction of a community protest against sex work in Balsall Heath. Although local activists, particularly the Balsall Heath Action Group and Calthorpe Park Neighbourhood Forum, had often attempted to put pressure on local councillors and police, the protest that began in 1994 sought a more direct means to eradicate sex work by picketing the streets and organizing regular street patrols. Armed with placards ('Kerb-crawlers — we

have your number', 'It's not a red-light zone, just a green one'), these protestors attempted to disrupt the work of prostitutes by targeting kerb-crawlers and taking their registration numbers which they forwarded to the police. Cheddar Road was, both geographically and metaphorically, the centre of this ritualized community protest, with the first picket of 150 residents on the corner of Cheddar Road/Edward Road (27 June 1994) resulting in an immediate 80% reduction in traffic. Within a few days, the campaigners widened their pickets to encompass the 19 main streets within Balsall Heath that were known as being the principal locations for street and window prostitution.

Although it was organized as a peaceful protest, the constant tension between street sex workers, their pimps and pickets did occasionally result in acts of harassment and confrontation. Pickets claimed to receive regular threats from pimps and associates of prostitutes, while sex workers alleged verbal and physical abuse from pickets:

If ever I went out and the vigilantes were out, or the media, I would just go back home ... half of the vigilantes were hypocrites because they were punters themselves. Well a few times they would try and push you about. A mate of mine, they would batter her with sticks and things and they were always giving verbal abuse. Or you may be crossing the road and they would put their foot down on the car and you would have to run.

Other sex workers felt this abuse was directed at them personally rather than being designed to disrupt sex work. Indeed, community protesters were observed to harass women who were not working the streets but were simply out walking alone:

I will be walking up the road with my daughter and they will stop me. I say to them at night when I am on my own and I am dressed in mini skirts then they have got a right to stop me but not at 3 o'clock in the afternoon, with my baby in the push chair with about six carrier bags. I mean am I really doing business in that state?

Additionally, the minibus used by Birmingham health authority for outreach work with prostitutes was regularly pelted with stones (and continues to be the focus of more recent protests). The pickets justified such actions by arguing that street prostitutes represented the embodiment of vulgar and conspicuous sex, with a language of moral outrage used to stress that prostitution was assaulting public decency (see Hubbard, 1999). Hence, the vigilante groups used the veil of 'public nuisance' to scapegoat sex workers for causing social and economic problems in the area. In turn, this representation of space relied upon the discursive identification of street prostitution as a challenge to 'family values'. Nonetheless, these pickets were widely acknowledged as causing a dramatic reduction in prostitution and kerb-crawling in the area. According to figures from Birmingham's SAFE street outreach project, based on their nightly contact sessions with female prostitutes, there was an immediate two-thirds reduction in street and window commercial-sex workers following the introduction of the protest. Initially, the local police (especially Moseley Vice Squad) were sceptical and unsupportive of this community protest, claiming that this was 'vigilantism' (*Birmingham Evening Mail*, 13 August 1994). Yet, when it became evident the campaign was reducing the amount of kerb-crawling and soliciting, they co-opted the campaign by insisting that all pickets were registered, forming a 'neighbourhood-watch' type group, Balsall Heath Street Watch (which excluded any pickets with a criminal record).

Despite the fact that the pickets mainly belonged to a Moslem community that was itself socially and economically marginalized (*cf.* Larsen, 1992), the overall impact of these protests and the publicity they generated was substantial. By the beginning of 1996, window working was no longer practised in the area, and there were only a few women working the streets, mainly on the fringes of Balsall Heath at times when pickets did not regularly patrol (e.g. early morning). Instead, the majority of Birmingham's sex workers moved to the area of Rotton Park around Summerfield Park and Edgbaston Reservoir, some two miles from Balsall Heath (Figure 1). On the surface, this displacement of sex work appears a victory for protestors, who continued to patrol the streets of Balsall Heath on a nightly basis to prevent prostitution returning. In the words of a campaign leader:

We residents have put in 25,000 man-hours over the last four to five years to combat prostitution. We have picketed the girls and the condom van ... We don't want the work to be undone now (cited in *Birmingham Evening Mail*, 26 February 2001).

In this sense, the community groups have drastically changed the dynamics of this particular urban environment and shifted the location of Birmingham's red-light district. But this was not achieved solely through the efforts of the pickets, with police making 338 arrests for soliciting in a 3-year period and the local authority simultaneously utilizing the powers of the Town and Country Planning Act (1990) to serve enforcement orders on 14 houses being used for 'window work'. The introduction of additional street lighting, road blockades and CCTV surveillance systems further served to dissuade sex workers and kerb-crawlers from liaising in Balsall Heath.

The surveillance and segregating practices that were adopted by the police and protestors exemplify many of the features that de Certeau (1984) associates with the practices of ordering that, collectively, constitute a 'mode of administration'. These strategies produce *un espace propre* ('purified space') which represses 'all the physical, mental and political pollutants that would compromise it' (*ibid.*: 109). Within a rational and heterosexually-ordered city, street prostitution is seen as polluting because it challenges the notion that a woman can express her sexuality only in the confines of the home. Over time, different strategies have therefore been enacted to hide prostitutes from public view and privatize many of the 'aesthetically and morally-offensive physical, psychological and medical and social problems' surrounding prostitution by confining it in marginal areas (Duncan, 1996: 140). This renders street prostitution foreign to the rational space of the city as conceived of via the ocular, phallic, geometric 'view from above', something de Certeau alights on in his description of the 'voluptuous pleasures' of experiencing and viewing the city from above:

One's body is no longer clasped by the streets that turn and return it according to an anonymous law; nor is it possessed, whether as player or played, by the rumble of so many differences ... His [*sic*] elevation transfigures him into a voyeur. It puts him at a distance. It transforms the bewitching world by which one was 'possessed' into a text that lies before one's eyes. It allows one to read it, to be a solar Eye, looking down like a god. The fiction of knowledge is related to this lust to be a viewpoint and nothing more (de Certeau, 1984: 92).

Following de Certeau, we can suggest that the strategies designed to regulate and segregate prostitution in Birmingham were underpinned by a dominant way of seeing that feigned an objective view from nowhere. This was a view that conceived of the city as a functional and ordered whole, and represented sex work as a disturbance to that socio-spatial order. Territorial actions (i.e. the strategies of pickets and police) were the means by which this order was maintained (Sack, 1986; Herbert, 1997).

In relation to Lefebvre's ideas, we might also suggest that the regulation of sex work through a phallocentric and ocular ordering of space (personified in the watchful gaze of the police or pickets) represents the repression of the sensual and the sexual in favour of the abstract (see also Brown, 2000). But what is particularly interesting is that the intention has never been to completely destroy prostitution, rather, to enact a mechanism of regulation that serves to enclose it. As Schlör (1998: 199) argues, the goal of the authorities has always been 'to render prostitution invisible, to restrict it to brothels or to dark and out of the way streets, the inner courtyards of tenements, to the hours of evening and the night, to remove it from public streets and hence enforce its stringent separation from good society'. Closeted away from the respectable public gaze (i.e. that of 'innocent' women and children), it becomes part of the restricted economy that hoards desire to capitalist ends (Bataille, 1993). As Lefebvre (1991: 310) suggests, confined by the abstraction of space and broken down into specialized locations, the (sexual) body is 'pulverized' and fragmented. These fragments are made socially visible only in certain spaces, so that the prostitute's body, for example, is transformed into a commodity through its isolation in specific spaces. Lefebvre (1972: 168) accordingly describes a capitalist city where all non-capitalist spaces are marginalized and/or

transformed, and where the extension of capitalist relations extends to non-productive sectors (including sex). This reproduces a dominant 'representation' of space that suggests that commercial sex is deviant, polluting and dangerous, an aberration in a society that values the sanctity of the family. Ultimately, the actions resulted in the displacement of sex work from the streets of Balsall Heath (where its presence was deemed threatening) to a space where its excesses could seemingly be accommodated without disturbing the order of the city.

Spaces of representation and tactics of resistance

The idea that the location of red-light districts is strongly influenced by the disciplining strategies enacted by powerful groups in society is widespread in the literature on geographies of prostitution (see Symanski, 1981; Ashworth *et al.*, 1988). In some accounts it is even suggested that vice police create red-light districts, identifying areas where sex work may be concentrated without provoking public concern. For example, when analysing the changing geography of street prostitution in Vancouver in the 1980s, Lowman (1992: 243) argued that the shifting geography of sex work was a direct result of law enforcement efforts. Nonetheless, geographical interpretations of sites of sex work have also hinted at their ability to act as a base from which dominant notions of morality may be resisted and challenged. The work of Law (1997), in particular, has emphasized that spaces associated with prostitution are sites where different sexual moralities are negotiated as clients and sex workers seek to locate their oppositional roles through intersections of power and difference. Far from simply being spaces of male mastery and domination where women's bodies are commodified and consumed, sites of commercial sex work may be spaces where prostitutes resist the voyeuristic gaze through performances that undermine any scripting of heterosexuality around notions of masculine power and feminine lack. In making this point, Law refers to Butler's (1990) notion of heterosexual performativity to stress that many prostitutes emphasize or parody their 'femininity' through performance to problematize easy understandings of their immoral status. Thus, while prostitutes and other heterosexual deviants have been historically denigrated and confined, it also needs to be noted these groups are always capable of exceeding their socio-spatial confinement.

This idea begins to highlight the resistances implicit in sex work, which may be a form of work that empowers some women from disadvantaged backgrounds. Here, it becomes apparent that to understand the geographies of sex work, it is necessary to explore the ways that sex workers adapt, decode and recode dominant representations of red-light landscapes. Pivotal here is de Certeau's notion of tactics — 'stubborn procedures that elude discipline' — and the way prostitutes shape spaces to their own ends. Starting from the assumption that the story of tactics begins 'on ground level, with footsteps', de Certeau writes:

If it is true that the grid of 'discipline' is everywhere becoming clearer and more extensive, it is all the more urgent to discover how an entire society resists being reduced to it, what popular procedures (also 'minuscule' and everyday) manipulate the mechanisms of discipline and conform to them only in order to evade them, deflecting their functioning by means of a multitude of 'tactics' articulated in the details of everyday life (de Certeau, 1984: 98).

These tactics (of the weak) potentially undermine the strategies of the strong by misusing spaces, escaping their constraints without necessarily disturbing their boundaries. Again, turning to Lefebvre, we can equate these tactics to the 'spaces of representation' that transcend the dialectic between spatial practices and representations of space (such as the way that sex workers use red-light landscapes by soliciting and transacting with clients, socializing with other sex workers, and so on).

This focus on the ability of sex workers to divert spaces of sex work emphasizes that red-light landscapes are not simply produced by the actions of the authorities

(‘from above’), but are produced ‘from below’. Hence, the movement of sex work from Balsall Heath to Rotton Park was not simply enforced by the police and pickets; it was the result of tactical responses of sex workers to these new strategies of control. This implies that the movement towards Rotton Park was a conscious decision on behalf of many of the 655 women known to have been working there between 1997 and 1999 (figures from the Safe-HIV outreach project, 2000). A key theme here is that as picketing and policing stepped up in Balsall Heath, Rotton Park was seen to offer better and safer opportunities for business. In part, this is because of the emergence of a new nightlife and entertainment strip on the Hagley Road (Figure 1). This area is now buzzing with restaurants, bars, hotels and conference centres, lap-dancing clubs, and nightclubs following the successful development of the International Convention Centre and the regeneration of the Broad Street area. Today, this is a major leisure and entertainment location attracting significant numbers of tourists and businesspeople. The connections between the sex industry and the entertainment industry are detailed by Carter and Cutter (2000), suggesting the spatial coexistence of both economies is a function of their complementarity. Anecdotal evidence from sex workers also suggest that patrons of various nightlife spots and hotels in the area visit the red-light district at weekends, with the commercial sex industry in the new red-light district being kept alive by the passing trade that spills over from the entertainment strip.

The spaces of this red-light district are also divided up into different ‘beats’ and ‘patches’ by sex workers, depending partly on the length of time a woman has been working in that particular area. The women who have greater status, due to their experience and knowledge of how the street scene operates, tend to work the prime locations nearest to the entertainment strip where the majority of the passing trade can be attracted. Often these prime locations are the cause of tensions within the sex-working community when workers from neighbouring cities enter the red-light district. This competition is an everyday feature of life in the red-light district:

One time I went out and there was this big black girl, she is big and she says to me, “This is my corner” and I said “Oh is it? Well it’s mine as well!”, and then we got on really well ... She is ever so nice, but she looked at me as though I would make more money than her.

But alongside competition there is collaboration; sex workers often work together in the same area or even on the same corner, making sure that there is always someone covering the corner while they are away doing business with a client:

All the girls on the beat seem to look out for you, you know what I mean. The girls on the beat, even the ones that are on drugs, if they have got any dodgy number plates or if the police are round the corner, what I find is that they let you know, they come and tell you “This guy I went with is dodgy” or one girl will take the registration number of the car. Where I work we all stick together on the beat which is like a little community. There ain’t no bitchiness like “This is my punter”, do you know what I mean?

Working together, watching for each other and practising the same rules and procedures are regarded as essential tactics to reduce the risks posed by the police, community action groups and potential attackers. Many women thus work in pairs for safety (‘doubling’) and note down the car registration numbers of clients as an added security measure.

After finding a location from which to solicit for sexual services, the ability to speak with clients when on the street is a major concern for a street sex worker. The negotiation of a sexual service normally takes place on the street through a car window. During the negotiation phase, neither the sex worker nor the client wants to be apprehended by the police as it could be used as prime evidence of both kerb-crawling and soliciting. For this reason, a sex worker normally has only seconds to decide whether to accept or reject the client. A decision-making process operates whereby the sex worker assesses whether the client is genuine or not by his appearance, attitude and mannerisms:

I look at their appearance, if someone looks shabby and horrible I won't see them. I look at their body language and how they carry themselves. I look at how they are using the language, how they are talking to me, what they are asking me for.

Certain attitudes are immediately rejected:

Their attitude is the first thing you look for. If they call me 'whore' then you tell them to fuck off basically as you have to go on first impressions ... Sometimes you get suspicious about men who are acting strange and you think they are on drugs. Usually you can tell from the way they are acting. Then we just walk away or pretend we are waiting for a regular client.

The establishment of a regular clientele is accordingly an aspiration for most sex workers, reducing the need for encounters with strangers:

It is safer with regulars because you can trust them ... When I see customers that I don't know, I won't do them, even if I am roasting and I am in pain because I ain't got no drugs and I am broke, then I will not do them. I would rather wait the extra twenty minutes for a regular customer.

If the sex worker feels she can trust a client, either because he is known or if he is giving off few 'danger signs', the negotiation concludes by fixing a price for the service requested (currently around £20 for sexual intercourse and £15 for oral sex, both with a condom).

Interviews with sex workers suggest that commercial sex negotiated on the street is usually administered in nearby areas or in clients' cars. What has been consistently reported is that sex workers normally have designated sites within the red-light district where they take clients. If clients suggest a place to complete the transaction this is often treated with suspicion. All of the street workers explained a general rule was to insist clients drove to a specific location: 'If they want to take me to their spot then no way, I have been taken to their spots before and left stranded, and I have not had a clue where I am'. Street workers have stringent guidelines that keep them safe:

You never go where they want you to go, you always take them to somewhere that you know is safe. Never let them take you to another town as they will kidnap you ... Never go with two men ... always check that there is no-one hiding in the back ... don't get into vans ...

For a sexual transaction to take place in public, certain conditions must be met. First, most street workers prefer to take clients to a place that is within the red-light district to limit the amount of time each transaction takes. Second, the space must be suitably out of the sight of people passing by or the police. Finally, and conversely, the space must not be so secluded that assistance could not be obtained if necessary:

I take them to the hospital car park even in the daylight. I never ever go where they want me to go. I won't go as the way I see it is why do they want me to go where they want? I will take them to the hospital car park and if they ain't comfortable with it then I will take them somewhere else, and drive round three different places if that is what they want but I will not go to their place, unless it is a house.

In Rotton Park, transactions occur principally around the reservoir or Summerfield Park. It is notable that both the reservoir and the park are characteristically secluded areas, uninhabited during the hours of darkness, yet within earshot of other sex workers. These therefore become prime locations for the sex worker to quickly administer a service and then be back on the streets to attract more trade. Other significant sites are the six cemeteries that are within Rotton Park, which are deserted and private, yet located in the public space close to the road. Car parks that are not used at night are also prime locations: the hospital car park was favoured because it had closed-circuit television and workers could use this as a deterrent if a customer decided to break the contract.

Controlling the environment is a tactic sex workers use to prevent attacks and to ensure that sexual negotiations and transactions go without incident. It is not only clients that attack sex workers on the street but passers-by who see sex workers as an

easy target for street robbery and mindless violence. Ward *et al.* (1999) calculated that women who work in prostitution are twelve times more likely to be killed than women of a similar age. Likewise, Church *et al.* (2001) interviewed 115 women who worked outdoors. Ninety-three of these (81%) had experienced violence from a client at some point in their working history. Clients had attacked all of the street workers contacted in this study while at least half had also been harmed by boyfriends, passers-by and drug dealers. Due to the extent of violence in the lives of many street sex workers, they seek to maintain control of the space of the red-light district to reduce risk. Standing under street lamps, away from dead-ends that may hinder escape and working close enough to residential houses that may be called upon for assistance, are all ways in which sex workers manipulate the street environment within which they work in order to reduce the considerable risks. At the same time, avoiding arrest is an obvious priority. Consequently, many sex workers locate themselves in street spaces where they are in view of the clients (who mainly solicit in their car) but in easy reach of a doorway, shelter or undergrowth whose shadows they can disappear into if the police approach. Similarly, women are most likely to work at times when they know the police are unlikely to be patrolling (such as weekend evenings or designated times when the police change shifts).

More widely, the movement of sex work from Balsall Heath to Rotton Park shows that geographical mobility is an extremely important tactic used to avoid the consequences of arrest, criminalization and stigmatization. As the following quote suggests, if the police are targeting soliciting and kerb-crawling in one area, there is always another neighbourhood where there are plenty of paying customers:

There has been a bad, bad purge from the vice — plain clothes and plain cars — and they have been sent out to target the residential area, which is fair enough because I wouldn't want it outside my house. But they have to be seen to be fair and they have to arrest us as well. I was nicked so I am not working there for a time ... I will go somewhere else.

Many women regularly engage in a transient movement from one red-light district to another in order to avoid becoming known by the police (Kinnell, 1989). This flexibility in working practice has been assisted by the use of mobile phones. This allows sex workers to be geographically mobile yet accessible for clients to arrange meetings in different towns. Similarly, sex workers across the West Midlands use mobile telephones to report on the activities of police and community groups. Movement between on-street and off-street working is also a key tactic:

I have been working in a flat with some other girls who are running from the cops. It is not so hot working inside. I have a warrant out for my arrest, so I only come to the beat when it is really quiet, or the weather is bad and no-one is up here. Late in the night is best, about 2 or 3 [a.m.] as the police are busy and the old ones who stand on the corner have gone to their beds.

The recent introduction of Anti-Social Behaviour Orders (under the Crime and Disorder Act, 1998) means that women who have been served an order face custodial sentences if arrested in a named area. Negotiating this restriction means combining different types of sex work in different geographical areas. Working from home and/or sharing rented premises may also prove a successful tactic for circumventing such orders.

But for many sex workers, the risk of being recognized by a friend or relative is as significant an issue as that of arrest or violence. Many of the women who work in the sex industry do so without their families, partners and close friends knowing what they do (see Hart, 1995). Sparing the embarrassment of parents or relatives is the main concern of some women. Maintaining a boundary between work and home is, then, important:

I always work in Birmingham and never Wolverhampton, doesn't matter how skint I am, I would never work in Wolverhampton because I never want anyone to find out what I do. Because I know quite a few people in Wolverhampton, and plus my family lives there as well, so I wouldn't work in Wolverhampton. When people ask what you do, well as far as my

family knows I don't work, I am just getting income support and that is it. They ask you too many questions though ...

This quote illustrates that although juggling geographical locations to avoid recognition can be successful to some extent, there are always risks of being 'discovered'. This suggests that soliciting in public is understood by sex workers to be both a risk to their personal safety as well as to their sense of self. Consequently, most women recognize the value of an informally designated red-light district in offering a space that is relatively anonymous and where they are unlikely to encounter people whom they do not wish to know about their work (in fact, it tends to be when clients encounter sex workers outside the red-light district that most problems arise). In this sense, sex workers actively use designated red-light districts to safeguard their private lives and relationships against the stigma of working as a prostitute.

Conclusions

In many ways, the location of prostitution in red-light districts is something that is taken for granted, with the connection between sex work and marginal urban areas being long established. Yet the more carefully one examines red-light districts, the more clearly one becomes aware of conflicts at work within them. In essence, they provide a classic example of what Lefebvre (1991) refers to when he talks of the production of space. This theorization suggests that the spatial practices played out in red-light districts — the routines and rituals of sex work that constitute the everyday in these spaces — 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). Considering sexuality as part of the production of urban space alerts us to the dynamism of this process, and highlights heterosexuality's constant battle to maintain its dominance through spatial processes that isolate sex work and render it invisible to the heterosexual 'majority'. Ironically, these processes create spaces where commercial sex becomes a valuable commodity, and where sex workers may conceal their identities whilst pursuing a potentially lucrative form of employment. This implies that sex workers are not passive recipients of the urban district they use as commercial trading grounds; rather, sex workers shape the urban environment in which they work by adapting and moulding the space so they can successfully sell sex.

This interpretation implies that the boundaries of red-light districts are fixed both by sex workers as well as police, politicians and protestors. Starting from this assumption, this article has elaborated on the consequences of this process, describing how prostitutes' tactics may turn sites of oppression and discrimination into sites of resistance. Indeed, much of the evidence discussed here suggests that prostitutes do not passively accept their victimization by clients, pimps and police, but adopt certain 'coping strategies' to maximize the rewards of sex work while minimizing the risks of violence, arrest and exploitation. Such coping strategies are simultaneously social and spatial, with prostitutes adopting tactics of mobility to frustrate the processes of law enforcement, seeking to distance their 'working' from their 'non-working' lives and attempting to exercise symbolic control over their working environment. This focus on tactics of resistance has therefore served to stress that the geographies of sex work in the urban West are the outcome of a complex (and ongoing) struggle between different social actors, albeit within an asymmetrical power relationship where the tactics of the weak already exist as the strategies of the strong (Cresswell, 1996). Sex workers may be able to turn space to their own ends, but this ultimately happens in spaces where the authorities may be happy for sex work to exist. Given this, it is dangerous to exaggerate the power that sex workers possess, given that, in contemporary capitalist society at least, representations of space tend to dominate and overcode lived spaces of

representation. Nonetheless, it is always difficult for capitalist society to maintain the chaotic, contradictory spaces it has produced, and Lefebvre reminds us that new 'differential spaces' forged through bodily practice may explode through the repressive and calculating spaces of capitalism. By challenging dominant notions of morality, the body and the city, sex workers offer a glimpse of a different space to come.

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