

## Ethnographic drawings: some insights on “prostitution, bodies and sexual rights”

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See the ethnographic drawings below or at <http://www.flickr.com/photos/39057652@N03/show/>

In contexts of prostitution, a photo camera is often a gun in the hands of reporters, policemen, public health professionals or, sometimes, “perverts”. They are shot by people in uniforms and their bright white flash lights denounces the faces of those whom do not want to be exposed and illuminate corners and forms that are to be kept in shadows. Camera usually destroys the multiple aesthetical and political complexities that inhabit the realms of prostitution. If there are exceptions, they simply confirm the norm.

Prostitution is constructed fundamentally around the bodies of female prostitutes. Images of prostitution that proliferate in the mass media or in public health documents give meaning to the emotions that -- as well related public policies and the wide range of violation and discrimination to which prostitutes are subject to -- prostitution triggers in our hearts and minds. Usually they are images captured during abusive invasions of spaces and bodies. Brutally extracted from personal and social narrative contexts these images give substance to pre-existing fantasies of the invaders, either via emphasis on victimization or through moral condemnation.

It is therefore urgent to produce a new repertoire of images that do not deny the vast multiplicity and complexity of the experience of prostitution. We lack images that are in tune with “native” discourses and meanings, images that do not simply project the dominant thirst of normalization and exoticism. We lack images that may trigger new understandings of prostitution as a vast war zone in which genders and sexualities are being re-constructed.

Even though anthropology is a field in which drawings proliferate, the images I have produced during my field work are subtly different. They implied a sort of aesthetic investment (in research) that eventually make of them both an expression of art and a tool for social science analysis. Most importantly yet the drawings have revealed, trace by trace, the conditions and limits of my own perception. As I have discussed elsewhere,<sup>2</sup> these drawings are a phenomenological reconstruction of my field experience, which continues to unfold in the “reader’s” perceptions and reactions. What is seen in them is not and it is not even supposed to be an objective and realistic sample of the universes under investigation. Rather they are an aesthetic reconstruction of my perception of ethnographic encounters I experienced in world of prostitution. Or as Merleau-Ponty would say: “This is the price to be paid for the real to be

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<sup>2</sup> Nieto Olivar, José Miguel. “Dibujando Putas: reflexiones de una experiencia etnográfica con apariciones fenomenológicas.” *Revista Chilena de Antropología Visual* (10), Santiago de Chile, 2007.

constituted”.<sup>3</sup> But at the same time the drawings are more than a research tool. They are part of a broader methodological effort aimed at promoting sexual rights and sexual health. Before coming to Brazil, I have worked as a consultant on education and communication to promote sexual rights among teenagers displaced by the armed conflict in Colombia. Our research team became tired of the easy and questionable discursive tools, which plague interventions to prevent HIV/AIDS and educate youngsters about their rights.

We have therefore searched for new pedagogies that could transform... not just the boys and girls involved in the project, but also ourselves and the contexts where we were working. We have resorted to literature, theatre, dance, media production as new ways to “promote”, or more precisely to de-construct and re-construct genders, sexualities and rights. These exercises have liberated us from the heavy load of academic language and the tyranny of “Cartesian rules”, still predominant in social sciences and initiatives aimed at rights promotion and health prevention.

The potential of art as a tool to enhance social and subjective transformation in relation to sexuality is widely recognized. For instance, various articles that circulate in a bulletin published by *Ciudadania Sexual* talk about it. However, questions remain to be explored, such as: What is “art”? What “art” are we talking about? We should recall that even in the realm of art we must be cautious of the “naturalization” of experiences. Many examples in the history of art tell us about perverse and obscure connections between expressions of power and artistic production... “Art” is nothing in itself, it is not an “essence” placed outside culture or external to the human condition, which descends over worldly bodies to ensure freedom and dignity. As thought by Gianni Rodari,<sup>4</sup> art is an exercise that walks along the paths it opens.

I started drawing these images in loneliness and for myself. But gradually they became a research tool and a means to imaginarily dialoguing with the women being portrayed, with the social movement of prostitutes and other people that do not belong to their universe. These drawings are an experiment in investigation but also art and communication. They constitute a relatively novel exercise to explore ideas and methods for the promotion-construction of rights in regard to the deconstruction and re-configuring of dominant imageries of prostitution. They are also a very shy way to make art.

My previous experience with literary, theater and dance workshops of self – representation performed by displaced young people in Colombia – have thought me that in exercising art and bodily creativity “non artists” create spaces where it is possible to circulate in radical and novel ways. These are spaces where both displaced young people and prostitutes submerge in processes of observation and reading of their cultural environments, as well as in experiences of embodiment that enable them to create, express, share and re-create themselves and the world, including in respect to translating and exercising of sexual rights.

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<sup>3</sup> Merleau-Ponty, M. *O primado da percepção e suas conseqüências filosóficas*. Campinas SP: Papirus, 1990: 47.

<sup>4</sup> Rodari, Gianni. *Gramática de la fantasía: introducción al arte de inventar historias*. Barcelona: Textos del Bronces, 1997.



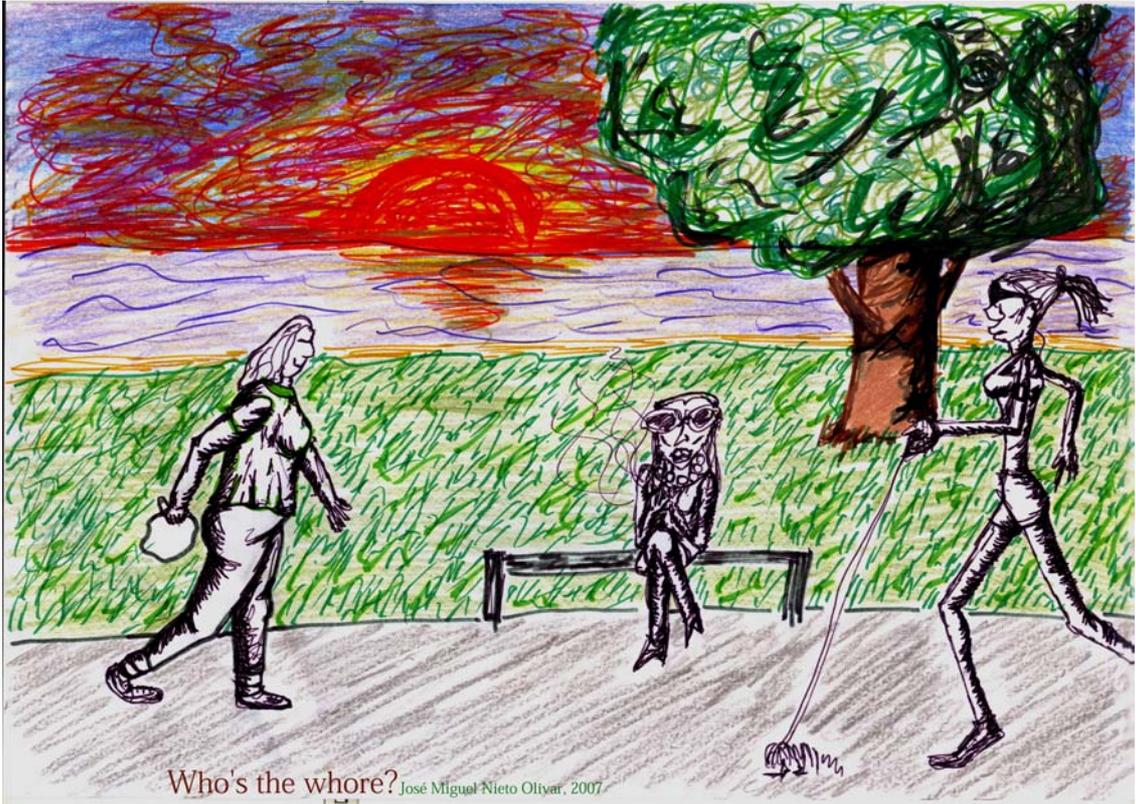
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