Data, desire and recognition: learning to recognise a ‘prostitute’ in Dakar

Abstract
Through an examination of an investigation of clandestine sexualities conducted by an NGO, I examine how a public health programme creates its object on the ground through painstaking fieldwork. This paper is about a particular emplaced, embodied, visual practice; NGO fieldworker/ethnographers identify and follow through the city women whose bodily dispositions identify them as “prostitutes,” although the women themselves vehemently reject this label. A particular politics of recognition emerges around the uneven visibilities of women in the city. The fieldworkers labour to make the banality of “prostitution” and its practices visible to the “prostitutes” themselves, while at the same time cultivating a visual expertise in the recognition and classification of a putatively culturally specific bodily repertoire. Paying close attention to the techniques fieldworkers use to read public bodies shows how ordinary practices of urban bodily cultivation, everyday Dakarois technologies of gender, become progressively weighted with risk as they tangle with the evolving categories of a public health programme. Risk emerges here via a series of unequal exchanges within the visual economy of the city. Fieldworkers may find themselves exposed to new forms of reputational risk while they labour to define the social, sexual and semantic complexities of genn (going out).

Keywords
Sex work, risk, HIV, global health, sensory knowledge, sympathy, social work, Dakar

Introduction

In Modou Fenn’s sketch Birgate de Polisse de Sitoyen (available on YouTube) the comedian plays a comically inept policeman who commits a serious error of misrecognition. The scene opens on a tall, middle aged Senegalese woman, ostentatiously but carefully dressed, standing alone by the side of the road speaking on her mobile phone. The policeman, played by Modou Fenn, arrives and stalks around her suspiciously, carefully scrutinising her before demanding in a blend of Wolof and comically Wolof-accented French: “give me your carnet de santé [health card] tout de suite, rapidement!” The policeman is inept, officious and bullying, protesting shrilly that he has the right to ask for her carnet because he is a policeman. When the woman, who is unresponsive throughout the scene, protests mildly that she does not have a carnet de santé the policeman snaps back Yow, caga la [you are a prostitute]. The rest of the skit unfolds predictably enough. The woman is arrested and with farcical consequences is subsequently revealed to be the wife of the chief commissioner; the hapless policeman’s misrecognition threatens disaster.

This sketch weaves a comic narrative out of the possibility of mistaking someone, or being mistaken for, a “prostitute”. The police in Dakar have generally dealt with the problem of how to identify “prostitutes” in a blunt fashion, arresting and detaining women on spurious charges of “soliciting”. For Dakar’s many public health programmes targeting groups at risk of
HIV/AIDS, however, the question of identification poses more acute problems and demands more subtle strategies of intervention. Seeing “like the police” who arrest first and ask questions later is understood by NGO health and social workers as the opposite of their own complex visual practice; theirs is a gaze which differentiates between potential *femmes vulnérables* weighing evidence across social, physical, aesthetic and gestural repertoires to select candidates for the health intervention.

This paper is based on ethnographic research conducted between 2008 and 2010 on a single urban health project in Dakar, a mobile clinic providing high quality medical care to the *clandestines*, unofficial or unregistered “prostitutes”. In the late 1990s ENDA Santé, a Senegalese NGO, began to conduct original research into the phenomenon of unofficial or “clandestine” sex work. As they pursued this research the organisation began to formulate a series of recommendations that went beyond tinkering with the existing legal framework of the state and proposed an alternative, more culturally and socially embedded and more flexible solution to the problem of women’s reluctance to identify themselves to legal and health authorities as “prostitutes. Beginning in 2003 ENDA ran a mobile clinic as an outreach programme, parking up the unmarked clinic van in some of the more deprived and least served parts of the city and providing poor women with reliable and high quality biomedical care from well trained and sympathetic doctors. Around this core service ENDA social workers won the trust of women who were reluctant to speak about their emotional and sexual lives or their health or wellbeing to those outside their immediate community. The social workers became part of the women’s lives and accompanied them to other parts of the city for more comprehensive care and for HIV testing.

At the heart of the project and its most striking aspect was the very particular experience of a surreptitious, late night mobile clinic consultation. Foreign visitors who were sufficiently adventurous were often sent out with the clinic in order to understand the work that ENDA-Santé did “on the ground”. These visitors were often greatly struck by and affected by the experience and I could well understand why, I was as well; standing late at night in one of Dakar’s poorest areas, part of the knot of women gathered by the clinic waiting to see the doctor, one could not help but be impressed by the simplicity and audacity of the idea and the great skill of its execution, as well as by the empathy and solidarity of the clinic staff and doctors.

ENDA, however, faced a key problem which became more challenging as the intervention was scaled up: the mobile clinic needed clients and more specifically it required clandestine (unregistered) sex workers. This was challenging to ENDA as the organisation were already working with a provisional definition of clandestine prostitution based explicitly on disavowal and denial. As I will further explore below, for ENDA, the *clandestines* were by *definition* women who rejected any attempt to interpellate them as sex workers. To overcome women’s reluctance to identify themselves as sex workers or as people having risky sexual relations, the NGO came up with a novel solution. The city was divided up among the fieldworkers and each was assigned an area they knew well and where they had some good local knowledge and political connections. The fieldworkers then mapped these neighbourhoods
combing the bars for women who might “fit” under the rubric “sex worker”. Sometimes they were lucky and met official sex workers who were prepared to put them in contact with their wider network which included many women who were working without sanitary cards, but often the process was trickier and more subtle. This article is based on participant observation with the fieldworkers both in the streets, bars and nightclubs where they “read” women’s bodies and in meetings and workshops at the NGO where they struggled to make visible the value and the skill of their brand of outreach social work. I also draw upon in-depth interviews with the social workers in which they reflect thoughtfully on the origins of their practice and the challenges of their work.

Rather than examining the meanings that women attach to their sexual practices and romantic entanglements or examining bodily investment and material speculation as a stratagem used by Senegalese women, I instead want to focus here on the fieldworkers who create knowledge about the clandestines. Drawing upon ethnographic data I explore how the NGO researchers work on the cultural problem of clandestine sexualities and how they assemble the “clandestine prostitute” out of various clues that lie in women’s comportment, dress, embodied traits and gestures, focusing particularly on the ways in which the body in motion is apprehended and interpreted. I begin by considering the ways in which ‘prostitution’ is defined in Dakar, reading the fieldworkers’ definitions through and against anthropological accounts of urban sexualities. I then consider how the categories established by the fieldworkers are read off and imposed onto the bodies of women in Dakar in a flexible and evolving account of clandestinité.

In pursuing this line of enquiry I follow the work of anthropologists who have explored the ways in which the categories of global health gain shape and traction through the labour of local actors parsing local moral worlds (Brada 2011; Prince 2012; Wardlow 2012). Examining the fieldworkers’ own reading of “prostitution” which incorporates complexity even as they produce fine grained taxonomies of clandestinité, is one means of parsing the ways in which local moral ambiguity is translated into a narrative of social, economic and sexual risk. Through an examination of the fieldworkers means of knowing “prostitution” and identifying “prostitutes” I argue that “prostitution” in urban Africa cannot be understood apart from the knowledge and government practices developed to regulate and control it. Women’s lives are shaped by practices of evasion and dissimulation that guide their responses to state and non-state regulation. In the case of the mobile clinic, these practices become the conditions of ambiguity and unstable, partial knowledge that is ultimately – for the fieldworkers – constitutive of the possibility of the category of clandestine.

My focus in this paper is the observer rather than the observed. I did, however, during fieldwork experience in an oblique way the perspective of the “observed” – the women who might be subjected to the gaze of medical authorities. In the homes of young women friends as we got ready for a night out I sometimes experienced a brief pang of anxiety at how we entangled ourselves in a complex matrix of recognition and identification as we dressed and prepared ourselves to go out into the city. This burden of doubled vision is continuous with the experiences of the fieldworkers. On a night out in a smart casino bar crammed with
provocatively dressed young women flirting and dancing, one of the fieldworkers, Rama, raised her eyebrows across the table at me and then leaned over to comment ironically in my ear about the difficulty of taking one’s work home. Perhaps this is a good example of the capacity of body-knowledge to unsettle the particular bodily habitus of the knowing subject - in this case that of the anthropologist herself. When the body grounds knowledge, refines, performs and ultimately publicly authorises that knowledge, as is the case, I will attempt to demonstrate below, with the bodies of the fieldworkers, then that knowledge exposes that knowing body-subject to certain kinds of uncomfortable existential queries experiences as well as to risk and uncertainty experienced at the level of one’s own body and social identity. I will return to these questions later in the paper. I will begin by examining the working definitions of “prostitution” used by the fieldworkers and how they understand commercial sexuality in Dakar as a complex practice.

**Defining “Prostitution”**

Dakar has a small population of official commercial sex workers who are registered with the state and who regularly attend health checks at a central clinic. The majority of women involved in commercial sexuality in the city however are unregistered and working clandestinely. A bare definition of *clandestine* in Dakar is a woman who sells sex illegally, without her official, government issued *carnet de santé*. However, as I explore in this paper, *clandestine* has a richer and more complex meaning to the fieldworkers and doctors who staff the mobile clinic and here I pay close attention to their elaboration of the meanings, challenges and vagaries of *clandestinité*, the state of being clandestine.

Anthropological research has exposed the difficulties of defining and delimiting practices of commercial sexuality in African contexts where many intimate relationships involve various degrees of calculation and instrumentality which is not considered inimical to loving intimacies and socially sanctioned relationships (Castro 2013; Cole 2010; Helle-Valle 1999; Nelson 1987; Tawfik and Watkins 2007; White 1990). In this context a range of alternative boundary definitions have been proposed to capture the complexity of economic and sexual relations in place including survival sex (Hunter 2002) and transactional sexuality (Wamoyi et al 2011). It is now axiomatic that such ambiguities in intimate relationships require “thick” social explanations and that health interventions should be underpinned by closely examined, qualitative social science data (Leclerc-Mandala 2009).

The “grey areas” in the negotiation of sexuality, identity and finance in African relationships is an incitement to a range of discourses and explanations which, as Laura Agustín argues, often perpetuate the stigmatisation of “real” “prostitution” by pitting it against a range of complex and indeterminate “transactional” practices (Agustin 2010). In Dakar, interested intimacies which risk shading into prostitution, and which are occasionally unambiguously identified as such, are known as *mbaraan*, a term which designates ‘a flux of lack of clarity in personal relationships, an ambiguity which is knowingly maintained in order to string partners along while profiting from gifts’ (Fall 2007, 169). In times of economic precarity and hardship when late marriage and family breakdown is common due to the erosion of masculine economic
authority, mbaraan names a temporary economic arrangement between a man and a woman which may or may not lead to a more stable relationship or to marriage (Hann, 2013). If mbaraan is a source of social anxiety it is, perhaps, because these ambiguous relationships seem to mimic, if not to parody in a subversive and rather painful way, a more traditional and idealised relationship in which a man provides economic support in return for sexual intimacy and fidelity from his sexual partner. In this guise mbaraan is a fictive play of respectability around an unequal and emotionally inauthentic relation.

While mbaraan is certainly stigmatised (although not as stigmatised as prostitution and many women “identified” as “prostitutes” by the mobile clinic programmes protest that while they do “go out” [genn] they do mbaraan rek; only mbaraan) it also seems to offer some women an idiom through which to consider and renegotiate the terrain of the reciprocal obligations of the traditional relationship between men and women in Dakar as well as the economic means to defer and refuse marriage. Foley and Drame (2013), for example, argue that mbaraan is the name given to a set of social practices which allow women to explore and contest their ‘unfulfilled material, emotional and sexual expectations within marriage’ (122). The ways in which generalised precarity and economic uncertainty have unmoored gender relations over the life course from their normative patterns has made it all the more urgent for women in Dakar to find new ways to ‘extemporize their respectability’ (Buggenhagen 2014 78), making the body and bodily display a high-stakes game balancing the desire to jaayu (display one’s physical attributes in public) while performing and embodying one’s fidelity to social and religious norms of modest and appropriate feminine conduct.

“When you say clandestine it means something that is hidden”

The fieldworkers agreed that the basic definition of clandestine sexual practice was that it was “hidden”. This connoted on the one hand a furtive night-time economy of unacknowledged sexual activities. However, commercial sexual practices could also be “hidden in plain sight,” as several of the fieldworkers expressed it; that is, commercial sexual practices could disappear into the weave of ordinary sociality that bound together the kinds of romantic and sexual relationships women in Dakar engaged for their security and survival. In this sense commercial sexuality was seen partly as continuous with mbaraan. The fieldworkers’ definition however partly exceeded a diagnosis of mbaraaneuse (a woman who practices mbaraan). One of the fieldworkers, Mamadou, argued strongly that prostitution itself was a simple matter to define. The indeterminacy of the category and the challenge of its definition arose when women refused to recognise their own practice as prostitution.

“When you say prostitution.. is the exchange of pleasure against some reward, that might be that the guy pays your rent, or that he pays for your water, or that he pays for your food. When you “go out” [genn] it is considered a kind of prostitution – it’s the exchange of pleasure for something else. The problem is that when you’re in this system you don’t see
that it’s prostitution, and even if you do recognise that what you’re doing is prostitution, it’s very difficult to accept that fact.”

The challenge to providers of public health services is construed here by Mamadou as the women’s refusal to recognise their own behaviours. The best and most effective part of ENDA’s mobile clinic programme for another fieldworker was the organisation’s success at allowing people to move from a state of clandestinité in which the reality of their own practice was hidden to themselves, and towards a greater understanding and acceptance of what they were doing.

“[ENDA] have encouraged and allowed so many clandestines to understand that they are sex workers. Before, these people didn’t know that they were in the sex industry and they weren’t conscious of what they were doing; for them, sex workers were older women, women older than thirty; women who had sanitary card and who went out at night. ENDA santé helped these women to understand that prostitution goes on in peoples’ neighbourhoods: it is women who go to the market, who go to hotels – we accompanied them in this process of understanding until finally they recognised that what they were doing was sex work, and that is our great success”

Anthropologists have questioned the definition of clandestinité evident in the fieldworkers’ discourse here as a kind of radical bad faith and have reinterpreted clandestinité according to its subjective meanings and its efficacies as an instrumental social and sexual practice. Thomas Fouquet, for example, has argued clandestinité is a “strategy that allows women to synthesise seemingly opposed social roles’ (2007, 108), maintaining respectable identities while experimenting with a range of different relationships. The role of the fieldworkers in bringing order and definition to the “chaos” of women’s self-perception is partly directed as disentangling and disaggregating these social roles. As one fieldworker explained:

“There are women who are married; there are also “officials” who are married. Sometimes in the poor areas of the city there are more married women prostituting themselves than young women. Then there are the women in the brothels, the bars, the hotels: it’s possible that they will self-identify as sex workers; the ones that frequent the sites of prostitution: those are the “professional clandestines”. Then you could have, for example, a woman who receives in her room three or four boyfriends: she probably doesn’t identify as a prostitute, although what she’s doing is very like prostitution. It’s a form of clandestine prostitution disguised as mbaraan. The woman who is in her quartier, goes about her business and manages to pass for someone with good morals: these are the hardcore clandestines [les pures et dures clandestines]. There’s also another forms of prostitution and that’s occasional prostitution: if there is a festival coming up, for example, you have to clothe and feed your family, your children, have something to
eat on the day, and if you have no other source of money…” (ENDA 2007 p. 43, my translation).

This quote further illustrates how central the notion of performance is to the fieldworkers’ definitions of “prostitution”. Here one of the fieldworkers argues that the “hardcore” clandestines are those women whose performance as a “woman of good morals” is the most plausible, when plausible implies that it is recognisable within a schema of consensual recognition; ‘respectability’ is an unstable and a relational category. It is these women’s duplicity, then, that places them firmly and unambiguously in the category of clandestine. However, there are others whose status fluctuates according to short-term need. The fieldworkers employ a kind of thick description to produce taxonomies of varying degrees of clandestinité and these shades of grey always imply always a sliding scale of moral severity. For the fieldworkers a clandestine is a woman who suppresses and obfuscates her status as a prostitute using all the resources at her disposal. Her social performance is so through and so vivid that she risks finally convincing herself of its depth and veracity. It is at this point of self-deception, according to the fieldworkers, that she is must fully inhabiting the fluctuating, unstable and contingent identity of clandestine.

**Vision in the city**

Medical anthropological accounts of public and global health programmes have paid little attention to the visual beyond its capacity to condense and represent standardised experiences. The literature overall has displayed a scepticism about vision as a knowledge making practice and associated visual relations with hierarchy and domination. Medical anthropological accounts of the body and of care strive to centre instead a body narrated in its sensuous and subjective modes from the inside out, countering the objectifying, detached gaze of medical authority. In this ethnographic example, however, vision is both a flexible and imaginative state of exposure and recognition and a way of knowing which is necessarily chaotic, dispersed, intimately comparative and non-hierarchical, and above all embodied.

In tethering scrutinizing gazes to particular embodied social relations in place I am building upon a long-standing interest in anthropology in the phenomenological and embodied dimensions of knowledge, experience and intersubjectivity (Mauss, 1973; Jackson, 1983; Marchang, 2010; Lambek, 2011). Here I accompany the NGO fieldworkers in Dakar’s streets and bars assessing the bodies around them through a careful practice of embodied looking. This visual practice is, in part, like the ‘professional vision’ cultivated by expert witnesses in the courtroom (Goodwin 1994), or amateur naturalists (Ellis 2011); however, knowing the clandestine also involves an overwhelming intimacy with the object of study, a kind of sympathetic dwelling and inhabiting of the risky bodily habitus of the clandestine.

This paper also empirically engages and extends the ethnographic literature on the urban theatre of bodily display and recognition. There is a substantial feminist literature on the ‘scopic economies’ (Skeggs, 2001) of assessment to which women are subjected in public. Caught in
the punitive or disciplinary gaze, the object of that gaze attempts to disguise her identifying features or to change their behaviours to deceive the onlooker, to correct certain habits and dispositions of the bodily hexis to more closely embody the shifting and often mutually exclusive values which govern women’s conduct in public. The examination of bodily recognition has recently been extended into encounters in the African urban in scholarship which seeks to foreground the ‘unexpected, fleeting, multiple, and hard-to-pin down experiences that characterise city life’ (Ghannam 2011, 792). Filip de Boeck, for example, argues that the African city is structured by multiple overlapping and interlocking immaterial infrastructures which shape and season the flows and rhythms of its encounters and spatial practices; one of the most important of these infrastructures, he argues, is the infrastructure of the body, not least because the ‘private and intense corporeal realms often reveal themselves to be the public stage par excellence’ (de Boeck, 2012). The mobile clinic programme itself can be seen as a mobile and fleet piece of infrastructure which connects, networks, and creates ‘thickenings of publics’ (de Boeck, 2012) at particular junctures of social, infrastructural, and bodily vulnerability: Dakar’s impoverished and poorly served banlieues, “off-the-grid” of biomedical and reliable medical provisioning.

The fleeting and the hard-to-pin down are the terrain of this paper – glances exchanged in a bar, a gesture, the tone of an exclamation, as well as the aesthetic dimensions of everyday cultural life in the city, the crucial cultivation of the body and its affects and affordances in the pursuit of what de Boeck felicitiously names “stage presence” in the African city. I examine the particular cultural context which shapes and permits recognition in order to understand how bodies are read at a glance. How does the gaze of an NGO fieldworker freighted with different kinds of experience gained in the field come to distinguish “risky” individuals from others? Here I am particularly interested in following Julia Elyachar (2011) in tracing the connections between bodily practice and political economy. I focus on how gesture is brought into language and becomes a politics of gesture and movement heavily laden with distinctions of class and age: distinctions which when read “correctly” visually diagnose the clandestine.

**Making the “clandestine”: bodies in motion**

The fieldworkers found it extremely difficult to precisely explain quite how they knew how to recognise a potential clandestine, it remained however of great importance for them to convey something of this process and of the skill and tact it demanded. As Julia Elyachar has argued, the precise mechanisms of bodily recognition – quite how we recognise a possible identity in the movement of another’s body, or how we might betray ourselves through our own motility and bodily dispositions – are difficult to draw into speech, to represent, or to make into meaning and argument (Elyachar 2011).

There were, of course, certain external indicators of a “prostitute”: clothes, hair and make-up for example – a panoply of flawed taste through which urban women might betray themselves as actual or potential sex workers. Smoking and drinking in public were classic “red flags” and in fact until relatively recently (and until ENDA conducted energetic advocacy work
with the police) they had frequently been considered by the police as grounds for arrest. The clue might equally lie in the tone of a woman’s voice, her gait, posture and gestures; it would be a combination of all of these factors, observed over time, which allowed the fieldworkers to piece together a *femme vulnerable*. One of the fieldworkers, Rama, even boasted that she could sit with her eyes closed in a bar and still be able to catch a note in a woman’s voice that would help her to identify that woman, so keenly calibrated were her senses that something about the pitch, volume and cadence of a woman’s voice would identify her as a *clandestine* even before she examined the visual clues.

According to the fieldworkers’ own accounts, then, the process of identification is partly or initially a process of ‘articulation’ (M’Charek, 2011) in which certain facts – for example, the place in which the fieldworkers first encounter the woman in question – articulate with certain socio-demographic characteristics and certain embodiments and, once triangulated, there is a reasonably good chance that the woman in question is or might be a *clandestine*. In further conversation the fieldworkers agreed that the judgment made “at first glance” was a felicitous combination of skill, serendipity and guesswork. In the process of getting to know the woman better, however, the relationship evolved. Here Mamadou explains, haltingly at first and then fluently:

“It’s, it’s a… a long process … say for example.. if I were trying to win your confidence… remember that I don’t know you, or perhaps we know one another through someone else, perhaps I met you in a bar, but the first time that I saw you I said to myself that at first glance, if I had to bet on it, I’d say that you are probably a prostitute, that you are in the *milieu*, I could say that I’m between 50% to a 100% sure. Perhaps I offer you a beer or something to drink, and then finally something passes between us and I say, “Listen, you interest me, I think that we could do business together”

As he spoke here Mamadou took me as an imaginary “client” to demonstrate to me the significance of the embodied dimension of sympathy. He threaded his thumb and forefinger around my wrist, itself part of a specific gestural corpus of intimacy. The process of recognition was in part based on a *shared habitus* in the moment of meeting and recognition in the field, a moment of what Susan Leigh Foster calls *kinaesthesia*. Kinaesthetic knowledge, according to Foster, works through an awareness of our own lived bodily experience, what it physically and emotionally feels like to inhabit our bodies in a particular way, and the connection of that private and intimate knowledge to an understanding of how another moving body might feel (Foster, 1982). This is a kind of mimetic knowledge and identification, knowledge which is “based upon a bodily awareness of the other in oneself” (Jackson 1983: 336).

Many times as the fieldworkers tried to explain this process to me and to convey to me some of the thickness and social force of the bodily dispositions they responded to in the streets, they used their own bodies to mime the gestures and movements that would attract their attention in the field. They got to their feet and imitated a woman who walks with a slight swagger, who catches and holds the eye of men and women with a quick and knowing insouciance. In
conversation on this topic with Rama she became inwardly absorbed in the performance: flexing one hand on her hip, she tipped her chin upwards and walked with an exaggerated sinuous sway. Introducing a powerfully illustrative point of comparison, Rama also imitated, not unkindly, my own bodily habitus with the same skill and brief economy of gesture that she applied to the imagined, absent clandestine. In her imitation of me she amplified a certain bodily awkwardness, hunched shoulders and eyes directed at my feet moving over uneven and uncertain ground. No danger, in my case, of misrecognition; with such a truncated, inhibited set of bodily and gestural dispositions, such a limited “stage presence,” I can move around the streets freely, it is not so for others. Sharing the spaces and lives of potential clandestines was particularly important in both acquiring the necessary skills of recognition through immersion in their milieu and also in performing and inhabiting a kind of solidarity with the object of the research. However, as I discuss in more depth below, fieldworkers were exposed to different kinds of social risk through these acts of imaginative sympathy in shared space.

The pleasure of recognition

So far I have focused on the craft of recognition, first in the fieldworkers’ own accounts of their practice and then in my own reading of their kinaesthetic knowledges and embodied sympathies. However, in order for bodies to be recognisable “at a glance” as “risky”, women’s bodies and the meanings they strive to convey using bodily cultivation must evoke or reference certain culturally intelligible forms of gendered identity. This leads me to the final dimension of recognition which I wish to draw out and that is women’s desire for recognition within gendered and classed norms, the pleasure which that recognition evokes, and the role that this pleasure plays within the constellation of ambivalent relations I have examined so far.

One night I accompanied Mamadou to a causerie in Khar Yalla, an impoverished and informal suburb. He was there to meet with a small group of around ten women who had been assembled by an ancienne of the project who worked as a peer educator. This session was the first point of contact with the women which would prepare them for the next step, a consultation in the mobile clinic. As the women gathered in a small bedroom half-lit with oil lamps and arranged themselves according to seniority, the older women sprawled across the bed, the younger women on the floor Mamadou addressed the group explaining ENDA’s approach. He cited the rules of teraanga or social solidarity. In the past if you had a problem with money, he noted, you could go and ask a member of your family, but nowadays the problems women are facing in the quartiers populaires are so complex and intractable that communities must seek help from outside agents to resolve them. The assembled women nodded in agreement as he listed the problems that poor women in Dakar face: poverty, family responsibilities, poor health, ordonnaanse (prescriptions), premature babies and the ill health of their children. Skilfully Mamadou inscribed his explanation of the work that ENDA-santé do within the norms of social and community solidarity. He clarifies that ENDA don’t work with people who have money, but with people “who are poor” [nit ku ñakk ndoole], or with women who are in a difficult situation [ku nekk ci jafe jafe]. There was a seam of frank sexual banter in the discussion, when Mamadou
teasingly ‘warned’ said that they will talk about female genitalia one woman asked if they will talk about male genitalia. “You already know what that looks like”, Mamadou parried quickly, “didn’t you look at it before he put it inside you” [yow, gisuloo ko balaa mu ko fà dugg?]. Afterwards I insinuated, teasingly, that there was a flirtatious edge to Mamadou’s bantering with the women. “You see!” he replied, delighted, “You see now how you must talk to these women,” before swiftly emphasising: “with respect”.

The older women monopolised the conversation and the younger women sat quietly occasionally whispering to each other and largely deferring to their boisterous elders. Mamadou drew out the younger women by addressing them as disquettes – a term which refers to a young woman and to a young woman’s (idealised) body shape (Nyamjoh 2005). The older women Mamadou referred to collectively as the diriyankes. Frances Nyamnjoh notes that in the population imagination in Dakar, the word diriyanke evokes ‘the dignified, slow and gracious gait and middle-aged elegance of the Senegalese lady at her best’ (Nyamnjoh 2005, 300). Hudita Nura Mustafa writes of the culturally and socially specific femininity of the diriyanke that it is a

‘public expression of the sensual beauty of women previously restricted to the domestic sphere – the household and extended kin. This ideal guides the consumption and display of middle-class women, who perform their gendered identities through elaborate and skilful dress in public ceremonies’ (Mustafa 2006, 25).

In referring to the women as diriyanke and disquette Mamadou was extending and performing a particular kind of respect rooted in recognition. Through his citation of culturally understood body types he participates in the thickness and the plausibility of their conformity to idealised femininities. He evokes how the potential clandestines cleave to these ideal types by direct and explicit reference to the shape and form of women’s bodies, their gait, taste, and bearing and he affirms this recognition even at this private and intimate moment when the public performance begins to fray and the women cautiously set aside their public personae and consent to talk more directly about sex, money, survival, stress, condoms and impoverishment: the business of ‘risk’. Mamadou’s recognition demonstrates a complicity in the women’s public performance in a sympathetic manner which belies the fieldworkers’ stated impatience for and suspicion of the deceptive and evasive performances of the clandestines.

The field is hard: bodies on the line

Early in my fieldwork when I was just beginning to become interested in the question of how fieldworkers found their “prostitutes” I attended a training session for ENDA staff run by an external facilitator. In the afternoon session members of staff were encouraged to step forward and reflect upon their more informal skills versus their official and formalized expertise. The object of the session was to encourage people to engage in a process of reflection of what they had in their “tool-kit” beyond educational qualifications, IT skills, and years of experience in post. In order to elicit this reflection the workshop coordinator asked everyone to list the skills
they “knew” they had and the skills “they did not know they had,” a formulation which caused some rather understandable confusion. Rama volunteered to share with the group the list of skills she had drawn up and sauntered to the front of the room with the confidence of a practiced animatrice. “If there is one thing I know I know how to do,” she said, “it is how to recognise a sex worker”. This knowing statement provoked much laughter in the room as she embroidered skilfully on the comic potential of her theme: fielding questions about whether or not she saw any sex workers in the room (she did not), and waxing mock-mournful about her converse inability to find a decent man. Everyone in the room knew the jokes and had heard them many times before, but her timing was razor sharp and the performance irresistible: the room was in uproar. Rama’s intervention upset the distinctions the workshop facilitator was trying to draw between tacit knowledge and formal skills. For Rama, knowing how to recognise a sex worker was part of her important formal and marketable skills – just as important as any certificates or qualifications she might acquire; as a professional Rama had to defend these skills, however ephemeral, or locally bounded they might appear.

Proud as they are of their professional achievements the fieldworkers complain endlessly about fieldwork, the time that their work takes up and the depleting emotional labour it entails. They each drew me to one side frequently to protest that they did not receive enough money or recognition for the work they did. They complained that their own money is tied up in the clinic, knotting together the good relationships that underpin the functioning of the programme. They also complained bitterly that they are treated unfairly by the office staff whose own jobs in comparison seem easy. What they (those with office jobs) did not understand, the fieldworkers protested, is that the field is hard.

More difficult still than the daily logistical problems the fieldworkers had to try to solve was the possibility that they themselves could be subject to misrecognition in the field. Following women around the city, being professionally solidaire, and inhabiting with some imaginative sympathy the world of the clandestines exposed the fieldworkers themselves to certain social risks. Questions are asked of the fieldworkers in their communities: why are they keeping such strange hours? Can it really be for “work” that they receive those suspicious young women in their homes? When the mobile clinic was just beginning to consult women in the banlieues the social workers were picked up in an indiscriminate rafle [raid] by the police and held overnight until someone could come from the office and confirm that they were on official business. Now the police are informed of the work of the mobile clinic and the social workers carry laminated cards confirming their association with the NGO – a tenuous grip on legal authority and social respectability which nonetheless must be constantly negotiated in the field in encounters with police, bar owners and suspicious passersby. The ease with which professional identities can tangle with stigmatised identities in the field is not easily forgotten and the wild laughter this particular story of misrecognition provokes in the office is charged with a distinct tension: the social workers belong to a different social class than the office workers who stock the pharmacy and crunch the clinic data. Through observation and mimicry that tends towards risky sympathies and identifications the social workers write a thick account of clandestine
sexuality in the city, an account in which their own bodies are implicated and their social identities are often on the line.

**Conclusion**

The particular story of recognition in the city I have told here shows how gestures and embodiments are read as belonging to a woman potentially engaging in risky sexual activity. In order for bodies to be read ‘at a glance’ as ‘risky’ the fieldworkers mobilise a range of knowledge practices which, in context, are particularly, if contingently, powerful: mimicry, intimacy and sympathy. The story of the mobile clinic and its methods for recruiting and classifying clandestines sheds light on local struggles with the insufficiency and indeterminancy of the working categories of global health and how they are debated, played with, and made to work in practice. The visual skill of the fieldworkers emerges here as part of participation in complex urban performances of class and gender.

The ambiguities of the mobile clinic programme emerge ethnographically. There are tensions between its methodologies (chaotic, dispersed, embodied, relational and non-hierarchical) and its outcomes (bureaucracies that make an aesthetic virtue of fluidity while foregrounding the constant and consistent). This ambiguity goes to the heart of bureaucratic knowledge-making about fluid categories of (dis)identification and sexual practice. The transformation of the fieldworkers’ bodies, the instruments of their knowledge, into an uncertain ground for knowing and living from, becomes itself a powerful example of the risk and uncertainty Dakaroises negotiate as they seek care, visibility, and recognition in the city.

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1 [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LRuKyzHDQ4U](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LRuKyzHDQ4U)

2 The ENDA fieldworkers are of course not the first to struggle with these questions. Colonial authorities also attempted to define the legal status of prostitution (see, Hunt 1994); Phillipa Levine describes these efforts in India as “spectacularly unsuccessful” (Levine 1994).

3 In practice the distinction between the officielles and the clandestines are not always clear (see AUTHOR forthcoming 2014). For example, if an official sex worker does not keep up to date with her mandatory health checks at the state clinic she can lapse into clandestinité. Registered sex workers also complain that their visibility to police leads to harassment and arrest on charges of public soliciting. Women working outside the state system argue that if they are gaaw (quick) and can talk around the police they have more chance of evading arrest than if they carried the identifying sanitary card.
The “grey areas” in the negotiation of sexuality, identity and finance in African relationships is an incitement to a range of discourses and explanations which, as Laura Agustin argues, often perpetuate the stigmatisation of “real” “prostitution” by pitting it against a range of complex and indeterminate “transactional” practices (Agustin 2010). Here I use “prostitute” – the fieldworkers themselves use prostitue, clandestine, and travailleuse de sexe interchangeably, although clandestine as a recognisable identity can be considered the outcome of their own analytical work – an evolving urban identity which is on the one hand shared and recognisable, and on the other hand a bureaucratic one, created and amplified by NGOs involved in HIV/AIDS work.

I find the analogy Elizabeth Povinelli suggests between ethnographic fieldwork and experimental ingestion to be a useful one in understanding this case (Povinelli, 2012).

This is not to suggest that these disciplinary encounters have been limited the scopic, see, for example, in an African context the “open your legs” exam in Zambia (Jackson 2002), or the many examples of sex workers subject to abuse, harassment and violence (see, for example, Crago, 2014).

Bibliography


