

Cabaret Dancers: “Settle Down in order to Stay Mobile?” Bridging Theoretical Orientations within Transnational Migration Studies

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Abstract

Adopting a transnational perspective has become essential in understanding the contemporary practices taking place across borders, especially with respect to migrants. In this article, I argue that we can distinguish two theoretical orientations within transnational migration studies: one theorizing the complexity of transnational processes and focusing on established migrants settled in host countries; and the second theorizing transnational practices on the basis of different but continuous forms of mobility. Using the example of cabaret dancers in Switzerland, I show how they develop a very specific form of transnationality, which corresponds at first sight to the second theoretical orientation. Some of them are genuinely “world travelers”—they work in erotic clubs in Switzerland, Japan, or Lebanon, go home regularly to visit their families, or continue their studies. As such, their transnational morphology is highly influenced by gender as well as by the (transnational) nature of the sex industry and the opportunities and legal structure in Switzerland. Nevertheless, to remain in circulation, the dancers need to develop a kind of mobility capital, which involves, paradoxically, becoming “sedentarized” to a certain degree in Switzerland. The article thus advocates a theoretical framework that better captures the experiences of settled as well as of circulatory migrants.

Introduction

The word cabaret evokes pictures of Paris during the *Belle Epoque* after the opening of the famous *Moulin Rouge* in 1889, with glamorous women in glittering costumes moving to the rhythm of the music. Anyone expecting a dazzling spectacle like this would certainly be disappointed by a visit to a cabaret in Switzerland because contemporary Swiss cabarets bear no resemblance to this image. When the first cabarets in Switzerland opened toward the end of the 1920s, the dancers belonged to foreign musical groups touring the main cities. They traveled with a large entourage and big trunks to transport their wardrobes for the variety shows. The dancers' performances in Switzerland were also highly artistic. Now the live musicians have disappeared, replaced by digital recordings. The shows last only for a few minutes. The women still dance to the music, but the sexual-erotic aspects are always the most important.

This evolution in the show itself is paralleled by another trend: Today, no Swiss citizens dance in Swiss cabarets; the dancers are exclusively migrant women. Approximately 6000 cabaret dancers enter (and leave) the country each year. In the 1980s, half the dancers in Switzerland came from countries in Western Europe; by 2005, this number was down to 2 percent.¹ Today, about three-quarters of the young women come from Eastern Europe while the rest are from Central or South America, and Asia. These cabaret dancers² represent a heterogeneous group that embodies a particular form of female circular migration. Some of them are genuinely "world travelers": they work in erotic clubs in Switzerland, Japan, or Lebanon, go home regularly to be with their children or their families, or to continue their education. These cabaret dancers represent a specific contemporary form of working migrants who develop transnational practices and subjectivities closely connected to the nature of their circular mobility.

Their transnational morphologies, however, do not fit theorizations of transnationalism following the seminal work of Glick Schiller, Basch, and Blanc-Szanton (1992), which are solely based on sedentarized, established immigrants. A substantial body of work

provides examples of variable forms of the way sedentarized migrants construct transnational political, economic, or social fields between the host country and the country of origin (or a third country), remaining involved simultaneously in both contexts (for a recent overview, see Levitt and Jaworsky 2007). These dancers do not leave their homes to settle in another country but remain mobile to maintain or improve their quality of life at their place of origin, which remains the center of their lives. Mobility, understood as the physical movement of people in transnational space, becomes an integral part of the dancer's strategy, and such mobility can take different shapes. Indeed, in order to be able to keep circulating, the dancers need to develop a kind of mobility capital, which involves, paradoxically, becoming "sedentarized" to a certain degree in Switzerland. Only by becoming familiar with the context and by building up local bridges—by "localizing"—with different actors in Switzerland, are they able to move back and forth between different countries. As such, their transnational morphology is highly affected by gender as well as the (transnational) nature of the sex industry and the opportunities and legal structure in Switzerland.

Pivotal ideas of the actual transnational migration debate—sedentarized or circulatory migrants—are introduced in the first section followed by a discussion of the methodology employed in this study. The subsequent sections analyze the ethnographic material showing the transnational ways of being of the dancers. I first examine how and why the women become actors in this transnational sex industry. Second, I show how the legal arrangements in Switzerland have almost paradoxical consequences: on one hand, they prevent the integration of the dancers in Switzerland while simultaneously strengthening their circular mobility. On the other hand, they put the dancers at risk, exposing them to precarious working conditions. Therefore, the dancers develop concrete strategies to not only to be able to earn more money by selling sex, but also to come back and stay mobile. In the concluding remarks, some reflections of more theoretical nature are developed.

The paper aims to contribute to actual debates in two ways. First, it contributes to the academic discourse on transnationalism by bringing in new theoretical insights, calling for the development of a common framework for transnational migration theories. It can also be read as additional ethnographic testimony about female migrants who sell sexual or erotic services in the midst of transnational and migration studies (such as Agustin 2006; Brennan 2004; Thorbek 2002). It reveals that the transnational perspective is epistemologically fruitful as migrant women working in the sex industry are seen as transnational actors equipped with agency (Emirbayer and

Mische 1998) and not solely victims of exploitation and trafficking. In line with other scholars, I advocate a dynamic approach that recognizes that while sex work—and stripping in particular—can be experienced as exploitative or coercive and it can reinforce institutional gender roles, nevertheless, there is a degree of agency involved in exotic dancing (Barton 2006; Roach 2008).

Two Theoretical Orientations Regarding Transnationality: Sedentariness versus Mobility

Since the early 1990s, studies on transnational practices and subjectivities of migrants have proliferated, and adopting a transnational perspective has become indispensable to understanding the contemporary practices that stretch across national borders. The transnational perspective has also been introduced as a promising way to tackle the critique of methodological nationalism widespread in migration studies (Beck 2002; Wimmer and Glick Schiller 2002). There are a number of ways to systematize this vast body of work on transnational practices or subjectivities of migrants. Here I distinguish two theoretical orientations³. One strand of work theorizes transnational processes, with a focus on established migrants *settled* in the host countries while a second focuses on different but continuous forms of *mobility*.

Transnationality based on Sedentariness

With regard to the more classical theoretical orientation focusing on the transnationality of sedentarized migrants, the idea of transnationalism emerges from the realization that immigrants simultaneously maintain ties with their countries of origin (or a third country), making home and host society a single arena for social action by moving back and forth across international borders and between different cultural and social systems, and by exploiting transnational relations as a form of social capital for their living strategies (Brettell 2000; Levitt and Glick Schiller 2004). Scholars have been interested in understanding the transnational practices of sedentarized migrants not only in the economic or political but also on social or religious realms (Vertovec 1999, 2009). Others distinguish between occasional and durable transnational practices or between different generations of migrants (Levitt 2009; Portes, Guarnizo, and Landolt 1999). Social scientists have also investigated the various types of transnational social space developed by such sedentarized migrants (Pries 2008). For instance, Faist (2000) distinguished among transnational kinship groups (e.g., contract workers), transnational circuits (Chinese, Lebanese, or Indian business

people), and transnational communities (e.g., diasporas such as Armenians or Kurds). Faist's typology provides interesting insights into the production of transnational spaces by focusing on primary resources embedded in social ties (such as reciprocity, exchange, or solidarity) and by showing their different outcomes.

The crucial point is that scholars working in this theoretical tradition mainly investigate practices and subjectivities of migrants who are either wage earners in the Fordist sense (as employees of local firms) or migrants who are ethnic entrepreneurs. As such, the variable forms of how migrants participate in and create transnationalism by exploiting social capital (Bourdieu 1980) based on the principle of ethnic and/or family solidarity and mutual support have been brought to light. They send remittances home, create ethnic businesses in the transnational space—e.g. the Indian restaurants with their import and export chains—or they develop a differentiated transnational way of economic living (Guarnizo 2003). Migrants join political associations and are involved in long-distance nationalist projects as described, for instance, for the Kurds, Kosovars, and others (Ostergaard-Nielsen 2003). Or, they receive visits from cultural groups from the home country to maintain or create their specific collective identity (Gowricharn 2009).

Other scholars delineate a kind of sedentarized migrants who are sometimes characterized by a (symbolic or physical) homeland orientation and by the maintenance of their ethnic boundaries (Barth 1969), thus preserving a distinctive identity vis-à-vis the host society (Dahindin 2008). Others show how *locality* is an important resource for migrants in building up such transnational projects. Here locality means being rooted socially, economically, and/or politically in the country of immigration and/or in the sending country and developing a set of social relations at specific places. To do business in a transnational space, one needs resources (being naturalized, having financial capital), so resources are a sign of being “rooted” in the new country (Portes, Haller, and Guarnizo 2002).

Transnational Practices Relying on Mobility

A second theoretical orientation no longer focuses on the long-term, settled migrant in the Georg Simmel tradition (1908)—“The stranger who comes today and stays tomorrow”—but rather on the continuous forms of mobility of people in the transnational space. This group of scholars examines migrants who do not leave with the aim of settling in another country, but rather tend to remain mobile to maintain or improve their quality of life at their place of origin, and who cross borders through short-term movements—regular or undocumented—for work and/or trade. As this theoretical

orientation is highly relevant to the example of the cabaret dancers, in the following Sections I will provide some ethnographic examples that depict this ideal type more in detail.

Morokvasic surveyed Polish women working as domestic helpers in Germany, whom she calls *pendulaires* (2003, 114), disclosing the way they create a transnational migratory space. The women have established a system of rotation so they can go home at regular intervals, while other women take up their cleaning or other jobs in Germany. Usually, a group of four to five women share both employers and housing. Each such group has a connection with a German female citizen with a stable address that it can use for job searches. The regularity of their commute seems to be determined by their concern for the family in Poland; they try to optimize the opportunities and minimize the obstacles related to their productive and reproductive work. The women neither aim for success away from their native town nor do they want to settle in Germany. Mobility is precisely the capital needed for transnationalism of this kind to develop.

Forms of transnational circular mobility are also widespread among traders. Thus Tarrus (1993, 2002) speaks of the new nomads who, by creating circular territories, can at one and the same time belong here and there. He describes how male Algerians contribute to a thriving economic exchange between Marseilles, Belgium, Italy, and Spain involving a wide variety of goods. They are not diasporic or ethnic entrepreneurs in the sense of the first form of transnationalism but rather nomadic entrepreneurs. Again, they do not intend to settle in France, Belgium, or Spain but rather are home-oriented while creating and exploiting a specific transnational space for their informal business. Moret (2009) has examined the way Somali women are implicated in a kind of *star-shape-mobility* while trading different goods. Their mobility is characterized by a constant movement back and forth between different locations while always returning to their place, where their family stays.

Suitcase trading is another activity relying on mobility: It is a commercial activity that basically depends on the person's mobility know-how and physical movement. All over the world, women have developed the art of travelling and smuggling jewellery and money, clothes, perfumes, and other items. For instance, Schmoll (2005) describes a group of Tunisian women who travel to Naples on a regular basis to buy items, which later will be sold in Tunisia. These women often travel in groups and establish a network of contact persons in Naples—primarily sedentarized migrants—whom they meet to do business with. These traders have acquired a specific

form of “*savoir bouger*” (Tarrius 2002) such as knowing the route, the places of trade, the intermediaries, or some Italian. They can exploit their femininity to overcome possible constraints, using ruses such as putting on head scarves or placing underpants on the top of their suitcases to avoid too close an inspection by Tunisian custom officers (Tarrius 2002, 145).

Freeman (1997) provides another example of such suitcase traders in the Bajan off-shore industries. Here the women combine wage work, as data processors in foreign-owned transnational office-factories, with informal suitcase trading and varying degrees of domestic or productive work. The data workers’ informal trade includes selling casually imported goods. Their formal employer often facilitates their travels. For example, employees of Barbados’s informatics company may take advantage of travel voucher bonus points earned through high productivity rates or exemplary attendances and team spirit to fly to Miami, Caracas, San Juan, or New York to purchase goods and sewing material, which they will sell upon their return. Again, the women do not try to emigrate to another country, but develop a contemporary form of circular migration.

Such forms of shuttle, rotation, star-shaped, or circular migration can also include work in the entertainment or sex industry: some women travel across borders as weekend prostitutes, which enables them to keep their job at home while doubling or tripling their salaries in one trip (Morokvasic, Muñst, and Metz-Goöckel 2008). The Filipina entertainers in Tokyo, described by Parrenñ as Salazar (2010), are another example. These circular migrants engage in repeated short periods of work abroad. While they settle in Tokyo, for instance, to learn enough Japanese to communicate with clients, their intention is to return home and they are unlikely to seek long-term residency. The Filipina entertainers are target earners, they earn money in Japan and spend it in the Philippines and they retain feelings of loyalty to their own country. As such, their pattern of settlement does not—as argued by Parrenñ as Salazar—fit into the classic definition of transnational migrants.

To “Sedentarize” in order to Be Mobile? A Call for Combining the Two Models

All those examples show the ways people on the move develop, construct, and occupy transnational spaces while remaining mobile. Yet, what do these descriptions have in common and what distinguishes them from the classical theoretical orientation? The ethnographic accounts suggest that it is often women who are involved in this kind of mobile transnational activities. In other words, until the 1990s, studies of transnational practices of sedentarized migrants

excluded women (Morokvasic 1984) as the gender approach only recently gained ground (Donato et al. 2006; Kofman 1999; Pessar and Mahler 2003). Yet, as the examples suggest, women are at the forefront of studies of transnational practices that involve regular and continuous mobility.

Various scholars have observed an increased demand for women migrants in the global market due to post-industrial economic restructuring and the establishment of a new gendered international division of labor (Hochschild 2002; Nash and Fernandez-Kelly 1983; Sassen 1996): These processes result in more migrant women finding their way to factories, public service (e.g., nurses), domestic work, and the sex industry in industrialized countries. The implication of women in such circular transnational activities forms part of these conditions of (gendered) globalization but the predominance of women in circular migration movements might also be related to gender representations and the division of labor in the household and the women's mothering role. Men, constructed as "breadwinners," send money to family staying behind and seldom return, while migrant women try to combine caring for the family with their work by returning more often. In other words, such transnational practices probably allow women to consolidate and combine their productive and reproductive work.

Another point underlined by this second form of transnationality is the importance of the mobility capital of the people involved and the different makeup of their transnational social capital when compared with the sedentary migrants. Suitcase traders and other circulating women do not aspire to be integrated as wage earners in western cultural models and are not migrants in the Fordist sense of the term. Moreover, the social capital exploited for their transnational activities is not based on strong but rather on "weak" relations (Granovetter 1973): Trust and solidarity, necessary in order to circulate, are built up with friends and acquaintances rather than with close relatives as is the case for sedentarized migrants. To construct this kind of mobility capital, women develop specific forms of knowledge, which allow them to continue to be mobile. I thus argue that, in order to continue to circulate, the women have to sedentarize to some degree—learning some of the language, building bridges with people familiar with the local context, etc. In other words, circular transnational mobility is only possible when the women develop some "sedentarizing" elements in their transnational way of being.

In the remaining parts of the paper, I will show how the transnational practices of the cabaret dancers can be understood in terms of the mobility approach. The specific milieu in which they are

employed—the sex industry—however, adds some interesting elements while introducing elements of the classic approach to transnationalism.

The Study Design

The material on which this article draws comes from a study conducted in Switzerland in 2005 on the working and living conditions of cabaret dancers in Switzerland. Two types of data sources were used: first, we conducted thirty interviews with key persons from the federal and cantonal authorities, employment agencies, advisory bodies, and night club owners in Switzerland. Through these expert interviews we tried, on the one hand, to approach the legal situation and authorization practices with regard to cabaret dancers and, on the other hand, to shed light on their working and living conditions from different perspectives.

Second and more important, we looked at the subjects' view of their own working conditions through the seventy interviews with the cabaret dancers themselves. As sex work is still considered taboo and the dancers often find themselves caught between exploitation and their own economic interests, research in this field poses some specific methodological challenges (Shaver 2005). Working in the sex industry is often a stigma, which increases the risk of getting “socially desirable responses” (Meston 1998; Paulhus 2002).

As we had to rely partially on external interviewers, who had access to the cabaret dancers or who spoke their languages, unstructured interview techniques were not considered as it would have been difficult to ensure similar approaches and comparable levels of information. We therefore opted for a semi-standardized questionnaire and written guidelines of questionnaire use, which were discussed during collective and individual interview training. The questionnaire consisted of closed and open questions that were translated into the dancers' mother tongues (German, English, French, Russian, Romanian, or Spanish).

In the interviews, we were interested not only in the work of the cabaret dancers in Switzerland but also in their decisions to come to Switzerland as dancers, their life trajectories in general, and their future plans. We used snowball sampling as at first it seemed the best possible way to get access to this population. As it turned out, however, this sampling strategy did not work; only six of the seventy dancers were contacted through this method. We thus opted for targeted sampling by cooperating with gatekeepers who contacted potential interview partners on their behalf. One difficulty of working with gatekeepers, however, is their limited contact. Thus,

relying on only one gatekeeper to form a sample may result in highly biased data. The solution was to diversify the gatekeepers. In all, we used seven channels: nightclub owners, women's organizations, placement agencies, local administration, interviewers, other interview partners, and private persons.

The seventy dancers we interviewed came from eleven different countries: 70 percent were from Eastern Europe, mainly from the Ukraine (twenty seven) and Russia (fourteen), but also two each from Latvia, Bulgaria, Moldavia, and Rumania. Fourteen came from Latin America, mainly from the Dominican Republic (nineteen), but also from Brazil (four), five were from Thailand, one was from Germany and one from Morocco. There are three different profiles according to origin: dancers from Thailand generally had a low educational background, all were married to Swiss citizens, and some have children. Most Latin American dancers are also married and have children: their children and families stay, however, in the country of origin. The Eastern Europeans are the youngest dancers and are mostly single. They can be distinguished from the other two groups by their higher education. These differences will be relevant when it comes to analyzing their transnational way of being.

Understanding the Transnational Morphologies of Cabaret Dancers

Becoming a Transnational Actor in the Transnational Sex Industry

How do the dancers end up in a cabaret in Switzerland and what are their motivations for becoming mobile and coming to dance in a night club? A Russian dancer explained:

I was living with my mother not far from St Petersburg. We had a tiny apartment. My mother has a small pension. I finished university and I couldn't find a decent job. I had done a bit of arts school, so I can dance and I decided to go away somewhere as a dancer. I had the choice between being a market vendor with a higher degree or earning more by dancing, even if this job isn't any better than the other.

Or, as a woman from the Dominican Republic put it:

Before, I worked as a controller in a shoe factory in the export processing zone. This was a lot of work and a low salary. I had a lot of problems; above all, my financial situation was very difficult. With my salary I had to support my family and sometimes this was not possible. Everything I earned was spent for

food. I had to support my mother and my two smaller brothers. I wanted to change my situation; I wanted to earn money for them, to buy a small house. That's why I came here.

These quotes, which are representative, indicate why these dancers developed a mobility project: these are, without exception, both economic and affective. All the women interviewed aspired to a better economic situation for themselves and for their families. Those who had worked in their country of origin—80 percent of the dancers had been integrated into the labor market before leaving for the first time—reported that they did not have enough money to meet their needs or that they wanted to earn more money to ensure their future, perhaps buy a house, set up a business, or continue their education (the latter for Eastern Europe dancers).

The pre-migration life situation of the women differed considerably, mirroring the socioeconomic and political structures of the respective (gendered) labor markets. The dancers from Latin America worked either in the factories of the export processing zones, or as cleaners, domestics, sellers, or hairdressers, whereas the women from Thailand were mainly active in the local sex industry or unemployed. The dancers from Eastern Europe with their above-average level of education were also integrated into the labor market before becoming dancers; however, they usually held jobs that did not match their qualifications. Thus, in the sample, there were women with postgraduate degrees working as secretaries, dress-makers, saleswomen, or in the tertiary sector.

Affective strategies are as important as economic aspirations, notably for the Latin American and Thai women who had considerable financial responsibilities for other family members—mothers, brothers, or their own children. “Family love” was an important push factor for their temporary migration project. These findings support Mai and King's (2009) plea for an “emotional turn” in migration and mobility studies, meaning that emotions, especially love and affection, are critical to understand migration decision-making and behavior.

These coexistent economic and affective migration motivations have far-reaching consequences once the dancers are in Switzerland: money and love are invested in the country of origin and not in the host country. The interviews revealed that most dancers send remittances on a regular basis. Oso Casas' (2010, 53) observations on Latin American sex workers in Spain hold for cabaret dancers: remittances transmit “love.” In other words, such economic and affective homeward bonds support the circulatory character of the dancer's mobility pattern. Parreñas Salazar (2010) has observed

similar phenomena among Filipina entertainment workers in Tokyo, who see migration as a process of putting their lives in the Philippines on hold. From the beginning of their stay in Tokyo, they plan the so-called *sayonara* parties (goodbye parties) and they regularly send boxes home to the Philippines, filled with goods that they start to collect after arrival. Such practices symbolize their economic and affective homebound orientation.

The dancers' economic and affective reasons for mobility can be realized thanks to transnational networks. The women who come to work as night club dancers in Switzerland are mainly recruited by friends or acquaintances who already have some experience in the sex industry. They play an important role as go-betweens with the agencies that find jobs for the dancers in Switzerland, obtain the necessary papers, and contact the cabarets.⁴ One dancer from the Ukraine shared her experience:

A friend of my cousin who had worked as a dancer in Switzerland gave us the telephone number of an agency there. We phoned, and the man asked us to send some photos and an email address where we could be contacted.

We are thus dealing with chain migration (Fawcett 1989; Massey et al. 1993) or chain mobility, although it differs from other traditional chain migrations in that there is one more "chain" than normal: the contact between the dancer and the agency is made by an acquaintance. The usual liaison between employers and future migrants is made by placement agencies and not by friends or acquaintances. The agencies, who operate either in the dancers' country of origin or in Switzerland, sometimes share information among themselves. They are themselves transnational players and they set up networks that, in some cases, are worldwide.⁵ No dancer is directly engaged by a cabaret: the cabarets cooperate with agencies that send photos and short descriptions of the potential dancers. The cabaret owners choose the women; the agencies then do the paperwork and take care of the visas.

In this way, through acquaintances and agencies, the dancers are integrated into the sex industry, which is strongly transnational in character in various ways. First, as already mentioned, the placement agents are in a transnational network of night clubs (and maybe other products and services offered by the sex industry), placing the women in different countries. The fact that the sex market is transnational explains why some of the dancers have become transnational players on mobility. A good third of the women interviewed had already worked as dancers in another country, many in Japan, others in Lebanon, South Korea, Bulgaria, Italy, or Australia.

Second, some of the women said they had already been in the sex business in their own countries. In these cases, the local sex industry—where we often find sex tourists from Western countries, as in Thailand—served as a launch pad for the transnational sex market. Here is the story of one woman from Latvia:

After 12 years of schooling I did a four-year training course to become a child psychiatrist. Perestroika brought a political and economic crisis. At that time, I was living with my parents and my brother. Both my parents had lost their jobs, and my brother had fainted several times from sheer hunger, so I decided to work as a prostitute in Riga, where I could earn enough money with the tourists.

One of the interviewed dancers from Thailand told us:

When I was 16 years old, my aunt sent me to Pattaya. There I worked in a brothel. After three years I found work in a bar, but still, I had to support financially my family. Three years ago, I met my husband. After a year, we got married and I came to Switzerland.

The two cases show once more that the entry into the transnational sex industry is motivated by economic as well as affective motivations—work in the sex industry opens up the possibility to earn money to support other household members.

There is a third aspect that sheds a different light on the transnational character of the sex industry: sex is not the only thing the dancers sell; they also sell their sexualized ethnicity or “race.” The category of gender combines with ethnicity to make these women seem “exotic” or just “different.” Asked why cabaret owners prefer to employ only women from outside (western) Europe, one owner told us that this corresponded to customer demand for women that spoke to certain imaginaries. Representations of gender, which are social and cultural constructs, are thus closely linked with representations that construct an ethnic or “racial other,” a process that has its deeper roots in the colonial world (Kempadoo 1998). An owner of a placement agency told us:

I only transmit women according to the criteria put in place by the cabarets. They must be beautiful, have a nice body, and she must be able to speak at least one European language, English or German. Because otherwise she is really defenseless and she does not understand her employer. But the body attributes must be good. Just now, customers want to have women with blonde hair.

Obviously, the criterion changes with time; it depends on which body attribute is “*a` la mode*.” At the time of the interviews, night-club owners mentioned a specific demand for women from Eastern Europe because they are well-educated, tall, and blonde. Prior to this, it was Latin Americans and Thais who were in demand, representing other forms of “ethnicized sexualities.” We are thus dealing with ethnicized or racialized gender representations that are dispersed globally, producing a kind of “transnationalizing desire” (Howe and Rigi 2009). Several overlapping political and cultural processes are at stake, taking place in transnational space and creating a demand for varied, specific ethnicized sex workers.

In sum, economic aspirations and affective reasons underlie the mobility project of the dancers, rendering it simultaneously homeland-bound and short-term-induced. The transnational nature of the sex industry—the transnational action radius of the placement agencies, the local (but transnationalized) sex industries in the country of origin, and a transnational imaginary about sexuality and ethnicized women—renders possible their circulation. In short, the case study of the cabaret dancers fits the second model very well. The next section will reveal elements that are more often highlighted by the classic model of transnationalism.

The Dancers’ Working Conditions and Legal Regulations in Switzerland: Wage-Earning Migrants Constantly on the Move

The situation of cabaret dancers has been of concern to the Swiss federal and cantonal authorities, nongovernment organizations (NGOs) working with women, aid agencies, and the media for the past twenty years. NGOs and politicians have called attention to the precarious nature of the working and living conditions of these dancers and this has led to numerous legal and administrative changes at the federal and cantonal levels, aimed at a stricter regulation of activities.⁶

For instance, there is a specific short-term residence permit (L permit), commonly known as a “dancer’s permit.”⁷ At present, this permit is granted for eight months a year at most, after which the dancers have to leave Switzerland for four months before they come back. Often, the women come to Switzerland for several consecutive years and go back home, or elsewhere, for a few months. Under the law currently in force, the permit for cabaret dancers is the only permit issued to unskilled women from non-European countries wishing to work in Switzerland. A short-term “dancer’s” residence permit is granted to cabaret dancers aged twenty or above. A dancer cannot change her field of activity: she is only entitled to work as a dancer in bars and nightclubs, etc.

After various cases of exploitation were publicly exposed, a number of measures designed to provide better protection for the dancers were introduced. Now the employment and residence conditions for cabaret dancers are laid down in detail. Professional services, gross monthly wages, and social deductions are precisely set out in a model work contract. This explicitly stipulates that the dancers are not allowed to incite customers to consume alcohol or to offer them sexual services. Prostitution and other economic-sexual relations are thus prohibited.⁸ All additional charges agreed upon with the employer—e.g., relating to board and lodging, travel expenses—must appear in the contract. As to the minimum wage, the itemized breakdown and payment of wages are included in this basic contract to prevent inadmissible deductions. This type of permit is thus linked to the women's high degree of mobility; indeed, it actually forces them to be constantly on the move as they have to leave Switzerland after eight months at the latest. In addition to their global circulation, the women move every month to a different cabaret within Switzerland, since the contract tying them to one particular cabaret is generally only for one month.

These specific regulations strengthen the circulatory character of the dancers and their continued orientation toward their homeland, while they limit at the same time their integration into the Swiss society. As will be made clear in the next paragraph, however, there is a discrepancy between the legal regulation and the working reality of the dancers because these regulations not only limit the integration of the dancers into Swiss society, but ironically, also put serious limitations on their ability to earn money, thereby limiting the fulfillment of their ambitions.

*Discrepancy between Working Reality and Legal Bases:
a Burgeoning Business Sense?*

The legal regulations in force in Switzerland have, in effect, turned cabaret dancers into traditional wage-earning migrants as they have a binding labor contract. Unlike the typical circulatory migrants—e.g., suitcase traders, (undocumented) domestic workers, or male nomadic entrepreneurs—the dancers do not work in the informal economy but in a highly regulated setting and they are not self-employed, but rather employed by a specific employer. Dancers are not involved in the product market; they do not sell electronic equipment, cosmetics, clothes, or similar things, as is usually the case. What they sell are their bodies, their sex, and their ethnicized sexuality. Their status as wage-earning migrants thus entails an element of sedentarized transnationality. The dancers are also bound by state regulations, which is not generally the case for freely

circulating traders. The work situation represented in the model contract is similar to that of sedentarized migrants. Some parts of the contract concern legal regulations to which all workers in Switzerland are subjected. Thus, in this way the situation of the dancers is similar to that of the sedentarized migrants.

Still, notwithstanding the legal regulations, almost all the cabaret dancers engage, at least from time to time, in activities that do not appear in their work contract, or which are explicitly forbidden. That is they work on an informal basis. They work longer hours, more often longer than what is allowed in their contract; they encourage customers to drink alcohol, chiefly champagne, as they are often given a percentage of the café-owner's margin on alcohol sales.⁹ And they offer sexual services both during working hours and in their free time. The dancers thus find themselves in a legal vacuum, which places them beyond the reach of controls or legal protection and in the informal part of the economy, similar to the suitcase traders or the nomadic entrepreneurs. Yet these activities are undertaken to some extent on their own initiative, which shows the economic nature of their mobility. Thanks to these services, they can earn an extra CHF 1,000 a month on average (approximately €600). One Russian woman told us:

Sexual services are our main source for earning money. It wouldn't be worth coming here for the wages we get.

Although some of the dancers' activities can be classified as prostitution, they do not see themselves as prostitutes and so avoid taking on an identity as such. Many women say that some of their clients have become good friends. "I keep them company before or after work, and sometimes we may have sex," one Bulgarian woman admitted. "But I don't ask them to pay me for that, just to give me money for the phone or presents and food." These testimonies are a reminder of the continuum in commercial-sexual exchanges between men and women, which is a recurring feature in social organization (Pheterson 2001). As Chimienti (2009) has shown for Switzerland, the dancers have developed strategies of comparison based on principles of hierarchy, to differentiate themselves from women working in the sex industry as street prostitutes or in massage parlors. They recognize that, in general, part of their work involves engaging in sex for payment, but they consider it very different from what they imagine happens in massage parlors or on the street: it can be refused, it is set in a context of social relations (conversation, flirting, and regular visits), it takes place in a "classy" setting far removed from the sleazy, unhealthy conditions experienced by other (foreign) prostitutes; it is valued at its due worth.

In line with their approach to sexual services, the dancers do not consider longer and more frequent working hours as negative *a priori*. “It’s in my own interest to work longer on occasion. When there are good clients it’s worth my while to stay longer,” a dancer from Latvia said. One is tempted to say that these women are strategic economic and social players adept in managing a form of “opportunistic capitalism” on the outer edges of legality by selling their ethnicized sex. All those regulations have been put in place to protect the dancers from exploitation, but, at the same time, they prevent the women from earning as much money as possible, which is why they are here in the first place. As they do not have a permanent migration project but remain oriented toward their homeland, they want to earn as much money as possible to spend it at home. Following the same line of reasoning, they are not interested in having leisure time because they do not want to spend the money in Switzerland, they want to invest it at home.

The story is, however, more complicated than it may seem: some dancers perform these additional services because they are not fully aware of the services that are actually part of their job description. They have only a vague idea of the rights and obligations contained in their work contract. It may be that they do not understand the contract because they do not speak the language in which it is written. The discrepancy between law and practice in the dancers’ work may also be the result of coercion—whether from outside pressures or a situation of dependence on cabaret managers, placement agencies, or even clients. When this is the case, the dancers find themselves in an inextricable situation. They drink alcohol, for instance, because they do not want to run the risk of not having their contract renewed:

We are doing all these things because we need the money. Because the money we earn is not enough. And you see, if you are not willing to do what they [the cabaret owners, the clients] want you to do, then you have to quit and you do not get a next contract (dancer from Ukraine).

Yet, it is the homeward boundedness of the dancers that motivates them to transgress the legal framework and to engage in activities that give them additional money. The precariousness of their situation is due to the conditions attached to the “dancer” permit and to the context of sex work in general. It does not, however, affect all the dancers in the same way. Some of them find themselves in a very difficult situation, particularly women who come to Switzerland for the first time. A considerable number of dancers come to Switzerland just once and never come back. But what are the

conditions that enable others to profit from this situation of “opportunistic capitalism”? To be able to exploit these opportunities in the shadow of legality and informality, the women develop a whole series of vertical, locally anchored relations.

What Does “Sedentarize” Mean in This Context?

One of the main characteristics of such a “transnationality through mobility” is, as the ethnographic examples have illustrated, that the women involved in different forms of transnational mobility need to develop specific forms of knowledge that allow them to continue to move. They must know the intermediaries in order to sell their products, they must be familiar with the routes to take, to invent some ruses in order to smuggle their goods. What specific conditions must be fulfilled that will allow dancers to remain in circulation while making good money?

Some dancers are able to exploit the uncertainties of the situation and achieve their economic ambitions. These are the women who, in the course of their stay in Switzerland, manage to build a network of different actors, who, in turn, provide them with various contacts to help them increase their income and to deal with their precarious situation. These dancers come back again and again to Switzerland and go to dance in other countries.

Who are the most important actors with whom the dancers form ties? First, the placement agencies: often the dancers hear from their colleagues which agencies are able to put them in a “good cabaret”¹⁰ and which do not demand exaggerated amounts for placement services. Dancers often change their agency during the first stay in Switzerland according to the new information they receive. Second, the women accumulate detailed knowledge as to which cabarets are worth working for and which ones are not: this means that they can evaluate which owners behave correctly and which ones should be avoided. If the owner of a cabaret is satisfied with the work of a dancer, she can count on the person to give her another contract in a few months’ time, which renders her situation less precarious. This way, after a while some dancers can choose which cabarets to work in. They become what Price (2000) calls “house girls” who are in a better position to benefit from solidarity with other workers they know through frequent interactions and the cabaret—and thus they see the owner as an ally. The clients are also important actors in these new networks of “locality” in Switzerland. In the interviews, the dancers gave examples of how they formed alliances with their clients to complain or to demand for their rights in situations of exploitation: “I try to get help outside the cabaret. My boyfriend, who was first my client, he helped me when I had

those problems” (dancer from the Ukraine). Notwithstanding the strong competition between the dancers, these colleagues are important as they are a source of a different kind of information. This way the dancers create a locally anchored social capital, giving them access to information that allows them to be able to stay mobile—they get to know where to earn most without taking risks.

As important as those local “bridges” are the strategies and the knowledge the dancers acquire, which allow them to avoid the risks related to the nature of sex work, are important to enhance control over their work environment. For instance, speaking English and German (or French) allows them not only to better access relevant information and exercise control of their working environment but also to better communicate with clients and therefore earn more money. Using the same line of arguments, the interviews showed that the dancers develop ruses for avoiding drinking alcohol all the time (put it away, have a barman as ally, etc.). They also learn to manipulate the clients and their desires by applying what has been called “counterfeit intimacy” (Enck and Preston 1988; Mestemacher and Roberti 2004) and strategic emotional work (Chapkis 1997). For instance, the conscious establishment of relationships that give the appearance of interest can be indicated by body posture or words of endearment. Put differently, the dancers are getting kind of “sedentarized” while staying mobile by acquiring a local social capital and control over their work environment—they settle down, to a certain degree.

Conclusions: Transnational Theory Revisited?

This article has described the transnational mobility pattern of cabaret dancers and suggested an analytical shift in our models of transnationalism. Cabaret dancers represent a heterogeneous group embodying a particular contemporary form of female transnational mobility, demonstrating new conditions for women in an increasingly global area. The dancers start to circulate out of economic aspirations and affective reasons. Their short-term migration projects are intended to earn money for themselves and their close family members. The interwoven economic and emotional motivations results in homeland boundedness. The dancers do not intend to settle down in Switzerland, or in Japan or Bulgaria where they might also be dancing. Money and love are invested in the home country, which, in turn, renders their mobility into a circular and impermanent pattern. The transnational nature of the sex industry—the transnational radius of the placement agencies, the local transnationalized sex industries, a transnationalized desire for ethnicized

sexualities—enhances their circulation and creates specific demands for non-Swiss cabaret dancers.

In other words, the cabaret dancer's mobility is closely articulated with the new international division of labor and highly affected by its gendered character. The legal arrangements in Switzerland strengthen the homeland orientation and prevent the integration of the dancers in the host country: they cannot change their work field, they have to leave Switzerland after eight months, and they move around every month within Switzerland, which inhibits the forging of long-lasting ties. While designed to protect them, the legal regulations however also prevent them from earning money and this is why a lot of dancers engage in informal, illicit activities, reinforcing the precarious nature of their working conditions but giving them additional gain.

The case study highlights two important theoretical elements: it demonstrates first that, a dynamic approach to sex work is theoretically useful as it goes beyond the dichotomy of sex work either as negative or positive: dancing in a Cabaret clearly has exploitative or coercive aspects and gender roles and corresponding hierarchies are partially reinforced. At the same time, there is a degree of agency involved in exotic dancing.

Second, the case study shows that initially the transnationality of the cabaret dancers does not fit into the classic transnational paradigm, focused on sedentarized migrants—but that it perfectly suits the “transnationality through mobility” model. A second look reveals, however that “sedentarizing” elements are also important. We should therefore look at how ideas of the classic theoretical paradigm can deepen our understanding of transnational circular migration. Dancers can be distinguished from other circulating migrants as they are subjected in Switzerland to a status of wage earners and, as such, they are bound to state regulations. In other words, state regulations influence not only transnational practices and integration processes of settled migrants, but are also highly relevant to circulating migrants and their (temporary) settlement processes. While the state and its regulations affect a lot of work on the classic transnational orientation (Bauböck 2003), it is surprising that the state has been found wanting when it comes to discussions of transnational circular migration. In other words, we have to bring back the state and related regulations (immigration as well as integration policies) to understand how they influence circulatory migration patterns.

Although the legal dispositions for dancers attempt to prevent them from integrating into Swiss society by segregating them temporarily and socially, dancers nevertheless settle down to a certain

degree, creating locally anchored social capital, which gives them access to information that enables them to stay mobile. They get to know where and how to earn most without taking risks. In addition, they accumulate specific knowledge in order to increase control of their work environment with its specific risks. Some women do not succeed but other women manage to make the best of their situation, while still others eventually develop marriage projects and try to settle down in Switzerland. In other words, such strategies—mirroring the urgency of the dancers—must be taken in to account when it comes to discussing “assimilation or incorporation processes” not only of sedentarized migrants but also of circulating migrants.

If we aim to develop a common theoretical framework to understand migration’s transnationalism, we need to take into account the experiences of settled as well as of circulating migrants. Perhaps, a more suitable analytic framework for documenting transnational (gender-specific) practices would be to combine the two existing theoretical frameworks, by documenting mobility aspects in settlements of established migrants and sedentarizing elements in circulatory practices of migrants or, in a more general way, by demonstrating how the two models affect each other.

NOTES

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1. The number regarding the cabarets was given by the ASCO, the Association of the Swiss Cabarets and Dancing. The numbers of dancers

are calculated on the basis of data obtained from the Swiss Central Register of Foreigners from the Federal Office for Migration.

2. While many different words exist to describe the work done in night clubs—go-go-girls, striptease dancers, etc.—Swiss law defines cabaret dancers as being “persons (who) present an item as part of a musical show during which—to a musical accompaniment—they undress themselves partly or completely” (Directives of the ordinance limiting the number of foreigners OLE, Annex 4/8c, fig. 1.2).

3. I would like to underscore that these ideal types of theoretical orientations have to be understood in line with Max Weber (1991 [1904]) as a means to grasp and understand conceptually social phenomena. An ideal type here is a model of an abstract nature and serves the purpose of theory building.

4. Of all the interviewed women, only six have been informed about the possibility of working as a dancer in Switzerland by way of newspapers or Internet; all others mentioned social relations.

5. These recruitment processes make the women vulnerable to the danger of exploitation: the women often have to pay huge sums of money for the agencies’ services, especially the first time they come to Switzerland to be a dancer. This places them in a situation of dependence where they can easily be pressured.

6. Similar debates regarding the working conditions and exploitation of strippers are widespread also in other contexts; for instance, in the United States, where there is a considerable corpus of studies about strippers (see, for instance, Barton 2006; Bradley-Engen and Ulmer 2009; Fischer 1996; Forsyth and Deshotels 1997; Price 2000; Roach 2008). However, as the focus of this paper is on *migrant* sex workers, this literature will not be reviewed here but only partially discussed.

7. For a description and discussion of the legal bases, see Mock (2003).

8. In Switzerland, prostitution is not prohibited as such, but it is forbidden for dancers.

9. Selling champagne to clients is the main source of income for the cabarets. So it is in the interest of the cabaret owners to have the dancers incite the customers to drink. Entrance to the cabaret is free of charge for clients, but if they want to talk to one of the dancers, they have to buy drinks. Champagne is thus intimately linked to the imaginary of a cabaret and to the economic survival of these enterprises.

10. For a typology of the cabarets, see Thie´vent (2008).

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