

On freedom, public space and women's experiences of prostitution. The (in)visible world of the Bois de Vincennes in Paris¹

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Abstract.

This paper focuses on Nigerian women's experiences of prostitution in a public space, the Bois de Vincennes in Paris, as democratic experiences questioning the value of freedom in pluralistic societies. It is based on the very provisional outputs of a collaborative field-research. It relies on an ecological-pragmatist perspective of analysis that suggests to consider public spaces as frontiers of capacitation: in-between spaces where Nigerian women reinvent themselves in the face of international and local, planned and unplanned, events. The aim of the paper is to rethink the political and cultural value of public spaces for just and inclusive territorial transformations.

Key-words: prostitution, freedom, public spaces, social justice, cultural pluralism

Prostitution constitutes a moral controversy, a public problem but also an urban and regional issue. On the one hand, diverse social groups, considered "undesirable" or "deviant", experience prostitution in public spaces by practicing their own forms of territorial appropriation and rights claiming. On the other hand, a public debate trapped in the ideological opposition abolitionists/pro-sex workers and, therefore, in the binary logic forced/free prostitution, tends to invisibilize experiences that question what human freedom means in the face of extreme human rights violations taking place in cities.

Nigerian women in situation of prostitution have been mainly represented as victims of human trafficking for sexual exploitation. Their freedom is supposed to be inhibited by traditional family and gender relations, Nigerian organized transnational networks and the black magic. Research on this topic has been conducted in clinical and court settings or in ngos. This paper extends the insight to Nigerian women's experiences of prostitution in a public space, the Bois de Vincennes in Paris, and is based on the very provisional outputs of a collaborative field-research combining ethnography, life histories and participatory research².

The following research questions will be taken in account: How has the relationship between prostitution and public space been studied? Can we confine

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² I was engaged as a volunteer for three years in the activities – mainly street unit and reception of Nigerian women in situation of prostitution – of the Saint Rita branch of the association *Aux captifs, la libération* in Paris. The ethnographic work I conducted would not have been possible without cooperating with Charlotte Sarah and Amel Selka, social workers in the association, who were also strongly involved, along with a few Nigerian women, Latin men and women, in the activities of the "Zuzulab", a pioneer experiment of participatory research addressing the issue of sexual exploitation, which took place at the EHESS in Paris from April 2023 to January 2024. The results of the "Zuzulab" are not reported in this paper.

Nigerian women's experiences of prostitution in the Bois de Vincennes to the horizon of the virtues of public spaces as spaces of co-presence of strangers? What arrangements do Nigerian women practice in the face of local and international, planned and unplanned, events affecting their margins of action? To what extent these women's experiences of public spaces can give a contribution to cities and urban regions more sensitive to the defense of human rights and cultural pluralism?

1. Prostitution as a territorial issue: Chicago, between Spain and the Balkans, the Bois de Vincennes

It was in the days of the Chicago School of Sociology that the social and territorial consequences of the moral crusades against prostitution were studied and the abolitionist model of care was questioned (Reckless, 1933). The red-light district was depicted as a zone of transition between the working men's world, the business district, and the women's world, the residential neighborhoods. It was an area where identities and cultures used to freely collapse and fuse. The repression of prostitution had unexpected consequences. On the one hand, vice migrated from the city to the borderlands outside city limits, making emerge a new area of transition where gang syndicates practiced their traditional tactics of invasion and occupation through intimidation of police graft and political alliances. On the other hand, women got through a new process of emancipation and individualization, rather than be redeemed by abolitionists. The brothel prostitutes, expression of organized vice business, were replaced by the "call girls", that is, a class of unregimented women outside the brothel, working in independent, emancipated and clandestine basis in apartments and flats and vice resorts in decentralized areas in Chicago, preserving their individual freedom and avoiding stigma and hardship of prostitution.

Following the Chicago School of Sociology, Tarrus (2022) extends the insight to the territories of transnational circulation traced by prostitutes who, moving between the Balkans and Spain, adjusted themselves to regional forms of cooperation between organized crime, migrant populations, illicit trafficking and local politics. Tarrus distinguishes three cross-border "moral regions": (a) around the Black Sea with the purpose to manage the traffic of women for prostitution in the Arabs Emirates and in Spain; (b) the transition area between the Balkans and Italy where the management of drug trafficking is handled by Calabrian, Apulian and Albanian-speaking mafias; (c) the French-Spanish Catalan space where the new mafias succeed in expelling the Neapolitan camorra in the management of drug trafficking and prostitution.

Unlike the individualization of prostitution undertaken by the Chicago's "call girls," women of the Balkans, moving throughout these moral regions, acquire a cosmopolitan sense of living. They propose their own idea of collective empowerment through the establishment of an NGO that supports projects of development in the Balkans thanks to earnings coming from prostitution, gives rise to an immense network of out-of-customs trade throughout Europe, reveals the force of emotional bonds shared by women having the painful experience of prostitution in common.

This paper focuses on Nigerian women's experiences of prostitution in a public space, the Bois de Vincennes in Paris, as democratic experiences questioning the meaning of freedom in pluralistic societies.

Nigerian prostitution has been represented as a story of globalization rooted in organized and transnational movements of trafficking and in a system of pawning and debt developed in West Africa in the context of colonial urbanization (Naanen, 1991).

Research conducted in clinical settings shows the magical-religious dimension of Nigerian prostitution: a ritual, the *juju*, is practiced to validate the asymmetrical power between the madame and the cadet, guarantees the paying off of the debt; regulate women's desire for migration and emancipation from generational, familial, and gender relations in Nigerian society (Taliani, 2019). In France research has also focused on NGOs and courts (Jakšić 2016; Jakšić and Ragaru, 2021) and relationships between prostitution, organized crime and ethnic community (Lavaud-Legendre, 2013).

This paper adopts an ecological-pragmatist perspective to explore Nigerian women's experience of prostitution in a public place. It relies on the notion of "experience" as the result of interaction between living creatures and the environments, the "close connection between doing and suffering" that can arise from interaction, the reflective nature of such a connection (Dewey, 1920). It puts in the foreground the notion of freedom, not as freedom of will, but assuming that it is: (a) rooted in the environment, in and among actual facts and events (Dewey, 1922); (b) based on the ability to carry out plans; on the capacities to vary plans, change the course of action, experience novelties; on the power of desire (*ibid.*); (c) the result of the creative and reflective integration of impulses and interests of the self in social relationships (Mead 1938a).

Thomas (1923) studied how the young prostitutes' behavior was regulated by four wishes: desire for new experiences, desire for security, desire for response, desire for recognition. To address Nigerian women's experiences of prostitution in the Bois de Vincennes in Paris, the focus is on a public space as a "milieu of life" (Cefaï, 2019) where Nigerian women try to integrate different impulses, emotions and desires, deal with moral, affective and cognitive troubles, as well as with concerns and problematic situations, reinvent the frontiers between different "webs of life" (Mead 1938b) – inside and outside prostitution. Thus, we definitely leave the long-standing dominant horizon of the virtues of public spaces as spaces of co-presence of strangers and we enter an ecological-pragmatist perspective on urban public spaces sensitive to the notion of transaction (Crosta, 2010; Proto, forthcoming), to the study of the relations between activities and movements in urban public spaces and the political controversies in democratic political spaces (Terzi and Relieu, 2003), to the urban and regional analysis of the relations between globalization, social injustices and cultural pluralism (Cefaï, 2024; Proto, 2023), to the current debate on culture and policy-making (Cremaschi et al., 2021).

2. Route de la Pyramide: an archipelago of trajectories of freedom³

The Bois de Vincennes is the largest green space in Paris. Located in the 12th *arrondissement*, it is separated from it by the passage of the Boulevard périphérique, a beltway encircling Paris. Route de la Pyramide is a street, 3 km in length, within the Bois de Vincennes, connecting the suburbs of Vincennes and Joinville-le-Pont. Everyday Nigerian women reach by public transportation this street for prostitution in the afternoons or evenings while they live mainly in apartments managed by "maman" or "brokers" in suburbs of the northern metropolitan Paris region, as Sarcelles, Villier-le-Bel, Aulnay-sous-Bois or Saint-Denis.

Their journeys to Europe mainly began in Benin City. By bus they reached Kano and, crossing the border with Niger, passed through Maradi or Zinder to arrive in

³ All Nigerian women's names as of this paragraph are not real.

Agadez. They then crossed the border to Libya, continued to Qatmmu or Sebha, and reached the coastal cities of Zuwara, Tripoli or Missatah. Others say that they crossed multiple African states before reaching Libya. The routes differed considerably upon their arrival in Italy. Women reached by boat Lampedusa, some of them moved to Catania and lived there for two or three years, before coming to Paris. Others have slowly made their way up Italy - Bari, Naples, Rome, Milan – before arriving in France. Others ones moved by sea from Libya to Lampedusa, from Lampedusa to Sardinia, from Sardinia to the North of Italy and, then by train, from Bergamo directly to Paris.

There's a strong connection between international events and changes in the presence of Nigerian women on route de la Pyramide.

First, as long as the civil war starting in 2014 in Libya strengthened cooperation between Nigerian trafficking organizations and Libyan militias, the journey to Europe turned into a real opportunity for so many Nigerian women arriving to Italy by boat. Their number soared from 1,500 in 2014 to 9,000 in 2016 and to 11,000 in 2017⁴. Meanwhile, in Paris, their presence on route de la Pyramide grew dramatically: social workers used to encounter 175 women in one hour in 2017, rather than 50 as it was in 2014. During these years judges and police officers raised awareness on the criminal evolution of Nigerian human trafficking. At the end of 2018, according to OCRTEH (*Office central pour la répression de la traite des êtres humains*), the management of prostitution in France was based on closer collaboration between "maman" and members of Nigerian cult organizations⁵: a highly organized money laundering system related to prostitution was identified and was based on the collection of proceeds from multiple cities, their transfer to Paris - to a hairdressing salon and a grocery store in the 18th *arrondissement* that acted as a depository of funds - and their sorting, by bus or by plane, to other European and African countries before reaching Nigeria.

Second, in Nigeria, on March 9 2018, Oba Ewuare II, the King of Benin ordered native doctors of Edo State to revoke all of the curses and oaths – the *juju* - placed on women exposed to human trafficking, himself invoking a curse on all those native doctors who continue to force or coerce girls into taking oaths. If the *juju* was the arrangement supposed to guarantee the paying off of the debt to the "maman" who sponsored the journey toward Europe, Nigerian women experienced the Oba edict as a liberation from debt while cultists and "maman", scared by the edict, were supposed to leave young women ready to reach Europe in Libya. The number of Nigerian women crossing the Mediterranean to arrive in Italy decreased significantly in 2018: 1250 out of 23370⁶. They disappeared altogether from the landing statistics as of 2019 in Italy and also on the streets of many Italian cities in 2019.

Nonetheless, Nigerian women remained in large numbers on route de la Pyramide in Paris until the Covid-19 crises. During the first confinement in spring 2020, they disappeared from the street and then gradually returned to it, albeit not in the same large numbers. If Nigerian women experienced the Oba edict in 2018 as an opportunity of debt liberation, the Covid-19 crises controversially extended their

⁴ <https://www.iom.int/news/un-migration-agency-issues-report-arrivals-sexually-exploited-migrants-chiefly-nigeria>;

<http://www.libertaciviliimmigrazione.dlci.interno.gov.it/it/documentazione/statistica/cruscotto-statistico-giornaliero>.

⁵ Nigerian cults are criminal organizations that have arisen in Nigeria since the 1970s, initially configured as secret student associations, later devoted to criminal activities.

⁶ <http://www.libertaciviliimmigrazione.dlci.interno.gov.it/it/documentazione/statistica/cruscotto-statistico-giornaliero>.

margins of freedom. Many of them realized that they could live without prostitution and asked aid to associations to get out of prostitution in large numbers. Meanwhile, route de la Pyramide has become a key-reference for inter-urban and intra-European circulations of adult Nigerian women in search of higher profits.

There are women still stable for years on route de la Pyramide, who try to maintain their own spheres of action on the street.

Camille is the oldest presence on the street. She works in a van and is familiar with social workers on the street but never asks for assistance. She lives in Saint Denis suburb. She stays in the van, in bra and loincloth, behind the wheel, without a license, playing video games, talking on the phone. Sharing the van with her means for women to pay a percentage of their earnings directly to her, rather than only to the owner of the van. She leaves every three months to Grosseto in Italy where she has lived for many years. There, she lost a 5-year son in 2016 but has a 4-year old daughter who lives with her sister, an employee in a cleaning company. Sometimes she talks about a husband living in the UK whom she would like to join, other times she complains because she cannot get papers to work in France. One evening in March 2022, she was very upset. Although she was the eldest daughter, she was unable to leave Paris while her younger brother and sister were moving to England for study and would have soon been joined by their father⁷.

In addition to Camille, at least two other women are present steadily on route de la Pyramide. Both of them, not in a van. The first one is Helene. She stays at the edge of the woods, at the margins of the street, always in the same spot for years, since 2016. Determined. She wants to remain in Paris. Different girls follow next to her. Starting in December 2022, a woman in her fifties, just arrived from Marseille, appears next to her. Helen is friendly with her but aloof. Both are always hungry and ask for condoms. The other woman stable on the street is Joan. Robust, provocative and ironic, she too wants to remain in Paris. She does not hide in the bushes but sits on the sidewalk. Landed in Sicily, she was taken to a reception center in Milan and after a few days was on a train to Paris. Her grandmother, mother and aunt live in Ventimiglia, on the border between Italy and France. The aunt is married to an Italian. Joan flaunts daily contacts with Lampedusa from where she receives news of shipwrecks and deaths during the landings. "The destination is assigned to you in Libya. If the destination is France, you must go to France," she repeats forcefully as she laughs on the sidewalk and responds in kind to the insults the women receive from speeding motorists on the street.

As long as the Covid-19 fosters Nigerian women intra-European circulation, the Bois de Vincennes turns into a milieu of multiple fast outsiders' accommodations. They all practice prostitution on foot.

Violet appears in the bushes on an afternoon in June 2021. Far away from the road. She looks uncomfortable. Her eyes are dull. She has been a week in Paris after six years in Spain. She lives in Sevran, 20 km north of Bois de Vincennes. She says that it was she of her own accord who left Spain. Then, a "we passed through Marseille but there is too much violence there and too many people of different nationalities. Here are my people." A week later, Violet has already changed her attitude. Long hair with blond braids, confident, smiling, she no longer stands hidden in the bush but laughingly negotiates with men on the sidewalk and disappears with a few of them into the bush.

⁷ Many of the Nigerian women sexually exploited are the eldest daughters in their families.

Cherry is at the margins of route de la Pyramide in February 2023. She is kind and smiling. She was transferred in a very few days from Lampedusa to Verona, where she stayed for six months before reaching Paris. "In Verona it's very difficult to get regularization. The documents have greater strength depending on the city. Those in Verona are stronger than those in Milan and even stronger than those in Turin," she tells social workers showing her clear vision of the attitudes of Italian institutions. She is trying to obtain documents in France and then return to Italy, to her boyfriend. She underlines that she is very attached to Italy. One evening she kneels to thank God for sending the Italians to rescue her at sea. Another night she brings dinner to social workers because she considers them part of her family in France. Still another night she cries because her friends encourage her to file a complaint against a woman as her "maman" by perjuring herself: this is the new strategy of hierarchical inversion among Nigerian women in order to regularize themselves quickly. After a little more than a year, in March 2024, she is still there, on foot, at the margins of route de la Pyramide.

Prostitution is practiced on route de la Pyramide even for very short periods. They come from Turin, Milan, Southern Italy, as well as from Normandy or other French cities to spend a few weeks or months in the Bois de Vincennes thanks to local connections. There are also women travelling between multiple French cities. At the same time, women in Paris may come back to the Bois after a long time. On March 2024 Pumpkin, purple curly wig, stands alone, on foot, on the sidewalk at the very beginning of route de la Pyramide. She looks scared, hesitant. She lives in Paris and works as a caregiver to the elderly but must pay her rent in a lull between the end of one job and the beginning of a new commitment. She stresses that she will only be on route de la Pyramide that evening. Two weeks later she is behind the wheel of a van, smiling and thanking friends who have allowed her to work inside the van in a more protected way, as many others women who prostitute themselves in the Bois de Vincennes on weekends, despite having papers.

3. Vans & bushes: a "precarious habitat" towards the Olympic Games.

Nigerian women have come to Europe pushed by the desire for emancipation and found themselves in street prostitution. They have learnt how to use route de la Pyramide to maintain peace. Who practices prostitution on foot in the afternoon reaches a sandy path next to the sidewalk, turn trees on the sandy path into hangers for their bags and vests, and wait for clients by sitting at the edge of the bushes and sharing the sandy path with families, children or groups on horseback. In the evening they move to the sidewalk and arrange themselves mostly in pairs, always keeping a distance of 20-25 meters each other, this time sharing the sidewalk with a few joggers and bike riders.

In the post-pandemics, although the Bois de Vincennes is becoming a key-reference for intra-European circulation of Nigerian women, fewer and fewer practice prostitution on foot. Many of them move to the system of prostitution inside vans.

About 20 vans station on route de la Pyramide in the evening. Women change their clothing, put on makeup, and put their wigs directly inside the van, which is organized in a "control-zone", behind the wheel, and a "work-zone" separated by a curtain. Lit lanterns on the dashboard indicate the women's availability. A heater warms the van cockpit in winter. Women inside vans may be about 30-40 in the evening. Two women usually share the van, sometimes as many as three, one of which, prostitutes herself in the bush.

In the early 2000s, when Nigerian girls appeared in the Bois de Vincennes, there was an agreement between the BRP (*Brigade de répression du proxénétisme*) and the "tradis" ("les traditionnelles") - those women - French or French-speaking - who used to practice prostitution in the Bois after abandoning the streets and apartments of rue Saint-Denis, in the 2nd *arrondissement*, in the late 1990s. To prostitute in a van, one had to have a driver's license; be alone; comply with all sanitary regulations for the prevention of any sexually transmitted disease; and not work on Wednesdays and weekends. Nigerian women transgressed the agreement. The stationing of the vans became a disturbance of urban decency for residents of the municipalities on the edge of the Bois and caused their protests, the adoption by municipalities of special measures to prohibit the stationing of the vans, various appeals to the Minister of the Interior and, finally, in 2003, the approval of the law for internal security - Law 2003-239 of March 18 2003. It was presented as a way to fight against the rise of foreign prostitution networks and pimping starting from the end of the 1990s. It reintroduced the crime of solicitation and also the crime of human trafficking: Nigerian women found themselves both as criminals and victims at the same time. Court convictions for soliciting increased more than threefold in less than just three years, rising from 291 in 2003 to almost 1,000 in 2005. In 2004 alone, 2,000 vans were seized. Pimping crimes remained stagnant.

The van constitutes a cell of intimacy and protection in public space for women but also an essential economic unit of Nigerian pimping. In the summer of 2022, stationed in single file, morning and afternoon, alongside the Castle of Vincennes, are as many as thirty Nigerian vans, together with the vans of Moldovans, Ukrainians, and Romanians who practice import-export of food products along that road. They are stationed within the administrative area of the municipality of Paris, albeit on the edge with the territory of the municipality of Vincennes. Actually, no prostitution is practiced inside the vans when stationed alongside the Castle of Vincennes, but following protests by the Mayor of Vincennes in November 2022, only a few remain there. Some are left all day on route de la Pyramide; others find space on avenue de Saint Maurice, still inside the Bois de Vincennes, albeit further away from route de la Pyramide.

Managing the circulation of the vans requires "disguised engagements" in the public space. We are not in the horizon of Goffman's civil inattention (1963), i.e., unfocused interaction between strangers aimed at maintaining public order, but in the course of situations of "false inattention", i.e., in the course of brief focused interactions - the delivery of a van - between young Nigerian men and young Nigerian women who pretend not to know each other. In June 2023, at dusk, while the green area near the Castle of Vincennes is crowded with passersby, a young woman, in her mid-20s, warms up a white van's engine. A young man, jeans, blue polo shirt, sunglasses, in his mid-20s too, down below checks the tires, opens the rearview mirror. They don't talk to each other. While she warms the engine looking straight ahead, he uses a tablet with his back to her. When the girl moves the white van from the parking lot, he looks at the tablet for a few more minutes, crosses the street, and gets into his turquoise car. The white van heads toward route de la Pyramide, the turquoise car in the opposite direction, toward Paris.

Still moments of "disguised engagements" are those involving the removal of the vans from route de la Pyramide. In the evenings, elderly white men take the vans away, keeping the Nigerian girls hidden below so that they are not visible on the street. Other times, in the morning, around 9 a.m., white men in their 40s move the vans from route de la Pyramide to Alfortville or Maison Alfort.

The circulation of vans shows that the management of Nigerian prostitution is not a matter of ethnicity, nor of woman-to-woman interaction but the result of a multiscale and interethnic symbiosis made of disguised engagements involving "maman", cult members, money collectors, drivers, garage owners. This symbiosis can still be disrupted.

The displacements of the vans can cause frictions with other social groups. At the end of September 2021, a few months after the Nigerian vans have reappeared on route de la Pyramide, following the Covid-19 deconfinement, a group of about ten white men jump out of a truck. They are not clients. They argue animatedly with a few black women. Speaking in English, they seem to threaten them. Then, they get back into the van and drive away. Are these conflicts with the drivers who take the vans off the road in the morning, or with the Moldovan, Ukrainian, and Romanian traders from whom they take space by parking on the same street beside the Castle of Vincennes?

With regard to client violence, Nigerian groups have to find more visible arrangements to protect prostitution in the Bois. Lurking in the bush with clients exposes girls to all sorts of violence. On the street they limp as a result of scuffles with clients to defend themselves from assault and theft - of money or cell phones. At night women are exposed to vandalism by speeding cars that throw firecrackers into the street or shatter van windows by firing air guns. Violence against women can become extreme. On the night of June 8-9, 2022, a man from Guadalupe, who had just entered as a client in a van, attempts with a knife to slit the girl's throat from behind, while she was busy picking up a condom. It is her friend behind the wheel who intervenes: she puts the man on the run, calls the police in vain, calls for help on route de la Pyramide looking for someone who knew how to drive. She finds only one girl out of about twenty vans on the street, and with the latter driving the van, she manages to take the bleeding girl, saving her, to the Vincennes police station, which alerts firefighters and the Samu (*Service d'Aide Médicale Urgente*) for emergency hospitalization. After this event, for the first time, black watchmen appear on route de la Pyramide: they stand on the sandy path near the bush and show familiarity with the woman by calling the few girls still on foot and those inside the vans by name.

Protecting prostitution inside vans finally requires the elimination of any autonomous women's group. In June 2021 five girls stand on foot at the margins of route de la Pyramide. They all move together along the street. One of them keeps a bottle of whiskey in her purse because "she thinks too much". Two women share a purse where they collect the money they earn. They joke, entertaining potential clients by dancing. The fourth woman provokes: "Am I Purity or Anti-Purity?". The fifth woman follows them, smiling silently. In October 2022 the group no longer exists. One of them has not been on route de la Pyramide for some time. The woman with the whiskey bottle stands alone across the street, ignored by all the others. She says she is leaving Paris because of what "bad boys" are doing. All the other girls who were part of the group are inside vans.

Nigerian women who integrate prostitution inside vans are guided by a desire for security and search protection in ethnic community ties. But approaching the Olympic Games, their troubles and concerns are increasingly related to police violence, rather than clients. Wednesday is police day. "Fanno il giro" ("They patrol"): some girls use this expression learned in Italy to refer to police patrols. Their problem is not the police presence on the street but understanding their motives: arresting clients or girls?

In fact, what they experience more and more often are moments of suspension of human rights that reduce freedom to impulses to escape. Police officers arrive in

threes or fours, with flashlights and dogs. They look for the girls, ask them for IDs and driver's licenses. They order OQTF (*Obligation de Quitter le Territoire Français*) over the weekend making it difficult to appeal in the following 48 hours as the law requires. Other times they tell the women they have one month to appeal, forcing them to be repatriated once the 48 hours have expired.

Escapes into the woods provide the only chance to protect themselves from the cops. They run away terrified. They jump out of vans to run toward the woods. Sometimes police dogs bite their arms and legs. When they return to the sidewalk, they limp from the pits they have fallen into or touch their hair, head and eyes from the pain it causes to be caught in the branches.

The organization of the Olympic Games goes hand in hand with a repressive evolution of police practices: so many Parisian associations see it as an experiment in urban gentrification that will have consequences far beyond the end of the event, especially because of the approval of the national immigration law 2024-42 of January 26 2024. As of fall 2023, twenty police operations have been conducted in the Bois de Vincennes in nine months: 203 people checked, 44 in retention administrative for verification of right of residence, 37 in QTDF et two placements in administrative detention center before forced referral⁸. In the media, the Prefecture claims to be countering the increased risk of exploitation of prostitution. According to OCRTEH, on the other hand, no significant increase in supply was reported during the Rugby Cup in 2023, which was considered as a "test" ahead of the Olympic Games. A camp for 4500 soldiers - an extraordinary operation last conducted during World War II - will be installed in the Bois de Vincennes to ensure security throughout the Olympic and Paralympic Games.

Meanwhile, the women of the Bois have been informed that very strict police officers will replace the police teams familiar to them. What is actually changing is the way familiar police officers patrol the street. On a Wednesday evening, in May 2024, a group of police officers, all women, arrives on route de la Pyramide. Familiar faces. All, perhaps, not even 30 years old. All in plainclothes. "One black, one with Indian features, one stout, one short": that's how Giorgia, a Nigerian woman who witnessed the scene up close, describes them.

They stop Cherry, the girl from Verona, but when they ask for her papers, she runs off into the woods. Rather than letting her escape, as the police usually does, this time it is the black policewoman who runs into the woods chasing her in vain. Cherry disappears into the bushes and manages to hide in Giorgia's van while the four policewomen, who have not noticed anything, continue patrolling the street. "How could a black policewoman turn in such a way against a girl almost her own age and as black as she is?", wonders Giorgia very upset. A week later, on a Wednesday, almost all the vans are empty and without lit lanterns on the dashboard.

4. The Bois: a frontier of capacitation?

Despite turning into an ever more "precarious habitat" that exposes Nigerian women to human rights violations, route de la Pyramide is also an "in-between space" where women begin a transition of their self in the welcoming society, dealing with conflicting impulses, emotions and desires (Proto, 2023).

⁸ <https://www.francetvinfo.fr/les-jeux-olympiques>.

On route de la Pyramide, afternoon or evening, Nigerian women express their ambivalent moral feelings in interaction with social workers. They can quickly move from shame to kindness, from embarrassment to bravado and, still, from bravado to unexpected moments of confidentiality. Route de la Pyramide is the origin of a new process of capacitation: a process of "socialization of justice" (Addams, 1902) that creates a new "web of life" (Mead, 1938b) and through which they reinvent their "public morality" (Cefai, 2019) and develop a new civic imagination, that is, the ability to "awaken emotions, make assessments, generate representations" but above all "to act and materially reorganize the environment" (*ibid.*).

A few of them may thus decide to reach out to social workers for the first time at the "permanence" of the association, seeking for domiciliation, French or computer classes. Then, they can enter a non-linear process of capacitation by engaging themselves in the different processes of association, cooperation and communication pertaining four spheres of action: play, inter-religious dialogue and participation, relationship with nature, engagement with justice.

First, moments of play foster out-of-ordinary horizontal forms of collective communication and association among women who are in prostitution, between the latter ones and women who are out of prostitution, among these two groups, social workers and volunteers. The Uno card or the photo-language act as "membranes" (Goffman, 1962) that momentarily disconnect them from the rest of their world and let unexpected personality traits kept hidden emerge, thus giving them the opportunity to exhibit attributes valued in the wider social world, such as knowledge, intelligence, courage, and self-control (*ibid.*).

Second, Nigerian women experiment with inter-religious imagination. On Sunday they attend Pentecostal churches in suburbs but during the week they attend Parisian associations. Symbols may create unexpected troubles. A woman arrives at the permanence but she doesn't want to play with the other women. Walking on her own in the room, she stops and stares at a wooden statue of Joseph, Mary and Jesus in a corner of the permanence for a few minutes. She takes small steps back and forth while continuing to look at the sculpture and then walks away, saying to a volunteer: "If I will have the courage, I will be back next week". Before the Oba edict, although Nigerian women are Pentecostal, catholic rituals to liberate them from the juju were extremely successful in making them stop paying debts, denounce trafficking networks and becoming activists. This doesn't work anymore after the Oba edict in 2018 but so many times the boundaries between the French Catholic church and the Nigerian Pentecostal church become porous when Nigerian women bring the sound of African drums and their singing in English to the small church close to the association.

Along with the moments of play and inter-religious experimentation, there are moments of intense emotional processing of their experiences when Nigerian women interact with unknown natural environments, as in the case of the breakup-stays, short periods – from 2 to 5 days – of time away from Paris, organized by the association. During a stay in the Jura mountains at the frontier between France and Switzerland in February 2022, a group of 5 women visit a cow farm for organic milk production. When they come back to the guest house, Pink, one of them, barely hold back the disgust she feels at how that organic milk is produced. "Producing milk needs exploitation, like prostitution!", she angrily comments and rejects a glass of organic milk given by the personnel of the guest house. She ran away from home when she was 13 because her father wanted to marry her off to a man much older than her. Then, she was forced in prostitution in a connection house in Libya in 2015 and in the Bois de Vincennes in Paris until the edict of the Oba in 2018. At that time she had given the "maman" 20000

euros out of 350000 euros of debt to be repaid. She stopped paying her but continued to prostitute herself because in a very precarious situation. One month after her travel to the Jura mountains, she goes to the BRP to file a complaint against trafficking networks but, terrified, remains very vague about her story.

The activities Nigerian women practice at the "permanence" don't act as techniques of neutralization of deviance (Sykes and Matza, 1957) but create unexpected situations of capacitation through which they reinvent themselves in the welcoming society.

Becoming familiar with the association, Nigerian women experience a new sense of home: the "permanence", equipped with a kitchen and a large room for meetings and training activities, turns into a hybrid space mixing a sense of intimacy and a sense of school. They might still share a room with eight women in apartments managed by "maman" or brokers in suburbs but each week they reach the "permanence" in Pigalle to feel their new "family of France", a few say. Little by little, they can develop a new reflexivity on their experience of prostitution. The first sign of a change in their attitude is the demand for housing to social workers: this implies that they have broken up their ties with Nigerian brokers and are eager to begin the path towards status regularization most appropriate to their situation.

The desire for affective response may strongly shape women's capacity for self-determination throughout her pathway from the Bois to the Court. Marguerite was prostituting herself in the Bois de Vincennes since early February 2016. She escaped from her "maman"'s home in Cagliari, in Italy, where she had started prostitution to repay an initial debt of 60000 euros, later negotiated to 40000 euros. The "maman" was married with a member of the cult organization Eiyé Confraternity and, although she lived in Italy, Marguerite prostituted herself in Paris under the "maman"'s blackmail to kidnap her sister in Benin City. In 2016 Marguerite's boyfriend in Benin City, who acted as a broker between her and the "maman", moved from Milan to live in a Parisian suburb with Marguerite and gave her contacts to prostitute herself in the Bois de Vincennes. On March 2017, Marguerite reached at the association the social worker she used to meet in the Bois and told her about her relationship with the "maman" without mentioning the man. Marguerite didn't return to the association because the man beat her violently upon learning that she had told about the "maman" and that it could easily be traced back to him. Marguerite reimbursed the madame only 20000 euros until August 2017, she told the family that she had decided not to prostitute herself anymore but continued by handing over everything she earned to her boyfriend to help him open a hair salon and marry her. Marguerite suffered repeated violence from the man when she used to express her desire to leave prostitution. Meanwhile, she got in touch with another association and she applied to OFPRA (*Office français de protection des réfugiés et apatrides*) for asylum, which was rejected in July 2018. In August 2018 she definitively broke up with her boyfriend and returned to the first association in September 2018. In March 2019 she filed a complaint against her "maman" to the BRP but in October 2019 her appeal to the CNDA (*Cour nationale du droit d'asile*) for asylum was rejected because her story was deemed stereotypical and not credible. In April 2022 Marguerite finally decided to provide a supplement to the BRP in which she revealed for the first time her boyfriend's role as broker with the madam, the latter's husband belonging to a cult organization and the network allowing the woman to move between France and Italy. In January 2023 she takes her ex-boyfriend to court and obtains his conviction while she falls in love with a Nigerian man who supports her for the trial. She becomes mother of two children while, engaging herself in training activities, she discovers her aptitude for construction painting and

obtains a contract of employment. She lives with her family in a social housing apartment but motherhood has forced her to give up the job.

The desire for social recognition is strong among women who file a complaint against trafficking networks. Apple bursts into tears of happiness when she realizes she has gained the freedom to work in Europe after her engagement with the French system of justice. Apple trembles as she holds in her hands the document authorizing her to work in France. "I went through five years of hell just because I wanted to work as a caregiver to elderly people", she repeats as she continues to cry in front of the Prefecture of Paris on June 2022.

The justice system however exposes women to re-traumatization. At the end of the trial against her ex-boyfriend Marguerite is shocked. He is sentenced to two years but he will not spend one in prison: only electronic bracelet and house arrest were provided. Furthermore, he leaves the court alone and some days later tries to get in touch with her again on Facebook but she will block him terrified. In 2020, the first trial took place in Paris in which a group of sixteen Nigerian girls who came of age, albeit as minors in 2015, filed as plaintiffs against Nigerian trafficking networks. Since then, they are still waiting to close a dramatic chapter in their lives that the justice system's timeframe does not allow an end to. Hearings and trials postponed, testimony repeated over and over again, on video and in person. But above all, what has been extremely controversial, as a lawyer notices, is the charismatic influence that men, rather than the "maman", exert on young women. When faced with the accused, one of them loses her words, remains silent, looks terrified and then unexpectedly becomes saddened and expressed compassion for the accused despite having received the maximum sentence as the girl herself wished.

There's another path, however, Nigerian women are increasingly practicing to leave prostitution. The law 2016-444 of April 13 2016 for the criminalization of clients decriminalizes prostitution and provides a new arrangement, the PSP (*Parcours de Sortie de la Prostitution*), with the aim to leave prostitution without declaring oneself victim of trafficking and going to Court. This law has for sure exacerbated the opposition abolitionists/pro-sex workers but little attention has been given to the results of the PSP. At only one association, from 2017 to the end of 2021, 38 persons started the PSP, 13 persons completed it. At the beginning of 2024, 67 persons are in PSP and 34 have completed it, have a contract of employment and residence papers. Despite initial resistance, the PSP is increasingly being used even by specialized associations on human trafficking for sexual exploitation. What is required is to provide firm evidence of interruption of prostitution on the basis of regular monitoring carried out by territorial commissions and social workers for two years.

Those who apply for PSP are mostly Nigerian women. They feel freer because they no longer need to persuade the court, as in the case of filing a complaint or applying for asylum. Hesitantly, they speak of new travel routes to Europe by plane, rather than Mediterranean crossings. Of interethnic networks forming around the institutional visa racket, rather than criminal traffickers. Of acts of disobedience to exploitation networks, rather than obedience to the juju. Of emotional isolation and sharp cuts with families in Nigeria. Of difficult entanglements between motherhood, housing and work in France. Of problems in re-entering ordinary life situations after a temporary "deviance", as Becker (1963) would say.

5. Conclusions

Nigerian women's experiences of prostitution in the Bois de Vincennes give research and policy-making three suggestions for understanding public spaces.

First, the moral and affective dimension of experience should be put in the foreground. Nigerian women's freedom does not coincide with the individualization and invisibilization of prostitutes as in the 1920s Chicago. Nor with a collective capacity to convert the troubles of prostitution to projects for sustainable development of the countries of origin, as in the case of the women of the Balkans. On route de la Pyramide freedom has a threefold nature. It is an impulse, with its visceral, unreflective, dimension of action. It is a desire, when a horizon of action appears. It is a non-linear process of capacitation when desire turns into ability to carry out plans, experimenting and changing plans.

Second, public spaces are frontiers of capacitation where material and immaterial transactions between human and non-human agents take place at different degrees of accessibility, publicity and visibility. Vans and their circulation turn public spaces into sites of disguised engagements and symbiosis with the world of Nigerian prostitution: Nigerian women's freedom, thus, collapses into an impulse for protection. Streets encounters between Nigerian women and social workers may disclose other possible horizons of life. Public spaces, thus, turn into "in-between spaces" where women experiment displacements towards new webs of life, partial replacements of old webs of life, accommodations between old and new webs of life, permanently in search of new balances between the desire for affective response and the desire for social recognition in welcoming societies.

Finally, we need to recover the political/cultural value of public spaces from the life histories of social groups in precarious living conditions. It has to be acknowledged that, despite constituting an international long-planned event, the Olympics Games – thanks also to the immigration law approved in January 2024 - are silencing public spaces as spaces of human capacitation, thus questioning what institutional accountability means in pluralistic societies. Only when research and policy-making will be really rooted in forms of experimental collaboration between people concerned by problems, experts and politicians, public spaces may turn into sources for just and inclusive territorial transformations.

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