

**“WE ARE TRANS WOMEN”:
ON-STREET SEX WORK AND TRANSGENDER POLITICS IN MEXICO CITY**

by

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Abstract

This dissertation is a feminist ethnography about on-street sex work and transgender politics in contemporary Mexico. It focuses on the socioeconomic and symbolic tensions existing between trans activists and trans vendors, mostly of sexual services, in Mexico City. It is based on ethnographic research consisting of participant-observation, formal interviews, informal conversations, and travel companionships with low-income female-gendered transpeople and self-identified trans activists in places of work, homes, social gatherings, and activist events about sexual diversity. The fieldwork for this study was conducted between 2010 and 2011, with shorter research periods spanning 2009 to 2014. The research also draws on bill proposals and official stenographic transcripts of socio-legal discussions held in Mexico City's Legislative Assembly between 2001 and 2013.

This study shows that, while not all transpeople are sex workers, a sizeable number of low-income trans women work as sexual labourers on the streets of Mexico City. Trans women have gained increasing visibility in on-street sex trade areas. Impoverished transpeople suffer the symbolic and material expressions of a generalized disrespect and disregard affecting on-street sex workers and low-income female-gendered transpeople. A sexual labour framework is thus critical to understand the ways in which social class and informal on-street vending shape the circumstances, livelihoods, and aspirations of low-income trans women. Their daily realities are shaped but not subsumed or exhausted by gender expressions and subjectivities or sex-gender systems alone. A class and labour lens, in addition to a gender lens, is necessary to shed light on the often-overlooked dimensions of socioeconomic standing and employment background that frame the lives of trans activists and trans sex workers.

This project applies an intersecting critical trans and sexual labour analysis to understand the socioeconomic concerns and livelihoods of female-gendered transpeople. It contributes to the ethnographies of Mexico by underscoring regional and class diversity in the experiences and circumstances facing Mexicans. Lastly, this work helps refine feminist anthropology by demonstrating the utility of classic concepts to understand shifting intersecting realities and, more broadly, by refusing to conflate trans and sex work issues in Mexico with those found in other contexts.

Lay Summary

The main goal of this study is to provide a feminist understanding about the concerns and struggles of transgender women in contemporary Mexico City. It is based on qualitative research carried out with female transpeople who identified as trans activists or who worked as vendors, mostly of sexual services, on the streets. The information for this study was gathered primarily between 2010 and 2011. A key finding of this study is that the sociopolitical concerns and everyday lives of female-gendered transpeople were shaped by socioeconomic standing and employment background; on-street sexual labour of low-income transpeople was not considered to be critical to formal trans activist demands for legal rights and social recognition. Also, impoverished trans women suffered the daily expressions of a generalized misrecognition and dishonour affecting sex workers and transpeople. This study contributes to rethinking common understandings about the key issues that affect transpeople in Mexico today.

Preface

This dissertation is original, unpublished, independent work by the author, Oralia Gómez-Ramírez. The University of British Columbia's Behavioural Research Ethics Board approved the research for this project (certificate numbers: H09-01461 and H09-02981). Jayme Taylor designed the maps that appear in this dissertation, and the author holds the copyright. The following peer-reviewed publication emerged as a result of this research project: Gómez-Ramírez, Oralia, and Frida García. 2012. Vivencias de las mujeres trans: base para la formulación de políticas públicas [Trans Women's Experiences: The Basis to Formulate Public Policies]. *Género y Salud en Cifras* 10(2-3): 69–76.

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List of Acronyms

I use Spanish acronyms for Mexico's institutions throughout my dissertation. Below, I list both Spanish names and English translations. For common and international terms, I employ the English acronym.

AIDS	Acquired Immunodeficiency Syndrome	
CDHDF	Mexico City's Human Rights Commission	Comisión de Derechos Humanos del Distrito Federal
CONAPRED	National Council to Prevent Discrimination	Consejo Nacional para Prevenir la Discriminación
COPRED	Mexico City's Council to Prevent and Eliminate Discrimination	Consejo para Prevenir y Eliminar la Discriminación en la Ciudad de México
DF	Federal District	Distrito Federal
DSM	Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders	
HIV	Human Immunodeficiency Virus	
ICD	International Classification of Diseases	
IFE	Federal Electoral Institute	Instituto Federal Electoral
INEGI	National Institute of Statistics and Geography	Instituto Nacional de Estadística y Geografía
IPN	National Polytechnic Institute	Instituto Politécnico Nacional
LGBT	Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender	Lésbico, Gay, Bisexual y Transgénero
LGBTTTI	Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transvestite, Transgender, Transsexual, and Intersex	Lésbico, Gay, Bisexual, Travesti, Transgénero, Transexual e Intersexual
LTAIPDF	Transparency and Access to Public Information of the Federal District Act	Ley de Transparencia y Acceso a la Información Pública del Distrito Federal
PAN	National Action Party	Partido Acción Nacional

PRD	Party of the Democratic Revolution	Partido de la Revolución Democrática
PRI	Institutional Revolutionary Party	Partido Revolucionario Institucional
PSD	Social Democratic Party	Partido Social Demócrata
REDLACTRANS	Latin American and Caribbean Network of Trans People	Red de Personas Trans de América Latina y el Caribe
REDTRASEX	Network of Women Sex Workers from Latin America and the Caribbean	Red de Mujeres Sexuales de Latinoamérica y el Caribe
SPFE	Secretary of Labour and Employment Advancement	Secretaría de Trabajo y Fomento al Empleo
STIs	Sexually Transmitted Infections	
STP	Stop Trans Pathologization	
TTT	Transvestite, Transgender, and Transsexual	Travesti, Transgénero y Transexual
UNAM	National Autonomous University of Mexico	Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México

Glossary

This glossary contains descriptions of usage, rather than prescriptive entries. Unless explicitly specified, terms in this glossary are in Mexican Spanish. “Lit.” refers to literal translations.

Ambiente	Lit. milieu. Gay and lesbian scene in Mexico City.
Bicentenario	Lit. Bicentennial. Short-term for the nation-wide, state-sponsored celebrations of the bicentennial anniversary of Mexican Independence in 1810 and the centennial anniversary of the Mexican Revolution in 1910.
Bicho	Lit. insect. HIV. It likely derives from the spelled pronunciation of “V-I-H” (lit. H-I-V). In Mexican Spanish “b” and “v” sound the same. This term is used by low-income trans women.
Biológica	Lit. biological woman. Non-trans woman. Often used by low-income trans women to refer to the author and female non-trans sex workers.
Bufar	Lit. bull bellowing. Taunting, mocking. A put-down. This is a term used by low-income trans women.
Chacal	Lit. jackal. Bastard. Racialized class term used for low-income men embodying tough masculinity. Among most low-income trans women, a “ <i>chacal</i> ” is an attractive and desirable man.
Churro	Lit. wheat-floured fritter or something elongated and twisted. A padding made of foam and cloth that is used underneath pants, skirt, or leggings to give the appearance of bigger, rounded buttocks. Some low-income trans sex workers also call it “ <i>chubi</i> ,” which does not exist as such in standard Mexican Spanish.
Comunidad TTT	Lit. TTT community. A phrase used to refer collectively to transpeople in Mexico. It includes people who are thought to belong to three distinct groups: travestis (lit. transvesties, cross dressers), transgéneros or transgenéricos (lit. transgender), and transexuales (lit. transsexuals).
Cuca	Lit. dolled-up person. Effeminate homosexual man, female-gendered transperson. The term is employed by low-income trans women, mostly in the past, to refer to themselves and others like them.
Diversidad sexual	Lit. sexual diversity. Often used as “ <i>comunidad de la diversidad sexual</i> ” (lit. sexual diversity community). In Mexico, the term is

	often used to refer to people who challenge normative sex-gender systems.
Gallina	Lit. hen. It is often used to refer to masculine-looking men who enjoy being anally penetrated by trans women without identifying as gay men. Low-income trans women know the term, but I mostly heard it being used by a few trans activists to refer to low-income men in a derogatory fashion.
Hermana	Lit. sister. A form of address among low-income trans women, largely used when talking to another trans woman working the streets as a sex worker. It has a working-class connotation. Better-off trans women often use the term “ <i>amiga</i> ” (lit. friend) for their female peers.
Hija	Lit. daughter. A form of address among low-income trans women for a trans woman who is socialized by a “mother” into the street-based sex trade.
Horror	Lit. horror. Disgusting. Low-income trans women often use the phrase “ <i>¡Qué horror!</i> ” (lit. What a horror!) to express disgust about something being spoken about.
Infiltración	Lit. infiltration. Body filler. It refers to the practice of injecting edible or industrial oil into cheeks, breasts, buttocks, legs, and other parts of the body.
Íntima	Lit. intimate friend. Used by low-income trans women to refer to their best female friends, usually other female-gendered transpeople working the streets like them.
Jota	Lit. effeminate homosexual man. Used at times by low-income trans women to refer to other people like them. The feminine “ <i>jota</i> ” is either neutral or positive when speaking to or about well-liked trans women.
Joto	Lit. homosexual man. Used at times by low-income trans women to refer to other trans women. Using the masculine form “ <i>joto</i> ” is often meant to provoke or disparage other trans women.
Madre	Lit. mother. A form of address among low-income trans women for a trans woman who socialized a “daughter” into the street-based sex trade.
Madrota	Lit. madam, female pimp. On-street sex-trade leader, representative. Most often, a “madam” in a trans sex-trade spot is another trans woman who works or used to work the streets as a sex worker.
Mana	Lit. sis. Short for “ <i>hermana</i> ” (lit. sister). Used by low-income female people to speak to other female people. Some low-income trans women used it to refer to the author. It is a term often

	ridiculed in TV shows and popular speech due to its working-class connotation.
Marido	Lit. husband. Lover, boyfriend, live-in partner. It has a working-class connotation. Better-off trans women often use the term “ <i>novio</i> ” (lit. boyfriend) for their lovers.
Mujer	Lit. woman. Non-trans woman. Used by low-income trans women to refer to the author, female non-trans sex workers, and other non-trans women in their social and community networks.
Mujer trans	Lit. trans woman. Term of relatively recent circulation in Mexico City used to refer to female-gendered people who challenge, in some way, normative sex–gender systems.
Muxe’	Zapotec, lit. man-woman. Individuals who challenge normative sex–gender systems within indigenous Zapotec culture. The ancestral land of the Zapotec people is located in the Istmo de Tehuantepec, Oaxaca (southern Mexico).
Perra	Lit. female dog. Bitch. Low-income trans women often use the phrase “ <i>¡Estás de perra!</i> ” (lit. “You’re being a bitch!”) It is often used to fend off criticism when trans women taunt each other. Some scholars conceive of the term “ <i>perrear</i> ” (as a verb rather than as a noun) as a genre of dialogue and interaction between “ <i>trans</i> ” and “ <i>gays</i> ,” or among “ <i>trans</i> .” Others think of “ <i>perrear</i> ” within the gay milieu of female drag impersonators, which draws on acid verbal humour to put someone down. Low-income trans women in Mexico City use the noun “ <i>perra</i> ” and the verb “ <i>bufar</i> ” instead.
Punto	Lit. spot. On-street sex-trade site, stroll. On-the-ground geopolitical unit in which sexual labourers gather and organize themselves to solicit services on the public streets of Mexico City. A street-based sex-trade site often is made up of several “ <i>puntos</i> ,” each defined by subtle borders such as a street crossing or a business locale. In the government literature and media, however, a “ <i>punto</i> ” is often conflated with a broader area on the streets where soliciting occurs.
Putería, La putería	Lit. whoredom, the whoredom. On-street sex trade. Used by low-income on-street trans sex workers to speak about their work.
Puto	Lit. male hustler. Homosexual man. The term is considered derogatory. It is used at times by low-income trans women to refer to other trans women, usually when taunting each other.
Ratito	Lit. a little chunk of time. Sexual service. For low-income, on-street trans sex workers, a “ <i>ratito</i> ” most often means providing a blowjob inside a car.
Sexo-servicio	Lit. sex-service. Paid sex work. The term was in wide circulation until a decade ago, but has declined since then. It most often takes

Sifos, La sifos	<p>on a female gender form to refer to “<i>sexo-servidoras</i>” (lit. female sex-service providers) or non-trans female sex workers.</p> <p>HIV. The origin of the term “<i>la sifos</i>,” as it is often referred to, likely derives from a short version of “<i>sífilis</i>” (lit. syphilis). The term “<i>sifos</i>” is used by low-income trans women to speak about people they suspect to be HIV positive, and it does not exist as such in standard Mexican Spanish.</p>
Torear	Lit. bullfight. Defying the police to sell merchandise and services on streets where street vending is prohibited or contested.
Trans, Las trans	Lit. trans, the trans. Singular or plural collective noun referring to female-gendered transpeople. Participants often also use the term “trans women.”
Transexual	Lit. transsexual. Some trans activists employ this term for those who have undergone genital surgeries to align their gendered subjectivities with their bodies.
Transgenérico	Lit. transgeneric person. Transgender. Some trans activists use the term for those whose subjectivity does not match with the gender identity assigned to them at birth. They may engage in hormonal ingestion and other bodily modifications, excluding genital surgeries.
Transgénero	Lit. transgender. Some trans activists use it as an umbrella term encompassing the three “ <i>Ts</i> ” or the “TTT community.” Others use it to refer to those who engage in bodily modifications, excluding genital surgeries, to bring their bodies and subjectivities in line with each other. It is a term considered non-discriminatory and correct in “sexual diversity” activist and allied intellectual milieus. It intends to apply to anybody regardless of racialized class background.
Travesti	Lit. transvestite. Cross dresser. In Mexico City, it is used for men who don female clothes or take on a female-gendered persona on an occasional basis. It does not appear to apply to women. In Brazilian Portuguese or Argentine Spanish, the term “ <i>travesti</i> ” may refer to a “transgender” person or someone who does not “cross-dress” occasionally but lives as a female-gendered individual on a permanent basis.
Vecindad	Lit. vicinity. Impoverished housing complex or settlement. In the past, a “ <i>vecindad</i> ” was a slum-like housing settlement with miniscule rooms and shared lavatories.
Vestida	Lit. female-fashioned or dressed-up person. Local term used by low-income trans women to refer to female-gendered transpeople in Mexico City. It has an on-street sex work connotation. Virtually

all trans and sexual diversity activists and allied intellectuals in Mexico City think that this term is derogatory and incorrect.

Note on Names and Last Names of Published Authors

As a dissertation on issues faced by transpeople, this work draws on the intellectual contributions of trans scholars. In the main text, to the best of my ability, I use present-day chosen names and preferred gender markers of the authors I am referencing, even if the publications I refer to went into print when the authors' names and gender identifications were different. To preserve bibliographic accuracy, and to aid the reader in the retrieval of any of the referenced materials, I have added the name under which the work was originally published in parenthesis in the Works Cited section.

I have come to learn of name changes and proper present gender identification sometimes through fortuitous means: for example, I read Christopher Turner's (2016) review of Paul Preciado's (2014) latest book and the publisher's advertising assistant editor Michael Newton's (2016) reply to it, explaining that the book had first gone into print when the author's name was different. At the heart of this work is the intention to acknowledge everybody as they want to be recognized. Any misstep or oversight in this regard is unintentional.

Similarly, since this dissertation examines issues shaping the lives and circumstances of people in Mexico, I have drawn as much as possible on local scholarship and debates. Most scholars from Mexico have two last names. I have added their entry in the Works Cited section following the Mexican Spanish rule, where the main last name is the first one. For Oralia Gómez-Ramírez, for example, one would find the alphabetically ordered entry under the letter G.

Note on Italics and Translations

I use italics for Mexican Spanish terms when they appear in the text. I provide literal and sociocultural translations in parenthesis in the main text, and I define them in the Glossary.

I also mark key translated terms in italics to emphasize vernacular usage and meaning despite their apparent equivalence in English. The most significant example is the term *trans women*, which is the literal translation of the Spanish term “*mujeres trans*.” However, the sociocultural, political, and economic milieu in which *mujeres trans* live in Mexico City, where the use of *mujer trans* acquires a specific local connotation, proves difficult to be straightforwardly translated into an Anglo–North American sociopolitical context. The term “trans woman” may conjure in readers’ minds concrete (both descriptive and prescriptive) ideas about what it means to be, live, or identify as a transperson in Anglo–North American settings. These ideas may or (often) may not overlap with what that means among low-income transpeople in Mexico City.

Thankfully, we still live in a world made of different worlds. Consequently, I have marked the translated terms in italics whenever they refer to the Mexico City context—a context in which they make sense in specific local ways as I discuss in this dissertation. The use of italics seeks to mark these terms as “foreign” to the English-language reader; that is, italics mark these words as socially, politically, economically, symbolically, and historically crafted constructs that are not easily transferable to other contexts without losing or gaining some meaning in the process. Italicized English terms are, then, an invitation to acquiesce to reading beyond the surface of terms and looking into the particular circumstances of time and place in which these concepts and realities emerge and make sense.

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I dedicate this work to my beloved mom, dad, and brother.
No other Oralia in the whole world could have ever dreamed of having such a tender-
hearted, unconditional trio in her life.

In memory of my grandma Chonita (†2015), who dispensed magic kisses when we thought
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To Older Brother, Fernando, Alberto, *Samantha*, *Joel*, *Libia*, Susan, and Vanessa.
They left life when they were far too young.

Introduction

“We Are Trans Women”

On the occasion of a sexual diversity fair organized in one of the northern boroughs of Mexico City, Mariana, Madga, Manuel, I, and about ten others made our way to a youth centre undergoing renovations for a local government-sponsored event.¹ It was before noon on a Thursday in early December of 2010.

During the weeks leading up to that day, Joel Mendoza, a recently appointed social development officer in this northern borough’s administration, had been excited about the events he and his office members had prepared for this five-day sexual diversity fair. The event series was meant to bring attention to sexual diversity issues, and included talks, discussions, film screenings, and musical events. Already acting like a seasoned politician, Joel Mendoza had personally called and gone to visit Paloma García, a *trans woman* and emerging trans activist.² Joel had invited Paloma and “her people,” the members affiliated with the street-vending association The Warriors, to actively participate and provide support during all the upcoming fair’s events. Although not explicitly stated, it was

¹ Following anthropological conventions, research participants’ personal names, nicknames, and group names have been replaced with pseudonyms to preserve confidentiality. Specific dates, locations, and areas within Mexico City that could compromise participants’ confidentiality have also been omitted or masked. I further explain the rationale behind each of these choices in Chapter 1 and throughout the main text.

² My choice of italicizing “trans women” here and throughout the text seeks to compel the reader to be aware of the specific sex–gender politics at play in Mexico City. In this I follow Tom Boellstorff (2003) who uses italics to signal the particular sociopolitical historical milieus in which local terms make sense despite their apparent equivalence in English language. I believe Anglo–North American understandings of trans* and sex work issues should not be the measuring stick against which all other trans* and sex work realities around the world are rendered (un)intelligible. The italics serve as a reminder of such anti-essentialist, anti-imperial, anti–global North-centric impetus in my work. I explain this further later in this Introduction.

assumed that Paloma's people—The Warriors' associates—would volunteer their time setting things up, attending information booths, cheering for speakers, and being present at events to increase the visible attendee number counts. Additionally, Paloma, who liked to identify herself in public and formal events as “a businesswoman and street-vending leader,” had been explicitly invited to be a speaker and sponsor of many of the fair's scheduled events. As leader of The Warriors, an association primarily devoted to the careful and complex orchestration of street-based informal commerce in a few of the streets of Mexico City, Paloma was to be featured prominently during the week's events. She was scheduled to give the opening remarks in the borough's court, the central administrative building's open square where official government ceremonies were usually held to indicate both the significance of the event and the prominence of the speakers. The fair was going to be inaugurated by Paloma, together with Joel Mendoza and another government representative formally addressed in the program as “*licenciada*,” the formal, respectful title used to address either lawyers or government officers presumed to have completed a bachelor's degree. Despite not having completed high school education, Paloma was similarly referred to as “*Lic.*” the abbreviation for this form of address, every time her name appeared in the event's program. She was also scheduled to give two “*conferencias*” (public lectures). She was expected to facilitate a debate on “*lésbico, gay, bisexual, travesti, transgénero, transexual, intersexual*” (lit. lesbian, gay, bisexual, transvestite, transgender, transsexual, intersex) issues, otherwise commonly known as “*LGBTTTT*” issues.³ She was

³ Where appropriate, I indicate both literal and contextual translations of significant local terms and phrases. I use the abbreviation “lit.” to indicate that a translation is literal. In cases where the literal translations do not reflect the accurate meaning in English, I also include contextual translations after a semi-colon. For example: “*travesti*” (lit. transvestite; cross dresser). Translations are, for the most part, from Mexican Spanish to English, unless explicitly indicated. For example: “*muxe*” (Zapotec, lit. man-woman; people who challenge

also set to offer the closing remarks during the official ceremony culminating in the week's end. Joel, a plump man in his mid-20s who identified as “*gay*” (lit. gay), had an easy and contagious laugh. He was actively seeking to secure Paloma's social support and that of the people she led, to jump-start his newly state-subsidized political career in one of Mexico City's 16 boroughs.

On that December day, Paloma was busy with street-vending politics and looking after her personal affairs. She had sent Mariana and other members of her street-vending association to the event on her behalf. Paloma's personal assistant Magda, Mariana, I, and members from The Warriors were driven to the theatre venue by Manuel, Paloma's childhood neighbour and later personal driver, in a large, well-groomed van. This was a van in which, during my extended fieldwork, we would often spend a few hours a day travelling to and from events, meetings, meals, and other errands across and sometimes outside Mexico City. The commuting hours would usually be spent cracking jokes, “*bufando*” (lit. bull bellowing; taunting or mocking), and generally catching up on gossip while jammed in the city's usual heavy traffic.

Although in a good mood, Mariana, a *trans woman* and sex worker in her late 20s, was nervous about delivering Paloma's speech at the event. In her hands, she had a wrinkled bunch of paper with the speech that Kim Fernández, Paloma's assistant and on-duty advisor on trans-related affairs, had originally written for Paloma. Other members of The Warriors had also been sent to the event and made their way to the venue on their own. When we arrived, about ten of them were there. Joel hoped to count on Paloma's people to

normative sex–gender systems within indigenous Zapotec culture). See also the List of Acronyms and Glossary.

harness support, but Paloma was similarly relying on her association's membership to advance her political career as an emergent trans activist and aspiring political party member in the local Legislative Assembly.

The sexual diversity fair's event had been planned to include Paloma's public lecture, titled "General Transgender and Transsexual Aspects," followed by the screening of a short film and photo series related to *LGBTTTI* issues. After we waited for quite some time in the dusty, still-under-repair venue, the event finally began with the speech that Paloma had been expected to deliver. Mariana read Paloma's speech word-by-word, mumbling at times, stumbling over the words at others. She sat by herself at a table covered with a red cloth that resembled chamois, and had a microphone in her hands. While reading the words printed on the scrambled paper, she did not look up once.

On that day, Mariana had made a point of wearing a black leather jacket that, even though it was slightly worn, made her look, in her view, more apt for the special occasion of delivering a speech in front of an audience. When Mariana finished the speech, she was received with supportive and excited claps from the members of The Warriors, who accounted for the largest number of people in the audience, and who had been asked to come to this event to function as cheerers. The claps were also followed by a few rehearsed shouts, "The Warriors! The Warriors! The Warriors!" When she was done, she asked me, still looking slightly nervous, how it had gone; I offered words of support.

The speech she delivered had struck me as trite in many ways and as ground-breaking in one way. Trite because in its tone and structure it followed the well-established political discourse genre of party-based political culture in Mexico, marked by grandiloquence and astringent demands. Ground-breaking, however, because Mariana

finished with an off-script, but clearly previously prepared, significant demand indicative of some of the broader sociocultural discourse and practice innovations relating to transgender politics underway in Mexico since at least 2008. My dissertation examines the class, labour, and sociopolitical tensions underpinning Mariana's off-script demand. However, before moving into what Mariana expressed, and to appreciate what transpired during and after Mariana's speech, let me briefly digress to what had happened a few days earlier.

In late November, there had been a Sexual Health Conference taking place in one of the centre states in Mexico.⁴ Paloma, Pancho, Kim, and Manuel had made their way to the nearby state in Paloma's van. I met them at the venue and spent most of my day hanging out with them. As part of the conference, Paloma delivered a paper on one of the panels while Pancho, a tall man in his early 30s with a pockmarked face, recorded her presentation from the front row. Kim had gone to the conference in her capacity as paid advisor to Paloma on The Warriors' payroll. However, being a vocal trans intellectual who was deeply interested and emotionally invested in advancing her brand of trans politics in Mexico City, Kim seized the opportunity to go on this job-related trip also to carry out her own political work and networking during the conference. Possibly pulling on the strings of her old professional network from the time she worked as a reporter, Kim had been announced days earlier in a press release publicized by a newswire focused on health, sexuality, and human immunodeficiency virus (HIV) issues as one of the featured "specialists" who would be attending the conference. During the day, Paloma sat in some panels and spent time with Pancho, her "*marido*" (lit. husband), as *trans women* refer to

⁴ In 2010, Mexico was geopolitically divided into 31 states and one Federal District.

their boyfriends or live-in lovers. Kim spoke up every time she had the chance during the conference's panels. The media interviewed both Paloma and Kim. By then, it had become clear to me that the main demands voiced by The Warriors on trans-related matters were swayed by Kim's own point of view about Mexico's "*LGBTTF*" politics.

Movements organized around "*diversidad sexual*" (lit. sexual diversity) concerns, as socio-legal demands that intersect with non-normative sex-gender systems are usually framed in Mexico, are heterogeneous (de la Dehesa 2007, 2010). Kim Fernández, an articulate *trans woman* and well-known self-identified trans activist, was primarily interested in advancing a struggle in which gender identity and sexual orientation, and more specifically, "*hombres gay*" (lit. gay men) and "*mujeres trans*" (lit. trans women), would be legally and socially recognized as distinct realities and not as comparable categories. During their media interviews at the Sexual Health Conference, both Paloma García and Kim Fernández made a point to emphasize the key message of the transgender agenda they were putting forth. This was that, as *trans women*, they were seeking to get legally-recognized waivers for the fees associated with the medical and psychological professional assessments required for transpeople to apply for a legal change of name and sex in birth certificates in Mexico City.

It was this same message that Mariana conveyed during her reading of Paloma's speech at the theatre venue in the midst of renovation. The speech comprised a description of the state of affairs for transpeople and their demands. Mariana explained that the "umbrella term" transgender referred to three distinct groups of people that shared a "common condition," and that it referred to a change in gender but not necessarily in sexual identity, and as such one could find "transgender lesbianism" or "heterosexual

transpeople.” Transpeople, the speech went, were seeking to obtain “*ciudadanía plena*” but the costly fees required to get the two mandatory professional assessments to apply for legal documentation prevented them from having access to such “full citizenship.” Transpeople demanded the waiving of the fees in principle, but ultimately they were seeking the removal of the requirement to undergo professional assessments that both subtly and openly associated transpeople with health disease and social malaise. Mariana also voiced—and on this point Kim would always be categorical and would often get worked up—that trans-related health programs should not continue to be delivered in Mexico City’s HIV Clinic, and that they should instead be offered in all public hospitals and clinics spread throughout the city.

When Mariana finished reading her prepared notes, however, she took the chance to say something that was not written on them. Paloma had recently gone to a “sex fair” in a province about 7 hours away from Mexico City, said Mariana, coming up with her own interpretation of the location and purpose of the sexual health conference that had, in fact, taken place in a closer state. Resorting to an eye-catching headline that was characteristic of the sensationalist “*prensa amarillista*” (yellow press), Mariana said, while showing a newspaper clip, that there had been a recent news article stating that The Warriors association “demanded the elimination of professional assessments for homosexuals.”⁵ Mariana added, with convincing force that left behind her initial nervousness about public speaking, “We’re *not* homosexuals. We *are* trans women. We’re demanding the removal of

⁵ “*Prensa amarillista*” (yellow press) refers to the sensationalist tone often found in the tabloids. In Mexico, it often overlaps with the “*nota roja*” (red press), which reports on gruesome crimes and murders usually in a graphic manner (see Arellano et al. 1993 [1992]).

professional assessments *for trans women*.” That was when the cheerers clapped and shouted in the crowd.

This dissertation is a feminist ethnography of the collective organizing efforts of *trans women*, both activists and on-street sex workers, to gain legal, labour, social, and health rights in Mexico City.⁶ Based on research carried out between 2009 and 2014, with a period of extended ethnographic fieldwork between April 2010 and August 2011, the chapters in this work focus primarily on the internal tensions existing between symbolically and relatively materially well-positioned trans activists and the generally impoverished female-gendered transpeople, who for the most part work as vendors of sexual services and other goods in the streets of Mexico City to make a living. These tensions are expressed in differing views about daily social life, street vending, vernacular trans- and sex-related vocabularies, and sexual labour more broadly.

Not unlike activist intellectuals involved in other realms of public, political, and social life in Mexico (Castañeda 1993), the trans activists who have formal education and a wealth of professional networks set the tone, content, and terms of the debate on trans-related matters. On the contrary, their less schooled and more marginalized counterparts often lack the symbolic and educational capital to intervene effectively in these discussions. While undoubtedly creators of prolific daily social networks in their neighbourhoods and places of work, and while avid and creative users of their own languages, humour, and concepts to understand and render their own surrounding realities comprehensible, those *trans women* who are street-based vendors, mostly of sexual services, are effectively kept

⁶ I use the terms collective organizing and activist efforts indistinctively throughout the dissertation.

from being able to set, and at times even participate in, the discussions, agenda and policy setting, and the relevant concerns of transpeople in Mexico. I pay particular attention to the contradictory and often exclusionary ways in which local self-appointed trans activists—being aware of and sensitive to the international and regional debates around trans identities, sexual diversity, commercial sex, and human rights—incorporate translocal discourses, ideals, and practices into the local context, often at the cost of excluding local low-income and vernacular understandings of sex–gender systems and labour configurations.

The questions this dissertation ultimately seeks to answer are: What organizing efforts have *trans women* in contemporary Mexico made towards achieving legal, health, and social rights? What have *trans women*’s collective actions achieved and what barriers have they faced? Lastly, how do local configurations of power in Mexico’s stratified society play out in these collective organizing efforts for trans rights, recognition, and social justice?

In what follows, I document the lives, contexts, and politics of a group of female-gendered transpeople involved, to varying degrees, with The Warriors, a street-vending association led by a *trans woman*. During my extended fieldwork, The Warriors’ leader was seeking to expand the association’s strictly street-vending scope and mission to become a semi-established association simultaneously organized around social, legal, and health issues concerning transpeople in the metropolitan area of Mexico City. I map these emerging organizing efforts against the hegemonic—more visible, heard, and known about—efforts of self-identified trans activists who, despite not having a street-vending background, seek to foster social justice for and in the name of transpeople in Mexico. To

critically examine the achievements and failures of these emerging organizing efforts in Mexico, I use a feminist intersectional lens and other critical feminist concepts to explore how, in Mexico City, trans activist politics are simultaneously mediated and enabled by complex intersections of social class, informal on-street sexual labour, sex–gender systems, party politics, public policy, and history.

A running focus in this work is the analysis of the ways in which existing structural, symbolic, and material disparities among different segments of the population in Mexico City almost inadvertently but certainly consistently frame the milieu for what is thinkable, conceivable, acceptable, or—in Judith Butler’s terms (2001)—“intelligible” concerning daily trans* realities and sociopolitical demands.⁷ My dissertation highlights the ways in which such relentless inequalities frame the “erasure”—to use Viviane Namaste’s (2000) concept—of the widespread on-street sexual labour, the seemingly coarse terminologies and sexualized humour, and above all, the precarious material conditions and circumstances in which marginalized, low-income, female-gendered trans* subjects in Mexico City find themselves.

My work is informed by and contributes to contemporary debates in the intersecting fields of critical trans and sex work studies, as well as in the ethnographies and ethnohistories in and of Mexico and Mexicans. More broadly, my work takes up concepts and discussions central to feminist scholarship in anthropology and related social science disciplines. I discuss how these bodies of literature conceptually underpin my work below.

⁷ I explain “trans*” and other terminologies used in this work later in this Introduction. For now, let me say that I use trans* to highlight that specific non-normative sex–gender dynamics are found in different geopolitical and historical contexts, and that they are not necessarily epistemically equivalent across time and space.

In Chapter 1, I will discuss the specific pathways—or “auspicious coincidences,” as I conceive of them—that led me to this project.

Intersecting Critical Trans and Sex Work Studies

The interdisciplinary field of trans studies has consolidated rapidly through generative intellectual work (Stryker 2006). During the last decade, two trans-focused seminal volumes and a journal have come into print (see Stryker and Aizura 2013; Stryker and Currah 2014; Stryker and Whittle 2006). Scholars and activists in the field have put forth successful interventions challenging prevailing understandings about gender, gender identities and subjectivities, and normative sex–gender systems (e.g., Bornstein 1995; Butler 1999 [1990], 2001; Califia 1997; Feinberg 1992; Stone 2006 [1991]; Stryker 1994, 2008). One of the most enduring lessons from these contributions has been the confirmation that—just like historian Joan Scott (1986) had argued before transgender studies emerged as a field on its own—gender is socio-historically constructed, and gender expressions and manifestations are complex, contextual, and shifting.

Several book-length studies and ethnographies about trans* subjects, subjectivities, practices, and communities in different parts of the world have been published over the past four decades (e.g., Boellstorff 2005; Devor 1997; Halberstam 1998; Manalansan 2003; Najmabadi 2014; Namaste 2000; Nanda 1999; Newton 1979 [1972]; Noble 2006; Shelley 2008; Spade 2015 [2011]; Valentine 2007). Research about subjects and practices that unsettle normative genders and sexualities in Latin American and Caribbean contexts has similarly abounded (e.g., Barbosa 2010, 2013; Benedetti 2005; Berkins 2003; Berkins and

Fernández 2005; Butler 1998; Camacho Zambrano 2009 [2007]; Carrier 1995; Carrillo 2002; Cutuli 2013a, 2013b; de la Dehesa 2010; Fernández 2004; Green 1999; Klein 1998; Kulick 1997, 1998a, 1998c; Lancaster 1992, 1995, 1997, 1998; Lewis 2010; Núñez Noriega 2009; Ochoa 2009; Oliveira 1994; Parker 1999; Pelúcio 2005; Sigal 2005; Silva 1993, 1996; Stout 2014). These studies demonstrate prolific debates and developments in the field through their documentation of a multiplicity of sex–gender arrangements in different historical and geopolitical spaces. On the whole, these studies help put forward a vision of scholarship that seeks the elucidation of social realities for the ultimate advancement of humans’ circumstances.

Mexico, in particular, has proved a fertile ground for historical and ethnographic research about past and present trans* realities. For example, historians Gabriela Cano (2006) and Susan Deeds (2005) explore past trans* subjectivities and practices in southern and northern Mexico respectively. Cano does so by revisiting Mexican Revolutionary history with a renewed gender history and queer theory lens, which enables her to reveal transgender histories and explore the limits of heteronormative and gender essentialist feminist historical interpretations. Deeds, in turn, looks at Inquisition trial records to uncover racialized subversions of the prevailing sex–gender order in New Vizcaya during the late 17th century. With a more recent historical frame, Susana Vargas Cervantes (2014) explores photographic representations of “*mujercitos*” (lit. little womanized men) in the popular “*nota roja*” (red press) tabloid *Alarma!* (lit. alarm) during the 1970s, showing how in Mexico, sex–gender subjectivities are imbricated in broader patterns of class- and race-marked difference.

Contemporary trans* experiences and circumstances have been documented with “*jotas*” and “*vestidas*” in Ciudad Nezahualcóyotl, State of Mexico (Prieur 1994, 1998a, 1998b), “*gay travesties*” in Colima, Colima (González Pérez 2001, 2003), “*sexoservidores transgénero*” in Xalapa, Veracruz (Córdova Plaza 2003, 2005, 2006, 2007), “transvestite/transgender sex workers” in Tijuana, Baja California (Castillo 2006; Castillo et al. 2010), “*travesties*” in Oaxaca, Oaxaca (Higgins and Coen 2000, 2002), “transgender sex workers” in Guadalajara, Jalisco and San Francisco, California (Howe et al. 2008), and “*travestis*” and “sexual minorities” in northern Mexico and Mexico City (Lewis 2008, 2012). These studies demonstrate that the terms we use to conceptualize what we now know as “transgender” realities have shifted across Mexico over time. Similarly, this body of literature shows that trans* research subjects share similarities but also bear specificity when seen in light of the lives and circumstances portrayed in classic ethnographies of trans* subjects in other regions of Latin America (see Benedetti 2005; Fernández 2004; Kulick 1998c; Oliveira 1994; Silva 1993, 1996).

In particular, Annick Prieur’s (1998b) work is significant because it stands, to date, as the only monograph-length study about trans* subjects in central Mexico during the 1990s. Her research shows that class-based aesthetics and constraints framed the lives and embodiments of marginalized trans* subjects in ways that did not match other co-existing sex–gender systems in Mexico at the time (see Carrier 1995; Gutmann 1996), and that these systems were likely shaped along gender, regional, and class lines. Ana Elisa Liguori and Gerardo Ortega’s (1990 [1989]) experiential narrative about “*vestidas*” in Mexico City, and Victor Ronquillo’s (1994) journalistic account of a series of murders of “*travestis*” largely involved in the sex trade in Tuxtla Gutiérrez, Chiapas, and Mexico City, are possibly the

only direct precursors of Prieur's work. These early works are valuable because they allow us to learn about trans* subjectivities and experiences, as well as the brutal violence faced by trans* sexual labourers in central and southern Mexico during the 1980s and 1990s.

At the same time, from the existing research, we know that indigenous configurations of non-normative sex–gender realities have existed and continue to exist throughout the country. Pete Sigal (2005, 2007), for instance, documents “*cuilonis*” or “*patlaches*” among historical indigenous Nahua people, while Marinella Miano Borruso (1998, 2002) and Lynn Stephen (2002) document “*muxe*” among historical and contemporary indigenous Zapotec people. Therefore, while understandings of “queer” or “trans*” people are, in essence, contemporary, it is important to note that the practices that today could be seen through such lenses have existed throughout time and across different ethnic groups in Mexico.⁸

My work draws on the wealth of research carried out on the subject to date. Yet, I draw primarily on critical trans scholars who have both demonstrated and expressly called on researchers to pay attention to how trans* (gender) realities intersect with other systems of social organization and uneven power. One limitation of classical trans studies is that they place the focus on gender identities or normativities. While this lens is necessary, it is also not sufficient for grappling with complex realities—for example, social class, on-street

⁸ As Shaylih Muehlmann's (2013b) research among the Cucapá in northern Mexico shows, the struggles of indigenous people to have their indigeneity recognized by the state have accommodated shifting socioeconomic and political circumstances. The ways in which “indigenous people” are recognized and counted in Mexico have changed over time. Indigenous and ethno-linguistic groups in Mexico range from 53 to 68 depending on the sources (see Instituto Nacional de Lenguas Indígenas 2008: 41–42; Navarrete Linares 2010: 13; Scheffler 1992: 14), with over 15 million indigenous people and about 7 million speakers of indigenous languages across the country according to the 2010 national census (Comisión Nacional para el Desarrollo de los Pueblos Indígenas 2014: 13–14).

sexual labour, or informal vending— that are not subsumed by gender expressions and identities or sex–gender systems alone. Consequently, I make use of the work of critical trans scholars who have advanced the discussions by looking at intersections. That is, these scholars use conceptual frameworks that examine how co-existing issues intersect in the lived experiences of people, and in doing so, challenge “conceptual limitations of [...] single-issue analyses” (Crenshaw 1989: 139).

Dean Spade (2009, 2015 [2011]), for example, draws on the intellectual legacy of African-American feminists (Crenshaw 1991; Davis 1981, 2003) to articulate critiques of the prison industrial complex and the lived realities and necessities of marginalized transpeople of colour who are disproportionately incarcerated and murdered in the United States. From this, Spade challenges mainstream trans activism framed within neoliberal legal inclusion and criminal punishment frameworks, which fail to account for the interlocking ways that built-in system inequalities—what he calls “administrative systems” (2015 [2011]: 11)— unevenly govern and affect the lives of the trans* poor.

Viviane Namaste (2000, 2011 [2005]) has similarly put forth a critical stance from within and for, but also against, mainstream trans and feminist praxis and theory. Namaste suggests that the debates around exclusion, inclusion, and gender identity are narrow and largely pertinent to Anglo-US gay and lesbian politics. Based on research carried out in Canada, Namaste demonstrates that transpeople are unevenly criminalized and unequally excluded and erased from the institutional world. Generic accounts of transpeople’s circumstances centred on gender identity leave the concerns of less privileged transpeople out of the discussions. In this way, the circumstances of drug users, prostitutes, inmates,

and homeless transpeople remain invisible, and the structures that sustain class and racial privileges remain intact.

If one were to follow a classical trans analysis for the study of the issues faced by transpeople in Mexico, Víctor Ronquillo's (1994) account of the serial killings of "*travestis*" in southern Mexico in the early 1990s could simply be seen as homophobic (then) and transphobic (now) hate crimes. A critical intersectional lens, instead, allows me to observe that many of the murdered people Ronquillo describes were female-gendered individuals and were likely performing on-street sexual labour. Such a critical trans lens is of significance when accounting for the realities of the low-income *trans women* in Mexico City with whom I carried out research because, as I will document throughout my dissertation, a sizeable number of female-gendered transpeople seek to make a living from the street-based sex trade. An intersectional frame helps me shed light on sex–gender configurations, but also on social class and informal on-street sexual labour as key structural factors shaping the lives of transpeople in Mexico today. Other scholars have made similar points in other contexts when they emphasize that trans* realities are underpinned by broader processes of epistemic violence, classism, racism, colonialism, imperialism, and neoliberalism (e.g., Boellstorff et al. 2014; Cabral and Viturro 2006; Connell 2012; Namaste 2009, 2015; Nichols 2012; Snorton and Haritaworn 2013; Spade 2012; Spade and Willse 2000).

Accordingly, my dissertation draws on the insights of sex work scholarship to provide a nuanced account of female-gendered transpeople in Mexico City. Built upon social constructionist approaches to sexuality (Foucault 1990 [1976]; Rubin 1984; Vance 1989; Weeks 2003 [1986]), the sex industry and commercial sex in historical and

geopolitical world contexts have become significant areas of investigation (e.g., Agustín 2005; Allison 1994; Bloch 2003, 2009; Bruckert 2002; Day 2007; Frank 2002; Hubbard 1997; Ross 2009, 2012; Ross and Greenwell 2005; Sanders et al. 2015; Walkowitz 1992; White 1990). Socioeconomic and political configurations around paid sexual transactions have also been documented in Latin American and Caribbean historical and present-day settings (e.g., Bliss 2001, 2004; Brennan 2004; Cabezas 1998; Carrier-Moisán 2015; Esteves 1989; French 1992; Hardy 2016; Kelly 2008; Lamas 2016b; Padilla 2007; Parrini et al. 2017; Rivers-Moore 2012; Williams 2014). By providing exhaustive ethnographic, historical, and sociological data, critical sex work researchers have helped uproot ingrained conceptions of paid sex as a pathological activity (Pheterson 1990), and of the sex trade as a labour niche that is unavoidably locked into a victimization versus liberation frame (Shaver 1994).

More specifically, the academic literature on the subject has documented sex workers' structural and working vulnerabilities (Browne et al. 2016 [2010]; Ditmore 2008; Hardy 2016; Jenness 1993; Kelly 2008; Sanders and Hardy 2013a, 2013b), questioned why certain segments of the sex trade are constructed as social problems at particular points in time (Brock 1998; Jenness 1990; Pheterson 1996), inquired into the exclusionary spatial dimensions at play in the regulation of sex work (Hubbard et al. 2008; Pratt 2005; Sanchez 2004), explained the logics of sex work and slut stigma (Attwood 2007; Pheterson 1993; Sanders 2017; Weitzer 2017), and investigated the many ways in which sex workers, despite multiple barriers (Poel 1995; Weitzer 1991; West 2000), have been able to articulate voices of their own through collective action, and to participate in local and global debates affecting their work (Chapkis 1997; Gall 2006; Hardy 2010, 2016 [2010];

Kempadoo 1998a; Klein 1998; Lamas 1996; Lopes 2006; Misra et al. 2005; Pheterson 1989; Pillai et al. 2008; Ross 2006). By looking at the complexities of commercial sex within specific geographical and political contexts, critical sex work scholars have shed light on sex workers' perspectives and experiences (Egan et al. 2006; Nagle 1997).

My dissertation builds upon this body of scholarship specifically by employing a sexual labour lens to understand transpeople's lives, livelihoods, contexts, and sociopolitical demands in Mexico City. A sexual labour framework—as Eileen Boris, Stephanie Gilmore, and Rhacel Parreñas (2010) suggest—allows us to “expand discussions on commercial sex as an economic and labor enterprise in which workers confront subjugations at the same time that they resist and maintain some semblance of control over their labor” (131–32).

Similarly to earlier discussions about women's work, reproductive work, domestic work, and informal work in Latin America and the Caribbean (Babb 1985; Blum 2004; Fernández-Kelly 1983; Freeman 2000; Goldsmith 1992; Nash and Safa 1976, 1985), a sexual labour lens works to broaden notions of what constitutes work at certain geopolitical junctures, and lays bare the ingrained gendered, classed, racial, and moralistic biases behind the repeated erasures of specific people's labour. Within this frame, sexual labour is labour because it is a human activity carried out to meet basic needs, produce, and reproduce human labour power and life (Kempadoo 1998b; White 1990).

In addition to highlighting the physical, emotional, and social work involved in paid sex transactions and the sex trade, a sexual labour lens also enables us to situate discussions about sex work within a labour rights framework rather than a moral framework. However precarious or vulnerable sex workers' labour circumstances may be, a sexual labour lens

contributes to the ongoing worldwide struggles of sex work decriminalization, rather than to the ineffectual and misguided policies of sex work criminalization and eradication that draw on moral crusades rather than on evidence (Doezema 2000; Kulick 2003; McClintock 1993; Weitzer 2010; Zatz 1997).

Moreover, a sexual labour lens supports the struggles against workers' structural vulnerability and precarity under neoliberal capitalism. Kamala Kempadoo (1998b) makes this point clear when she argues that, within global capitalist economy, sexual labour forms a primary source of profit and wealth. Consequently, Kempadoo (1998b: 8) continues, "If sexual labor is seen to be subject to exploitation, as with any other labor, it can also be considered as a basis for mobilization in struggles for working conditions, rights and benefits and for broader resistances against the oppression of working peoples, paralleling situations in other informal and unregulated sectors." If we follow Michael Denning's (2010: 79) premise that "under capitalism, the only thing worse than being exploited is not being exploited," then a labour lens applied to the sex trade would effectively help to strategize the resistances of sex workers as workers struggling alongside other precarious labour sectors (Hardy 2010; Lopes 2006). Sex work needs not to be the "ultimate precarious labour" as Teela Sanders and Kate Hardy (2013b) convincingly explain; to move in that direction applying a labour lens to the sex trade is indispensable.

I employ this frame because, in my view, it acknowledges people's efforts and structural circumstances, accounts for sex workers' arduousness and industriousness, and stresses the humanity and hopefully the improved futures of sex workers worldwide. Employing a sexual labour framework to understand transpeople's lives, livelihoods, and collective organizing struggles in Mexico City is particularly relevant because, as I have

briefly pointed out earlier and will explain in detail throughout my dissertation, on-street sexual labour is an economic activity that many *trans women* have been involved in at some point in their lives. In spite of this, dominant trans politics in Mexico that have focused on introducing legal and medical reforms concerning gender identity, have done this without paying attention to the ways in which social class and on-street labour frame the circumstances and concerns of low-income *trans women* who seek to make a living as informal workers selling sexual services and other goods in the streets of Mexico City.

In sum, I acknowledge that both fields, critical trans and sex work studies, have a wealth of insights to contribute to their particular topical issues. Yet, my work conceptually intersects these two fields to make visible a dimension of transpeople's lives in Mexico that has been largely overlooked; in Mexico City, at this particular point in time, on-street informal sexual labour shapes the lives and livelihoods of many *trans women*, but self-defined trans activists have overlooked or downplayed the central place of on-street sex work in the mainstream struggles for transpeople's recognition.

Many studies to date have either focused on transpeople's mobilizing efforts (e.g., Currah et al. 2006; Devor and Matte 2004; Juang 2006; Minter 2006; Slamah 2005; Stone 2006 [1991]; Valentine 2007), or sex worker organizing (e.g., Gall 2006; Jenness 1990, 1993; Lamas 1993, 1996; Lopes 2006; Madrid Romero et al. 2014; Misra et al. 2005; Poel 1995; Ross 2006; Weitzer 1991). My work builds on, but ultimately departs from, these studies in that it treats both movements as interrelated rather than as independent and distinct. In this sense, my dissertation is as much about transpeople as it is about sex workers. This intersecting space is illuminated by benefiting from the insights of both

critical trans and sex work studies, and specifically by the employment of a sexual labour lens to shed light on the lives and circumstances of transpeople in Mexico City.

In other words, my work goes against some of the dominant currents in earlier trans studies, which focused primarily on issues of gender identity and gender troubling (Butler 1999 [1990], 2001). Instead, my ethnographic insights lead me to take up Mirha-Soleil Ross's provocation for non-trans allies carrying out research on transpeople's issues. She said: "I do think that non-trans allies can be very useful, but not if they are to swallow uncritically the discourses of transgender activists. [...] So the best allies in any movement are the ones who, after a careful examination of key issues, are not scared to take unpopular positions" (in Namaste 2011 [2005]: 130). Seeking to support transpeople's struggles for justice in Mexico, I make use of an intersecting sex work and trans studies conceptual framework that seems most pertinent to appreciate the articulations of sex-gender, social class, and informal labour that shape the contexts of low-income, female-gendered, trans street-based sex workers and vendors in Mexico City.

Ethnographies of Mexico and Mexicans

My work also draws upon the ethnographic and ethnohistorical work of Mexico and Mexicans.⁹ This body of literature has included both "gigantic" analytical lenses to explore what constitutes "Mexico" and "the Mexican" (León Portilla 1978; Paz 1959 [1950], 1990; Piña Chan 1963; Ramos 1951 [1934]) and "miniature" accounts to underscore regional

⁹ I use Mexico and Mexicans as distinct terms to reference the fact that Mexico is a geopolitical category that includes people other than just "Mexicans" or "Mexican citizens," and that Mexicans are not bounded to the geographical and physical limits of the Mexican nation-state.

differentiations and histories (Bonfil Batalla 1989 [1987]; Lomnitz-Adler 1992, 2001).¹⁰ Drawing on challenges to grand narratives about Mexico and Mexicans (Bartra 1992 [1987], 1999; Simpson 1966 [1941]), and on studies focused on varied configurations of class, ethnicity, gender, and sexuality (Acuña 1996; Alonso 2004; Anzaldúa 1999 [1987]; Behar 1993; Cano 2006; Fernández-Kelly 1983; Gutmann 1996, 2002; Lomnitz 1977 [1975]; Muehlmann 2013b; Nash 1997; Prieur 1998b; Wright 2001), I critically examine the ways and extent to which scholars of Mexico and Mexicans (e.g., Fuentes 2008 [1958]; Lewis 1961, 1975 [1959]; Riding 1989 [1985]) have willingly and unwillingly been the producers of notions of insurmountable cultural differences and “exotic alterities” devoid of history and dynamism (Abu-Lughod 1991; Gutmann 1997; Keesing 1990; Narayan 2000).

In my work, I am particularly interested in the ways in which Mexico and Mexicans have often been conceived of as coherent wholes, irrespective of historical and regional variety. Perhaps not surprisingly, fossilized, essentialist, and culturalist explanations about Mexico and Mexicans continue to draw on selective readings of gender, sexuality, and racialized class configurations that fail to account for the existence of what historian Lesley Byrd Simpson (1966 [1941]) called, over 70 years ago, the “many Mexicos.” In many of the popular understandings of this group of people and this piece of land, social class and differential labour niches are flattened out, and thus more sophisticated understandings about how Mexico is a stratified society, and with them, the possibility of successfully overturning inequities, are missed.

¹⁰ I take the terms “gigantic” and “miniature” from Dorothy Ko’s (2005) work; I will explain the use of these terms shortly.

Selective readings of the scholarship on Mexico and Mexicans, and Latin Americans more broadly, have also had the harmful effect of producing and popularizing ideas of Latin American and Mexican “machismo,” “sexual culture,” “culture of poverty,” or “conservatism” (Lewis 1961, 1975 [1959]; Paz 1959 [1950]; Ramos 1951 [1934]). Similar to various scholars interested in historicizing practices and preventing indiscriminate lumping (e.g., Amuchástegui 2001; Amuchástegui and Aggleton 2007; Beattie 2002; Bellinghausen 1990; González-López 2004; Gutmann 1996; Hirsch and Nathanson 2001; Monsiváis 1995; Navarro 2002; Szasz 2007; Wentzell 2011), I aim to contribute to the refinement of current ideas about Mexico and Mexicans. For despite the tremendous amount of work that has been done in this direction, stigmatizing attitudes and discourses against Mexico and Mexicans continue to exist (Hill 1993; Mendoza-Denton 2017).

In a site of more than 110 million people, totalizing depictions—what Uma Narayan (2000) has aptly called the “package picture of cultures”—are unrealistic. Examining the lives and contexts of transpeople in Mexico City grants me an opportunity to write against the existing “controlling images”—as Patricia Hill Collins (2009 [2000]) terms the constructed ideologies that serve to justify the oppression of structurally marginalized subjects—that affect them, and in doing so, write against dominant tropes about Mexico and Mexicans. Using the intimate vantage point that my ethnographic fieldwork allowed me, I seek to make sense of the consequences of these kind of quasi-fictional imaginings (Said 1989). I thus shed light on the ways in which Mexico City’s complex politics offers opportunities to tell unexpected histories.

In seeking to provide a nuanced account, I often employ Dorothy Ko's (2005) "gigantic" and "miniature" metaphors. In a beautifully written study of changing footbinding practices and meanings in China between the 19th and mid-20th centuries, Ko uses these metaphors to advance an argument for more localized or concrete "miniature" feminist historical accounts. Ko holds that we need to make an explicit effort to challenge singular monolithic narratives and reject any subscription to unilinear, "gigantic" historical accounts and, along with them, the sense of a global march of time.¹¹ I use Ko's metaphors to both pay attention to the particular and draw comparisons with the general. I see value in finding parallels with circumstances found in the "gigantic" Mexico, Latin America and the Caribbean, or other parts of the world. However, I also hold that these should not detract from the "miniature," specific circumstances found in Mexico City.

Feminist Analytics

Lastly, in my work I make use of several feminist concepts that have been employed in anthropology and other social sciences, and that continue to be pertinent to understanding complex, shifting realities. In particular, I have tried to use the work of feminists of colour, trans feminists, and sex work scholars to account for the livelihoods, contexts, and struggles of trans activists and sex workers in Mexico.

I draw upon the insights of Audre Lorde (2007 [1984]) and Evelyn Hammonds (1997) who respectively propose the concepts of "horizontal hostilities" and "politics of

¹¹ What Anne McClintock (1995) compellingly called "the angel of progress" in her critique of the ideology of global progress embedded in imperialist and colonial history.

respectability” to understand some of the class-based dynamics I encountered among transpeople in Mexico. Lorde’s (2007 [1984]: 48) notion of “horizontal hostility” emerged as an effort to examine the “vertical lines of power or authority” existing between black and white women in the United States in the 1980s. I use it to investigate the cross-cutting power differential dynamics existing among trans “peers,” particularly between trans activists and on-street trans sex workers. Hammonds’s notion of the “politics of respectability” referred to the tactics of moral respectability that Black women drew on to ward off racist tropes about promiscuity and sexual availability circulating in the United States during the 1990s.¹² I use it to explore the ways in which sexual labour, which is tainted with stigma, is a contentious point among trans activists.

Similarly, I make use of the classic concepts of “controlling images” (Collins 2009 [2000]: 76–106) and “whore stigma” (Pheterson 1990, 1993) to understand relentless gendered and sexualized configurations that still, despite the years passing, seem to hold on with a firm grip. As fiction-like ideologies, controlling images have symbolic and material repercussions for the people to whom they refer (Collins 2005; Said 1989). I use this concept to explore the ways in which transpeople in Mexico City, and Mexico and Mexicans more broadly, have often been imagined by Mexico City’s inhabitants and the media—a process which has had harmful material and symbolic consequences.

¹² Frances White (2001: 36) credits Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham (1993) for articulating the notion of the “politics of respectability” when she examined the dilemmas faced by black women seeking to fend off the stereotyping and abuse often ideologically linked to negative and simplistic images about black people and blackness. However, to the best of my understanding, it was Evelyn Hammonds (1997) who brought this dilemma of respectability directly into the field of sexuality. Hammonds drew on the earlier intervention of Hortense Spillers (1984) during the famous 1984 Barnard College “Pleasure and Danger” conference, and on the work of Hazel Carby (1986) on black singers constructing themselves as sexual subjects through the musical idiom of the blues, to build her landmark arguments about the politics of silence, visibility, and articulation.

“Whore stigma” (Pheterson 1993), “sex work stigma” (Weitzer 2017), “slut shaming” (Attwood 2007), “prostitution-related stigma” (Lewis et al. 2013), “whorephobia” (Bruckert and Chabot 2010) are concepts that sex workers and allies have articulated to describe and stand against the legal, social, and symbolic repudiation of sex work, sex workers, and people presumed to be or act like sex workers. Gail Pheterson (1990: 397) defines “whore stigma” as the “social and legal branding of women who are suspected of being or acting like prostitutes,” and considers the stigma attached to women prostitutes as a general “female gender stigma” (398) with harmful legal, social, economic, and political ramifications. I draw on Pheterson’s concept to understand the dynamics of stigma attached to low-income, female-gendered, trans on-street sexual labourers in Mexico City.

The notion of “whore stigma” draws on Erving Goffman’s (1963) classic theory of stigma, in which stigma is seen as an undesirable attribute that renders a person deeply discredited and tainted, and spoils the person’s social identity, disqualifying them from full social acceptance. Donald Weitzer (2017: 3) reminds us that stigma “remains an occupational hazard” for sex workers worldwide. Teela Sanders (2017: 1) supports this point when she says that there is ample evidence for the pervasiveness of “public disapproval and structural prejudice” against “sex workers and those who directly or indirectly work within commercial sex and related industries.” Chris Bruckert and Frédérique Chabot (2010: 61) explain “whorephobia” as the “prejudice and bias against sex workers,” a form of widespread discrimination facing sex workers, with stigma laying at its

roots.¹³ For all of these reasons, the concept of “whore stigma” allows me to see the intersecting “repudiations” (Shelley 2008) that transpeople face for challenging sex–gender normative arrangements but also for making a living as sexual labourers.

Throughout this work, I also draw on Viviane Namaste’s (2015) concept of “oversights.” Namaste (2009) has been particularly critical of the way in which transpeople’s bodies and livelihoods have been misused in Anglo-American feminist thinking to elucidate theoretical debates without much concern for the actual daily and lived concerns of transpeople. I take up her notion of “oversights,” understood as both what is both overly seen and what is overlooked, to examine several ways in which some transpeople’s lives and circumstances in Mexico have been omitted, while others have been put under the spotlight. The aim is to help resituate dominant visions about trans politics and on-street sex work in Mexico City.

The concept of “normativities,” and sex–gender normative arrangements in particular, is also of value throughout this dissertation. The notion of something in societies being “normative” has served to highlight the dominant or hegemonic assumptions entrenched in daily life and institutions often without the spoken acknowledgment of their existence. The concept has had several iterations, from the discussion of normative sex–gender systems (Rubin 1975) to heteronormativity (Rich 1980), homonormativity (Stryker 2008), cisnormativity (Enke 2013), and lately, transnormativity (Snorton and Haritaworn 2013). Gender normativity, in particular, highlights presumed and expected gender behaviours and expressions (Stryker 2008). I often refer to sex–gender normativities

¹³ Bruckert and Chabot (2010: 79) state that the term emerged among French activists as “*putophobie*” (lit. whorephobia).

because, despite the analytical value of distinguishing both fields (Rubin 1984), in Mexico City and in many parts of the world (Valentine 2004; Waites 2009) “gender” and “sexuality,” or “gender identity” and “sexual orientation,” continue to be closely articulated. One example of these articulations is the way in which trans* subjects in Mexico are often seen as part of the “sexual diversity” groups. A clear-cut sexuality/gender distinction is not always transferable to daily life, even when some activists are seeking to disentangle one field from the other.

More broadly, my work draws on and contributes to anticolonial and postcolonial feminist theories in two ways. First, I make use of the concept of “intersectionality,” which, as I have explained earlier, resists “single-issue” analytical approaches (Crenshaw 1989). This intersecting approach has been of great value to postcolonial feminist scholars because, as Kimberlé Crenshaw (1991) notes, racism and other systems of oppression are often what affect people, in addition to sexism. The interactions among overlapping axes of social organization shed light on experiences that are, in fact, articulated on the ground. My dissertation takes up this principle and applies it to the intersecting analysis of transgender politics and on-street sex work in Mexico. Second, my work also contributes to an anticolonial/anti-imperial impetus in feminist scholarship (Amos and Parmar 1984; McClintock 1995) in that I refuse to easily conflate Anglo–North American understandings of trans and sex work issues with what happens in Mexico City. My careful thinking around *translations* of realities and terminologies into English—as I explain in the following section—further captures this refusal.¹⁴

¹⁴ See also Note on Italics and Translations and Note on Names and Last Names of Published Authors in the front pages of this work.

Terminologies

Anyone familiar with the emerging and rapidly changing critical trans studies and sex work literatures may easily attest to the fact that grappling with terms and concepts can be a slippery road. Both historically and currently, terms employed to understand these fields have had different sociopolitical leanings. Consider, for instance, the conceptual and political shifts behind both the emergence and usage—at different times and for different purposes—of the English terms “whores” (Pheterson 1989), “prostitutes” (Jenness 1993; Pheterson 1996), and “sex workers” (Leigh 1997). Despite the shifts, they have all served at one time to voice struggles in support of sex workers worldwide; for example, these words were used to convene the First and Second World Whores’ Congresses respectively in 1985 and 1986 (Pheterson 1989), to organize committees for Prostitutes’ Rights (Brock 1998; Poel 1995; Weitzer 1991; West 2000), or to rally for Unions of Sex Workers (Gall 2006; Kempadoo and Doezema 1998; Lopes 2006; Misra et al. 2005).

In Mexico, there has been a gradual shift from *sexoservidoras* (lit. sex-service providers), a term still in wide circulation a decade ago (see Bautista López and Conde Rodríguez 2006; Gómez Flores 2007), to the term *trabajadoras sexuales* (lit. female sex workers) (see García Martínez 2016; Redacción 2015), especially among those sympathetic to sex workers’ wellbeing and recognition (see Lamas 1996, 2016b; Salud Integral para la Mujer A.C. 2010). Other terms coexist: *comercio sexual* (lit. sexual commerce) or *prostitución* (lit. prostitution). I imagine a few others will continue to emerge. Each terminological innovation has either sought to illuminate an overlooked angle or upset prevalent wisdom to make the debates more accurate and our understandings more sophisticated.

In this work, I have made the following decisions about the terminology I employ. The logic informing my choices has attempted to be sensitive to the most up-to-date debates and accepted terminological frames, as well as to account accurately for the ethnographic findings. I acknowledge that all terms may have limitations. Terms are inherently “elusive” (Manalansan 2003: 50) and categories should remain tentative (Valentine 2004), or else risk their explanatory power. However, I hope that the following terminological entries provide a sense of the difficulties of *translating* realities occurring mostly in Spanish and in Mexico to an English-reading audience, and of the complexities of categories *travelling* across geopolitical and historical landscapes.

Sex Workers, Sexual Labourers: “I knew that redefining prostitution from prostitutes’ perspectives would be my life’s work,” said Carol Leigh (1997: 228) when she sought to carve a space for tolerance and recognition for the women working in the sex industry. Since then, the term “sex work” has gained worldwide recognition (see Campbell and O’Neill 2006; Delacoste and Alexander 1998 [1987]; Kempadoo and Doezema 1998). It is now largely used with two intentions in mind: first, to stand against common derogatory shaming terms (e.g., “prostitute,” “whore,” “slut”) and disempowering victimizing terms (e.g., “prostituted,” “sex slaves”) used to disrespect and disavow people who work in the sex trade, and second, to highlight the labour involved in making a living in the sex industry.

There have been attempts by sex workers themselves to turn the tables around and reframe the debate in their own terms. Take for example, the term “*puta*” (Portuguese, lit. whore) reclaimed by sex workers in Brazil to articulate a “prostitutes’ movement” without shame or apology for using an otherwise socio-politically tainted word (see Blanchette and

Murray 2016; Leite 2008). Similarly, there have been scholars who have critically enquired whether terms like “prostitution” or “sex work” can be employed to accurately reflect commercial sexual practices across cultures (Wardlow 2004) or to undertake epidemiological intervention research (Zalduondo 1999 [1991]). However, I use “sex work” and “sexual labour,” as well as “sex worker” and “sexual labourer,” to expressly contribute to the struggle for the respect and recognition of the people involved in the sex trade, and to clearly point out that my dissertation draws on a sexual labour framework (Boris et al. 2010; Kempadoo 1998b) to understand paid sex work issues in Mexico and elsewhere. It is important to note that occasionally, and still preserving a labour lens, I use the term “prostitution” when accuracy to the historical or ethnographic records merits it.

Transpeople: I take my cue from Christopher Shelley (2008) who uses the term “transpeople” (as a single word) to collectively refer to people who share a trans history, and thus a shared experience of trans erasure and repudiation despite their specific identity differences. Other descriptive or identity terms referring to trans realities and subjectivities have gained currency at different times in the Global North, including: “transsexual and transgendered people” (Namaste 2000), “transgender” (Valentine 2002, 2007), “transgender women” and “transgender men” (Sevelius 2009; Sevelius et al. 2016), “trans” and “trans-” (Stryker et al. 2008), “trans*” (Tompkins 2014), “gender variant” and “gender fluid” (Roen 2002, 2016), “non-binary” (Frohard-Dourlent et al. 2017; Harris 2012), and also, “transgender and gender nonconforming people” (American Psychological Association 2015). Conceptualizations have thus changed over time with critical analytical, sociopolitical, legal, and medico-pathologizing consequences.

In such a shifting context, I choose “transpeople” over other terms because, as Nicholas Matte, Aaron Devor, and Theresa Vladicka (2009: 44) state, transpeople is a broad “umbrella” concept that underscores “the need to depathologize and recognize difference among people who may or may not see themselves falling under its purview.”¹⁵ This term thus aims to act as a placeholder for different expressions of trans life and recognition due to its gender inclusive and more abstract character. It also highlights my effort to avoid imposing a firm label upon everyone I met through this research, and to keep in mind the varying and shaky quality of “trans” categories.

More significantly, in my view, using the term “transpeople” does not immediately situate issues faced by transpeople—as “transgender” often appears to do—strictly in the realm of gender identity or gender expression. I agree with seminal scholars in the field that transpeople, in one way or another, challenge normative sex–gender systems (see Butler 1999 [1990], 2001). Yet, as I will show in my dissertation, transpeople’s issues in Mexico City are as much about social class and on-street informal labour as they are about interlocking sex–gender normativities. One of the central tenets of this dissertation is that, in Mexico City, particularly among low-income individuals, female-gendered transpeople’s realities are inextricably shaped by simultaneous labour, class, and sex–gender configurations and concerns. The term “transpeople” thus allows me to convey geopolitical

¹⁵ T. Benjamin Singer (2014) highlights the histories and politics of the transgender “umbrella” when he states that such a visual metaphor supposes that sex–gender formations are “taxonomically containable” (259) within its open canopy. This “aggregative categorical imaginary” (259) often misleads people to assume that those contained underneath it form a prior, naturally organized grouping, which in turn obscures its construction through imaginary classification efforts. Singer claims that since the publication of Leslie Feinberg’s (1992) *Transgender Liberation*, the “transgender umbrella” image has displaced visual imaginaries of a gender nonconforming “continuum” or a “particular mode of being” (260).

and historical specificities encountered in Mexico City, and Mexico more broadly, without uncritically imposing meanings emerging from Anglo–North American contexts.

Trans*: Avery Tompkins (2014) explains that unlike the terms trans-, trans, or transgender, the use of trans* with the asterisk seeks to acknowledge and open space to include multiple possibilities of gender identities and expressions. Because the asterisk is a wildcard character in internet search engines, proponents of this term aim to contest “binary notions of transness” (Tompkins 2014: 27) that only include “trans women” and “trans men.” Hence, the more recent appearance and use of terms like “non-binary,” “genderqueer,” or “transfeminine” in the English-speaking world to refer to people who are not or do not want to be easily pinned down to an “either or” approach of gender identification or gender expression narrowed down to only two options (see Roen 2002).

Yet, the term trans* is not without discussion. Canadian trans activist Susan Gapka, for example, has expressed discomfort with the use of an asterisk because trans subjects are people, not the result of an internet search.¹⁶ Additionally, the term trans* appears to narrowly frame transpeople’s issues within the domain of gender identity or gender expression to the exclusion, for example, of the realm of sexual identity or sexual orientation.

Tompkins (2014) emphasizes multiplicity along (and even outside) the gender spectrum. Nevertheless, since trans* seems to be one of the contemporary English terms that offers space for the widest possible multiplicity, I think it can be further stretched to encompass geopolitical and historical diversity. This is particularly important when

¹⁶ I thank Susan Gapka for graciously allowing me to write about this here.

examining scholarly publications focused on trans* subjects in different locales. Allied scholars need to find ways to refer to transpeople as a collective to help advance the social justice struggles of transpeople worldwide. The same applies to sex workers as a group. At the same time, allied scholars cannot succumb to essentialist group understandings that do a disservice to social justice struggles by flattening important sociocultural, economic, geopolitical, and historical specificities.

Hence, after reflecting on the most appropriate way to convey the experiences and circumstances of female-gendered transpeople in Mexico City to an English-speaking audience, and considering the existing social science literature on transpeople in Mexico, I have chosen to use the term trans* with the following bent in my dissertation. I use the term to highlight that we might see, for example, *fa'afafine* (Wallace 1999), *leitī* or *fakaleitī* (Besnier 2004), *hijra* (Nanda 2007 [1985]), *kathoey* (Jackson 2007 [2000]), *mak nyahs* (Slamah 2005), or *waria* (Boellstorff 2008) as examples of “transpeople” across cultures. Or, specifically for Mexico, that we may see historical indigenous Nahua *cuilonis* or *patlaches* (Sigal 2005, 2007), historical and contemporary indigenous Zapotec *muxe'* (Miano Borruso 2002; Stephen 2002), or even mulatta slave Antonia de Soto (Deeds 2005), “the 41” (Buffington 2003; Monsiváis 2002) or revolutionary figure Amelio Robles (Cano 2006, 2014) as “queer,” “transvestite,” “transgender,” “third gender,” or “transpeople.”¹⁷

¹⁷ Antonia de Soto faced an Inquisition trial for subversions of magic and witchcraft, and insurrections to the prevailing gender order for “masquerading as a man” during colonial times in the northern New Vizcaya, today northern Mexico (Deeds 2005: 95). “The 41” were 42 men detained—one was presumably released for being a family member of the then-president Porfirio Díaz—after they were found dressed as women and dancing with each other in a lavish party in Mexico City in 1901 (Buffington 2003; Monsiváis 2002). Amelio Robles was a coronel during the Mexican revolution who forged and adopted a permanent masculine identity for himself at a time of algid social and political upheaval. Initially, feminist historians approached the story of Robles seeking to contribute to the recovery and visibilization of women’s participation in past sociopolitical processes. The unwitting erasures of a women’s studies approach in feminist historiography of the 1980s were later revisited (Cano 2006), and Robles, now seen as a transgendered man, is considered “the

But as the existing studies of trans* people consistently demonstrate, the local ways in which people identify and see themselves are complex, and contemporary mainstream understandings should not serve the erasure of trans* subjects who do not subscribe to those frames (Boellstorff et al. 2014; Namaste 2011 [2005]). To that point, Tom Boellstorff asks that we keep in mind that not everything included within the frame of trans* is reducible to each other, and that there are “multiple, intersecting ways that transgender circulates transnationally, all with novel dimensions but also deep histories that shape present contexts” (Boellstorff et al. 2014: 437).

Thus, while “transpeople” allows me to keep the variety of existing “trans” experiences in contemporary Mexico City noticeable, I use the term “trans*” to draw comparisons, when pertinent, with trans* dynamics found in other geographical and temporal settings without suggesting they are—or should be—equivalent.¹⁸ My use of the term seeks to underscore that subjectivities and embodied material expressions of transgenderism may overlap with, or even be eclipsed by, other axes of sociopolitical organization, and that we need to pay attention to what those may be in specific contexts.

only documented case of a gender transition that occurred during a Latin American revolution” (Cano 2014: 178).

¹⁸ Early anthropologists paid attention to “manly-hearted women” among Blackfoot people (Lewis 1941) or “transvestites” among the Zuni (Parsons 1939). I am not knowledgeable in their fields of study, so it is impossible for me to critically assess whether these scholars employed vernacular or external categories and epistemic frames to apprehend the realities they were encountering. My point is that it would be an error to uncritically impose a contemporary “trans” lens to revisit these historical ethnographic accounts. At the same time, I see sociopolitical value in trying to find examples of potentially similar trans* realities in different times, places, and sociopolitical milieus because the established existence of sex–gender diversity has proved to be an effective mobilizing tactic in contemporary social justice struggles. We would only have to bring the paradigmatic work of Margaret Mead (1950 [1935], 2001 [1928]) to mind to see how this cross-cultural, cross-historical, mirror-like technique worked in the past to expand prevailing notions of sex–gender arrangements.

Trans Women, Las Trans, Vestidas: I use transpeople as a gender inclusive placeholder. However, it is important to recognize that many of the people I carried out research with wanted to be socially recognized and spoken about as women, and everyone sought recognition in female-gendered terms. Accordingly, I also employ the term “*trans women*,” to refer to the people I worked with, as it allows me to make visible the gender pronouns that were part of the many symbolic and socio-legal battles the research participants were immersed in. I use the term “*trans women*” because despite the variations, vacillations, and wide array of co-existing trans* terms I encountered during my fieldwork, many of the people I met were actively fighting to be recognized legally and socially, in their daily lives and in the media, by peers, policy and government officials, and researchers as “*mujeres trans*,” or simply as “*las trans*” (lit. the trans)—a prefix turned into a generic noun with an article functioning as female gender marker. The introductory account of this dissertation is one example of these emerging “trans” recognition claims, where activists were demanding to be recognized as “*trans women*,” not as “homosexuals.”

I employ the term “*trans women*” in English and in italics with the intention to prevent culturalism and the mystification of a Global South marginal other (Abu-Lughod 1991; Keesing 1990; Said 1989). I have noticed, for example, that since Don Kulick (1998c) first made the term “*travesti*” known to an English-speaking readership, it has become somewhat fetishized in subsequent works focusing on gender and sexuality issues in other parts of Latin America and the Caribbean. By that I mean that I have seen the term thrown into the discussions as if it was a stable descriptor, rather than a concept in flux and dependent on shifting sociohistorical realities. I do not want to contribute to the same process occurring to the Mexican Spanish term “*mujeres trans*.”

My use of italics is a continuation of such anti-culturalist intention. I take a cue from Tom Boellstorff (2003) who highlights the utility of italicizing terms, even when their exact translation or wording exists in English, to signal local usage, and more specifically to signal the local sociopolitical, economic, cultural, and historical milieus in which those terms are situated. The italics are my way to visually underscore to the reader that the term “*trans women*” has specific local meanings and histories in Mexico City, and that its seeming equivalence with the English term does not mean that the realities behind the emergence and uses of this term can or should be dismissed or overlooked. It is important to explicitly point out that in no way is this to question whether the trans women I met were indeed women. I refuse to contribute to the repudiation (Shelley 2008) and erasure (Namaste 2000) of transpeople under tired tropes of “realness” and “inclusion” (Koyama 2006).

My work discusses the uses and on-street sexual labour–imbued sense of the local Mexico City term “*vestida*” (lit. female-fashioned, costumed, or dressed-up person). Self-identified trans activists and allied intellectuals in Mexico City, at the time of my fieldwork, unanimously considered the term “*vestida*” to be derogatory and incorrect. I explain why this may be so later in this dissertation. Here I use the term “*vestida*” to explain its uses, meanings and histories, and to position it *vis-à-vis* the usage of the terms trans and sexual diversity activists considered correct, namely “*travesti, transgénero, transsexual*” (lit. transvestite, transgender, transsexual), or the “*TTT*” or “three *Ts*.”

It is important to note that the term “*vestida*” is employed by low-income trans participants; it is not one I am attributing to them. I continue to hear my research participants using this term in 2017. I thus use “*vestida*” to preserve ethnographic and

historical accuracy whenever appropriate. I also bring this term into my discussion to call into question the class-based erasures and politics of respectability at stake in the disdain and disregard with which “*vestidas*” are often perceived in Mexico.

Cisgender, Non-trans, Female-gendered: A. Finn Enke (2012: 20) explains that “cisgender” means staying or being perceived to stay with the gender assigned at birth. The Latin prefix “cis-” (on the same side of something) has the advantage of conveying the privilege often accorded to those who did not trans gender, or are presumed to not have trans gendered (Enke 2012). It also challenges the reproduction of “unstated norms associated with cisness” (Aultman 2014: 62). In this dissertation, I use the term cisgender sparingly, mostly in the context of discussing my cis-privilege as a person whose female gender subjectivity remains the same as the one assigned to me at birth.

Instead, I choose to use the term “non-trans” to refer to the people in Mexico City whose gender identity and subjectivities are perceived to “align with the assigned gender at birth as well as resulting behavior, expression, and community” (Lennon and Mistler 2014: 63). As B. Aultman (2014) has observed, the term “nontransgender” has been used as a synonym of “cisgender,” though it has received criticism because of “the negative quality of its identity description as the state of being opposite of transgender” (62). Nevertheless, as Aultman also points out, cisgender would appear to suggest that gender normativity and its accorded privileges rest solely on the side of cisness (see also Enke 2013).

In my view, using the term cisgender to refer to low-income non-trans family members and individuals I encountered during my fieldwork in Mexico City would unwillingly make it seem as if they were, *by definition*, structurally more privileged than their low-income trans children, siblings, mothers, godmothers, and neighbours. It may also

obscure the ways in which non-trans individuals, however joyful of cis-privilege, might at times contravene gender norms and expectations despite their continuous “alignment” with the birth gender subjectivity assigned to them. I do, however, seek to not leave cis-individuals unmarked with my use of “non-trans,” as doing so would presuppose terms like “man” or “woman” are normalized and naturalized (Aultman 2014). A wealth of research on the matter has consistently shown that this is not the case (Fausto-Sterling 2000).

Finally, I also seek to accomplish this anti-essentialist intention by unsettling the common subgrouping terms often employed in sex work studies for “female,” “male,” and “trans” sex workers in Mexico (see Allen et al. 2003; Castañeda et al. 1996; Infante et al. 2009). I thus use the term “female-gendered” sex workers to refer to both trans and non-trans individuals who work in the trade since both groups of people fashion themselves in ways signalling female gender in Mexico City.

Outline of Chapters

This dissertation consists of five intersecting chapters. Chapter 1 provides detail on the research context and process of this feminist ethnography. I discuss: the geopolitics and cultural configurations of one “monster” site, the metropolitan area of Mexico City; one moment, the nation-wide bicentennial and centennial celebrations of Mexico’s independence from Spanish colonial rule and the Mexican Revolution in the context of Mexico’s current “Wars on Drugs”; and one set of auspicious coincidences, the

serendipitous moments that led me to this project and the subsequent ongoing reflections on issues of presence and accountability in feminist ethnography.¹⁹

Chapter 2 focuses on the shifting geographies and socio-legal frameworks shaping on-street sexual labour in Mexico City. I show that the on-street sex trade has multiplied from three well-known historical places of female sexual commerce to several trans and non-trans female “*puntos*” (lit. sex trade spots) spread out across the city. At the same time that there has been a proliferation of “*puntos*” across the central parts of Mexico City, *trans women* have gained higher public visibility within them. In this chapter, I focus on the repercussions this has had for the ways in which socio-legal interventions have been employed to regulate sexuality (Weeks 2000), and more specifically, to construct on-street sexual labour as a social issue needing to be addressed (Brock 1998). I thus pay attention to the legislation that has framed transpeople as “trans” subjects deserving of legal and health rights in Mexico City since 2008, but also the legislation that has historically contributed to the pernicious creation of sex work as a social problem in Mexico.

In Chapter 3, I discuss the lives and sociocultural milieus of the *trans women* with whom I carried out fieldwork. I use my findings, mapped out against the published literature on the subject, to critically examine the ways in which past and present representations of transpeople have fared. In this chapter, I aim to show the ways in which social class shapes the lives and milieus of *trans women*, and how these manifestations of class shape the precarious circumstances in which many *trans women* in Mexico City find themselves. I argue that my ethnographic findings show significant commonalities with

¹⁹ I explicitly elaborate on the idea of Mexico City as “a monster” in Chapter 1.

other studies about transpeople in Mexico. The most substantive is transpeople's life fragility and the central role of sexual labour in their lives. At the same time, the published literature on the subject and my own research suggest that there is a richness in the diversity shaping transpeople's lives in Mexico. Accordingly, I seek to employ a lens attuned both to "miniature" accounts and "gigantic" perspectives to examine some of the sociocultural dimensions of trans* life in Mexico City.

The following chapter, Chapter 4, focuses on the livelihoods of *trans women*, where I use ethnographic portraits to interrogate the omissions and the spotlights that have been present in the recent literature on transpeople in Mexico. In this chapter, I claim that most *trans women* in Mexico City are or have been on-street vendors of sexual services and other goods at some point in their lives. The street-based sex trade certainly offers a space for most low-income transpeople seeking to make a living. This finding is consistently supported by other existing studies on the subject. Yet, the published studies on the matter have tended to frame transpeople as street-based sex workers without examining in more detail the broader informal street-based economy in which such sex trade often takes place. I seek to redress this gap by showing the ways in which many of my low-income research participants formed part—inconsistently, at different times, and for different ends—of The Warriors, one of the many street-vending associations existing in Mexico City. On the surface, this shift in ethnographic frame may seem minor. Yet, conceptually, it allows me to situate transpeople as informal workers labouring arduously on many of the streets of Mexico City, hence standing alongside many of the precarious labourers similarly positioned at the bottom of Mexico's informal economy, and seeking to fend for themselves in an economic landscape riddled with inequality.

In Chapter 5, I explore the paradoxical relation between trans activism and sex work. As *trans women* working the streets during both day and night become unavoidable sights in many of the central thoroughfares of Mexico City, the anxieties about transpeople as sex workers and the stereotyping connotations about them as trouble-makers and criminals, have also intensified. Trans activists, for the most part, have responded by seeking to obtain social recognition for transpeople as educated professionals, distancing themselves from the sex trade. Yet, the ongoing daily challenges faced by their on-street sexual labourer counterparts remain largely unvoiced. I employ a sexual labour lens to shed light on these “omissions.” I revisit the classic concepts of “horizontal hostilities” and the “politics of respectability” to interrogate local trans activists’ positions on sex work and the opposition to the delivery of the trans healthcare program in Mexico City’s HIV Clinic. I document the ways in which, by seeking to attain legitimacy for transpeople, trans activists end up uncritically reproducing dominant, stigmatizing attitudes towards sex work, sex workers, HIV, and HIV-positive people.

In the Conclusion, I revisit the arguments developed throughout my dissertation and elaborate on some of the potential sociopolitical implications they may have for rethinking trans and sex work social justice movements in Mexico. I also explore some potential avenues for future research. This research spans a period of several years, and attending to the ebbs and flows that unfold with time, I close my dissertation with an update on Mexico’s trans and on-street sex work politics, and this research’s key participants as they stood between late 2016 and early 2017.

1. Feminist Ethnography in Mexico City

Beloved Monster

Many of us call Mexico City “The Monster.” Tenderly. As in, when we are abroad and homesick, and all I want is to spend an afternoon hanging out at the apartment where my parents live in the northwest periphery of the Federal District, reading the newspaper or a book in my favourite corner of their home library, watching the hovering hummingbirds through the window, conversing with my mom and planning with my sweet-toothed dad about which delicious treats we can get at the nearby market and street-vending stands. We call it The Monster, but proudly. As in, when we realize we are extremely resourceful people under strenuous circumstances, and I am reminded of how fortunate and privileged I am for having grown up in such a heavily-peopled valley, now spreading furiously beyond its edges and into some of the surrounding mountains. We call the city this in deep awe. As in, when we fly into The Monster by plane, especially at night, and see the immensity of the boundless lights everywhere we turn, and I am under the impression that poetry, theatre, fiction, chronicles, music, film, or ethnography can only ever capture a fragment, for a few instants, of its enormous beauty and its acute shifting complexity and contradictions. We name it with irritation towards its monstrosity too. As in, when we are caught in the now only euphemistic “rush hour” traffic—which, by the time I returned to carry out my doctoral fieldwork, had gone from somewhat distinctive morning and afternoon hour chunks (around the beginning and end of the children’s school day or adults’ work day) to an all-day affair—and I pray strongly for the other drivers’ widespread impatience not to impair my concentration so that no other person ends up like my maternal grandfather,

shattered literally to pieces under a car's wheel. For many of us, The Monster's sociopolitical, cultural, economic, and historical entanglements embroil their thousand-fold tentacles with the joys and dramas of our own and our loved ones' lives.

Mexico's Federal District, what is known as Mexico City proper, was founded by decree on November 18, 1824. It was established as a region of about 2 *leguas* (Spanish leagues) or about 8.3 km of radius that would become the residence of the federal government (Hernández Franyuti 2008). It initially encompassed municipalities, cities, towns, and villas as geopolitical units (de Gortari Rabiela and Hernández Franyuti 1995). Yet, since 1978 Mexico City has been comprised of 16 boroughs (*delegaciones*) (Instituto Nacional de Estadística Geografía e Informática 1997) that spread out across a surface of 1,486 km² (Instituto Nacional de Geografía y Estadística 2011c).²⁰ In early 2016, the legal-political configuration of the Federal District changed, becoming officially named "Mexico City" (Agren 2016; Romero and Vargas 2016), but it still preserves the same 16 borough geopolitical jurisdictions, each headed by elected government representatives.²¹

Despite its formal geopolitical divisions, Mexico City appears not to know of official boundaries within the Valley of Mexico, where it is located 2240 m above sea level and across a surface of 9,560 km (Instituto Nacional de Geografía y Estadística 2011c). The

²⁰ The 16 boroughs are: Álvaro Obregón, Azcapotzalco, Benito Juárez, Coyoacán, Cuajimalpa de Morelos, Cuauhtémoc, Gustavo A. Madero, Iztacalco, Iztapalapa, La Magdalena Contreras, Miguel Hidalgo, Milpa Alta, Tláhuac, Tlalpan, Venustiana Carranza, and Xochimilco (Instituto Nacional de Estadística Geografía e Informática 1997: 77). While the distinctions have become less sharp as time goes by, there are both urban and rural areas within Mexico City, the latter being generally found in the south and southeastern parts of the city.

²¹ News reports initially suggested that the legal name change from "Federal District" to "Mexico City" would give this geopolitical jurisdiction the status of a fully independent "state" with its own governance like the other 31 states in the Mexican Republic (see Agren 2016; Romero and Vargas 2016). However, some media reports suggest that legislators have yet to come to an agreement about what the legal-political name change will ultimately entail in terms of local and federal governance and jurisdiction (see Chávez 2016; Navarro 2016; Saldierna and Garduño 2016).

metropolitan area within the larger Valley of Mexico (*zona metropolitana*) spreads out into two geopolitical divisions: the Federal District (as it was called until early 2016) and the State of Mexico, the state wrapping around all of the Federal District except to the south. In other words, the greater Mexico City (*área conurbada*) extends across all 16 boroughs of the then-Federal District, and across 18 municipalities of the State of Mexico (Instituto Nacional de Geografía y Estadística 2011c).²² Due to its porous ability to sprawl continuously out into newer areas, Mexico City is also colloquially called “the urban stain” (*la mancha urbana*). Its “monstrosity” would appear to leak its contours out into new, seemingly ever-expanding areas. Some locals also call it “the DeFectuoso,” an acronym-inspired designation for the Federal District—the D.F. in Spanish—conjuring up, with both affection and frustration, the many DeFects of a ruthless “concrete jungle” (*selva de concreto*) that, despite its shortcomings, is the site where they live and they know best.

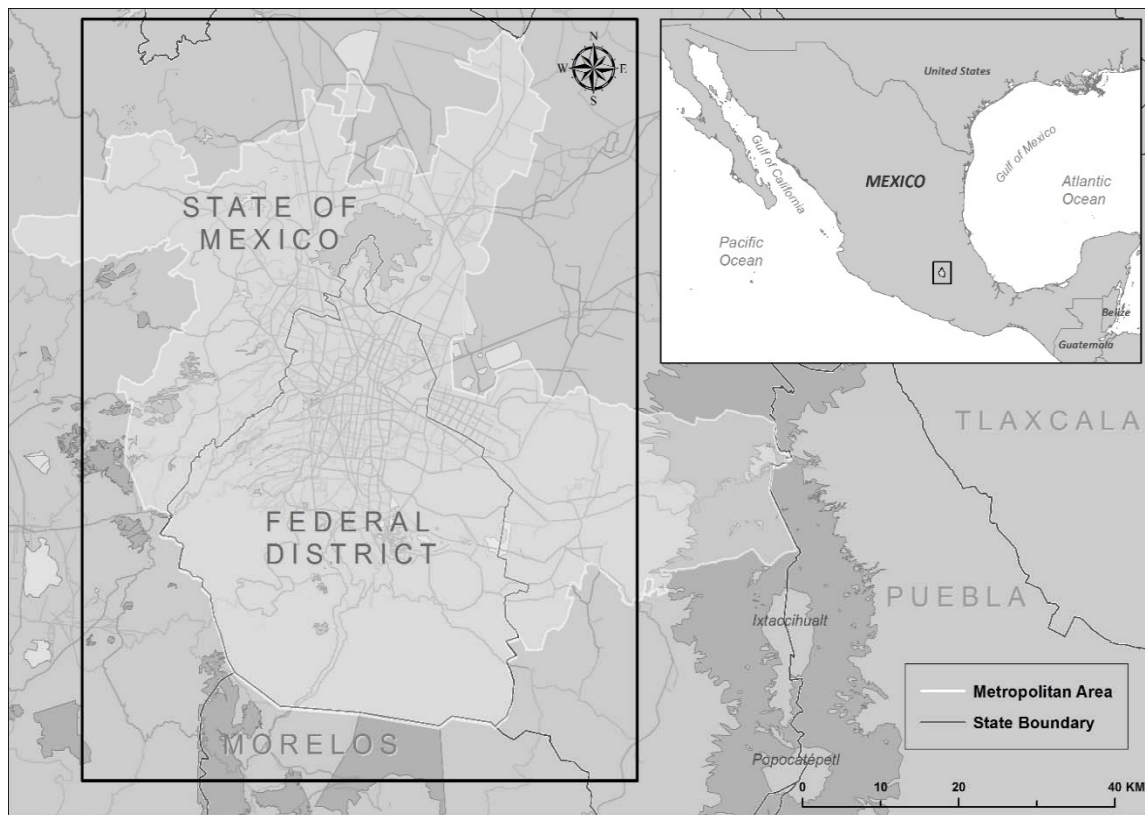
(Figure 1)

Between May 31 and June 25, 2010, Mexico’s National Institute of Statistics and Geography (INEGI, Spanish acronym) dispatched over 106,000 people across the country to collect, door-to-door, statistical information for the 2010 National Census (Instituto Nacional de Geografía y Estadística 2011a).²³ At that point, the Federal District had 1,775

²² The 18 municipalities in the State of Mexico that form part of the metropolitan area of Mexico City are: Atizapán de Zaragoza, Cuautitlán Izcalli, Coacalco, Cuautitlán, Chalco, Chicoloapan, Chimalhuacán, Ecatepec, Huixquilucan, Ixtapaluca, La Paz, Nicolás Romero, Naucalpan, Nezahualcóyotl, Tecámac, Tlalnepantla, Tultitlán, and Valle de Chalco (Instituto Nacional de Geografía y Estadística 2011c).

²³ For a highly entertaining book compiling some of the stories and experiences of the 2010 census pollsters, see Instituto Nacional de Geografía y Estadística (2011d). It turns out, for example, that one of the major hazards faced by census takers in the streets of Mexico City were feral dogs! (18–19).

Figure 1. The Federal District and the metropolitan area of Mexico City, 2010



Map created by Jayme Taylor, using base geodata from OpenStreetMap. Conceptual design by the author.

neighbourhoods and 40 *pueblos originarios* (ancestral towns) (Instituto Electoral del Distrito Federal 2010). In early June 2010, the census taker assigned to the neighbourhood in the centre-west part of Mexico City where I resided between April 2010 and August 2011—a relatively young woman wearing a white cap and a light brown vest—arrived at the 3-storey building where my then spouse and I lived. When the last National Census had been taken 10 years earlier, I had been counted as part of my parents’ family unit. My mom had been in charge of giving the answers then. In 2010, I provided the responses for my own two-person family, and to my own surprise, I found myself feeling strangely moved by such a material expression of nation-state making. I had left Mexico to complete a Master’s degree in Canada five years earlier. Since then, life had taken unanticipated turns, the most important being that my return home had been put off by two to three years. The pollster took the census hastily and then glued a sticker on the door that marked not only that my household had been counted, but also, to me, that I still belonged to this land.

According to the 2010 National Census of Population and Housing, 8,851,080 people lived in the Federal District at that time (Instituto Nacional de Geografía y Estadística 2011e), out of a total of 112,336,538 people living in the entire country (Instituto Nacional de Geografía y Estadística 2011a).²⁴ In 2010, the population of the greater metropolitan area of Mexico City, including both the Federal District and the State of Mexico, was 19,239,910 people (Instituto Nacional de Geografía y Estadística 2011c). The 2010 National Census accounted for two “sexes”: “men” and “women.” In the Federal District, for example, 4,233,783 men and 4,617,297 women, out of a nationwide total of

²⁴ This represents a ratio of 91.7 men for every 100 women in the Federal District, and 95.4 men for every 100 women at the national level (Instituto Nacional de Geografía y Estadística 2011e). National statistics are gender binary.

54,855,231 and 57,481,307, were counted (Instituto Nacional de Geografía y Estadística 2011e). It is important to mention that, in the 2010 census, there were no alternative options for “sexes,” and the census did not set out to compile information about “genders.”²⁵

In broad strokes, Mexico City is symbolically and materially split along a north–south divide. The north has historically been an industrial area associated with poorer and less educated people in Mexico City. The south, in contrast, has generally been clearly delineated to be a more middle-class, residential, touristic, and cultural area of the city, especially since the construction in the early to mid-1950s of the *Ciudad Universitaria* (University City), the main campus of the public National Autonomous University of Mexico (UNAM, Spanish acronym), and in the mid-1960s of the Olympic Village for the 1968 Olympic Games.²⁶ An example of some of these symbolic and material distinctions is the geographic distribution of bookstores in Mexico City, a sign of “culture” and education among the population. In that context, Juana Zahar Vergara (1995: 98) explains that the northern part of Mexico City only has one large bookstore. This was a Catholic parish bookshop established in 1964 that mostly sold religious books, brochures, and stamps. The

²⁵ It remains to be seen whether the “sex” portion of the census design continues or is modified when the next National Census is collected in 2020. It also remains to be seen whether transgender people in Mexico, influenced by the developments that are already taking place in other parts of the Global North, see value in challenging the prevalent binary gender system by seeking to integrate third genders or even agender options in this survey.

²⁶ The constructions for the UNAM’s main campus, *Ciudad Universitaria*, began on July 5, 1950. The finished campus was inaugurated and opened for classes in 1954 (Diccionario Porrúa 1995). Before then, classes had been held in different historical buildings in the downtown area of Mexico City. Of significance is that, unlike in Canada, in Mexico a “public university” is one fully funded by the state. Students may pay a minimal registration fee, but do not pay tuition fees. Student mobilizations have sought over the years to keep public education fully free. Unfortunately, optional payment of minimal registration fees was introduced at UNAM in 2000 after a partially-failed ten-month student strike against mandatory fees, but there is still no charge for tuition fees. After the strike, I paid \$0.20 peso cents to offset the printing cost of my course registration timetable to complete my BA studies.

rest of the bookstores are still located in the centre and southern parts of the city.²⁷ As a sign of the central role “culture” has had in the history of Mexico City (Gruzinski 2004 [1996]), bookshops offering other than religious books and basic education textbooks continue to stand as a marker of educational status, and consequently cultural and economic capital in Mexico.

New arrangements emerge constantly in a city of this size. One of the most visible was the emergence since the early 2000s of a secluded, in some parts gated, wealthy area in the western part of the city. More recently—most intensely since 2007 under the local Marcelo Ebrard administration—the revamping of certain areas of the downtown core involved a shift from a primarily low-income commercial area to a lower- to middle-class entertainment district, where people who once did not feel safe to set foot there have started spending social time. Additionally, one can find pockets of wealth within poor northern neighbourhoods, and there have always been irregular and underserviced neighbourhoods in the southern parts of the city. Deprivation and affluence often converge. Yet, the north–south symbolic and material divide was in place during my extended fieldwork and still persists today. My research took me to several places across the city, but the sex trade areas and neighbourhoods I describe in this chapter and in Chapter 4 were located in the centre–north parts of Mexico City.

With such an extensive number of people seeking to make a living and going about their daily lives in this corner of the planet, it is certainly an understatement to say that

²⁷ Juana Zahar Vergara (1995) accounts for 18 bookstores in total in Mexico City. The tally would likely go up when small textbook bookshops and second-hand bookshops are taken into account. Yet, these too are primarily located in the central and southern parts of the city.

Mexico City is filled with all the imaginable and unimaginable, multi-coloured edges of humanity. With such a large metropolitan surface and many geopolitical, symbolic, and material divisions, in this place it is perfectly possible to encounter any experience any person could ever hear of, read about, witness, experience, endure, or be blessed with. My dissertation provides only a snapshot of some of those multifaceted dynamics and histories. This aims to be an ethnographic snapshot of what Leslie Bird Simpson (1966 [1941]) aptly called Mexico's "many Mexicos." I have met locals who were surprised to learn about my research topic. I have met non-locals who were taught at school that Mexico City was merely a land subsumed within a polluted smoke cloud. Even in the well-researched and inspiring work of scholars, a colossal picture of Mexico City as a "delirious," insurmountable "urban leviathan" comes about (see Davis 1994; Gallo 2004a). My work aims to help reshape such views—even if just a little—by providing some observations about a set of issues not well-known, and some insights about the many layers of complexity—tensions, contradictions, people's resilience, life's poetry—converging in this place. The varied textures of human life encountered in Mexico City have been the subject of numerous, beautifully written, and often entertaining chronicles (see Gallo 2004b; Guillermprieto 1994 [1990], 1994 [1992]; Monsiváis 2010; Pacheco 2002, 2003 [1984]), and I seek to contribute to such humanizing efforts.

Bicentennials and "Wars on Drugs" at the Turn-of-the-21st-Century

This study took place in the complex political and economic landscape of Mexico at the turn of the 21st century. My main field research period between 2010 and 2011 occurred against the backdrop of two broader sociopolitical developments: the nationwide

“bicentenario” (lit. bicentennial) celebrations and a state-led “War on Drugs” launched in 2006.

The joint celebrations of the centennial of the Mexican Revolution and the bicentennial of Independence from the Spanish colonial rule took place in 2010. These were most commonly referred to as “the bicentennial” and echoed similar celebrations held in other countries of Latin America.²⁸ In Mexico, there were parades, public events, and historical film and TV productions. The federal government made funding available for research projects and book publications speaking to the occasion. A major thoroughfare in Mexico City was renamed the “Bicentennial Freeway,” as were a few public parks and smaller streets. Strangely, famous US swimmer Michael Phelps was flown into the capital of the country, after having become famous during the 2008 Summer Olympics that were widely televised in Mexico, and he swam in a temporary pool built in honour of the *bicentenario* festivities.

Bicentennial paraphernalia proliferated. “The *Comer*,” one of the leading chain supermarkets in Mexico City advertised, “We celebrate the Bicentennial,” and in their printed product catalogues offered discounted prices for national beers and tequilas. The *tortillería* (tortilla shop) inside this chain would wrap my tortillas in “100% biodegradable recyclable Made in Mexico” paper. It was imprinted with “*Bicentenario 1810–2010*” and with images of key figures of the independence movement: Josefa Ortiz de Domínguez, Miguel Hidalgo, and Ignacio Allende, and “*Centenario 1910–2010*” (centennial) with the

²⁸ In Colombia, for example, 1810 also marked the beginning of the armed struggle that would eventually lead to the end of Spanish domination, and festivities to mark the occasion occurred across the plazas of the country in 2010.

iconic images of Mexican Revolution leaders Emiliano Zapata, Francisco Villa, and Venustiano Carranza. Similarly, the pink-coloured “*bus de las mujeres*” (lit. women’s bus)—an initiative of local Passengers’ Transportation Network aimed at providing public transportation exclusively for women starting in 2008, but more visible since mid-2011—donned brief biographical blurbs of women of the Independence and the Revolutionary period on its sides. For example, there was one about Benita Galeana, “1907–1955, feminist and social fighter,” which stated in big letters that, “for her commitment to the peasant, worker, and feminist struggles and to guerilla movements, she was incarcerated 58 times.” The bus campaign was said to be a “Homage to the Women of the Bicentennial 1810–2010.”

In the lead up to September 2010, the month when Mexicans celebrate Independence Day, a 80 by 40 cm long Mexican flag arrived by mail where I lived. It was accompanied by a printed letter signed by then-President Felipe Calderón Hinojosa. It was addressed to “*mexicanas y mexicanos*” (lit. female and male Mexicans). It stated that we were celebrating “200 years of being proudly Mexican,” and as a result 2010 had been declared “*Año de la Patria*” (lit. year of the fatherland). President Calderón compelled us, Mexicans, to admire the national flag and always be reminded of the historical meaning of its three colours—green standing for “the hope that there will be a better Mexico,” white for “the peace that we have achieved,” red for the “spilled blood of our ancestors in the struggle for the highest ideals of our Nation”—and shield, the symbol that Mexicans would be ready to face rising challenges. The package also included a copy of some of the verses of the national anthem printed on glossy paper.

While the flag's red colour was said to symbolize the blood spilled by the nation's forbearers, by 2010 discontent had grown about the blood that was currently flowing across the nation since President Calderón had launched a state campaign against "organized crime," and more particularly against local cartels supplying drugs for consumption, at the time, mainly in the United States. On a broader level, my doctoral research also took place during then-President Felipe Calderón's "war on drugs."

Calderón's strategy consisted of deploying the Mexican military into regions in the country where drug production had been (until then) concentrated, and targeting the leaders of cartels. However, Calderon's militarization move had the unintended effect of generating and aggravating violence, increasing the number of organizations dedicated to criminalized activities, and helping diffuse their geographical reach across the country (Daniel Rosen and Zepeda Martínez 2015). Former President Calderon's "war on drugs" drew widespread criticism, even among the ranks of his own right-leaning political party, the National Action Party (PAN, Spanish acronym). Jorge Castañeda, Minister of Foreign Affairs during the Vicente Fox presidential administration (2000–2006), was one of them. Castañeda argues that not only did Calderón unleash a "war" for which he was dramatically unprepared, but that this was a military and political strategy targeting a problem for which there had not been substantive evidence (Castañeda 2012-2013). While the demand for drugs increased across the country during this process, this continued to be a largely export-driven industry. With no legal decriminalization and public health frameworks in place

(Rattansi 2009), by 2011 an estimated 40,000 people had been murdered in the country as a direct or collateral result of the “war on drugs” (Raney 2011).²⁹

During my extended fieldwork, Mexico City was proudly depicted by local government officials as a “protected bubble” where no drug cartels had strongholds, like they did in other areas of the country. To many, this idea appeared to be accurate since, until then, there had not been many of the visible “signs” of drug cartel presence that could be seen in other regions, such as public shootings, tied bodies hanging from bridges, or dismembered corpses with “*narco*” messages inscribed on them (Enrique 2014). Drawing on available official data, Carlos Vilalta (2014: 147) reports a total of 653 organized crime deaths between 2006 and 2010 in the Federal District, compared to the northern state of Chihuahua, which reported 10,135 organized crime deaths during the same period. This was about 1 death every other day in the Federal District compared to about 7 deaths per day (largely from executions) over a four-year period in Chihuahua.

Whether or not there were drug cartels in Mexico City, by 2010 it was clear that certain everyday things had been transformed. I had spent part of the summer of 2008 in Mexico City, and by mid-2010, only two years later, the quotidian atmosphere had visibly changed. Even though I grew up in a relatively rough, impoverished neighbourhood in the northwest part of the Federal District, I saw things I had not seen before. There were people who would make their way through the low to middle-income neighbourhood where I lived during fieldwork with a megaphone mounted on the roof of a car, announcing violent incidents and selling red press (*nota roja*) newspapers about them. Going through

²⁹ See Gibler (2011) and Muehlmann (2013a, 2013b) for accounts about some of the on-the-ground effects of these broader processes.

neighbourhoods with speakers had earlier been reserved for people collecting used mattresses and home appliances for resale. I sensed people growing worried about giving out their phone numbers to new people for fear of being blackmailed or taken advantage of. I grew aware, for the first time, of civilians who owned firearms despite this being illegal across the country. I perceived much more volatility and irascibility in interactions with people on the streets. I also witnessed things that I had seen before that appeared to have intensified. The most notable was what I coin—only half-jokingly—as “*sospechosismo*” (lit. suspicion-ism), a generalized and, in my view, paralyzing distrust, particularly strong among educated people, of anything and everything that government officials do or say, that appears in mainstream media, and sometimes even that people tell each other.

In May 2011, a nationwide Caravan for Peace with Justice and Dignity rallying thousands of people marched across the country, ending in Ciudad Juárez, the city that was then said to be the most violent in the country. Moreover, Ciudad Juárez had become known abroad for the systemic disappearances and murders of women since the 1990s (Driver 2012; Portillo 2001; Wright 2011). Many feminist activists and mothers of these young women had sought to attract attention to these femicides and seek justice for the many unsolved legal cases. Marisela Escobedo and Susana Chávez, for example, were themselves brutally murdered in December 2010 and January 2011 for speaking up. There had been a feminist, women-led campaign organized around the slogan “Not One More” in January 2011 to protest these murders. Ironically, it had been male poet Javier Sicilia who, positioning himself as the father of a murdered son, succeeded in drawing large numbers to the cause. These kinds of ironies and complexities were also picked up by mothers and fathers of other murdered or disappeared men and women in Mexico. Once the Caravan

had made its way through Mexico City in early April 2011, a poignant placard was left on an impromptu memorial made of photos, drawings, candles, and letters for the disappeared and murdered and placed on the ground of the downtown plaza. It read: “Some parents are poets, but all our children are poetry.” (**Figure 2**)

The presidential administration of the centre-leaning party President Enrique Peña Nieto (2012–present) continued the militarizing and criminalizing strategy of his predecessor Calderón. In 2015 alone, it is estimated that 17,000 died as a result of the war against *narco* trafficking. The British International Institute for Strategic Studies has recently deemed the conflict intensity in Mexico to be “high,” hence comparable to the war in Syria (AFP 2016). It is estimated that there have been 150,000 murdered and 28,000 disappeared people in Mexico since 2006 (Pardo Veiras 2016).

Unexpected Turns, Auspicious Coincidences

This research project began with what I identify as a secular version of an “auspicious coincidence” (Trungpa 2001). I initially set out to conduct an ethnography of sex workers’ collective organizing in Mexico City. Deeply inspired by the efforts to advance the rights of sex workers worldwide, including the Lusty Lady’s strip-trade workers’ union in the United States (Kempadoo 1998a) and the development of the Calcutta Sex Workers Union to support prostitutes in India (Misra et al. 2005), I envisioned a doctoral research project focused on the similar development of a sex workers’ rights movement with translocal dimensions in Mexico. Informed by my own previous research

Figure 2. "All Our Children Are Poetry," photo by the author, 2011



on an emergent popular segment of the strip trade in Vancouver, Canada—the fleeting popularization and commercialization of pole-dancing classes primarily for women not involved in the labour force of the exotic dancing industry—I was most interested in documenting the advancements of sex workers’ rights in Mexico.

I had included ethnographic and historical readings about sex work among women, men, and transpeople during the theoretical preparation for my field research. Once I was in Mexico City, I decided to focus solely on transpeople for reasons I further explain below. The actual developments of my ethnographic work made me realize that I had inadvertently been asking questions mostly relevant to non-trans female-gendered sex workers, which were not necessarily appropriate or relevant for the study of transpeople’s lives. Conceptually, for instance, I had initially been interested in finding out whether sex workers in Mexico City fought for access to state-sponsored childcare and comprehensive health care; whether sex workers fought against violence, stigma, and discrimination, and for women’s rights; or whether sex workers organized around the transmission of sexually transmitted infections (STIs), HIV, the acquired immune deficiency syndrome (AIDS), and a persistent pathologizing gaze. Methodologically, I proposed to gather photographic material only in limited circumstances due to my knowledge of the high levels of stigma that still persist around the practice of sex work in Mexico and due to my reading in the literature that many sex workers preferred to keep their sexual labour hidden from family, friends, and acquaintances (e.g., Bautista López and Conde Rodríguez 2006; Castañeda et al. 1996; Lamas 1993).

All these questions and interests persisted throughout my field research. But during my fieldwork, I came to learn that even though some *trans women* have children, they are

not always the primary caregivers and do not seek to obtain childcare services sponsored by the state. It also became obvious that struggles to obtain health care were present, but these were neither exclusive to *trans women*, nor focused on a notion of health services that could easily be focused only on endocrinology or excluding treatment for HIV and prostate cancer. Similarly, *trans women* indeed fought for women's rights, but did so in ways that expanded prevailing notions of what it means to be a woman in contemporary Mexico City. The organizing around HIV/AIDS and against pathologizing medical frames were also part of *trans women*'s concerns. Yet, transpeople dislocated the prevailing ideas that they suffered from "gender dysphoria" or that they were transmitters of HIV/AIDS. While I still hope to contribute to the destigmatization of sex workers by refusing to disseminate indiscriminate visual records that may be potentially harmful to them, I came to know that most family members of working-class *trans women* knew and actively benefited from their labour in the sex trade. Moreover, *trans women* collected endless visual materials of themselves and their surroundings. Thus, having a photo camera with me during fieldwork was neither offensive, nor unusual. Clearly, my early reluctance to collect photos of and among sex workers was shaped by my assumptions that non-trans female-gendered sex workers were either ashamed of or stigmatized for their work. In truth, trans sex workers do suffer from whore stigma and trans repudiation, and they are stigmatized for being transpeople and for being involved in the sexual trade. Nevertheless, they also suffered the broader social, political, and economic consequences of being impoverished precarious labourers in Mexico, a crucial aspect of their lives that has not been addressed in previous studies.

A number of unexpected turns led me to carry out a feminist ethnography with transpeople about “trans” and other sociocultural, political, and economic issues in contemporary Mexico City. My project evolved out of a set of auspicious coincidences: the great fortune of having met transpeople at the right time in the right place and for having had the permission to follow and become friends with them to document moments of their lives when it had become more and more obvious that my initial project on (non-trans) female-gendered sex workers was misinformed.

I carried out pilot research in preparation for my long-term ethnographic engagement with the issues between August and September 2009. At that point, I sought and thought that I had successfully secured the permission to document the activities of one of the formal associations working on sex work issues with women in a central area of Mexico City. The research questions in my doctoral research proposal were directly informed by my pilot field research and by the conversations I had had with the leader of that organization. By June 2010, the third month into my extended doctoral ethnographic fieldwork, it had become clear to me that while I was never and would never be explicitly told, “No, you cannot do research with or about us,” the organization’s leader, a middle-aged female-gendered sex worker activist who would wind up being incarcerated for “trafficking” in 2014, subscribed closely to a notion she had learned through her involvement with the global sex workers’ rights movement after the International AIDS Conference in Mexico City in early August 2008. She firmly held that research on sex work could only be carried out by sex workers themselves. I came to see this “failing” as the first key insight of my research about the ways in which the translocal influx of ideas and practices shapes sex worker organizing in Mexico City. It had also become apparent by

then that my own politics (and my health, which had begun to “act out” with unusual stomach aches and headaches) prevented me from continuing to negotiate access to a place where I was not really welcome, and to an organization that was shrouded in secrecy.

This is where a set of auspicious coincidences expressed itself with full force. By the time I realized I was not going to work with non-trans female-gendered sex workers, I had already met a few *trans women*. I did not set out to look for them in order to “study” them. The initial friendships and acquaintances I was able to generate with *trans women* came about as a direct result of my own life-wanderings and place-goings, my own personal and professional quest for learning, and my intimate attempts to make life worthwhile, comprehensible, and ultimately meaningful. It happened as part of life. Because there is no separation between subject and object, as many influential feminist critics of science have persuasively argued (Haraway 1988; Harding 1992), this ethnographic project, like any other, rests upon the paths I have built for my own life throughout the journey. Consequently, although the formal extended fieldwork for my doctoral dissertation began in April 2010, the broader issues encompassing this work span my long-held interest in Mexico, history, social movements, feminism, gender and sexuality issues, literature, poetry, and world politics for at least the last two decades. In fact, I had formally interviewed a trans activist I knew during my pilot research in Mexico City in 2009, and that interview provided an excellent reference point when I had to shift gears away from non-trans sex workers and towards *trans women*. Two additional events threw me, with full force, into the swirls of transpeople’s issues and trans activism, and at times their thwarted relation to HIV, sexual diversity, and feminism in Mexico that would eventually become the focus of my doctoral dissertation.

The first of those events was the International AIDS Conference that I attended while visiting my parents in Mexico City in August 2008. A sex worker I met in 2007, while I was a student of a Summer Institute of Sexuality, Culture, and Society at the University of Amsterdam in the Netherlands, advised me that I should attend the 2008 conference to learn more about issues of sex work. During the 2008 International AIDS conference, a well-known sex worker activist from Argentina—Elena Reynaga from the Network of Women Sex Workers from Latin America and the Caribbean (REDTRASEX)—gave a powerful keynote address on sex workers’ rights that many of the attendees kept talking about as the sessions went on. I found the critical discussions of epidemiology coming from sex workers and *trans women* most fascinating. It was at this AIDS conference that I heard, for the first time, a transperson, whom I later recognized as Claudia Pía Baudracco, a famous activist from Argentina, say forcefully during a panel: “We are *not* msm. We aren’t men who have sex with men. We are *trans women*!”³⁰ Back in 2003, while volunteering for the Women’s Centre of the University of Victoria (UVic), Canada, where I had the fortune and privilege to learn English, I had been intrigued by the explanation that the space was for “self-identified women.” I had identified as a feminist already for about a decade by then, but just like I did not know what a “woman of colour” meant, up to that point I had not been exposed to the position that to be a woman, one had to identify as such. The legend of the women’s centre at UVic, and my interactions with the people who attended the space, were an excellent way to bring me up to speed on the Anglo–North American debates, conceptualizations, and disjunctures around the concept of “women” that have so powerfully revolutionized feminist thinking in many parts of the

³⁰ In 2012, I learned that Claudia Pía Baudracco had unfortunately died that year.

world over the last three decades. Hearing the Argentinean trans activist challenge the seemingly descriptive epidemiological category of “men who have sex with men” with an identity-based dispute further opened my mind to new ways of thinking.

The second event took place a few months later, also in Mexico City, in March 2009. There, I attended the Feminist Meeting of Latin America and the Caribbean, and there I also encountered the presence of *trans women* for the first time in these kind of meetings. The issue of *trans women*’s presence in regional feminist encounters had generated heated debate during the preceding meeting in Ponta Negra, Brazil (Curiel 2005; Galvão Adrião et al. 2011). In different national contexts, such as Brazil and Argentina, this had also been an ongoing debate (Fernández 2003; Galvão Adrião and Filgueiras Toneli 2008). When I first attended one of these regional feminist meetings in Playa Tambor, Costa Rica, in December 2002, the issue had not yet come up in the discussions. But the times had changed rapidly, and in Mexico City, not only had young and indigenous women attended in greater numbers, but also sex workers and *trans women*. Despite the participation of *trans women* and sex workers, the debate about commercial sex and transpeople’s presence in feminist meetings was still raw or contentious for some participants (Bartra 2010). By the time the meeting took place in Mexico City, however, I was impressed by the development of an experience-based session where many *trans women* from both the panel and the audience took the microphone and, in a format resembling spoken testimonial storytelling, shared their lived experiences. It seemed to me as if they were relying, even if not on purpose, on the collective genre of *testimonio* (testimony) employed in other parts of the Latin American region to articulate social justice demands using the first person voice (Beverley 1994; Gelles 1998). I was even more

pleased to find out that many of the meeting's attendees came to a small room, which turned out to be fully packed, to learn attentively about the attending *trans women's* experiences. I was one of those avid pupils who wanted to continue learning from them. There, I heard established and eloquent Mexican and Argentinean activists for the first time, such as Angie Rueda and Lohana Berkins (see Berkins 2003; Rueda Castillo 2011), and their use of classic feminist thinking and concepts—such as Simone de Beauvoir's (1952 [1949]: 267) idea, “One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman”—to make their lives, struggles, and experiences intelligible to those of us in the audience. In all, it was an extremely enlightening experience.³¹

Life has taken me along some unexpected roads. Some of its stretches have put me in situations of steep-curve learning. My own vision has constantly expanded, been focused and refocused. Once I reconsidered the direction of my doctoral fieldwork, I decided to preserve the same research questions about collective organizing and its local and translocal dimensions that I had set out to answer. These same research questions, however, when applied to the collective organizing of *trans women*, led me into new and unanticipated situations. And this, in turn, resembling the cyclical nature of anthropological knowledge, led to new questions (Wolf 1990).

I initially envisioned (non-trans) female sex work as taking centre stage in this dissertation, but issues about and around *trans women* in Mexico City took up, by fortune, a more prominent role. A great majority of *trans women* are or have been involved in the sex

³¹ As I wrote up this research, I also learned that, regrettably, 50-year-old Lohana Berkins, a major *travesti* activist in the development and approval of the gender identity law in Argentina in 2012, had died in a hospital in February 2016 from health-related complications.

trade at some points in their lives. Strikingly, much of the trans activist efforts are framed around issues of trans identities, practices, and experiences, but tend to exclude the thorny question of sex work. Sexual labour does not escape my own attention; it could not, since I actually began with the intention to examine it attentively. How and why was it that, while being largely involved in commercial sex, sex work did not figure more prominently and positively in *trans women*'s efforts to gain recognition, legibility, legitimacy, and state-sponsored rights? I am fortunate to have had interests in labour issues while in the field, otherwise I could have run the risk of focusing my research primarily on issues of (trans) gender identity politics as other doctoral dissertations about transpeople in Mexico City have done (see Gutiérrez Martínez 2015; Lamas 2012; Sandoval Rebollo 2011). However, in an effort to present the reality I documented in Mexico City as accurately as possible, I pay attention to the issues that the *trans women* I worked with paid attention to, and I seek to frame my ethnographic writing in a way that renders clear and visible how the *trans women* I worked with frame the issues that concern them most.

When I entered graduate school, I hoped I would be able to contribute to feminist histories, practices, and theories: my long-standing areas of passion and interest. By setting out to look at sex work, I knew I would have to touch on the contentious debates around it. But I could not be luckier in that my doctoral path has simultaneously taken me along the examination of another set of equally complex and similarly important issues, namely, those concerning transpeople's practices, identities, realities, lives, and experiences as they play out in the metropolitan area of Mexico City. There are no accidents. Just auspicious coincidences.

Researching Trans and Sex Work Politics in Local and Translocal Spaces

My doctoral dissertation is based on substantive ethnographic research in Mexico City, spanning the period between 2009 and 2014. First, I carried out preparatory pilot research between August and September 2009. At that time, I interviewed key activists and government officials working in the field of gender and sexual diversity and HIV. I wanted my doctoral project to be driven by the concerns and demands of local sex workers, so I also interviewed the leader of the organization of non-trans female sex workers that I hoped to work with. In April 2010, I started an extended period of ethnographic research in Mexico City that went until August 2011, when I returned to Vancouver, Canada. I planned to focus on the translocal dimensions of the local efforts of the organization led by the non-trans female sex worker activist I had interviewed during my pilot research.

During my extended research, I documented the lives of trans sex workers and key trans activists living in Mexico City. I sought to make contacts related to issues of sex work in Mexico in HIV/AIDS, sexual diversity, feminist, and gender equity events and conferences. It was during one of these meetings that my dissertation focus shifted towards *trans women* instead. I had the fortune of meeting Paloma García, the leader of an association, which I identify as The Warriors, primarily devoted to the organization of street vending in some of the streets of Mexico City. I met Paloma at a feminist conference that took place in a central state of Mexico in the summer of 2010. I went to the conference as part of a “travel companionship” with the non-trans female sex worker leader I have mentioned; the aim was to travel with participants to venues of formal activism to see the “behind the scenes” work of their political engagements, rather than only seeing them “on stage” as they were carrying out formal activism. I had managed to secure a spot for the sex

worker leader to facilitate a workshop on sex work at the feminist conference. The workshop consisted of discussing and challenging common perceptions about sex work and sex workers by asking participants to draw what a sex worker and an average day in a sex worker's life would look like. The sex worker leader designed and delivered the workshop; I aided with the logistics and recording of the session and with a write-up for the conference proceedings afterwards.

When I first met Paloma, she had just set out, at the time, to found the first formally registered *trans women's* foundation in Mexico. Paloma's attendance and participation in feminist, health, political party, and sexual diversity events during the rest of my extended research sought to fulfill the purpose of establishing this foundation. On my side, it had become clear to me by then that I was not going to be able to document the sociopolitical activities of the non-trans female sex worker I accompanied during the conference or the organization that she led. I was thus fortunate that, when I approached Paloma García, she agreed to welcome me into her group, and upon returning to Mexico City, I spent the following months travelling with her and "her people" to many of the local and national events and daily activities that she went to. Most of these travel companionships took place across the city. The intention was to get an ethnographic perspective on how sociopolitical messages and demands are conceived and articulated to the broader public. Using theatre metaphors, I sought to gain insights into the "script" development, the "rehearsal" process, the "show" itself, and the reflections of the participants after the events (see Dolan 1993).

With Paloma, I also met a few of the sex workers and aspiring activists that were affiliated, on and off, with The Warriors, the street-vending organization she led. As part of those interactions, I got to know many more of the on-street sex workers and street vendors

affiliated with The Warriors. Some of the trans sex workers were Paloma's friends from the past, as Paloma had been a sex worker at some point in her youth before she became the leader of her own street-vending organization, as I recount in more detail in Chapter 4. I also met some of the activists with whom Paloma had meetings, and particularly, those who advised her on political and trans matters. These activists were both trans and non-trans people, and even though I focused on Paloma's political activities related to her "trans" work, I was able to appreciate the ways in which her emerging trans activism was part of the broader street-vending and partisan political work in which she was immersed. It is important to mention, at this point, that when I identify someone or an event as "activist" it is because the person was identified and the event was branded in this way by the people involved. I do not mean to imply that sex workers are, by definition, not "activists," but rather that certain activities and people both self-identify and are recognized as "activists" while others are not.

As months went on, I began meeting more and more street-based sex workers. Some of them would come to The Warriors' headquarters to attend workshops, ask for favours, or to say "hi" and hang out. I made a point of becoming friends with them and I was able to begin tapping into their own network of *trans women* to meet more of them outside of The Warriors' headquarters venue. Most of the other *trans women* I met knew of Paloma and of her organization, but their degrees of involvement with it ranged from none to sporadic or occasional to regular. Most of them, in fact, had at least some connection or participation with The Warriors, and sought the help of Paloma when they needed it. Many of them paid membership fees when there was something they wanted in return, but for the most part, they remained largely independent from it. As I got to know them, and they got

to know me, I was able to begin carrying out fieldwork in their homes, neighbourhoods, places of work, gatherings and parties, as well as in the “activist” meetings that we all went to throughout Mexico City. I chose some events to attend on my own, but for the most part, I followed Paloma and the rest to the events they chose to attend.

Clearly, my field research took place in specific geographic places of Mexico City, but my ethnography is not *of* a particular site. I spent a lot of my time in public and private places located in the Chililiapa and Zacualtipán neighbourhoods and in the broader Panotlán sex trade area of Mexico City. I also spent time in the Cosapa neighbourhood and the Tepeoco street-vending area. I got to know low-income *trans women* who primarily worked the streets at two “*puntos*” (lit. spots; sex trade areas): the Panotlán and the Cacala Spots, and who largely lived in the Cosapa and Zacualtipán neighbourhoods. The Warriors’ headquarters was located in the Chililiapa neighbourhood, where many of the low-income *trans women* I met would gather. I present profiles of the “*puntos*” later in this chapter, and of the neighbourhoods in Chapters 3 and 4.

My ethnographic approach consisted of following the research participants throughout the city to where they went, not in documenting what happened at a bounded or specific site. Two of the most well-known ethnographies of transpeople in Latin America focused their insights on the almost exclusive documentation of very specific places. Don Kulick (1998c), for instance, spent his time in the street of São Francisco in Salvador, Bahia, Brazil. Annick Prieur (1998b), as well, spent a lot of time in a research participant’s house in Ciudad Nezahualcóyotl, State of Mexico, Mexico, where the participants living in the neighbourhood where she carried out her research gathered. The title of Prieur’s monograph reflects this methodological choice. I spent a lot of time in The Warriors’

headquarters. I spent a lot of time in the apartments where research participants I grew closest to lived. I spent a lot of time hanging out in the streets of the neighbourhoods where many of the *trans women* I met worked, lived, ate, and socialized. However, I also spent a lot of time in a van, on the subway, on the *metrobús*, and in a cab, travelling to and from places spread out across Mexico City where “activist” events would be held.³² These “activist” sites included clinics, schools, theatres, government offices, and auditoriums. I also spent a lot of time at the coffee shops, restaurants, parks, and city streets where *trans women* agreed to meet with me. I realized this was their way of getting their food paid for, and so I actively offered to meet at food shops so that I could reciprocate for their time, words, and friendship with the payment of our meals. I spent a lot of time commuting from the many “sites” of fieldwork to the apartment in the centre-west part of the city where I lived during the extended fieldwork. I travelled extensively throughout the city. My ethnography is not the study of a site, but rather of a set of issues as they unfolded in many places in Mexico City.

Methodologically, I employed participant-observation, formal interviews, informal conversations, and travel companionships in Mexico City. The information I collected for my doctoral project sought to focus on the efforts of trans sex workers and activists’ struggles to obtain legal, health, social, and labour rights in Mexico. My dissertation is based on anthropological ethnographic research with two intersecting constituencies, that of self-defined trans activists and that of on-street trans sex workers and vendors. I largely employed different methodologies to access these two populations. For the most part, I

³² The *metrobús* is a ground-level bus line with fixed stops resembling underground subway stations.

conducted formal interviews primarily with self-defined trans activists and other government health officials, and I carried out participant observation, informal interviews, and travel companionships with low-income female-gendered transpeople. Nevertheless, I also sought to carry out participant observation with trans activists and I managed to develop close personal relationships that I still preserve with at least two of them. Similarly, whenever feasible, I also carried out a few formal interviews with trans workers and vendors. Yet, Mexico City is a society sharply structured by class and educational disparities. I thus adjusted my research techniques in a way that allowed me to document the presence and existence of low-income female-gendered transpeople in Mexico City. Had I chosen to conduct a study solely based on formal interviews, my dissertation would probably look very different. Significantly, this would have likely meant that I would have been able to tap into self-defined activist networks, but that the low-income transpeople—many of whom did not have previous exposure to research projects—would not have been part of the ethnographic snapshot I present in this dissertation.

In Mexico City, I got to know approximately 40 to 50 low-income *trans women*. Virtually everyone I met had been involved in the on-street sex trade at some point in their lives and, with the exception of about three, they remained involved in it when I met them. Of this large group, during my extended fieldwork I carried out substantive participant-observations with Paloma García, Francis, Mariana, Jazmín, Vianey, Dulce (Osa), Valentina (Rana), Giselle, Samantha, Melissa (Fey), Julieta/Mateo, Libia, and Yadira. I also got to spend time, though to a lesser extent, with Azucena, Ashley, Paola, Sylvia, Michelle, and Alondra.

Paloma García's initial permission to follow her throughout her activities and her willingness to introduce me to the *trans women* she knew was critical in carrying out this project with participants who were affiliated or knew about The Warriors. Yadira's support, however, was crucial in allowing me to spend day after day at The Warriors' headquarters, and to be able to sit in on a series of "trans" workshops in which low-income *trans women* participated to learn about the issues facing the "TTT" community. Yadira was among the older *trans women* I met. She worked in the Cacala Spot, and was known for her folk knowledge of "*infiltraciones*," an issue I return to in Chapter 3. I had met Yadira at the feminist conference where I met Paloma García, with whom she was travelling. When the time came for me to formally seek permission to document the workshop activities with those who were attending them at The Warriors' headquarters, Yadira put her foot forward on my behalf. I had not asked her to do so but Yadira surprised me when she compellingly made a point, in front of everyone, to explain that I was "a feminist" and so I should be allowed to document their activities, as I had the best interests of transpeople at heart. Outside of The Warriors, a few low-income *trans women* were crucial for the development of my project. Mariana, who worked at the Panotlán Spot and lived in the Zacualtipán neighbourhood, was one of them. During my extended fieldwork, I learned that I was being recognized as one of Mariana's "cousins." I also counted on the kindness of Samantha, who worked in the Cacala Spot and, unlike many of the rest, lived in the western outskirts of the city. As the years went by, Osa, a street vendor at the Chililiapa area, and Vianey, a sex worker at the Panotlán Spot, remained central to my research project.

UBC's Behavioural Research Ethics Board granted me permission to carry out this research project using both verbal and written consent. For the most part, I used verbal or

oral consent with low-income participants. This stemmed from the fact that, in Mexico City, especially among those who have been on the receiving end of bureaucratic inefficiency, state corruption, scams, thieves, or extortions, being asked to sign papers is largely viewed with suspicion. Also, as one of the reviewers of my ethics application pointed out, I had to make my best effort to avoid putting participants at risk, and leaving them with a paper trail of our interactions could potentially endanger them (or me, though the reviewer did not point this out) in some way. In addition to explicitly explaining my project and asking participants to agree to participate in my study, I reminded them often that I was a researcher. I chose to carry my notebook (with tear-off sheets from the previous days—also a strategy that came about as a result of the comments I received from the ethics board reviewer) and whenever something important came up, I would explicitly ask if I could record that on my notebook for my research. I had learned this technique from a fieldschool in Prince Rupert, British Columbia, where it was said that power imbalances between the researcher and participants are often so great that pretending to blend into everyday life without standing out as a researcher runs the risk of participants forgetting that one is carrying out research. I also made a point to often introduce myself as “the anthropologist” and whenever someone saved my phone number in a cell phone I would ask them to do so under “the anthropologist.” In this, I followed in the steps of anthropologists who have called for context-based ethical engagements that take into account the circumstances of research participants and accommodate the research process accordingly (Bell 2014; Farmer 2002).

Similarly, in Mexico City, I got to know about 10 self-identified trans activists. From this I was able to carry out formal interviews, sometimes repeatedly, with Lucy

Bartolomé, Kim Fernández, Natalia Lewis, Jeannie Belgrano, Angela Navarrete, and Pablo Martina González. I also got to interact with Graciela Jiménez and Alejandra Hurtado, among others. I spent time with activists in public activist spaces and, for some, in their places of employment and living. None of these activists had street-vending backgrounds. Significantly, with the visible exception of one male-gendered person, self-defined trans activists in Mexico City at the time of my extended fieldwork were largely female-gendered trans activists. “Trans” issues at formally activist venues and events are often framed in gender-generic terms, for instance, issues facing the “*comunidad TTT*” (TTT community), but in practice “trans activism” is largely shaped by female-gendered transpeople. I employed written consent with self-defined activists because they had previous exposure with research projects and, even though consent forms are an artifact still largely non-existent in social science research projects in Mexico, I felt that I was able to fully explain the forms and that they were useful for them to understand the implications.

During the course of my research in Mexico City between April 2010 and August 2011, I attended several “sexual diversity,” “trans,” “*LGBTTTI*,” “HIV/AIDS,” and “feminist” activist events, meetings, forums, conferences, and marches. I return to these events in Chapter 5. Significantly, I managed to take two low-income *trans women* to a radio show to which I had been invited, where they had the opportunity to express their points of view publicly. I also sought to publish short pieces on the issues I was encountering; I succeeded in disseminating a non-academic article focused on low-income *trans women*’s lives, co-authored with a *trans woman*, in *DFensor*, the official publication of Mexico City’s Human Rights Commission. I also sought the publication of opinion pieces on “whore stigma” and “transphobia” in *MujeresNet*, an online feminist newsletter

that reaches subscribers across Latin America and the Caribbean. Towards the end of my extended fieldwork, between May and June 2011, I wanted to run a series of “giving back” workshops for the low-income transpeople who had participated in my project. I managed to run two of them, and since they took place at The Warriors’ headquarters, these were attended by people I knew as well as by people whom I had not met before. I sought to informally share what I had been finding and thinking during my research project and to implement activities that, drawing on strength-finding and story-telling, would (perhaps) contribute to their rethinking of themselves as people with many positive personal qualities and strengths. In July and August 2012, and May 2014, I carried out follow-up research. This consisted of meetings and conversations for the purposes of research with Kim Fernández, Natalia Lewis, Lucy Bartolomé, Paloma García, as well as with Vianey, Clara (Osa), and Mariana, with whom to date I still remain close.

Interested in the translocal dimensions of these collective organizing efforts, I also carried out fieldwork at two international conferences and at a few national conferences or meetings in Mexico. In July 2010, I attended the International AIDS Conference in Vienna, Austria where I carried out “snap interviews” with key international trans and sex worker activists from Mexico and elsewhere. These were brief, almost journalistic recorded interviews capturing the most vivid and pressing concerns of the interviewees in a fast-paced environment. I also spent time with a Mexican and a Peruvian trans activist who attended the private meetings of the Latin American and Caribbean Network of Trans People (REDLACTRANS). In November 2011, I went to the Feminist Meeting of Latin America and the Caribbean that took place in Bogota, Colombia. There, I held a well-

attended workshop on trans issues, and I wrote a brief on the intersections of trans issues and feminism that was circulated in preparation and during the meeting to all attendees.

In Mexico, I carried out research, mostly in the form of travel companionships, combined with informal conversations and brief formal interviews, at conference meetings focused on feminism, trafficking, sexual diversity, *LGBTTTI*, and sexual health matters in 4 centre region states and 1 northern state. Three took place on a 1- to 3-hour bus or car trip, one on a 7- to 8-hour drive, and one more on a 2-hour flight.³³ For two of them, I designed and implemented “interactive posters”; I would put up a research poster to which conference attendees would have to contribute. One poster asked them to write on index cards and hang their thoughts to finish sentences on a “clothesline” of ideas; the other poster invited them to use post-it notes and paste them to the poster itself with their answers to questions. All these activities inform my understanding of the issues I discuss in the following chapters. For the purposes of this dissertation, I focus primarily on the examination of the developments I documented in Mexico City.

Lastly, to gain a broader understanding about the socio-legal contexts shaping the ethnographic research carried out in Mexico City, I submitted Access to Information requests to the Legislative Assembly of Mexico City, and to other local and federal government “*entes obligados*” (obliged entities), which are required by law to share public information with citizens. Access to Information requests in Mexico City and elsewhere in the country are respectively mandated by the *Transparency and Access to Public Information of the Federal District Act* (LTAIPDF, Spanish acronym) and the *Federal*

³³ Since conference programs might be found online, I do not use the actual names of the states where the meetings took place to ensure the confidentiality of the research participants.

Transparency and Access to Public Information Act. Between 2008 and 2016, I submitted 17 distinct Access to Information requests to governmental offices in Mexico City and 6 to federal governmental entities. For the purposes of this dissertation, I employed a loosely directed qualitative content analysis approach to examine selected official stenographic transcripts gathered from 7 Access to Information requests I submitted to the Legislative Assembly of Mexico City, and particularly from the “*recursos de revisión*” (appeal processes) to 3 of those 7 original petitions also submitted to the Legislative Assembly of Mexico City. On the whole, I was given about 290 materials at the local level and about 70 at the federal level; these include stenographic transcripts, magazines, official publications, event programs, debate logs, online links, codes, government reports, videos, photos, and posters. But not everything that comes back from an Access to Information request—particularly at the local level—is relevant or comprehensive.³⁴ As such, I also consulted the open access online archives containing the Access to Information requests submitted by other people in Mexico. A few bill proposals that I had not been able to obtain through my own Access to Information requests came from those searches.³⁵

³⁴ My Access to Information requests focused on sex work, trans, gender, sexuality, and street-vending issues. Yet, I was given, for example, information on discussions about parking or property in Mexico City. I was also initially given repeated information, even though I had been made to pay separately for each piece of the information provided, so I decided to submit appeals on three occasions. On several occasions, governmental representatives formally denied having information on the subjects in their possession or formally held that the information requested was not part of their jurisdiction.

³⁵ I explain in more detail how I obtained each of the documents mentioned in this dissertation whenever I mention them in the remaining chapters.

Positionings and "*Puntos*"

There were gender, labour, and socio-economic structural differences and similarities between the research participants in this study and me that are important to mention. Feminist scholars have highlighted the value of undertaking a sustained reflection about researchers' "politics of location" (Kaplan 1994; Rich 1989 [1984]) and "invisible knapsacks" (McIntosh 1995 [1988]) to render visible disparate power dynamics while carrying out research (Lawless 1992; McCorkel and Myers 2003). I carried out research and have written this dissertation as a cisgender woman and as a non-sex worker. I thus enjoy the structural privileges granted to cisgender people (Enke 2013; Frohard-Dourlent 2016; Snorton and Haritaworn 2013) and people who live, for the most part, free from whore stigma (Doezema 2001; Nagle 1997; Pheterson 1990).

I conducted fieldwork as a cisgender or "nontransgender" (Aultman 2014: 62) woman who, despite not conforming to many of the female gender role expectations imposed on women of my age and background, benefited then and continue to benefit today from "cisgenderism" or "the power and privilege of identifying as someone whose gender identity aligns with assigned sex at birth" (Lennon and Mistler 2014: 64). The participants in my study did not enjoy the same structural and socio-legal benefits granted to those of us who benefit from the in-built sex-gender inequities with which the socio-legal system and everyday life currently operate. Just like critical race scholars have emphasized systemic racial inequities that are deeply embedded within institutions and daily life (see Collins 2005; Davis 2003; Twine 1996), systemic inequities stemming from sex-gender exclusions affect transpeople in Mexico and elsewhere (see Namaste 2000; Spade 2015 [2011]).

I also conducted fieldwork as a person with no experiential background in commercial sex. Neither economic necessity, nor personal interest have driven me to the sex trade to date. I have had to fend off, at different times in life, including during fieldwork, some of the social and symbolic effects of those female-gendered individuals who are suspected of being or acting like prostitutes because they do not conform to normative female-gendered roles and expectations. Yet, I enjoy the privileges of those who remain experientially oblivious to the fleshly challenges of soliciting sex services on the streets of Mexico City, and of those who have never had to bear upon their skin the centuries of negative associations, stigma, repudiation, fear, and so on, that affect sex workers.

“*Puntos*” are geopolitical units through which the soliciting of sexual services on the streets of Mexico City are both self- and state-organized.³⁶ Marta Lamas (2003: 10) defines “*puntos*” as “places ‘tolerated’ by the authorities where workers of the streets are concentrated” (my translation). Lamas (2016b) holds that the establishment of “*puntos tolerados*” (tolerated spots) came about as a result of the first reorganization of sex work in the public thoroughfares of Mexico City between 1976 and 1982. The low-income *trans women* I met worked primarily at two of those citywide “*puntos*.”

³⁶ In Canada, on-street places for soliciting are known as “strolls.” Hilary Surratt et al. (2005: 24) define “strolls” as “locations where sex workers openly walk the streets soliciting customers.” Frances Shaver (2005: 299) defines them as “the recognized territory of streets for soliciting.” It would appear that the term “stroll” is primarily used in Canada (see Lewis et al. 2005; Ross 2012); I thank Graham Ellison from the Sex Work Research Hub for this note. The term was first recorded in the 1600s, where it likely came from the dialectal German “*strollen*” meaning “to stroll about, or loaf,” and was linked to the Swiss/German “*strolchen*” meaning “vagabond, or vagrant”; I thank Kate Lister, also from the Sex Work Research Hub, for this etymological explanation. I chose to translate “*puntos*” as “spots” because the term “stroll” denotes, to me, mobility—a mobility that trans sex workers do not have in Mexico City, as they mostly remain fixed to a particular part on the street that is known to be their spot.

The Cacala Spot was located in a middle- to high-income entertainment and residential neighbourhood of the city.³⁷ This was a night Spot only; workers solicited in this area from about 11 p.m. and until the early morning. There were about 20 to 40 *trans women* working this site. A few non-trans women could be seen soliciting services across the street, concentrated at a bus stop, from where the Cacala Spot was. Even though the term “*punto*” is often used to refer to the broader areas where on-street sex trade takes place, the borders of the “*puntos*” are highly visible to and patrolled by those who work within them. A worker cannot just pop up at a part of the street—across a street for example—and be allowed to work by those who work the other Spot. The Cacala Spot consisted of parts of two to three small streets located by a major street of Mexico City. The Spot was largely worked by well made-up, young trans sex workers. Though seldom openly acknowledged to me, there was a street fee required to work at this Spot that was to be given to one of the two trans sex workers who co-managed the Spot. The workers commuted to the spot, many of them from a nearby working-class neighbourhood located about 20 minutes away by taxi. There were hotels located in a nearby lower-class neighbourhood, too. This was an entertainment area, so many cars and taxis parked through the night in the Spot.

³⁷ Place names for the “*puntos*” and neighbourhoods where low-income trans participants lived and worked have been inspired by barrio and village names in and around Zacualtipán, a town located in the highlands of Hidalgo. To a reader familiar with Mexico’s geography and history, these place pseudonyms may convey indigeneity. These are, however, just pseudonyms, and my choices do not seek to indicate a transposition of indigeneity to Mexico City. Some street, neighbourhood, and borough names in Mexico City have indigenous (largely Náhuatl) place names, but (mostly male) historical figures, historical dates and events, Catholic saints, trades, animals, and numbers, among others, also make for common place names (see Cortés 2013; Ramírez 2015). One of the advantages of using these pseudonyms is that, according to the *Guía Roji Ciudad de México 2005* (Palacios Roji García and Palacios Roji García 2004), a well-known city-wide atlas, there were no streets or neighbourhoods in Mexico City with the names I use here.

The Panotlán Spot was near a busy subway station situated in a working-class neighbourhood of the city. The broader Panotlán sex trade area had mixed trans and non-trans street-based soliciting. This was a day and night Spot, meaning that workers could be there at any time during the day or night. The Panotlán Spot, in particular, had about 10 to 20 trans sex workers. Most lived and worked in and nearby the area, though some also travelled from farther areas for work. The most common sexual service that trans sex workers were able to sell here were blowjobs inside a car. There were several hotels nearby renting rooms by the hour. At this Spot, workers were not required to pay street fees to managers, though at times other trans sex workers sought, often unsuccessfully, to establish themselves as managers of the Spot to charge fees. In the area, there were also numerous small-scale food restaurants, informal food-vending stands, and street businesses selling electronic and clothing merchandise; thus, sex work took place alongside a number of other on-street, informal socioeconomic activities.

There persists the popular idea that prostitution is “an easy life” (see Gómez Flores 2006, 2009). However, on-street sex work is anything but easy. The low-income *trans women* I met barely made enough to get by. A blowjob usually cost \$200 pesos. Many days and nights, not everyone was able to make a “*ratito*” (lit. little chunk of time); many participants would return home having turned zero tricks, and having spent money on transportation to and from the “*punto*” to top it off. Monthly rentals in low-income areas usually cost \$1,000 to \$3,000 pesos. The minimum daily salary in Mexico City for formal employment was \$57.46 in 2010 and \$59.82 in 2011. In April and May 2010, some of the food products in the “*canasta básica*” (basic basket) cost the following: one litre of milk cost \$12.50 pesos, a dozen eggs cost \$35.10 pesos, 430 grams of beans cost \$11.90, and

one kilogram of tortillas cost \$6.90 pesos.³⁸ To make ends meet—sometimes barely—*trans women* had to “*pararse en la calle*” (stand on the streets) for hours on end. While I was often sick during the extended field research for this project, my then spouse and I always ate.

Systemic incarceration and premature mortality disproportionally affected the low-income *trans women* I carried out research with, as well as their family members, their lovers, their friends, their neighbours, their acquaintances—the people they knew and loved (see also Ávila 2017a, 2017b). I grew up in a working-class neighbourhood in Mexico City and I come from an intergenerational working-class background. Yet, I grew up in Mexico City at a time when my parents—unlike most people in my generation—were still able to find teaching jobs in the public school system that, while they were lowly paid and overworked, offered them stable formal income and benefits. It was because of that background, and because my family values education highly, that I and my younger brother were able to go to public university. None of the low-income research participants in my study made it past high school. The great majority had dropped out of school at the secondary level, and a few had only a few years of elementary education. Moreover, systemic incarceration was not part of my everyday working-class life. The ubiquity of prison and imprisonment experiences caught me certainly by surprise as I carried out fieldwork. Premature mortality has been part of my existence in this life, but ironically, a

³⁸ Other products in the “*canasta básica*” cost the following: one kilogram of ground red meat cost \$85.70 pesos, one kilogram of chicken breasts cost \$74.90 pesos, one kilogram of rice cost \$11.95 pesos, a kilogram of carrots cost \$4.90, a kilogram of tomatoes cost \$26.90, a kilogram of zucchini cost \$9.50, a kilogram of “*chayotes*” (Mexican squash) cost \$8.90, a kilogram of corn cobs cost \$18.90, a kilogram of avocado cost \$29.90, a kilogram of “*nopales*” (cacti) cost \$10.50, 200 grams of spinach cost \$33.70, and a kilogram of Poblano chilies cost \$24.50.

number of the people I know who have died prematurely are people I met as a result of this research. Neither premature mortality nor systemic incarceration is the primary focus of this dissertation. Nevertheless, I have let the spectre of death and prison run through the pages of this work as a stark reminder of the systemic structural inequalities that, one day, I might return to during a subsequent research project, and as a raw memory of my ongoing accountability to the people I have met during this process.

Additionally, I have written this dissertation as a low-income, overworked, though not homeless or jobless individual. I am a childfree, single, racialized woman of colour, and heterosexual. I was born in Mexico City and I am a non-native English speaker who is an immigrant in Canada.

For some, Mexico City is a “field site.” For me, Mexico City is the place where I grew up, where my parents and extended family live. It is the place where my older brother is buried, and where I hope I, too, will be buried when the time comes. There are substantive differences between me and the people I carried out research with, but I also see some lines of similarity (see Narayan 1993). Mexico City itself and the personal entanglements that I have in that piece of land are some of them. I did not have the possibility of being a foreign researcher whose embassy would extract them from Mexico or offer them consular protection had things gone suddenly awry in the country. I thus treaded with care. Many of my ethical research choices were shaped by my awareness that I could not just leave “the field” one day and never have to return if I did not want to. I remain fully aware of that as I write this dissertation. When I think of reciprocity with my research participants, above all I think about making my utmost best effort to preserve confidentiality and to think extra carefully about what, and how, I write about them. I will

continue to return to Mexico City and I want to continue seeing and knowing the people featured in these pages, not necessarily as research participants, but simply as part of the group of humans I have come to know and love. Most of all, I would like to see them alive, healthy, and free.

Confidentiality and Pseudonyms

It is important to note that, in this work, I use pseudonyms for people and specific places in Mexico. The only exceptions to this are when I refer to people who held positions in public office or well-known activists from other parts of Latin America who participated and made public statements in international meetings. In choosing to craft pseudonyms for *trans women* in this work, I have run into an ethical dilemma. On one hand, established anthropological conventions require me to use fictitious names for my participants to preserve confidentiality. Yet, these are people who had already struggled in life to be recognized by names of their own choosing. After serious reflection on this matter, however, I have come to the conclusion that the ethical balance is tipped towards the pseudonym side, even if that simultaneously entails an additional layer of erasure already experienced by most participants in my study. Since the sociopolitical context in Mexico today is fragile and unpredictable, I have come to the conclusion that preserving the confidentiality of my research participants is one way to remain accountable to participants and to contribute to protecting their wellbeing.

I have generally attempted to use pseudonyms that preserve the language, class background, and aesthetic taste of the names *trans women* chose for themselves outside this

work's pages. With one exception, in which one person was represented as two, each person appearing in this work represents one real-life individual. Some of the personal characteristics of the research participants have been masked in some cases, but I have sought to think about such ethnographic writing strategies carefully so that the substantive findings in this work remain accurate. I am interested in discussing broader sociocultural and political issues, rather than in personalizing or individualizing such issues.

Similarly, while I have chosen pseudonyms for the key places where I carried out research, I have preserved a sense of their general location within Mexico City's geography. I have chosen to do so because, to those familiar with the social landscape of the metropolitan area of Mexico City, by referring to a neighbourhood in a northern borough or in the eastern outskirts of the city, the working-class and symbolic dynamics and undertones associated with certain parts of the city will make better sense. I have also given general location and general social rubrics to understand the context of specific states within Mexico, but I do not mention the specific names. Lastly, since I came into contact with people who participate in high-profile events, I have deemphasized the exact temporalities of my fieldwork. For instance, instead of saying March 20th, 2016, I have said March or spring 2016.

Presence

This is a feminist ethnography about female-gendered transpeople, many of whom were on-street sex workers. In this work, I contribute to feminist ethnographies by proposing "presence" as a sensible mode of feminist ethnographic representation of

marginalized populations facing strenuous circumstances. Debates about representation in anthropology (see Clifford 1983; Clifford and Marcus 1986; Keesing 1990; Said 1989; Trouillot 1991) and, more specifically, in feminist scholarship (see Behar and Gordon 1995; Haraway 1988; Minh-ha 1989; Stacey 1988; Wolf 1992) have pointed to the inherent partiality, political and situational quality of written accounts seeking to capture complex lived realities.³⁹ Critical thinking about power has been central to the discussions about representation in contemporary social sciences, and, more to the point, a critique and awareness about the often social, financial, geopolitical, and symbolic power imbalances often riddling researcher-participant interactions has been noted (see Mohanty 1988 [1984]). I have already shed light on some of the power differentials; I now turn briefly to “presence” in feminist ethnography.

On the feminist anthropological front, one of the most common strategies employed to address these issues has been to call on the incorporation of participants’ “voice” in ethnographies (Visweswaran 1997). Scholars advancing or responding to such interpellation have either used first-person accounts, presented multiple points of view, or sought to integrate the narratives of those not usually considered legitimate registers of a given sociocultural issue, time or location. (e.g., Patai 1993; Shostak 1981; Wolf 1992). Capturing the voices of those in the margins of society—despite the challenges (Alcoff 1991-1992; Spivak 1988)—has involved a paradigm shift in anthropological research. Yet, I think it is now necessary to acknowledge that presenting the “voices” of those written out

³⁹ Similar critiques have been made by indigenous scholars espousing critical decolonial and decolonizing perspectives. See, for example, Linda Tuhiwai Smith (1999), Leanne Simpson (2004), and Silvia Rivera Cusicanqui (2012).

of ethno-historical accounts does not necessarily, or by definition, accomplish a feminist decolonizing purpose.

Reflecting on the conditions, context, and characteristics of my participants leads me to seek “presence” in this work as my primary tactic to present the stories and circumstances of the *trans women* I met. What I mean is that if I seek “voice” in this work, the voices that I would present would be primarily of the self-defined trans activists I met; while if I seek “presence,” the presence of the low-income transpeople I met gains clearer shape. This is not to suggest that voice does not matter. Rather, I aim to highlight that the participants in this research had different levels of “research literacy.” Some of the participants who were activists at the time I carried out my project had indeed been involved in other researchers’ projects, had familiarity with the interview method and sometimes with other research methods, and in some cases had been, due to the nature of their training and professional background, similarly positioned to carry out research studies or journalistic accounts that required the collection of information from human subjects. By contrast, most of the participants in my study who were street-based sex workers and vendors at the time I met them and invited them to take part in my project had not taken part in a recorded qualitative interview before. My research techniques, as I have explained, sought to accommodate these differences to make my project more inclusive of low-income female-gendered transpeople. For those with minimal experience with researchers, and in particular with anthropologists, I relied on quintessential anthropological participant observation as the main method of learning from them. I sought to obtain formal recorded interviews with all of them several times, but that research

technique just did not yield many results with low-income participants. Their “presence” in this work is thus captured through my narrative.

My suggestion to think of “presence” as a way of advancing feminist ethnographies stems from an attempt to account for the existing disparities among *trans women* in Mexico. It is my initial attempt, albeit limited, to magnify their presence on the streets and spaces of Mexico City. My proposition for “presence” as a feminist ethnographic sensibility does not seek to suggest or displace the attempts and leanings of other researchers towards representing marginalized people’s voices in their projects, or towards presenting them as sole or main narrators of the project findings. After all, I could not agree more with George Guggelberger and Michael Kearney (1991: 3) when they argue that the writing about or for subaltern people needs to ultimately enable the “relatively powerless to represent themselves either symbolically or by more immediate political means.” Given the constraints of the fieldwork circumstances I was able to create for this project, I see “presence” as part of the ongoing feminist and decolonial political project that strives towards promoting social justice and solidarity with structurally disempowered people.

Interpreting and Reading Softly

In the fall of 2014, I taught a class on the Ethnography of Mexico for third-year sociology and anthropology students. I had designed my syllabus to include some of the most powerful pieces of ethno-historical and artistic-literary work about Mexico and Mexicans. I was somewhat baffled—and touched—when three of my Latin American-Canadian female colleagues had cheered me on for having the chance to join the ranks,

even if for just one term, of the precarious underpaid force of sessional instructors. For them, this was one step forward in *our* turning the tables on having substantive “Latin American” faculty representation—women, racialized, foreign-accented, immigrants—in post-secondary institutions in the greater Vancouver area.

In the midst of this personal and community optimism and anticipation, Mexico was undergoing yet another of the sociopolitical phases overwhelmed by upheaval and unrest that appear to have become so characteristic of contemporary Mexican history. The National Polytechnic Institute’s (IPN, Spanish acronym) students went on a major strike to protest the deskilling of degrees and decision-making processes in the higher university ranks (Sánchez Jiménez 2014a, 2014b). Forty-three indigenous and peasant students from the rural teachers’ college of Ayotzinapa went—and remain to this day—missing (Tuckman 2014c, 2016a, 2016c). President Enrique Peña Nieto’s “*Casa Blanca*” (lit. White House) scandal involving conflicts of interest and nepotism was uncovered (Tuckman 2014b, 2016b). These are events that continue to have lingering repercussions for politics and freedom of the press today. For me, these events laid bare the existing rifts among different societal sectors about access to public education, governmental corruption and favouritism, and the ever-present undercurrents of racialized, gendered, and class inequalities in the country.

In my course, I turned my students’ attention to these realities. My course focused on external and internal colonization, border and Chicana writing, femicides in Ciudad Juárez, spread-out violence and vigilantism, failed drug policies and militarization, low-intensity war, and “de-Indianization.” It focused on Malintzin’s historical blame as *the* traitor of the Mexican nation (see Paz 1961 [1950])—when such a geopolitical construct

did not yet exist—and her more recent rightful reinstallation among feminist thinkers as an interpreter during the early-colonial times in the 16th century (see Alarcón 1989; Glantz 2001). To my knowledge, this was the first time that a course focused specifically on Mexico had been taught in the post-secondary institution that hired me. My aim was to provide students with an overview of some of the most pressing issues affecting Mexico and Mexicans today. By carefully scrutinizing key persistent concepts in the ethno-histories and ethnographies of Mexico, such as “deep Mexico,” “the other Mexico,” “imaginary Mexico,” “the Mexican psyche,” “the Mexican character,” “distant neighbour,” and Mexico’s “labyrinths and solitudes,” among others, I sought to provide an entry into the “many Mexicos”—as the classic formulation of Lesley Bird Simpson (1966 [1941]) suggests—that make up Mexico and Mexicans in and beyond the contemporary geopolitical boundaries of the country.

At the end of the term, however, the two Mexican students in my class expressed both gratitude for having had the opportunity to learn more about Mexico in Canada and frustration for what seemed to them to have been a mostly bleak picture of what Mexico was, or could be. They did not want their classmates to think that everything always went wrong in Mexico and with Mexicans: they said, “there are beautiful things too,” “nobody is going to want to go for a trip to Mexico.” I acutely felt their anguish and their dilemma. It had been my own anguish and dilemma as I had lectured throughout the term about the piece of land that saw my heart beat for the first time, upon exiting my mom’s womb. This is a land and a group of people that hurt and still hurt in more unimaginable ways than I ever felt possible, especially when so much blood, inequality, and preventable suffering has shattered our lives and the lives of many of our own-skinned ones in recent years.

In this dissertation, I seek—to the best of my ability—to contribute to the ongoing effort to write against culturalism (Abu-Lughod 1991), against exoticism (Trouillot 1991), and against mystical radical difference (Keesing 1990). As I was teaching about the ethnography of Mexico, I kept asking if there had been an Edward Said of Mexico, someone who had taken grand, persistent, and pernicious othering depictions of Mexico and Mexicans to task. Roger Bartra (1992 [1987]), Matthew Gutmann (1996, 1997), and more recently Álvaro Enrigue (2014) came to mind. What would an explicit intersectional feminist lens, I wondered, bring to bear on this anti-essentialist critique? What would a Lila Abu-Lughod kind of intervention concerning Mexico and Mexicans look like? My own miniature answer to these questions rests in seeing the central role of a feminist ethnographer as someone who seeks to be an accurate interpreter, a thoughtful translator. Yet, such Spanish-to-English, Mexico-to-Canada, Global South-to-Global North translations have not been straightforward. They remain on shaky ground. How could daily love and friendship be translated without trivializing the fact that Mexico and Mexicans are undergoing a terrible time, when hope and justice seem so far off? Conversely, how could class-based symbolic and material distinctions and unequal sex–gender systems be at the forefront of this work without erasing the heartfelt musicality that surrounds Mexico City? As other feminist anthropologists have expressed, anthropology seems to be a discipline that either bleeds into one’s life (Reiter 1999) or breaks your heart (Behar 1996). With no firm answer to these quandaries, all I ask is for the reader to engage with me in my ongoing effort of interpretation—that is, to read these pages softly.

In the next chapter, I examine the socio-legal regulations that have been introduced over time in Mexico City that have consistently contributed to the production of sex work

as a social problem. In examining the changing geographies of the on-street sex trade and the growing visible participation of *trans women* within them, I shed light on how socio-legal reforms on sex–gender issues, particularly the approval of the local trans law in 2008, fail to conceive of sexual labour as a trans issue.

2. Changing Sex Trade Geographies and Socio-Legal Regulation

Introduction

In this chapter, I focus on the socio-legal interventions that have been employed to construct on-street sexual labour as a social problem that needs to be addressed. I make use of Deborah Brock's (1998) idea that social problems are socially constructed phenomena, and more broadly, of Jeffrey Weeks's (2000) notion that there are regimes such as the state and medical, public health, and social hygiene discourses regulating sexuality. Based on existing historical research, first-hand inspection of legislation and policy discussions, and information gathered during field observations and conversations with this study's research participants, I provide a brief social history of Mexico City's shifting sex trade geographies and the continuing socio-legal policies that have been introduced throughout time to manage sex work.

Against a backdrop of continuous socio-legal approaches contributing to the production of sex work as a social problem, I examine the approval of Mexico City's "trans law" in 2008. This law helped to legally frame transpeople as "trans" subjects deserving of legal and health rights. The legislation has also contributed to transpeople's social recognition. As these socio-legal changes have taken place, the geographies of the on-street sex trade have also shifted within the last decade. There has been a proliferation of "*puntos*" (lit. sex trade spots) on central streets of Mexico City, and *trans women* have attained rising visibility within many of them. I thus examine how the trans law stands as a significant achievement towards the respect of transpeople in the country. However, in spite

of this important legal accomplishment, on-street vendors of sexual services and other goods—many of which are female-gendered transpeople—remain in peril on many of Mexico City’s public thoroughfares. The socio-legal regulation of sexuality and the evolving construction of sexual labour as a social problem contribute to this situation.

Regulating “Social Problems”

Marta Lamas (2016b: 21–23) affirms that, before the Spanish conquest of 1521 into what is today Mexico, prostitution was commonplace in hospitality and ritual practices in the Aztec world. The arrival of the colonizers, however, introduced a Hispanic model of sexual commerce carried out under the control of third parties that limited the margin of action for the women who performed it. In pre-Columbian times, prostitution appeared not to have been a distinct domain in socio-religious practices. In contrast, Spanish colonizers’ thinking led to the establishment of commercial sex as a separate, tolerated, yet shunned sphere. In 1524, for example, the Spanish Crown provided express authorization for the construction of the first “*burdel*” (brothel) in New Spain (Lamas 2016b: 23). By the 18th century, women involved in sexual commerce went from being seen as “*las alegres*” (lit. the happy women) or “*alegradoras*” (lit. those who make others happy) to “*mujeres de la mala vida*” (lit. women of the bad life). It was in this shifting context when the term “*prostitución*” (lit. prostitution) first entered the Spanish language in 1711 (Lamas 2016b: 23).

Different legislative interventions have been implemented in Mexico City to regulate prostitution since then, contributing to the creation of prostitution as a social

problem needing to be solved. As Deborah Brock (1998) explains, “social problems” do not exist as social facts but rather as socially constructed phenomena, which emerge as “the creation of a complex interplay of economic and social forces at particular historical moments in specific locations” (Brock 1998: 3). Brock’s (1998) argument is that, historically and politically, prostitution has been made into a social problem as a result of larger economic shifts, urban development, and local state interests. In Mexico, this social problem-making process has been particularly evident since the 1850s, when legislative proposals to regulate prostitution appeared and materialized into the 1867 Ordinance and, later, its refined version, the 1872 “*Reglamento*” (lit. regulation) on prostitution (Bliss 2001). Historian Katherine Bliss (2001) explains that this legislation introduced a state-regulated brothel-based prostitution model that imposed mandatory registration and strict sanitary controls targeting “*mujeres públicas*” (lit. public women) (see also Lamas 2016b).

In reading Marta Lamas’s (2016b) account of sex work throughout time in Mexico City, we gather that the figure of the “*matrona*” (lit. female matron; madam), a woman looking after a brothel, came about at this time. This is supported by Bliss’s (2004: 166) research, who found that the *Reglamento* enabled authorized registered prostitutes to provide sexual services in brothels—tightly regulated closed houses in which madams “portrayed themselves as ‘mothers’ to the women in their employ and used the language of family to describe the brothel’s environment, referring to shared meals as well as their duties to clothe, feed, and protect the women under their roofs.”

Following Brock’s line of reasoning, it does not seem surprising that such regulatory efforts in Mexico appeared during the decades following the formal independence from Spanish colonial rule in 1821 and preceding the outbreak of the

Mexican revolution in 1910. Brock's (1998) framework underscores that prostitution is constructed as a social problem at particular times, and Bliss's (2001) historical research further supports the view that, in Mexico City, this occurred at a time of socioeconomic upheaval and unrest.

However, regulatory efforts around prostitution did not cease once the Mexican revolution had come to an end in 1920. Bliss (2001: 2) argues that a "revolutionary morality" materialized in the moral reform campaigns that became central to the political projects of renovation and nation-making between 1910 and 1940. At this time, for example, Mexico City underwent a shift from regulated prostitution to abolitionism. Mexico City had been known as the "city of pleasure" during the Porfirian era (1877–1911) due to the presence of rampant alcohol access and brothel prostitution that catered to both local and visiting clientele. However, once the Revolution began, many attempts at public morality and social order took place. Prostitution, in particular, became associated with the Porfirian authoritarian rule, social disorder, exploitation, and extreme poverty, and not surprisingly, prostitution and female sexuality became objects of direct revolutionary moral crusades. As regulated, brothel-based prostitution declined during the last years of the Revolution, clandestine and non-registered prostitution taking place in emerging cabarets and dance halls became more prominent (Bliss 2001).

Bliss (2001) relates that, in 1926, a new *Reglamento* was introduced that set restrictions on the allowed legal age for female prostitution. In 1929 and 1931, the criminalization of "*lenocinio*" (pimping) was enshrined in the Penal Code. Following revolutionary ideals, public officials, urban planners, and development planners sought to make sexual commerce less visible, while still offering sexual services to travellers and

local men. The 1926 *Reglamento* included zoning regulations that were strongly opposed by the inhabitants of the working-class downtown district where the formal “*zona de tolerancia*” (tolerated zone) was to be located. According to Bliss (2001), inhabitants of this neighbourhood saw themselves, unlike the government, as “people of order” and refused to have a “vice district” in their neighbourhood. While the zoning debates were taking place in the impoverished downtown area, mid-scale brothel owners saw the opportunity to move from the downtown area into middle-class neighbourhoods. Bliss (2001) states that this effectively helped reshape the geography of sexual commerce in Mexico City along class lines.

During the 1930s, with the advent of the new morality and labour legislation brought about by the Revolution, public health officials encouraged women to seek alternatives to prostitution, and radical labour unions compelled them to unionize for better working conditions (Bliss 2004: 166–67). Bliss (2004) found that women working in prostitution rejected union organizing because they thought of their work as shameful and transitional, but at the same time, they saw themselves as decent, honourable people who ensured the nation’s stability by providing sexual services to men.

Even though abolitionist ideas had been expressed since the 1860s, it was not until the 1930s that they began to displace regulationist approaches to commercial sex in Mexico City. The first Congress against Prostitution in Mexico City took place in 1934. Under the influx of changing public health views targeting syphilis infection (Bliss 2003), the “*delito de contagio*” (lit. disease transmission crime) was introduced in 1937. A year later, under the federal government of Lázaro Cárdenas, officially tolerated brothel prostitution ended.

President Manuel Ávila Camacho followed suit by campaigning in 1944 against cabarets and pimping (Bliss 2001).

The revolutionary abolitionism was nevertheless distinct from present-day abolitionist stances. Lamas (2016b: 25) explains that, at the time, abolitionism meant the ending of state intervention in granting permissions and carrying out sanitary inspections on sex workers. Not surprisingly, commercial sex continued taking place in Mexico City despite attempts to eradicate it and make it less visible by withdrawing direct state intervention in its spatial and sanitary regulation. Thus, in the 1950s and 1960s there were continuing attempts to dismantle the “*zona roja*” (lit. red-light district) in the historic downtown area (Lamas 2016b).

Several studies in different geographical latitudes have consistently shown that prostitution legislation proposals and their enactments often contribute to the spatial reconfiguration of sex work (Aalbers and Deinema 2012; Hubbard 2004; Hubbard et al. 2008). Displacements and spatial exclusions at play in the regulation of sex work (Hubbard et al. 2008; Pratt 2005; Sanchez 2004) do not eliminate the demand for paid sexual services, but rather leave sex workers precariously standing at the crux of attempted erasures as urban renewal projects and socio-economic modernization projects take place (Kelly 2008; Wright 2004).

In the 1970s, during the government of President Luis Echeverría, female sex workers took openly to the streets of Mexico City again. During the government of President José López Portillo (1976–1982), the chief of the Federal District Department, Carlos Hank González, established “*puntos tolerados*” (lit. tolerated spots), with the appointment of authorized “*representantes*” (lit. representatives), where female sex workers

could solicit on the streets. Marta Lamas (2016b) states that “this corresponded to the first reorganization of sex work in public thoroughfares in the Federal District” (25, my translation).⁴⁰

The efforts to combat AIDS in Mexico beginning in the mid-1980s (Carrillo 1993) brought about the introduction of a “*credencial de Promotora de sexo seguro*” (lit. safe sex Promoter ID card) for those female sex workers who tested negative and promoted condom use (Lamas 2016b: 32).⁴¹ In 1987, Enrique Jackson, head of the Cuauhtémoc borough, sought the promotion of condom use in hotels. Since the services of those soliciting in the streets often took place inside hotel premises, hotel owners were mandated to provide a minimum of two condoms in each room (Lamas 2016b: 31–32). The manufacturing of paid sexual labour as a social and health problem to be regulated appears to be well entrenched in Mexico City’s society by then because, as Héctor Carrillo (1993: 131) attests, “[c]ontrary to popular perceptions, as of 1991 there were more cases of AIDS among housewives than among female prostitutes.” Yet, sex work and sex workers were seen as people needing to be medically and socio-legally regulated and controlled.

Deborah Brock’s (1998) research on sex work in Toronto, Canada, from the mid-1970s through the 1990s, and Katherine Bliss’s (2001) research on sex work in Mexico City, Mexico, between 1910 and 1940, both show that social problem-making processes by way of moral panics, public health discourses, and legislative interventions manifest during

⁴⁰ Lamas uses the phrase “*trabajo sexual en la vía pública*” to refer to on-street sex work. I translate “*vía pública*” as public thoroughfares.

⁴¹ Héctor Carrillo (1993: 129) states that the “first case of AIDS in Mexico was identified in a Mexico City hospital” in 1983. This was presumably the case of a male patient, because Marta Lamas (2016b: 31) states that the first case of a female patient was identified two years later, in 1985.

periods of heightened socioeconomic upheaval. The socio-legal regulation of sexuality (Weeks 2000), and particularly of sex work, appears to continue to hold a firm grip in a socioeconomically uneven and continuously embattled Mexico City to date. The developments described above support the idea that socio-legal interventions in Mexico City have been at the core of the ongoing conceptualization of paid sexual labour as a social and health malaise needing to be resolved. This conceptualization is further supported in the present by the quasi-legal (and increasingly quasi-criminal) status of sex work and on-street vending in Mexico City, as I explain below.

Sex Work in Mexico City

Sex work in Mexico City is currently regulated by the *Federal District Civic Culture Act* (Federal District Legislative Assembly 2004a).⁴² The provisions of Article 24, Section VII of this Act state:

Article 24. It is an infringement against the tranquility of people:

VII. Soliciting or practicing prostitution, as well as requesting such service. In any event, prosecution of the possible offender will only proceed when neighbourly complaint exists.⁴³

Thus, in Mexico City, while corruption of minors, child pornography and child prostitution, and procuring or pimping regardless of a person's age are criminal offenses outlined in the

⁴² In Spanish: Ley de Cultura Cívica del Distrito Federal.

⁴³ Other "infringements against the tranquility of people" listed under the *Civic Culture Act's* Article 24 are: coaxing someone into paying for an unsolicited service (Section I); possessing animals without proper hygienic measures resulting in neighbourly complaints (Section II); creating excessive noise that presents risks to neighbours' health (Section III); impeding use of public domain goods (Section IV); obstructing property entry or exit gateways without proprietor's permission (Section V); inciting or provoking quarrels (Section VI); and seizing access to public offices and surrounding areas and offering unauthorized paperwork operations (Section VIII).

Federal District Penal Code (Federal District Legislative Assembly 2002b), soliciting, practising, and consuming sexual services may not necessarily be seen as an offence.⁴⁴ Because sex work is contemplated under civic culture law, in practice the selling and buying of sex services between adults over 18 years of age is tolerated, and if neighbourly complaints arise, sexual commerce is treated as an administrative offence punishable with a fine or an arrest of up to 24 hours.

A notable characteristic of this regulatory framework towards sex work is the fact that only prostitution is generally seen as a sexual service. Exotic dancing, massage parlours, and phone sex work, for instance, are not taken into account within this legislation. These sex industry activities are instead regulated by local mercantile law, although the sex workers are always vulnerable to administrative prosecution for soliciting or practising prostitution, and the owners or managers of such business may be prosecuted for procuring or, lately, for “trafficking” (Chamber of Deputies 2007, 2009).

Until early 2011, cabarets and other establishments where “*ficheras*” (lit. female tokenists) and other workers offered sex industry services indoors, such as coupled dancing for pay and paid sexual services, fell within the permissive purview of local mercantile law (Federal District Legislative Assembly 2002a).⁴⁵ But a renewed *Mercantile Establishments Act* (Federal District Legislative Assembly 2011b) now includes a prohibition provision against “pimping, pornography, prostitution, drug trafficking and consumption, crimes

⁴⁴ In Spanish: Código Penal para el Distrito Federal.

⁴⁵ “*Ficha*” literally means token. “*Ficheras*” are women who collect dancing tokens from customers in exchange for pay from business owners. This is different from “*table dancing*” or stripping in that “*ficheras*” do not strip in public; the bars where they dance usually play cumbia, son, or other “tropical” music and, consequently, they cater to low-income clientele. Some people use the term “*fichar*” or “*fichear*” to refer more broadly to prostitution because the boundaries between paid couple dancing and paid provision of sexual services are presumed to be tenuous.

against health, corruption of minors, sexual tourism, and trafficking of people for sexual exploitation” (Article 25, Section V) occurring inside mercantile establishments. Yet, the same legislation leaves room for interpretation on whether this refers mostly to cases involving minors (those under 18 years of age) (Article 71, Section III). Meanwhile, in the rest of Mexico’s states, soliciting and practising prostitution remains largely legal insofar as it takes place within state-regulated and privately-run brothels or within the limits of “*zonas de tolerancia*” (tolerance zones) (see Curtis and Arreola 1991; Kelly 2008; Parrini et al. 2017).

Since the provisions on prostitution contained in Mexico City’s *Civic Culture Act* state that sex workers may be prosecuted only when neighbours’ complaints arise, the current legal status opens a leeway primarily for the discretionary prosecution of street-based sex workers, and for the quotidian abuse, harassment, sex worker representatives’ demands for payment of a fee to have the right to work the streets, and bribes for police.

Poignant early examples of such discretionary prosecution and police violence targeting on-street sex workers are found in the testimonies of sex workers included in *Recommendation 8/94* (Comisión de Derechos Humanos del Distrito Federal 1994).⁴⁶ This policy recommendation regarding sexual commerce in public thoroughfares was issued in 1994 by Luis de la Barreda Solórzano, ombudsman of Mexico City’s Human Rights Commission (CDHDF). In it, the ombudsman documents beatings, extortions, and arbitrary detentions committed by police officers against people working in public prostitution and their clients in central parts of Mexico City. Three “*sexo-servidoras*” (lit. female sex

⁴⁶ In Spanish: Recomendación 8/94.

service providers) stated that borough government officials were forcing them to pay \$100 new pesos to not be sent to the “*delegación*” (borough’s prosecution and detention centre).⁴⁷ They also testified that “*patrulleros*” (road patrol officers) were extorting their clients, threatening to accuse them of encouraging prostitution or “*cargarlos*” (lit. loading them), which is planting them with marihuana packs, if they did not concede. Similarly, the *Recommendation* contains the testimonies of six “*sexo-servidores homosexuales*” (lit. homosexual sex-service providers), some of whom stated that they worked as “*sexo-servidoras*” and had “changed their sex through surgical intervention.” Their accounts show that road patrol officers often forced them to provide them with unpaid sexual services or face detention. Their accounts also speak of “*policías judiciales*” (judiciary police officers) threatening their clients with informing families or the tabloid press that they had been detained seeking prostitution services and, in particular, those of “*un homosexual*” (a male homosexual). The local human rights ombudsman found that all these events contravened the regulations and legal procedures outlined in the *Civic Culture Act*. Specifically, de la Barreda concluded that only “*policías preventivos*” (preventive police officers) could detain people. He added that prostitution-related detentions could only occur if there was a neighbourly complaint, and if a complaint was filed, a detention could only take place if the

⁴⁷ In Mexico, the terms “*sexo-servicio*” and “*sexo-servidora*” were, until recently, widely used to talk about commercial sexual transactions. The term “*sexo-servicio*” is made up of two words, “sex” (*sexo*) and “service” (*servicio*), whereas the term “*sexo-servidora*” results from the combination of “sex” (*sexo*) and “female who offers a service” (*servidora*). The word “*sexo-servicio*” seems to have emerged in the context of local struggles among sex workers for recognition and legitimacy of their work, and in an effort to displace the pejorative and insulting term “*puta*” (whore). More recently, however, the term appears to have lost support among some sex work activists, who prefer to employ the term “*trabajo sexual*” (sex work) as a way to gain legitimacy and respect. For more information on these and other terms, see the Introduction and Glossary.

The “*nuevos pesos*” (new pesos) were introduced in the early to mid-1990s. At this time, the old pesos lost three zeros in an effort to deal with the dramatic depreciation of the peso and the profound economic crisis of the 1980s (see Cárdenas 2010).

accused was formally summoned and failed to appear in the prosecution office to declare. The testimonies of sex workers proved that none of that was happening.

It was against this socio-legal backdrop that, on June 12, 2007, deputies of the local Party of the Democratic Revolution (PRD) Víctor Hugo Círiga Vásquez and Juan Bustos Pascual proposed a bill with the intention to reform the legal regulation of sex work in Mexico City. The bill was presented to the Federal District Legislative Assembly with the intention to reform and protect the “*sexo-servicio*” (sex-services) in Mexico City (Federal District Legislative Assembly 2007b).⁴⁸ Effectively, the bill sought to repeal Article 24’s Section VII of the *Federal District Civic Culture Act* (2004a) and to create the *Federal District Sex-Services’ Protection Act*.⁴⁹ The bill attempted to change the status of sex work from an informally tolerated to a legally regulated practice and, in doing so, to contribute to the legitimacy of sex work as an occupation.

The proposed bill attempted to legalize sex work by recognizing and emphasizing the human dignity of “*sexo-servidoras*” and “*sexo-servidores*” (female and male sex-service providers). Moreover, it included a provision to guarantee the exercise of sex workers’ rights, attempted to regulate the soliciting and practice of sex-service, sought to establish a basis for the construction of a culture of respect without violence against “*sexo-servidoras*,” and regularized the norms and programs that would contribute to their holistic development. The law also sought to provide a juridical framework supportive of the right

⁴⁸ The rationale and text of this draft bill was obtained through an open Access to Information request (folio number: 5000000216111) submitted to the Legislative Assembly of Mexico City. Once processed, every submitted request should, in principle, become publicly available to anybody who has the patience to dig into the institutional digital archives where the open access information is stored. This is mandated by both the LTAIPDF and the *Federal Transparency and Access to Public Information Act*. I consulted the local government INFOMEX site at: <http://www.infomexdf.org.mx/InfomexDF/Default.aspx>

⁴⁹ In Spanish: Ley de Protección al Sexoservicio para el Distrito Federal.

to live free from violence, exploitation, extortion, arbitrary detention, harassment, and abuse. At the same time, it emphasized the obligation of sex workers to not provide sexual services to people under the legal age of majority, included some sanitary control provisions solely targeting sex workers, and suggested mandatory condom use—an obligation that would have been the responsibility of the sex worker and not the client. In addition, the proposed bill banned the exercise of commercial sex on the streets or in public spaces, but would have allowed sex work to take place within the spatial limits of “*perímetros autorizados*” (authorized perimeters). Breaking any of these provisions would have resulted in fines ranging between 10 to 20 days of minimum daily salary.⁵⁰ Breaking the rules would have also led to a detention of 12 to 36 hours (Federal District Legislative Assembly 2007b; see also Tesoro 2007a).

An interesting aspect of the proposed *Federal District Sex-Services’ Protection Act* was that, unlike the 2004 *Federal District Sex Work Bill Proposal* (Article 23, Section 4) (Federal District Legislative Assembly 2004b), it did not establish the obligation for sex workers to pay for use (“*pago por uso*”) of public space; that is, it did not require sex workers to pay for being able to work the streets within the authorized perimeters.⁵¹ In spite of this, the delimitation of authorized geographical areas where sex work could take place would have fallen under the responsibility of the Legislative Assembly, the different borough heads (*jefes delegacionales*), and the local Human Rights Commission (Tesoro 2007a, 2007b). As explained in Chapter 1, Mexico City is geopolitically divided into 16

⁵⁰ In 2007, the minimum daily salary was \$50.57 pesos.

⁵¹ In Spanish: *Iniciativa del Ley del Trabajo Sexual para el Distrito Federal*. It was submitted for consideration by deputy Julio César Moreno Rivera from the PRD. I obtained a copy of the 2004 draft bill through an open Access to Information request (folio number: 5000000018312) submitted to the Legislative Assembly of Mexico City.

different administrative boroughs (“*delegaciones*”) and sex work, in its most visible expression (i.e. street-based prostitution), is said to happen only in some of them. At the time the 2007 bill proposal was introduced, there were authorized perimeters in only about three to five of those boroughs, including Miguel Hidalgo, Cuauhtémoc, Benito Juárez, and Venustiano Carranza. These boroughs were seen as working-class demarcations based on official indexes of high urban density, poor socioeconomic status, and scarce availability of social services and recreational facilities.

The draft bill was met with reservations. The stenographic transcript of a “work meeting” held a week after the proposal was put forward (Federal District Legislative Assembly 2007c) shows, for example, that a female-named sex work leader complained that “you always want to fix our lives, our problems, and when we’re ‘*paradas en la calle*’ (lit. standing on the streets), nobody fixes that.” Despite the concerns, several meetings among different stakeholders—including deputies affiliated with different political parties, neighbourhood and community associations, human rights organizations, Catholic faith-based associations, academics, and, to a lesser extent, sex workers and sex-work civil associations—took place between June and December of 2007 to discuss the proposed bill. One of them took the form of a “Forum for the Regulation of Sex Work Services in Mexico City” (Federal District Legislative Assembly 2007a).⁵²

The Forum was interesting for many reasons. One of them was that participants readily mentioned specific names of streets, neighbourhoods, and areas where sex work took place in Mexico City. Many, if not all the speakers, echoed a certainty about the places of

⁵² I obtained official stenographic transcripts of this work meeting and public forum through an Access to Information request (folio number: 5000000033608) submitted to the Legislative Assembly of Mexico City.

sex work in the city. Places like La Merced, Avenida Circunvalación, Tlalpan, and Sullivan were often brought up in the discourses. Participants largely agreed that places where sex work was conducted were highly visible and identifiable. Sex work, however, did not occur in just any place in those constantly named sites; rather, the street was actively imagined as the place of sex work. Despite the facts that soliciting commercial services occurs on the street and that commercial sexual transactions largely take place in hotels, houses, rented rooms nearby, and sometimes inside cars, in the popular imagination, the street was constructed as the quintessential space of sex work. This is significant because research on sex work conducted in other geographical locations, such as Canada, suggests that only a small fraction of all sex work exchanges—an estimated 10 to 15 percent—occurs in the public space (Benoit and Shaver 2006; Ross 2003; Shaver 1994).⁵³ In Mexico, there are no estimates about the indoor–outdoor distribution of commercial sex services. However, it may well be plausible that, in Mexico, the proportion of on-street soliciting in relation to other segments of the sex trade could be higher than the estimates in Canada. This could be the case because, as I will explain in Chapter 4, informal labour, of which on-street vending of sexual services and other goods is one significant niche, accounts for at least 30 percent of Mexico’s gross domestic product under conservative estimates (Schneider et al. 2010). In any case, street-based sex work figures disproportionately in media representations and

⁵³ With the criminalization of clients in Canada in effect since November 2014 under Bill C-36, the on-street/off-street distribution may have recently shifted. Despite being less visible than on-street sex work, indoors sexual labour in Canada is often also morally disapproved and socio-legally regulated. For example, Becki Ross and I documented how in August 2012 the British Columbia Minister for Advanced Education issued a misguided directive to university presidents in the province compelling them to ban exotic dancing recruiters from campus job fairs. The directive articulated a gendered moral condemnation that failed to account for the economic burdens faced by students already working in the sex industry, and the equally susceptible occupational hazards of violence and sexual harassment experienced in other “reputable” industries (see Ross and Gómez-Ramírez 2014).

in common public imagery. The street continues to be the place where sex work is largely thought to occur. Media representatives and other attendees to this Forum expressed a view that Mexico City was plagued by street-based prostitution.

Another reason the Forum was significant is that each of the stakeholders expressed differing spatial views about the “proper” place for sex work. In their debate, some places got constructed as places of sex work, whereas others got constructed as inappropriate places for this activity. Because sex work was seen as a matter of contagion that might spread immorality, criminality, and disease, neighbourhood representatives wanted the removal of sex workers from their neighbourhoods, boroughs, and nearby streets. Law enforcement representatives suggested the government had to find a place for sex workers to do their business, while at the same time remaining cautious about not being seen as promoters of sex work. Government representatives—the deputies who proposed the bill—similarly proposed the regulation of geographical space, holding that while public streets were open to everyone, sex workers had to be removed from contentious places and be relocated to sites specifically designed for sex work. There were also non-governmental human rights promoters in the Forum who thought that neither designated sites nor streets were places for sex work, in fact, there was no place for sex work in society at all. Still, the sex workers in attendance opposed the demarcation and designation of zones for sex work in the city. Tellingly, sex workers and sex work association representatives in the Forum argued that the right to work in the public thoroughfares of Mexico City was and had to be considered a victory of the “*movimiento amplio de las trabajadoras sexuales*” (female sex

workers' broad movement).⁵⁴ They claimed that “*la calle es de quien la trabaja*” (the street belongs to she who works it), and thus that, first of all, sex workers had the right to work, and secondly, that they had the right to work on the street or in public space.⁵⁵

Both the Forum and the draft legislation are significant because they shed light on the social, political, and legal climate around prostitution in Mexico City in the not so distant past. However, partly because the proposed bill generated opposition from sex workers, partly because the deputy who drafted the bill failed to show up at all of the consultation meetings with sex workers, and partly because sex work tended and still tends to generate heated local debates, the proposed bill came to a halt in December 2007 and it was ultimately not approved by the local Legislative Assembly (see Gómez Flores 2006, 2007, 2009; Llanos and Romero 2007; Llanos and Romero 2008; Olivares Alonso 2007; Romero Sánchez and Sánchez Samaniego 2008; Tesoro 2007b).

In this, the 2007 draft bill joined the ranks of previous unsuccessful local legal regulatory attempts, such as the 2001 *Federal District's Female and Male Sex Workers Bill Proposal* (Federal District Legislative Assembly 2001), put forward by deputies María del Carmen Pacheco Gamiño from the PRD and José Luis Buendía Hegewisch from the Social Democratic Party (PSD).⁵⁶ A few years later, in 2011, deputy Israel Betanzos Cortes from

⁵⁴ “*Movimiento amplio*” (lit. broad movement) is a phrase often used to refer to left-leaning sociopolitical movements in different parts of Latin America.

⁵⁵ I chose to translate the phrase with the female gender pronoun “she” because the stenographic transcript indicates the slogan was attributed to groups of female (non-trans) sex workers. Public awareness that people from other genders are also involved in the sex trade in Mexico City is relatively recent (see Ripoll 2002). The phrase comes from the long-lasting agrarian demand that “the land belongs to those who work it” (*la tierra es de quien la trabaja*).

⁵⁶ The title in Spanish was: *Iniciativa de Ley de Trabajadoras y Trabajadores Sexuales del Distrito Federal*. I obtained copy of this bill proposal through an open Access to Information request (folio number: 5000000018312) submitted to the Legislative Assembly of Mexico City.

the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI) proposed to allow for the exercise of sexual labour within authorized perimeters, mercantile establishments, private houses, and “*espacios de tolerancia*” (tolerance spaces) that would have been known as “*ciudades del sexo*” (sex cities); the *Bill Proposal to Regulate Sex-Services in the Federal District and to Repeal the Federal District Civic Culture Act’s Article 24, Section VII* (Federal District Legislative Assembly 2011a) suffered a similar fate.⁵⁷

There are no official estimates on the number of people currently involved in sex work. Neither are there official gender breakdowns of sex trade workers. Nevertheless, the most recent attempted socio-legal interventions show that sex work in Mexico City has begun to be framed within a prohibitionist regulatory perspective and with the end goal of sex work abolition and client criminalization in mind. For example, the *Bill Proposal to Create an Ordinance that Issues the Federal District Sex-Service Regulation Act* put forward by deputy Agustín Torres Pérez from the PRD in 2013 stated, “one of the most difficult and controversial issues in the legislative activities of the Federal District is sex-service since it is intimately linked to the trafficking of people” (Federal District Legislative Assembly 2013: 1).⁵⁸ In the context of a growing international focus on “sex trafficking” as a pressing social issue (Munro 2005; Weitzer 2013), in Mexico, the trafficking of people was initially legally recognized and criminalized with the *Prevention and Sanction of the Trafficking of People Act*, approved in November 2007, which later

⁵⁷ A copy of this bill proposal was obtained through an open Access to Information request (folio number: 5000000018312) submitted to the Legislative Assembly of Mexico City. The title in Spanish is: *Iniciativa de Ley que Regula el Sexoservicio en el Distrito Federal y deroga la Fracción VII del Artículo 24 de la Ley de Cultura Cívica del Distrito Federal*.

⁵⁸ I obtained a copy of this bill proposal through an Access to Information request (folio number: 5000000093516) submitted to the Legislative Assembly of Mexico City. The title in Spanish is: *Iniciativa con Proyecto de Decreto por la que se expide la Ley para Regulación del Sexo Servicio en el Distrito Federal*.

underwent a substantive revision in June 2012 (Congress of the Union 2007, 2012).⁵⁹ At the local level, the trafficking of people became a crime typified in the *Federal District Penal Code* (Article 188 Bis) also in 2007. Successive reforms have further conceptualized this as a “*delito grave*” (serious felony) (Article 71), and it has been linked to the corruption of minors (Articles 183–185), sex tourism (Article 186), pornography (Articles 187–188), and pimping (189 and 189 Bis).

While no official statistics exist about the nature of sexual labour in Mexico City, the 2013 draft bill at times collapsed the disparate issues of “sex trafficking” and sex work. Making imprecise reference to a Human Trafficking Assessment Tool,⁶⁰ the proposed bill suggested that “in Mexico City there are more than 250 thousand women and girls engaged in sex-service, 88 percent of which are not from the city, 89 percent began being prostituted at 12 years old, and 99 percent are exploited by procuring and pimping networks.” Yet, the draft bill also held that trafficking and sex work could not and should not be confused because “confusing ‘trafficking’ and ‘sex-service’ does not do anything but promote the favourable conditions for trafficking to subsist and spread” (Federal District Legislative Assembly 2013: 11). The overall rationale for this most recent legal attempt to regulate sexual labour in Mexico City was to eventually eradicate the sex industry by opposing the criminalization of “*personas prostituidas*” (prostituted people) and criminalizing those who procure and purchase the “*uso sexual*” (sexual use) of “prostituted people” (Federal District Legislative Assembly 2013).

⁵⁹ In Spanish: Ley para prevenir y sancionar la trata de personas.

⁶⁰ The bill proposal did not elaborate or include a bibliographic reference for this “Human Trafficking Assessment Tool,” but curiously, it mentioned this assessment tool in English.

While still unsuccessful in Mexico City, the criminalization of buyers of sexual services appears to be gaining some ground. The “Swedish” or “Nordic” model, as this practice has become known since this framework was implemented in Sweden, Norway, Iceland, and Finland beginning in 1998 (Kulick 2003, 2005; Skilbrei and Holmström 2011), has been the subject of advocacy efforts. During the “Second Latin American Congress on Trafficking and Smuggling of People” held in late September 2010 in Puebla, located about two hours away from Mexico City, I listened to the plenary speech of the director of the Swedish national police force, Jonas Trolle. Trolle firmly exulted the Swedish example as an exemplary model that Mexico, a “less developed” country by comparison, should follow. Similarly, Janice Raymond, from the Coalition Against Trafficking in Women (CATW), spoke about prostitution in the context of (female) gender violence. Raymond’s spiteful views on sexual labour and sexual labourers continue to gain traction among those seduced by the appeal of helping to *rescue* (non-trans) women and girls from the claws of patriarchal subordination and oppression (see Raymond 2013), even though numerous scholars have continuously highlighted the reductionist, ideology- and moralist-laden imprint of many of these views (e.g., Beloso 2012; Segal 1998; Shaver 1988; Shrage 1994, 2005; Walkowitz 1980; Zatz 1997). Additionally, Raymond is also known for the implacable, hateful conceptualizations of trans women in her book, *Transsexual Empire* (see Raymond 1979, reprinted in 1994), which as Susan Stryker and Stephen Whittle (2006: 131) aptly put it, “did not invent anti-transsexual prejudice, but did more to justify and perpetuate it than perhaps any other book ever written.” During the Puebla Congress, Raymond’s participation was translated and aided by local “anti-trafficking” lobbyist and lawyer Teresa Ulloa Ziaurriz, who is the director of the Mexican branch of the Coalition

Against Trafficking in Women and Girls in Latin American and the Caribbean, and has been behind the legislative advocacy around “trafficking” across the country.

In spite of, or perhaps because of, the structural vulnerabilities created by global debates and anxieties about gendered labour migration that have increasingly tended to conflate sex work with sex tourism, child pornography, and “trafficking” of women on a transnational scale (Agustín 2006; Bloch 2009, 2017; Ditmore 2008; Doezeema 2000, 2002; Guy 1991; Kempadoo 2005; Middleberg 2006; Munro 2005; Weitzer 2013), many sex workers have been propelled into collective organizing to respond to and participate in those continuing discussions that affect and shape their daily working conditions. At the local level, for example, sex workers came forward to articulate their work as a legitimate enterprise even in the face of relentless stigma and violence. During the 2011 Labour Day March on May 1, for example, a group of non-trans, female-gendered, balaclava-clad, and handkerchief-covered sex workers took to the streets downtown to claim that “sex work was as worthy as any other job.” (**Figure 3**) The misspelled slogans written on paper placards hinted at the possibly limited formal schooling of these sexual labourers, but their hiding behind hoodies and baseball hats spoke clearly about the continuing whore stigma in Mexico City. Since 1997, members of the Mexican Sex Work Network have organized an annual nation-wide political meeting, similarly seeking to gain labour rights (Madrid Romero et al. 2014).

Unlike Brazil, where sex work has been recognized as a professional occupation by the Ministry of Labour and Employment since 2002, in Mexico sex work does not figure in the list of formal or informal occupations. Scholarly investigations conducted in Mexico

Figure 3. "Sex Work Is as Worthy as Any Other Job," Labour Day March, photo by the author, 2011



City and in other parts of the country, however, have consistently shown that despite sex work not being included in the national employment census, many trans and non-trans people—among which female-gendered individuals figure prominently—continue to make a living by engaging in commercial sexual transactions (see, for instance, Allen et al. 2003; Castillo 2006; Castillo et al. 1999; Castillo et al. 2010; Córdova Plaza 2005, 2007; Desrus and Gómez Ramos 2014; Galárraga et al. 2014; Howe et al. 2008; Kelly 2008; Lamas 1993, 2002, 2016b; Parrini et al. 2017; Prieur 1998b; Wright 2004). The street continues to be a place where a number of these transactions occur. It is thus important to explore the geographies of the on-street sex trade in Mexico City, and the shifting place of *trans women* within them.

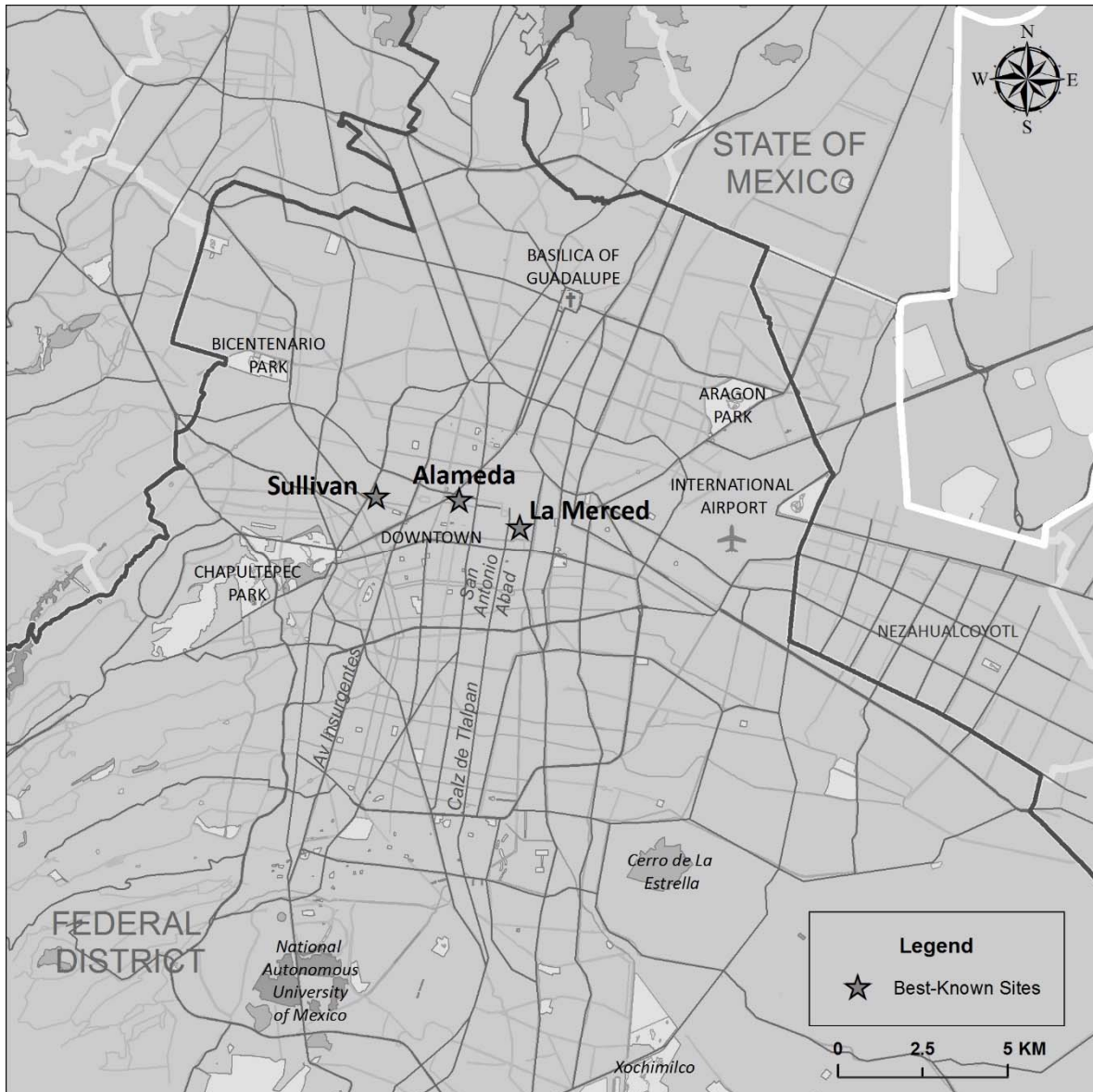
Changing Geographies in the On-Street Sex Trade

The number of on-street sex trade areas in Mexico City has visibly grown during the last fifteen years. It has gone from two to three well-known central areas of Mexico City to several places where sexual labourers solicit paid sexual transactions in the city's public thoroughfares. Until the early 2000s, La Merced, Sullivan, and La Alameda were possibly the best-known sites where sexual services could be found in the central parts of the city.⁶¹

(Figure 4)

⁶¹ Throughout my dissertation I employ the pseudonyms Cacala and Panotlán to refer to the two sex trade “spots” where many of the low-income *trans women* I met during my field research worked. However, to situate my observations vis-à-vis the existing literature on the subject, in this chapter I use factual names for the other geopolitical landmarks and sites in Mexico City.

Figure 4. Historically best-known on-street sex trade areas in Mexico City, early 2000s



SOURCE: Conversations with research participants and Mexico City's inhabitants during fieldwork, and existing historical and policy data. Map created by Jayme Taylor, using base geodata from OpenStreetMap. Conceptual design by the author.

Famous for being a significant commercial area, La Merced is also known for being the historical downtown sex trade area of Mexico City from the early 17th century until today (Bautista López and Conde Rodríguez 2006). The areas today known as Mexico City's downtown core and its surroundings have also been significant commercial areas since pre-Columbian times (Gruzinski 2004 [1996]). According to Katherine Bliss (2001, 2003), the downtown area was a place where state-regulated indoor sexual commerce thrived during the 19th and early 20th centuries, lasting until the mid-1940s when the state took an abolitionist stance that criminalized prostitution and sought to dismantle the *zonas de tolerancia* (tolerance zones) that were established in the mid-1920s. Today, La Merced is a bustling working-class market area, where outdoor, multi-generational sexual commerce continues to take place (see Bautista López and Conde Rodríguez 2006; Casimiro Sánchez and Angoa Martínez 1999; Desrus and Gómez Ramos 2014; Gómez Flores 2006, 2009; Nieto and Valverde 1996; Rodríguez et al. 2003).

La Alameda is a central park likewise located in Mexico City's downtown area. In early colonial times, it was established as a public gathering place (Orozco y Berra 1995 [1854]). The park had sought to cater to wealthy *criollo* people⁶² who gathered and courted in a park filled with *álamos* (poplar trees), hence the name Alameda. Historian Manuel Orozco y Berra (1995 [1854]: 63) stated that, during the 18th century, the presence of “*toda persona rota*” (lit. every broken person, ragged-clothed individuals; bandits) in La Alameda was prohibited.

⁶² In the colonial race-based caste system, a *criollo* person was a descendant of Spaniards born in the New Spain colony. It was the second group in the caste hierarchy, after Spaniards or *Peninsulares*, those who had been born in the Spain's peninsula and were thus said not to have mixed Indian or Black ancestries.

By the 1980s, however, things had changed, and the park became a site where domestic and other working-class workers would gather during days off. After two devastating earthquakes in September 1985 knocked down a few nearby buildings, La Alameda and the surrounding area underwent a period of marked socioeconomic downturn. It became a site where street children lived in sewers, solvent sniffing was a common sight, and petty theft was widespread. For few years, until the early 2000s, the nearby area was well known for its porn cinemas. Despite the early 2000s bringing about major “revitalization” projects in the downtown area in general and in the La Alameda in particular (Amador Tello 2012; Gómez Flores 2010a; Slim 2011), informal street vending continues to take place, especially in the outlying borders of the park (see also Crossa 2009). Additionally, La Alameda has remained a popular courting, cruising, and pick-up site, particularly for low-income individuals. Those who offer paid sexual services also work there. While those offering paid sexual services in the park are diversely gendered, La Alameda is generally known to many as a site of male sex work (Galárraga et al. 2014; Infante et al. 2009).

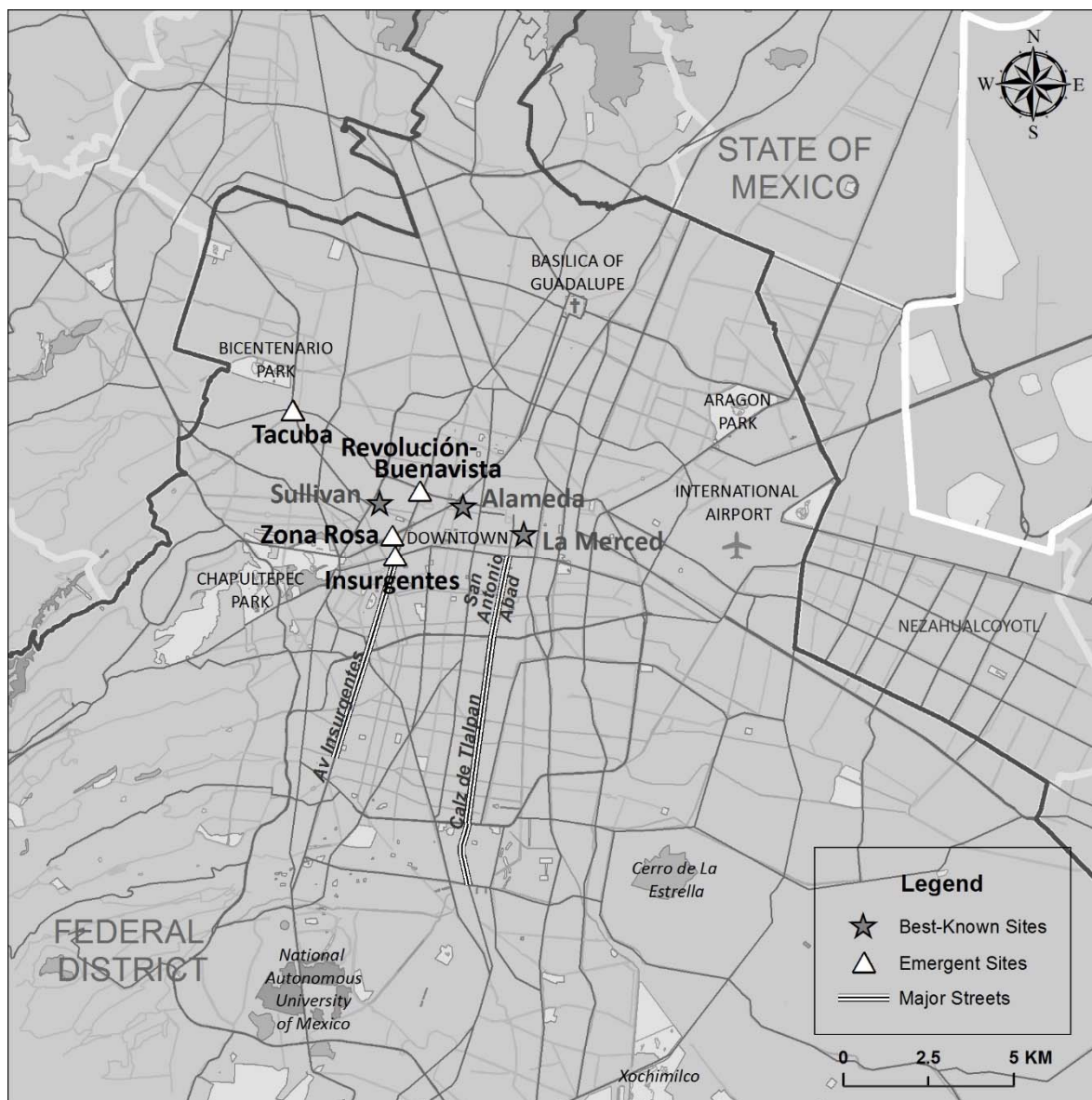
The third site, Sullivan, in turn emerged in the 1980s as a location for on-street female sex trade; this came about with the relocation of female sex workers from the Colonia Cuauhtémoc, an area a few blocks south (Robles 2004: 274). What is today known as Sullivan had been defined until the 1940s by a nearby train station, and by the end of the 20th century it had become a neighbourhood bustling with *hoteles de paso* (lit. transit hotels; love motels offering rooms for rent by the hour, flophouses). In contrast with La Merced, Sullivan was known to cater to low-income as well as middle-class clienteles. But

similarly to La Merced, Sullivan has largely remained an area where female sex workers solicit sexual services.

At the time of my extended fieldwork, several changes in the traditional geographies of Mexico City's on-street sex trade were taking place. One of the most significant was that the number of areas with on-street soliciting had distinctly multiplied across the city. This phenomenon was attracting the increasing attention of government officials, journalists, and scholars (e.g., Llanos and Romero 2007; Peláez Galvez 2008; Reyes Parra 2007; Romero Sánchez and Sánchez Samaniego 2008). Even though La Merced, Sullivan, and La Alameda continued to be places of sex work, many more areas had emerged as places of on-street sex trade. Emergent sites had sprung up in regions like Tacuba and its surroundings in the city's northwest, Zona Rosa and the Revolución-Buenavista area not far from the historic centre, a few "spots" at different junctures along the main Avenida Insurgentes, and several sites along Calzada de Tlalpan. **(Figure 5)**

La Zona Rosa (lit. pink zone) is an area for paid and unpaid cruising in the city. Located in the Juárez neighbourhood, Zona Rosa is known for being Mexico City's gay entertainment neighbourhood. According to Rodrigo Laguarda (2009), during the 1970s and 1980s the "*gente de ambiente*" (lit. hip people; gay milieu) were more visible in central parts of the city, including the Roma, Cuauhtémoc, and Juárez neighbourhoods (see also Zapata 2004 [1979]). But in an ethnography of Calle Amberes, one of the streets in the neighbourhood, Laguarda (2011) further specifies that it was between 2003 and 2008 when La Zona Rosa was transformed into a renovated commercial space catering largely to the gay male population. Early in the 20th century, it had been an aristocratic area, and the

Figure 5. Emergent on-street sex trade sites in central parts of Mexico City, 2010–2011



SOURCE: Field observations and conversations with research participants. Map created by Jayme Taylor, using base geodata from OpenStreetMap. Conceptual design by the author.

zone had attracted intellectuals and hipsters until the 1970s. However, after the 1985 earthquakes, the area went into decay, which meant that formal businesses were not able to attract clientele and informal street vending sprawled through the area. This changed in 2004 when local entrepreneurs and the municipal government agreed to develop a plan to revamp the zone. Zona Rosa is an area where largely male-gendered people cruise in public spaces and solicit paid sexual services both indoors and outdoors.

The Corredor Buenavista-Revolución is another emergent location where noticeable outdoor sexual commerce began taking place within the last two decades. The recent increased visibility of the on-street sex trade in this area for a larger segment of Mexico City's inhabitants does not mean that the sex trade had not taken place there before. Situated in the broader Cuauhtémoc borough, many of the neighbourhoods that make up the Revolución-Buenavista area are said to be some of the most "troubled" neighbourhoods in the city due to the presence of several "urban, social, and economic risk factors" such as the drug trade, street vending, the destitute, sex work, and a large number of inhabitants with criminal records (Servin Vega 2007a).⁶³ The Cuauhtémoc borough also has a large floating population because the downtown area and other touristic spots are located there. In the 1990s, one could spot the occasional female sex worker soliciting on the streets. This may have been compounded by the fact that the old Buenavista train station was located in this area, although in the mid-2000s it was turned into a large public library (Poniatowska 2003).⁶⁴ What may have been limited to one or two streets in the past later became a large

⁶³ Note that in this chapter I have referred to both the Cuauhtémoc neighbourhood and the Cuauhtémoc borough. They are distinct. The neighbourhood or *colonia* is located within the borough, and the borough is one of the 16 larger political jurisdictions or *delegaciones* in which the local government operates.

⁶⁴ According to Mireya Cuéllar (2000), *Ferrocarriles Nacionales de México* (Mexico's National Railways) closed operations in August 1999.

street-based sex trade zone, and today extends over 10 to 15 blocks and sites in the area. By the 2010s this was both a female and trans sex work site, yet a sizable portion of the most visible segments of this sex trade zone are now worked by trans labourers.

Several places along the Avenida Insurgentes, the main avenue extending from the north to the south exits of Mexico City, have undergone a parallel shift. The emergence of more recent on-street sex trade areas, catering to both itinerant and more permanent middle- and lower-class populations, has been particularly noticeable around the Glorieta de Insurgentes located at the entrance of Zona Rosa, and along a few streets in the Roma and Hipódromo-Condesa neighbourhoods. The Avenida Insurgentes, however, has seen the sprawling of sex trade sites into the southern stretches of this long avenue, but so far they have mostly remained under the radar. So have the “spots” located in the northwestern parts of the city, like in the Tacuba area, which have remained active yet have not been under the same heavy scrutiny in the media and among the general population as other sites have (see Arellano 2009; Davenport 2010; De Mauleón 2016; Gómez Flores 2009; Guzmán 2016). The Calzada México-Tacuba connects the west with the downtown area, and the Tacuba area in particular has been known for indoor female sex trade sites mostly associated with a military camp located in the area since the 1920s. Yet, the historical work of Pablo Piccato (2001) on the murders of Consulado River prostitutes demonstrates that northern parts of Mexico City were already sites of female sexual commerce beginning in the 1880s. In the years of my extended fieldwork, a few visible on-street sex trade spots had emerged in the vicinity, and these were worked by *trans women*.

At the same time, for ordinary Mexico City inhabitants, new visible sociopolitical processes were beginning to take shape during my fieldwork. For one, it had become

evident to many that hustling sex trade areas were no longer sex trade zones only during the night. In the popular lore, *sexo-servidoras* (lit. female sex-service providers) had been veiledly known as “*mujeres de la noche*” (lit. women of the night; prostitutes, whores). Earlier scholars had both elaborated on this nocturnal dimension of street-based sexual labour and used it as a shorthand for what their studies were about (e.g., Lamas 1993, 2002; Ponce 2009). While the night continued to be associated with hard partying, wayward fun, impudence, and licentiousness (Carrillo 2002; Monsiváis 1998), during my field research in 2010 and 2011, on-street paid sex soliciting was evidently not confined to evening hours. My own observations and conversations with *trans women* confirmed that some of what may have been, at one time, nighttime sex trade zones, subsequently became daytime, or in some regions of the city, 24-hour sites of the sex trade.

Moreover, the presence of specifically trans sex workers in on-street sex trade areas was becoming unavoidably evident. My research, for example, attracted attention from most of the people I interacted with in personal and professional settings during the main period of research; Mexico City’s inhabitants could easily perceive that something novel was happening on the streets. Major architectural projects are constantly changing Mexico City’s landscape. Between 2010 and 2011, the subway line and the rapid bus transit (“*metrobús*”) systems were being expanded, another stretch of the Periférico’s upper deck, the city’s beltway, was under construction, and one could now drive on the San Antonio arterial road, an elevated expressway seeking to streamline traffic in the south-central area and the western reaches of the city. As with these changes, it was impossible to brush aside the changes occurring in the public sex trade areas. The city’s social landscape was being reconfigured. Virtually nobody I interacted with failed to miss these shifts.

It is important to note that these new sex trade “sites” or broader areas I have identified, which intersect with heavily travelled public thoroughfares, do not necessarily have precise boundaries or clear-cut names. Also, not all of the more specific “spots” within such broader areas were recognized in official documents, newspaper articles, or scholarly publications.⁶⁵ The most conspicuous absence to me was the nightly trans “spot” that I lived near. While small in terms of the number of workers, it was located in a fairly visible, busy, middle-class part of the city. Yet, it remained unaccounted for in official reports and news accounts.⁶⁶ Moreover, many of the sites I have mentioned likely have longer indoor and outdoor sex trade histories than what my term “emerging” may suggest. However, the vending of sexual services in these street areas had not previously occurred in plain sight, to the extent that it was attested to during fieldwork. During my fieldwork, it became clear that the on-street sex trade had multiplied in the early 2000s from three famous historical places of female sexual commerce, and by the 2010s had come to comprise many spots of female, male, and trans sex trade spread across both the centre and edges of the city. It had also become clearer that there were many trans sex workers “standing” (soliciting) on those streets. These changes were being widely recognized by Mexico City’s inhabitants, regardless of their spheres of work, sites of residence, or class backgrounds.

⁶⁵ In Mexico, virtually all published social science research uses factual names and locations. It is thus easy to recognize which areas scholars and officials’ reports have taken into account.

⁶⁶ This is possibly a fortunate situation for those who work in this “spot,” so I do not disclose its location. For similar reasons, I have purposely been vague in naming the different street-based sex trade zones. Elvira Reyes Parra states that on-street sex trade groups are “self-defined by their location, by a distinctive element, or by the person who represents them” (2007: 136, my translation). My ethnographic research supports her claim. I have thus chosen to collapse, under general geographical “sites” or “areas,” what are in fact several more specific “spots” located in and throughout each of these zones and major streets.

While on-street sex trade areas had multiplied across the city since the early 2000s, on-street sexual labour remains a highly feminized form of labour (see Allen et al. 2003; Lamas 1993, 1996; Rueda Castillo 2011). In Mexico City, street-based sex work is a form of labour performed largely by trans and non-trans female-gendered individuals. Certainly, there are male “spots” across the city (see Galárraga et al. 2014; Infante et al. 2009). Newspaper reports in the early 2000s sought to shed light on “male prostitution,” and thus counter the dominant narrative that sex work was performed only by women and consumed only by men (e.g., Guzmán 2016; Ripoll 2002). Even earlier, during the 1980s, Gerardo Ortega, who identified then as a “*vestida*” (female-fashioned individual), but spoke about himself in male and masculine terms, stated that there were several specific zones for masculine prostitution: “three in the Cuauhtémoc borough, two in Benito Juárez, one in Coyoacán, and one in Miguel Hidalgo (cited in Liguori and Ortega 1990 [1989]: 109, my translation).⁶⁷ Yet during my extended fieldwork, many of the most visible and new on-street sex trade sites were being worked by trans sex workers.

One of the reasons behind this shift is that what used to be considered “male” prostitution was beginning to be conceptualized as “trans” prostitution. Ortega’s earliest historical description provides hints of this fact; even though the prostitution of “*vestidas*” was considered “male” prostitution, they were already distinct from those men who dressed in masculine attire (see Liguori and Ortega 1990 [1989]). It is impossible for me to know whether those “*vestida*” spots were being worked by individuals who limited their female-

⁶⁷ I preserve Gerardo Ortega’s self-identified gender and gender pronouns here. If still alive, Ortega might have changed the way he referred to himself during this time, but I have searched for more publications or comments attributed to Ortega in the recent past and I have neither been able to find any published indication of what Ortega may be doing in the present, nor whether his past identification as a “*vestida*” may have shifted to “*trans woman*” over time.

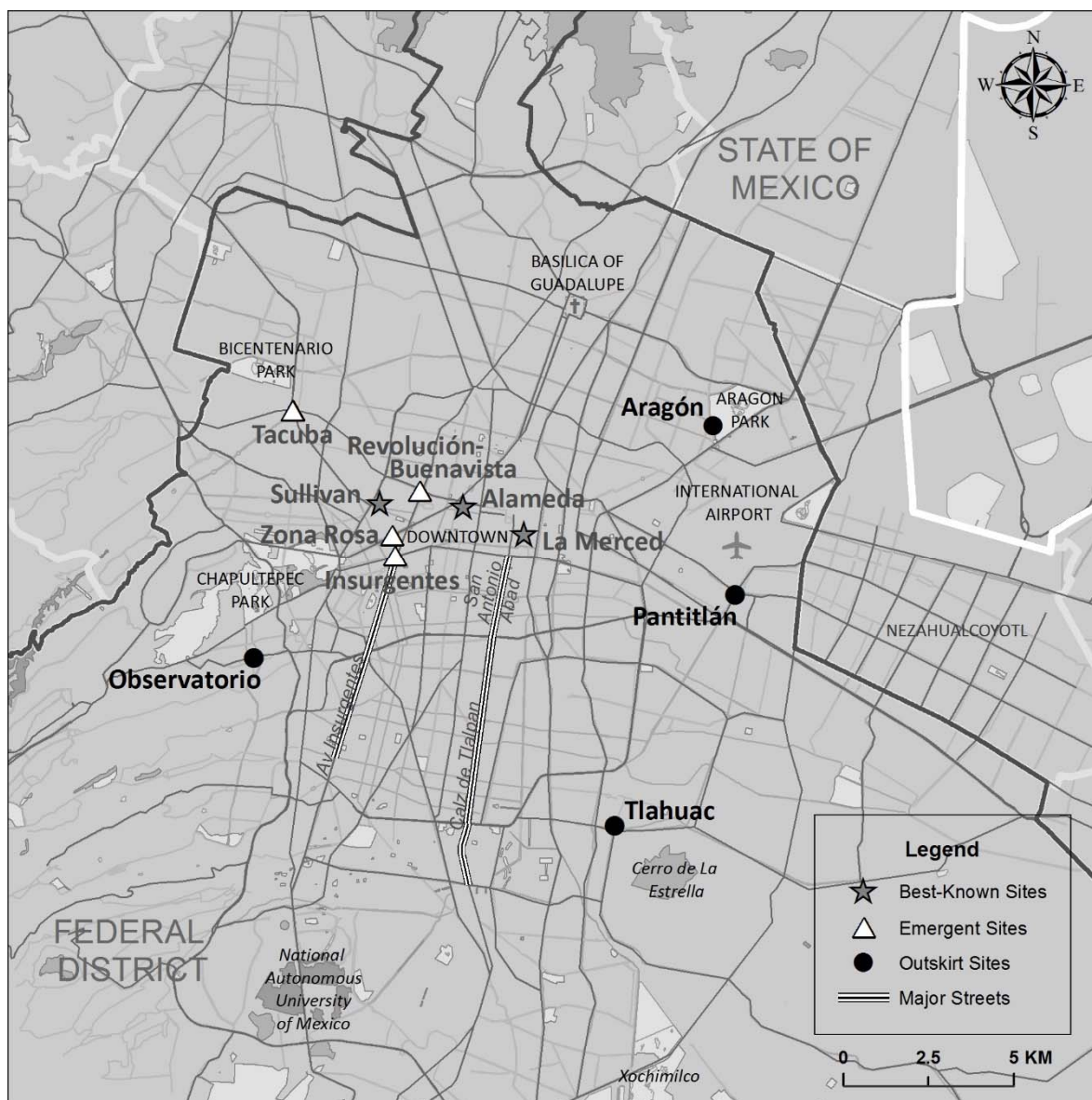
gendered expression to their sexual labour, or how they may have identified their gender and sexuality at that time. However, the emergence of “trans” sex trade spots has been coupled with the more recent appearance of the “trans” category (as I suggest in chapter 4), and with it, the materialization of novel practices and, for some, novel subjectivity and identity recognitions now gathered under the rubric of “trans” or “*TTT*.”

The proliferation of sites where trans sex workers stood was also due to the sheer fact that soliciting spots had literally multiplied under everyone’s eyes. Many of these newer spots were located in busy commercial, entertainment, and residential neighbourhoods. Thus, while trans sex workers may not have been so conspicuous in the past, their existence and sexual labour were becoming unavoidably noticeable in the present. This certainly did not displace the enduring labour of female sex workers. Historical sites like Sullivan and La Merced, for example, remained numerically dominated by non-trans women. Nevertheless, I attest to an increasing acknowledgement of the presence of trans sex workers during and after my extended fieldwork in the emergent sites, and this was palpable in their numeric presence in most of the soliciting sites along Calzada de Tlalpan, many of the “spots” along Avenida Insurgentes, and a good number of the streets in the Buenavista-Revolución sex trade area. While many “spots” continue to have sections for both female and trans sex workers, a few of the emergent on-street sites had become largely trans-dominated strolls. If, in the past, *trans women* worked primarily indoors or within the nocturnal confines of a limited number of streets, during the course of my fieldwork, their presence could be observed during the day and during the night in streets that went beyond the historical geographies of sex work locales.

Moreover, historical “*vestida*” spots in the margins of the city were also becoming recognized trans spots during my fieldwork (Ripoll 2002). Some of these spots had existed at the edges of the metropolitan area of Mexico City since at least the late 1980s. The famous ethnography of Annick Prieur (1998b) with “*jotas*” and “*vestidas*” in Ciudad Nezahualcóyotl—the largest urban settlement at the easternmost edges of the greater Mexico City—suggests that, between 1989 and 1991, “*vestidas*” were already working on the outskirts as well as in the central areas of prostitution in Mexico City. While not recognized as “*trans women*” back then—and trying to be careful not to project a presentist lens onto the past—we can still infer that sex trade areas in the city’s outskirts and peripheries where female-fashioned labourers have sought a living are not merely a present-day occurrence. The *trans women* I interacted with spoke about Observatorio, Aragón, Pantitlán, as well as Tlahuac as four contemporary outer-street-based sex trade sites they either knew about, had worked in, or lived close to. **(Figure 6)** These sites are located near main bus terminals, parks, and major streets and commercial areas, and are all considered working-class, or even “rough,” areas of the city. The “spots” in Avenida Tlahuac, for example, are located in the Iztapalapa borough, which is considered to have one of the highest levels of crime and the largest number of inhabitants with criminal records in the entire city (Servin Vega 2007b). I suspect that, similarly to the histories of the central sex trade sites, the sites on the outskirts have longer histories of on-street sex trade than may be apparent at first sight.

Essentially, as the sex trade has enlarged its street-based spatial reach throughout Mexico City, *trans women* have simultaneously increased their numeric presence within it.

Figure 6. Trans on-street sex trade zones in the outskirts of Mexico City, 2010–2011



SOURCE: Conversations with research participants. Map created by Jayme Taylor, using base geodata from OpenStreetMap. Conceptual design by the author.

“*Vestidas*,” many of whom might recognize themselves today as *trans women*, were already making a living from the sex trade in the past, but the distinct presence of *trans women* in the trade also confirms the fact that, as a group, they are now beginning to be seen as distinct from effeminate gay or homosexual men. To this, we should add that the sheer number of “spots” and of trans workers within them has certainly expanded. In other words, at the time of my research there was an emergence of new categories, but also an expanding number and visibility of female-gendered transpeople in the city’s central and peripheral urban landscape.

The Trans Law

The formal legal recognition of transpeople in local civil law has contributed towards their urban societal recognition and distinct visibility since 2008. In that year, a series of legal reforms concerning the “*reasignación por concordancia sexo-genérica*” (sex–gender concordance reassignment) were approved (Bonifaz Alfonzo and Guevara Olvera 2009; Flores Ramírez 2009, 2010a, 2010b; Gobierno del Distrito Federal 2009). These modifications were often referred to as the “trans law.” This legal reform, in essence, allowed trans men and women to change their name and sex in birth certificates. It came about after about eight months of lobbying from deputies Jorge Carlos Díaz Cuervo from the PSD and Leticia Quezada Contreras from the PRD, who presented respective bill proposals in February and May of 2008 (Federal District Legislative Assembly 2008b).

The approved reforms modified three existing codes: the *Civil Code*, the *Civic Procedures Code*, and the *Fiscal Code* of the Federal District. First, the *Civil Code*

recognized that, together with age, sex, pregnancy, civil status, race, language, religion, ideology, sexual orientation, skin colour, nationality, social origin or position, employment, and profession, “*identidad de género*” (gender identity) and “*expresión del rol de género*” (gender role expression) could not be a basis for discrimination. The code granted the issuing of new birth certificates for sex–gender concordance reassignment without visible marginal notations of this change on the new documents. Record of the sex–gender concordance name and sex change would only be noted in the original birth certificate, which in turn could only be made public under explicit injunction. It was stated in the *Civic Procedures Code* that a “*juicio especial*” (special litigation) would be required to request the name and sex change in birth certificates and that two professional assessments would be required as part of the civic trial. Lastly, the reformed *Fiscal Code* stated that the new birth certificate due to sex–gender reassignment would cost \$1505 pesos.⁶⁸

Trans activities and intellectual allies saw this as a legal victory for the trans community. The law had jurisdictional limitations (it is only in effect in Mexico City, and initially was only available to those born in Mexico City) and represented access barriers (the required endocrinology and psychological professional assessments were \$10,000 pesos or more during my extended research and could not be waived, and the fees were not subsidized by the state). Nevertheless, the trans law has often been compared with other *avant-garde* legislations of Mexico City. In particular, the trans law is often set against other local gender- and sexuality-related legislations, such as the cohabitation societies bill (“*sociedades de convivencia*”) (de la Dehesa 2011; Díez 2013) and the legal pregnancy

⁶⁸ In 2008, the currency exchange rate was at an average of \$10 pesos for every US dollar.

interruption bill (*“interrupción legal del embarazo”*) (Lamas 2011). Local government officials have often drawn on these and other progressive bills to discursively position Mexico City as Mexico’s “city of freedoms,” a place where the highest liberties enjoyed in the most progressive places in the world are similarly guaranteed, and a place that stands out in relation to the rest of the seemingly traditional, conservative country’s states. This idea transpires in the official stenographic transcript of a “Latin American and Caribbean Meeting of Trans People” convened by deputy Jorge Carlos Díaz Cuervo from the PSD in the Legislative Assembly on August 5, 2008 (Federal District Legislative Assembly 2008a).⁶⁹ Held just a few weeks ahead of the eventual approval of the local trans law on August 29, trans activists from Argentina, Peru, Nicaragua, and Chile, were called upon to help move the legislation through by explaining how advanced legislations and legislative efforts existed in their countries, particularly in Argentina, and how the approval of the trans reforms would help situate Mexico as an *“important reference cultural”* (important cultural reference) in the region and the world.

In 2009, about a year after the local trans law had been approved, I interviewed Lucy Bartolomé. I had met Lucy a year earlier during her participation as a trans activist in the Feminist Meeting of Latin America and the Caribbean held in Mexico City. This had been the first time that trans women had been formally allowed to attend the regional feminist meetings, and together with other well-known activists from other parts of Latin America, Lucy had made sophisticated interventions about the appropriateness of drawing on classic feminist conceptual tools—Simone de Beauvoir, for instance—to make sense of

⁶⁹ Official stenographic transcript of this regional meeting of transpeople was obtained through an Access to Information request (folio number: 5000000033608) submitted to the Legislative Assembly of Mexico City.

transpeople's issues. In 2009, during the pilot phase of this project, I met with Lucy to get her input on the direction of my extended doctoral fieldwork. Lucy explained that the local trans law had been unintentionally approved. She also explained that, unlike the cohabitation societies and legal pregnancy interruption legislations, the sex-gender concordance law had not generated intense societal discussion and backlash from "*la derecha*" (the right wing). In her view, in fact, the right wing religious, political, and societal factions had failed to notice when the approval came about. Lucy told me, "Look, this law is huge, and how nice that the right wing did not take notice." Drawing a contrast with Canada, since I explained I was a doctoral student there, Lucy stated that before the trans law in Mexico City, trans women had been "*indocumentadas*" (undocumented people) because they did not have "*seguridad jurídica, tu plena ciudadanía*" (juridical security, full citizenship).

Natalia Lewis, another well-known, self-identified trans activist to whom I became close during my extended fieldwork, would often reminisce about the lead up to the approval of the local trans law in a similar way. Drawing on the plight of undocumented Mexican migrants in the United States, Natalia would often say, "*somos indocumentadas en nuestra propia tierra*" (we are illegal aliens in our own land).⁷⁰ The phrase effectively and

⁷⁰ I translate "*indocumentadas*" not as undocumented women but rather as "illegal aliens" to emphasize the latent linguistic and sociopolitical meanings that the phrase immediately conveys in the US and Mexico. It is plausible to assume that, in Mexico, when someone hears that somebody is undocumented in their own land, they already and always know that this is similar to the situation faced by Mexican undocumented workers in the US. In Mexican Spanish, the term "illegal" does not immediately refer to something criminal or unlawful. Often, someone "illegal" (*ilegal*) is thought of as a person without papers or documents, particularly migrant workers who cross an international border without passports or visas. We say, for instance, that someone "left as an illegal" (*se fue de ilegal*) to speak of a person who left for the US in search of undocumented work. Since many of us have friends, acquaintances, or family members who have been migrants without documents in the USA, an "illegal" is not seen as an unlawful criminal, but more often as someone simply seeking survival and a better life. However, with the more recent arrival of undocumented Central and South American migrants into Mexico, this general neutral or empathetic perception of "illegals" might be shifting.

powerfully drew an emotive parallel between Mexican “illegal aliens” in the United States and the socio-legal battles of trans women who, similar to many international labour immigrants, were undocumented, in the case of Mexico because they did not count within a legal framework that allowed them to obtain documents that attested to their gender identity. Since the troubles of Mexican immigrants in the United States often draw sympathetic support, the use of a similar phrase in the context of transpeople’s struggles proved a powerful means to criticize the lack, until 2008, of a Law that allowed transpeople to change personal information on birth certificates and other official legal documents.

And yet, while the trans law sought to benefit transpeople, it conceptualized the betterment of transpeople along gender identity and expression lines, while unfortunately leaving informal sexual labour concerns aside. The trans law represented a clear legal and symbolic gain for trans activists and their allies. It would be hard to imagine living in a place where these kinds of basic legal guarantees did not exist. At the same time, a sizeable number of transpeople, particularly female-gendered transpeople, are involved in the sex trade in Mexico City, as I document throughout the chapters of this dissertation. Other studies of Mexico City (Infante et al. 2009; Liguori and Ortega 1990 [1989]; Prieur 1998b) and other parts of the country (Castillo et al. 2010; Córdova Plaza 2006, 2007; González Pérez 2003; Higgins and Coen 2000, 2002; Howe et al. 2008; Prieur 1998b; Rueda Castillo 2011) suggest something similar. Low-income, on-street, transgender sex workers did not feature in Mexico City’s 2008 trans law. During my extended fieldwork, many *trans women* were still subject to the discretionary prosecutions, police harassment, and violence that I discuss throughout the remaining chapters, and that largely stems from the socio-legal construction of sex work as an undesirable nuisance. Moreover, existing studies have

shown that sex work continues to be a stigmatized activity that leads some to keep their work secret (Castañeda et al. 1996), that sex workers are vulnerable to HIV (Galárraga et al. 2014; Infante et al. 2009), and that they are susceptible to extortion, violence, and even murder (Bautista López and Conde Rodríguez 2006; Liguori and Aggleton 1998).

One could argue, given the broader context, that the trans law inadvertently overlooked the informal structural precarity facing on-street trans sexual labourers. The trans law put forth a vision of sex–gender concordance issues as fundamental trans issues. Yet, this narrow focus on gender alone appears to have contributed little to lobbying for and bringing about a decriminalizing and destigmatizing socio-legal framework in which sex workers, many of which are transpeople, could carry out their work under fairer conditions. From this perspective, one could ultimately argue that sexual labour is a trans issue and, as such, should become part of the transgender political agenda in Mexico.

Conclusion

The geographies of the on-street sex trade have changed rapidly in Mexico City within the last two decades. *Trans women* have become more visible sexual labourers within emergent sex trade spots. However, the socio-legal regulation of sexual labour, and particularly on-street sexual labour, that contributes to its crafting as a social problem has not substantively changed. If anything, while in principle sex work is still tolerated, there is evidence suggesting that it is becoming increasingly more criminalized in this urban space. In this context, the local 2008 trans law allowing transpeople to change their sex and names on birth certificates is an important step towards the social recognition and legal rights of

transpeople. However, it does elide a discussion about how a trans law could work towards the improvement of the lives and precarious circumstances of low-income, on-street, informal, female-gendered, trans vendors of sexual services and other goods.

In the next chapter, I turn my attention to the lives and sociocultural ethos of *trans women* in Mexico City. Just as changing on-street sex trade geographies and socio-legal regulations shape the sociopolitical context in which transpeople find themselves, many sociocultural manifestations of class contribute to positioning transpeople, particularly low-income, female-gendered transpeople, in precarious and vulnerable structural locations.

3. *Trans Women's* Lives and Sociocultural Milieus

Introduction

This chapter examines the lives and sociocultural milieus of *trans women* in Mexico City. I first explore the naming, nicknaming, last naming, and gender pronoun practices of *trans women*. Then, I describe some of their embodiment practices, paying attention to both the multiplicity of experiences and the ways in which class and occupational backgrounds differently shape desires and subjectivities. Relationships with lovers and beloveds, including *trans women's* romantic, family, community, and on-street sex trade relations are important to many of them, and as such I take a look at the diversity of these connections. Last, I move onto a discussion about the beliefs and housing circumstances of my research participants, and use these as an entry point to discuss the socioeconomic profiles of the neighbourhoods where many of them live and work, as well as the systemic issues that disproportionately affect the low-income inhabitants of those areas in Mexico City. In exploring these aspects of *trans women's* lives, I aim to address the ways in which social class shapes the lives, circumstances, and sociocultural milieus of many of the *trans women* with whom I carried out research and how, in turn, these sociocultural manifestations of class shape the broader precarious and vulnerable conditions in which many transpeople in Mexico City today find themselves.

Low-income female-gendered transpeople have been increasingly profiled in the scholarly literature (see Castillo 2006; Castillo et al. 2010; Colchero et al. 2015; Córdova Plaza 2006, 2007; González Pérez 2003; Higgins and Coen 2002; Howe et al. 2008; Infante

et al. 2009; Lewis 2012; Prieur 1998b; Ronquillo 1994; Vargas Cervantes 2014). My research findings present some important commonalities with these studies; significantly, all of these studies show life's fragility and the critical place of sexual labour in low-income female-gendered transpeople's lives. Yet, as I aim to show in this chapter and those to follow, two critical issues merit further scrutiny: social class, to which I devote this chapter, and informal labour, to which I turn in Chapter 4. Taking inspiration from Dorothy Ko's (2005) research insights, I thus employ a "miniature" lens to describe the specificity and diversity of circumstances and experiences facing *trans women* in Mexico City, and also a "gigantic" nation-wide and regional perspective to juxtapose my findings with those of other preceding scholars, upon whose research my work is built.

Names, Nicknames, Last Names, and Pronouns

The *trans women* I worked with were individuals who lived as "women" or "female-gendered" people, or who identified as women and who had been assigned "male" genders or were seen as "men" when they were born.⁷¹ Take, for example, Mariana, a *trans woman* in her late 20s who had been regarded as a boy by her family members until later in

⁷¹ I place quotation marks around women and female-gendered to visually mark the constructedness and contingency of these categories upon (and across) time and space, *not* to question whether the *trans women* I met were indeed women. I identify as a feminist and I conceptualize this work as a feminist ethnography. However, other similarly-identified feminist scholars have put forth transphobic lines of argument about transpeople's lives and subjectivities, and particularly about female-gendered transpeople (see Gayle 2015; Morris 2015; Quinn 2015; Raymond 1979). Despite the wide array of feminist theories and politics across time and space, in popular imaginaries, and sometimes even in scholarly writings, the nuances and stark differences all tend to be collapsed under a broad "feminist" banner, uncritically presuming that all feminists share the same position on trans issues, or on sex work issues for that matter. That is certainly not the case. To be clear, it is not my intent to follow, rehash, or add steam to trans repudiation. The debates about "feminist" views on "trans" issues, and about "trans" people on "feminists" are nonetheless robust. For a recent debate about the politics of boycotting, or "no-platforming," see Jacqueline Rose (2016b) and the subsequent discussion it sparked in the "Letters" section of the *London Review of Books* (see Barrett 2016; Campbell 2016a, 2016b; Dustin 2016; Dutchman-Smith 2016; Padman 2016a, 2016b; Prosser 2016; Rose 2016a).

her teenage years when she began styling herself as a woman, and upon the advice of her best friend—also a *trans woman*—took up her female name. Or, as another example, take a *trans woman* in her 40s who had similarly been given a male name at birth, and upon beginning permanent bodily and social transformations that sought to feminize her presentation, later went by the name of Vianey. Some research participants, especially low-income *trans women*, lived as female-gendered people and would initially identify as “men” or as “*vestida*” (lit. female-fashioned or dressed-up person) when I first met them. Some began conceiving of themselves as “*trans women*” during my extended fieldwork, but a few at times still identified as homosexual men even if they had engaged in lasting feminizing bodily modifications and used female-gendered names consistently.

For the most part, *trans women* consistently used names socially recognized in Mexico as women’s names, and employed female pronouns to refer to themselves. The exceptions to this took place when *trans women* were beginning to be socially recognized, when they did not recognize themselves as men any longer, or when they were intermittently recognized as men and/or women. This was the case of Saúl/Andrea who, when I first met her in her early 20s, had long black wavy hair, wore high heels and a black skirt, and introduced herself as Saúl, her male name, but then explained that she also went by Andrea, her female name, especially when she worked the streets at night as a sex worker. Another exception was the case of Julieta/Mateo, who, by the time I met her in her late teens, had started recognizing herself as a *trans woman*. This recognition followed from her work on the streets as an almost permanently female-gendered sex worker, and her developing engagement in permanent bodily modifications. Julieta/Mateo had been working as a street-based sex worker since he was a young boy, but as she began engaging

in bodily transformations that marked her more permanently as a feminized being more often, she began calling herself and presenting herself in front of others in female terms more often.

Saúl/Andrea and Julieta/Mateo, however, did not use both names and gendered presences at the same time. They would alternate between names and gendered presences as they actively sought to strategize about how to maximize the employment opportunities available to them. They were not seeking to make a point about the continuum or the unsettling of gender, as was the case with Pablo Martina González, a person in his/her mid-30s who was an activist in the AIDS and sexual diversity movements. Pablo Martina identified as a transperson, and used the labels “*travesti*” and “*vestida*” to put together activist shows, cabaret entertainment, and artistic plays recounting his/her life and that of other transpeople. Pablo Martina would refuse to permanently settle for a single gender, though for the most part s/he lived his/her daily and work life socially as an engendered male and kept her activist and entertainment work as a female-gendered person.⁷²

⁷² I refrain here from using the increasingly popular English gender-neutral pronouns, “they,” “them,” and “their,” because it seems to me that these pronouns tend to be chosen in English-speaking contexts when a person is seeking to embody and/or take an intellectual and political stance in favour of gender nonconformity, gender non-binarism, gender queerness, gender ambiguity, and/or androgyny. For instance, at the Vancouver campus of the University of British Columbia (UBC), I have met students who introduce themselves by saying that they “use she/her or they/them pronouns,” and some add that they “like it when they are alternated.” The singular “they” pronoun appears to be used when people do not want to identify or be identified as either a female or a male, and the underlying message is one of disrupting binary gender thinking. Similarly, in some Anglo-North American activist circles, promoting the acceptance of “they” as a singular gender-neutral pronoun in formal media outlets has led to boycotting publications until “they” is accepted as a legitimate pronoun in writing for people “coming out as agender” (Rae Spoon in Shraya 2016: 59). In Spanish, however, attempting to turn the third person plural pronoun “they” into a singular gender-neutral pronoun would still require the use of a grammatical gender marker (“*ellos*” or “*ellas*”). Emerging forms to mark pronouns (or nouns) as gender neutral have appeared in written Mexican Spanish; for instance, using the “at” (“*arroba*”) sign or an “x” to mark collectively gender-neutral pronouns (“*ell@s*” or “*ellxs*”). Among Vancouverite Latin American Spanish speakers, I have occasionally heard and read a few people using terms such as “*todes*,” with an “e,” to refer to inclusive collective terms without female or male grammatical gender markers. This was not the case of Pablo Martina González.

Whereas Pablo Martina sought to be recognized intermittently as male and female, and at times as someone in between, Lucy Bartolomé, a *trans woman* and activist in her late 40s, wished she could only live and be recognized as a female, and by her female name, but instead had to present herself and use her male name in front of her pre-teen children. Lucy, who zealously guarded her male name from me, was recognized as a *trans woman* in every context in which we ever interacted, but her children and children's mother, her ex-wife, were finding it difficult to accept that their father was now a woman. Due in part to an acrimonious divorce and custody battle, she had to present herself as a male to visit with them, and told me that for them she had to insist: "I will always be your father."

Generally, *trans women* referred to other *trans women*, or people they recognized as similar to them, using female gender pronouns. The exception to this sociolinguistic practice would occur when they were angry. At these times, they would refer to one another using the masculine terms "*¡joto!*" (lit. homosexual man) or "*¡puto!*" (lit. male hustler). Both of these terms employ the ending, "-o" that is commonly the grammatical gender marker in Spanish that denotes someone or something as male. Additionally, the terms generally mean "queer," and the intention of the speaker most often was to put the other person down or provoke them by using a male ending. Speakers used these terms either in the presence of the person they applied them to, or in their absence. But either to their face or behind their backs, the usage of these terms uniformly conveyed irritation towards the spoken-about *trans woman*.

Like non-trans people's naming practices, the kinds of female names *trans women* choose for themselves had multiple inspirations and varied origins. Some *trans women* chose foreign-sounding names, such as Giselle, Ashley, Kim, or Michelle, as well as names

with foreign sounds, such as Samantha or Melissa, in which neither the “th,” “h” nor “ss” spellings represent existing sounds or sounds that carry significance in Mexican Spanish.⁷³ Others kept Spanish spellings but decided to name themselves after faraway foreign places or countries, such as Libia.

Foreign sounds and spellings were part of an unspoken but firm aesthetics that sought to suggest glamour, sophistication, cosmopolitanism, or uniqueness. Only a decade earlier, many of the names I encountered among *trans women* had been often immediately associated with the stage names adopted by *teiboleras* (lit. table dancers; strippers or exotic dancers), thereby with a false sophistication that connoted a lower class. These were the kinds of names that one would hear in the echoed voiceover of a male host or master of ceremonies (MC) in a nightclub introducing a dancer: “¡Ella es Yesssseeniaaah!” (“Here comes Yesenia!”), playing in the microphone with the elongations and reverberations of the “y,” “s,” or “h” sounds to provide an exotic feel to the stage dancers brought from faraway lands.

Moreover, a look at sexual service advertisements of those defined as “*travestis*” in two popular newspapers—*El Universal* and *La Prensa*—in Mexico City between 2010 and 2011 suggests the existence of a broader sociocultural class ethos in the foreign-sounding, worldly names that female-gendered transpeople (and others) choose. On January 18, 2010, for example, one could read in *La Prensa*: “Travesti **Interactive** ‘Incomparable’ (*Blond Kenny*)” (Avisos Clasificados 2010e). On May 24, 2011, in *El Universal*, one

⁷³ Spanish is a language with a phonemic orthography; each grapheme, or written symbol, is supposed to represent one phoneme, or a sound that is significant or intelligible for the speakers. Needless to say, there are a few exceptions of written symbols that do not correspond to spoken sounds, such as “z” and “s,” or “v” and “b,” which essentially sound and mean the same to a Mexican Spanish speaker.

could read: “‘Travesti’ Natalia truly beautiful, majestic body, well-endowed! Accommodating, toys” (Aviso Oportuno 2011c). In addition to Kenny and Natalia, during the months of my extended field research I learned of “Alexxa” (Avisos Clasificados 2010d), “Jessica” (Avisos Clasificados 2010c), “Montserrat” (Avisos Clasificados 2010b), “Scarleth” (Aviso Oportuno 2011a), “Kenya” (Aviso Oportuno 2011b), “Cassandra” (Avisos Clasificados 2011), and even “Laura León,” homonym of a famous, well-endowed, dyed-blond Mexican artist and singer (Avisos Clasificados 2010a).

Susana Vargas Cervantes’s (2014) research about the 23-year-long weekly visual and textual representations of *mujercitos* (lit. effeminate little men; effeminate men with a mocking diminutive, feminized male gender marker) in the popular red press tabloid *Alarma!* further sheds light on these issues. She documents that, in the 1970s, trans* subjects in Mexico were already using foreign-evoking names like “Odette” or “Paulette” as a strategy to evoke Frenchness and Europeaness and, in doing so, underscore their erotic capital. According to Vargas Cervantes, the foreign-sounding names and gendered poses of those portrayed as “*mujercitos*” in *Alarma!* denote their class aspirations and their attempts to occupy spaces of socio-economic privilege in a society in which skin tonality is intimately linked with class stratifications (see also Glenn 2008; Moreno Figueroa 2010). This appears to have continued being the case 40 years later.

During my research there were also *trans women* who took on names with long histories in Mexico and in the Spanish language, such as Dulce, Paloma, or Valentina. Still others choose their names by shortening or adapting the male name they initially had been given, as in the case of Francis, who had been named Francisco earlier in life and chose a female version of the same name to be able to keep her original name. Whether choosing

from names with established presences in Mexico and/or Spanish language or from foreign-sounding and looking names, *trans women* generally steered clear of the practice of adopting names from the Roman Catholic Saints calendar. *Trans women* are part of the broader social trend of shifting naming practices that capture an influx of new influences, tastes, and histories. The inspirations for their chosen names, I learned during field research, came from famous television (TV) soap opera actresses or singers, from the lyrics of a cherished song, or from personal stories, as in the case of Mariana who adopted the name her best friend had given her when the latter passed away.

I argue that the naming practices of the *trans women* I met spoke to broader sociocultural class dynamics at play in Mexico. *Trans women* sought to express their physical beauty, worldly sophistication, and at times also their sexual prowess, through their chosen names. Jane Pilcher (2016: 776) suggests that naming practices are “quintessentially social processes” that relate to the embodiment of sexed, gendered, ethnic, and racialized identities. Earlier studies on naming practices showed that naming and namelessness capture gendered social status and personhood, or the lack thereof (Watson 2001 [1986]). As such, a name can both evoke and mark a person as gendered and classed. The naming choices of my participants evoked social class aspirations. In this, *trans women* showed remarkable continuity with the aspirations for socio-economic privilege reflected in the images of “*mujercitos*” photographed in *Alarma!* four decades earlier. Susana Vargas Cervantes (2014) demonstrates that such images in Mexico City show how sex–gender models are imbricated in broader patterns of class- and race-marked difference.

Significantly, these classed naming practices were not specific to low-income *trans women* working as sexual labourers, but were also found in the names of non–sex worker

trans activists—for example, Lucy Bartolomé, Jeannie Belgrano, Natalia Lewis, or Kim Fernández—whose names evoked an aspiration to be connected with foreign ancestry and worldly cosmopolitanism. The patent sense of sophistication and glamour in trans activists’ names was particularly reinforced by their use of legal last names in their daily, professional, and activist activities, while low-income *trans women* I met went by their chosen names (in most circumstances). Despite spending time in close proximity to several *trans women* over the period of several months, very seldom was I able to learn their legal last names, because in their daily contexts the pedigree associated with professional titles (“*licenciada*,” for example) and last names had limited socio-economic utility. In contrast, activists went by their first names and last names and many people referred to them using both. In a few cases, their legal, and in a few cases their chosen, last names also had a foreign-language sounding reference to them, which unlike “Hernández,” “García” or “López”—to use three of the most common last names in Mexico—added further to the expression of class privilege aspirations and histories embedded in their names and last names.

Some *trans women* also had nicknames. Similarly to some names, the nicknames that *trans women* were given, and sometimes also adopted and came to be known as, came from personal stories. For example, Dulce said, “[My name is] Dulce but everyone calls me ... ‘the Osa (the she-bear).’” When I asked her why people call her “Osa,” Dulce explained that when she first moved out of home and went to live with friends, she put a bear cartoon sticker on one of her windows. She would use it as a place marker for her friends to know where to pick her up to go out dancing Thursdays, Fridays, and even Sundays: “‘Here,

where the bear is,’ and there was the bear, and there was I. And ‘Osa’ stuck with me,” she said.

Likewise, Valentina’s nickname was *la rana* (the frog) because she once had an eye infection so bad that her eyes seemed like they would pop out, and Melissa was also known as “Fey,” a name given to her from her physical resemblance to a pop singer with that name. Valentina and Melissa used their chosen female names, but they were also known by their nicknames. It was common for them to both be referred to and refer to themselves with these nicknames. Osa had chosen to speak and be spoken about by her nickname most of the time, which in essence had become a pet name, and that was how, for the most part, I and others knew her.

Some other *trans women* had been given nicknames by other *trans women*, and I never heard anybody speak about them by any other name. I found this to be the case particularly among “*las madrotas*” (“the madams”) in charge of the trans sex trade “*puntos*.” There was *la tostada* (the frizzled one), whose nickname sought to mock her disheveled appearance and dark skin colour, or there was *la Bellota* (the Buttercup), a character from the dubbed Powerpuff Girls cartoon shown on TV, which intended to allude to her appearance and fierce personality. These did not necessarily function as pet names given out of affection, but as monikers suggesting a degree of mockery. However, some of the *trans women* had also adopted these nicknames to talk about themselves.

Two social and symbolic processes involved in naming and nicknaming practices for and among *trans women* are thrown into sharp relief from my description so far. First, at some point in their lives *trans women* had chosen a name for themselves that was different from the one they had been given by their families at birth. This represents a step towards

exerting the will of *trans women* to name themselves as they choose. Most times, these names were eventually accepted by the family members of the *trans women* I met, and virtually all the time other *trans women* consistently called them by the name they wished to be known as. Additionally, some *trans women*, particularly activists, used last names in their daily activities to introduce themselves, and came to be recognized with both their names.

Second, some *trans women* were given a nickname, and among those, some adopted their nickname as another name to go by on a regular basis. The stories behind nicknames showed that *trans women* often liked making fun of others and were made fun of by others—a practice that working-class *trans women* called “*bufar*” (lit. bull bellowing; taunting, mocking). Of those whose nickname story I knew well—for instance, Valentina, Melissa, and Osa—all had gotten their nicknames when they were already *trans women*, and thus the gender markers of their nicknames were female right from the start. In Mexico, nicknames are known to emerge out of mocking, teasing and ridiculing someone’s physical characteristics or temperament. But the adoption of one’s own nickname as a usual manner in which to be known as also indicates that some of them, even when the undertone of mockery remained traceable, could be embraced in daily life as fond self-designations. I have attempted to show the ways in which aspirations for class privilege impinge upon the naming and last naming practices of female-gendered transpeople in Mexico City, by illuminating their foreign sounds and foreign ancestry—an evocative worldly cosmopolitanism.

In the media, there is another layer of social class manifested through naming practices of transpeople that is important to mention. When *trans women* were represented

in the media, their chosen names were deemed “aliases,” transforming them into the false names used by “criminals” who hide their real identities from law enforcers. This became evident to me when Jazmín, a trans sex worker in her late 30s, and Bellota, one of the madams in the Panotlán sex trade area (also a transperson), were jailed during my extended fieldwork. They were accused of trafficking people into the sex trade. When the related press release was issued, it appeared with their given first and last names, which were posited as the “real” ones due to their existence in legal documents. Their chosen names were deemed to be aliases, in quotation marks, using female markers, as in “la Jazmín” (“the Jazmín”).⁷⁴ Additionally, they were written about in masculine terms, and the employment of a female gender marker to mark their seeming aliases succeeded at feminizing, and in this context mocking, subjects that were presumed to be actually men.

Still, I assume —because I can only imagine the moment in which they were detained and I did not speak to those who detained them— that both Jazmín and Bellota, inadvertently adding one more tier of significance, were presumed to be *men* as their written representation suggested, but they were likely visibly not *male* at the time of detention: their permanently modified bodies likely showed otherwise. The lack of apparent naming and gender concordance in the written press release suggests a contradiction between the paper and the lived reality. Paradoxically, it also points to a generalized perceived discrepancy between the ways in which most people in Mexico are taught to recognize gendered human bodies and the bodies that *trans women* portray. Though not

⁷⁴ In central Mexico, the use of definite articles “el” or “la” (“the,” with male and female gender markers) before proper names is most often a way to belittle the person being spoken of. Definite articles in central Mexico are reserved for inanimate objects, thereby their disparaging use and perception when referred to people. In northern Mexico, however, definite articles are commonly and neutrally used to introduce proper names.

accurate in the actual lived details of the *trans women* I knew, representations like this one in the media capture, with exactitude, the kinds of existing complexities in the varying ways of understanding gendered and sexual human bodies of non-transpeople and transpeople alike in Mexico City. Moreover, in the context of “criminality,” the official media naming choices used to refer to low-income female-gendered transpeople contributed to imbricating them not only within existing sex–gender systems, but also within broader patterns of social class.

Bodies and Embodiments

Most of the *trans women* I met had visibly physically-abled bodies. By this I mean that most were able to walk, move, speak, and hear. Most transpeople I carried out my extended research with were not blind or deaf, and did not use hearing aids, crutches, or prosthetics to get around.

Few *trans women* would wear visible prescription glasses. Wearing framed glasses in Mexico, despite changing attitudes, is and was at the time of my fieldwork still not considered an attractive practice among women. If *trans women* had visual impairments, they either wore contacts to keep in line with hegemonic beauty standards, or got by with no prescriptions, like many people do in Mexico despite the vast majority of the population facing visual impairments (Bahena-Rojas 2001; Cañas-Lopez et al. 2004).

Visible bodily ability was the case for most *trans women* I met, but as I have sought to show with other aspects, *trans women*’s lives and experiences were varied. Natalia Lewis stood as a telling example of this complexity. She had been born with a degenerative illness

that, by her mid-40s when I met her, had her bound to a wheelchair and beginning to dramatically lose her sight. She was also unable to feed herself solid foods, only liquids using a straw. Her wife Esther, a non-trans woman also in her mid-40s, would cut her meal in pieces and spoon-feed her, alternating with feeding herself. Natalia was extremely gracious and patient with Esther, but sometimes, when really hungry, she would have to demand that Esther, who would tend to get distracted when engaged in lively conversation, continue feeding her. On flat surfaces, Natalia would be able to push her own mechanical wheelchair. She had enough body strength to pull herself in and out of the car when Esther would dutifully drive her around, but Esther would have to fold and put the wheelchair in the trunk of their small, old car every time they went somewhere. Natalia was able to read and write on a computer using the zoom-in function and a pen held in her mouth, which would aid her in typing, one-by-one, the letters on the keyboard. To pick up any of the phone calls that Esther made during the day to check in with her, Natalia would have to grab the pen with her teeth and lips and click the connect and disconnect buttons.

I cannot tell whether any of the *trans women* suffered from mental and invisible disabilities. If they did, this was not known to me. Neither can I tell whether their visibly able-looking bodies were indeed strong, healthy, and fit. Recent personal accounts of people suffering from visible and invisible, occasional and permanent, partly and completely restricting, disabilities have shed light on the intricacies of attempting to place firm boundaries demarcating healthy from unhealthy, or abled from disabled bodies (see Clarke 2002; Klein 1997; Mahawald 1998). Nevertheless, it is important to point out that, while all except one of the *trans women* I met were, at least on the surface, abled-bodied, illness also had a disabling effect on some of them. Thus, towards the end of the substantive

portion of my fieldwork at least one of the *trans women* I spent time with, Samantha, in her early 20s, had developed a visible health-related disability that hindered her ability to walk with a stable stride.

Trans women engaged in a wide range of body modifying practices. For the most part, *trans women* had female breasts, whether small or large. Some had gotten their breasts by injecting edible or industrial oil fillers into their chest. This was called “*infiltraciones*” (lit. infiltrations). It was not uncommon for them to have uneven breasts in line or size, and the texture of these breasts seemed heavy and stiff. Others had ingested self-prescribed hormones obtained over the counter at a pharmacy, which allowed them to develop small breasts.

At the time I met the *trans women* in my study, an ongoing generational shift was occurring regarding bodily manipulations, particularly breasts. Many of the older *trans women* had *infiltraciones* in their chests and other parts of their bodies, such as the cheeks, legs, hips, and buttocks. But some of the younger *trans women*, especially those aged 25 and younger, had silicone breast implant surgeries. There were differences among *trans women* of different generations, and bodily manipulations were not merely shaped by their age or their differing generational access to novel gender-making technologies, but also by their varying income. Thus, Samantha had flat breasts and used to fill in her bra with crumpled toilet paper balls, a practice that reminded me of my own middle-school years. Julieta/Mateo, who was in her late teens, also had flat breasts and, unlike her closest friend Melissa, who was also in her late teens, she did not have enough money to pay for breast implant surgery and no one in her social network was willing to finance her surgery. Valentina, who was in her late 20s and one of the *trans women* in charge of the sex trade

spot, was not only able to finance Melissa's surgery, but also to pay for her own breast implant surgery. Similarly, Paloma, in her mid-30s, had had *infiltraciones* in her youth, but now older and with greater income obtained through the revenues generated by leading the street-vending group The Warriors, had begun having her previous breasts and hips redone. Vianey, who was in her mid-40s and a close friend of Paloma, had *infiltraciones* in her breasts, legs, hips, and buttocks; without the possibility of getting them redone or fixed in any way, she would often complain about "being all *infiltrada*," especially during the heat of Mexico City's scorching days, when standing up for a long time, as her legs would harden and she would feel like her "insides boiled."

Enlarging their breasts either through oil injections or silicone implants was a practice engaged in by virtually all *trans women* who worked as street-based sex workers. Yet, this was not a practice that all *trans women* engaged in. Lucy and Natalia, trans activists not working in the sex trade spots, for example, had preferred to ingest doctor-prescribed hormones to help their breasts grow.

Infiltraciones could be had in any part of the body, but cheeks, hips, and breasts were the most common places to have them done. Even though by the time my fieldwork took place *infiltrarse* was becoming a little less common, there were still *trans women* like Yadira, a *trans woman* in her early 60s, who were known to be experts at *infiltraciones*. Some others, like Giselle who was in her mid-20s, were less known as experts in this practice, but nonetheless carried out *infiltraciones* on others, like on Julieta/Mateo's cheeks.

Ingesting hormones was another body modifying practice carried out by the *trans women* I met. For the most part, *trans women* would obtain information through word-of-mouth from other *trans women* in their networks about what hormones they had to take and

how often: an injection of contraceptives once per month, or contraceptive pills every now and then. For example, many of the low-income *trans women* I met had, on occasion, taken and recommended others to take “pernutal,” as Osa and others called the contraceptive Perlutal, which contained estrogens that helped feminize their bodies and voice pitches. Offering and receiving folk medical advice and healing remedies in Mexico is common. *Trans women* were not distinct in this regard, and they would volunteer remedies for any kind of illness or health-related situation every time someone got sick or was in need. Obtaining hormonal-related knowledge often took place through these social network venues. In August 2010, a local disposition prohibited obtaining antibiotics and other “controlled medicines” without prescription, but people were still able to obtain medications through informal means (see Cortés 2010; del Valle et al. 2010).

Not all hormonal ingestion occurred through the informal means and folk knowledge held by *trans women*. By the time I carried out research, some had also begun receiving the professional advice of endocrinologists at the HIV Clinic, where the Trans Health Program of Mexico City has been based since 2009. Low-income trans sex workers, like Mariana or Francis, would occasionally be seen by an endocrinology specialist there. They sought to feminize their bodies and soften their voice pitch. But similar to other trans sex workers, like Valentina, they worried that their hormonal intake would negatively impact their sexual performance on the streets. Valentina told me one night when we were at the *punto* where she worked: “I still want to be able to ... [made a sign with her index finger lifting up].” Others, like Lucy Bartolomé and Natalia Lewis who were non-sex workers, did not share in these concerns and had decided to tap into their activist

experience and networks to be seen by medical specialists since they had begun “transitioning.” For them estrogen intake was steady, not occasional.

Despite the generational shifts that were occurring that made more technologies of gender available to *trans women* in Mexico City, and the differing practices enabled and prevented by income power, social networks, and the labour sector, it was not at all unusual for many *trans women* to have both internal body manipulations, such as hormones and *infiltraciones*, and external body manipulations. Most *trans women* had undergone bodily manipulations that presented feminized bodies and appearances on a daily basis, even when off work. Many had facial, chest, underarm, and body hair removed with laser techniques or with razors. Plucked or tattooed eyebrows were commonplace. A few were also joining the growing trend of having orthodontic treatments done, a practice that was just becoming more common in Mexico City even among marginalized populations only five-to-ten years prior. Still, a few had some missing back teeth.

Every *trans woman* I met liked to wear long hair and at least a touch of facial makeup, such as lipstick, eyeliner, or eyebrow liner. Those who worked the streets were especially careful with their attire and grooming, tending to their every makeup and clothing detail with care. Their long, dark, straight or wavy hair was often neatly styled and for some, like Kim Fernández, Lucy Bartolomé, or Natalia Lewis, dyed in light brown or blond tones.

While in the past, non-trans women were expected to wear reserved clothing and portray demure femininity, by the time I carried out my doctoral research things had been shifting. Many non-trans women, particularly young ones, were now invested in making themselves appear sexy and provocative. One of the most striking examples of this change

involved heels, which had gone from one-to-two inches high in the early 2000s to full-blown stilettos ten years later. In Mexico and elsewhere, stilettos had been associated with “*teiboleras*,” burlesque, or cabaret dancers (see Briggeman 2004; Ross 2009). Yet, in 2010 many working-age women hired in offices and banks would wear stilettos, sometimes with ankle straps, even when riding the crowded subway, bus, or *metrobus*.

Past expectations did not hold true for *trans women*. *Trans women* were anything but demure in their attire. In fact, they had the expectation of themselves and others to be dressed to the nines at all times. They would usually dress in flashy clothes with glittery sparkles and tailored outfits that delineated their hips and showed their legs, arms, and cleavage. The constant beautification of their bodies was also visible in the continuous adjustments they made to their makeup. Not all *trans women*, however, would beautify themselves intensively or on a daily basis; some would reserve this for the days and times when they were working.

Keeping up with beauty standards, however, proved at times unattainable for many of them, and when this happened the ensuing mockery was always sharp. This became clear to me one afternoon after a group of us—Azuzena, Mariana, Vianey, Yadira, Paloma and others—had been eating at a downtown “*fonda*” (lit. restaurant; a small non-franchised eatery with homemade food). We had left the restaurant and were making our way to the bus stop. Mariana, walking ahead of us, was dressed in a pink pair of loose pants, a print t-shirt, and sneakers, her hair tied in a messy ponytail. Seeking to make fun of Mariana’s outfit, Vianey said to us: “Look, the Mariana, all dressed up as a woman,” and laughed. Walking next to us, Azuzena was wearing a black glittery stiff corset with ruffled cups, her cleavage showing exuberantly above her narrow waist. For her part, Vianey was wearing

her usual jeans and plainly-coloured, close-fitting t-shirt, but the tightness of her clothing displayed her large buttocks, ample hips, and sizable breasts, and combined with her facial makeup, served to distance her from Mariana. *Trans women*'s aesthetics departed sharply from what they perceived to be non-trans women's plain, unfashionable customs or expectations. Annick Prieur (1998b), who carried out research in Ciudad Nezahualcóyotl, State of Mexico (central Mexico), between 1989 and 1991, conceptualized this as the selective distilling of class-based aesthetics of femininity. Don Kulick (1998c), in turn, drew on his work with "*travestis*" in Salvador, Brazil, to hold that transpeople sought to perfect the gendered messages that exist and give meaning to notions of man and woman. I similarly argue that female-gendered expectations of transpeople's beauty, bodily modifications, and physical appearance in Mexico City were shaped along class-based lines. Like their naming practices, some of these dynamics were perceptible in body fashioning practices, such as dyed-blond hair, and in the expectation that curvy, well-made up embodiments were sexually appealing and desirable.

Some *trans women* getting ready to go to work would wear something they called "*chubi*" or "*churro*" (lit. wheat-floured fritter or something elongated and twisted), a padding made of foam and cloth that they added underneath their pants, skirt or leggings to have bigger, rounded buttocks that made them look, in their own aesthetic and sense of beauty, more feminine and sexually appealing. Wearing a "*churro*," however, did not prevent them from having hip "*infiltrations*," and it was used to accentuate the look of curvy buttocks.

When someone had undergone genital surgery, low-income *trans women* would call her “*cambio*” (lit. change).⁷⁵ In the centre of Mexico, more generally, this is called “*la jarocho*” (demonym for a female person from Veracruz, a state and port city in the east-central Gulf of Mexico), a surgery that people imagine, many times in horror, as simply consisting of cutting off someone’s penis. Only one of the *trans women* I met had had a vaginoplasty, a genital surgery consisting of both the removal of testicles and penis and the crafting of a “neovagina,” as she called it. She was not a street-based sex worker, but a self-defined trans activist and an occasional sadomasochist (S&M) sex worker. Despite her non-street sexual labour background, this trans activist had contact with street-based trans sex workers who would often say when speaking about her “*ella es cambio*” (lit. she is change). During my fieldwork, none of them ever talked, at least to me, about wanting to become *cambio* themselves. For lower-class *trans women*, being *cambio* was associated with madness. There was the ongoing rumour that anybody who underwent a genital surgery would go crazy and become a madwoman. This belief was especially rehashed when confronted with the bad temper of the few people they knew who had had genital surgery. A trans activist known to many low-income *trans women* was known for being prone to

⁷⁵ Aware of the Anglo–North American politics behind the labeling and emphasis authors and activists place on these surgeries, I have chosen to use neither “gender confirming surgery” nor “sex reassignment surgery” to write about this. One presupposes that one’s gender is something held and known inside, an identity; the other presumes that, as if crafted via human-made technologies, one’s sex is fixed and fixable. Both reflect and promote a conceptualization premised upon a disruption between the body’s material manifestations and the true self, a Rousseauian inner reality that came into being in Europe’s 18th century (see Butler 1999 [1990]; Culler 1997; Derrida 1974 [1967]). Both terms also obey the logics of trans* practices, articulations, and understandings available and put in motion in some Anglo–North American or English-speaking contexts; see, for example, Chelsea Manning’s (2016) column about the ordeals of seeking to receive “gender-confirming healthcare” in US military and general prisons. Things do not neatly align to this epistemic model in Mexico City, thus it is crucial to be mindful of the sociocultural translations of concepts and ideas when explaining the dynamics found in the Mexican context. Further, neither sex nor gender identity constructions were the primary subjects of my research; I cannot argue for a particular position on those matters.

hissy fits and lacking friends. In the minds of most of the *trans women* I interacted with who knew this trans activist, her fits and friendlessness were thought to confirm the kinds of social ills that happened when one had a genital surgery. Jazmin, Mariana, and others from the Panotlán sex trade spot would often say, “¡*Qué horror!*” (What a horror!) to express disgust about this. On rare occasions I heard of on-street trans sex workers consider having a genital surgery. Alondra, Jazmín’s niece and a early-20s trans sex worker, was said to be one of them. Yet, most low-income *trans women* would mock her and suggest that they had found an explanation for Alondra’s reticent and socially awkward character. Virtually everyone I ever heard speak about the prospects of having genital surgeries said, at one point or another, that the person undergoing this would turn crazy or even crazier. One day, when we were at The Warriors’ headquarters, and I asked Valentina if she had considered having a genital surgery, she said no, “because of my job, because of my job, because it’s what we most use.” Among low-income female-gendered transpeople in Mexico City the penis was an economic necessity (see also Ripoll 2002), a situation similar to that of trans sex workers in Vancouver, Canada, where being able to offer the “full package deal” to clients is an essential consideration for not having genital surgeries (Ross 2012: 130).

Nevertheless, certainly not everyone thought of genital surgeries in horror and disgust. Neither were penises an economic necessity for everyone I met. When I returned to Mexico City in August 2012, Lucy Bartolomé and I met for lunch. She told me she was now considering having genital surgery. But in contrast to when I first met her in 2008 during the Latin American and Caribbean Feminist Meeting, as well as what she said to me in 2009 during my pilot research, Lucy now phrased this change as an obvious, expected

one. Now, it was just a matter of time for her to eventually fully “transition” and get her testes and penis removed and a vagina made. Unlike most of the low-income *trans women* I met, for her genital surgeries were framed in positive terms.

Maridos, Chacales, Kin, and Other Lovers and Beloveds

Many of the *trans women* I met call their lovers “*maridos*” (lit. husbands; lovers, boyfriends, or live-in spouses). These are the men in their lives who either live with them, or are their non-live-in occasional or long-term lovers. It is often the case that *trans women* provide, in one way or another and to a lesser or greater extent, financially for them.

Most *trans women* liked their “*maridos*” to be “*chacales*” (lit. jackal; bastard), a form of embodied masculinity said to be rough, bravado, young, and muscular-looking, or “male.” A “*chacal*,” according to Carlos Monsiváis (1998: 60, my translation), “is a proletarian youth of indigenous appearance or newly mestizo.” Monsiváis asserts that it is someone who embodies “proletarian sensuality,” and as such situates the historical emergence of “*chacales*” as desirable racialized subjects within the limited, class-confined resources available to low-income men. Rosío Córdova Plaza (2003, 2005), who carried out research in in Xalapa, Veracruz (eastern Mexico), between 2002 and 2003, conceives of “*chacales*” as aggressive, hyper masculine men with homosexual or bisexual sexual practices who are not considered to have, and do not assume a homosexual identity. For *trans women* it was important, a sign of good status, and a visible social index of their own value as humans, to have a committed lover on hand. But simply having a “*marido*,” for

most of them, was not enough. The most sought-after and prized “*maridos*” were those who were seen and perceived as “*chacales*.”

The place of “*maridos*” in low-income *trans women*’s lives affected them both symbolically and financially, symbolically because it showered them in social status as desirable and desired subjects, and financially because *trans women* tended to be widely involved in the lives of their “*maridos*.” This is one of the reasons, teasingly, that many *trans women* spoke about each other’s “*maridos*” as their “*padrotes*” (lit. pimps; lovers or pimps).

I often heard *trans women* being worried about their “*maridos*” cheating on them. Mostly, they were afraid that their “*maridos*” would cheat on them with other *trans women*. Since many of these “*maridos*” were people they had met initially as clients, or potential ambiguous clients, in the sex trade spots, the concern about being cheated on with other *trans women* was ever present. As a matter of fact, such clients-turned-lovers—their “*maridos*”—would on more than one occasion be known to cheat on them with other *trans women* also working the spots. Mariana, for example, kicked out the live-in “*marido*” she had had for about three years by the time I met her—a construction worker from her neighbourhood—when she found out that he had been walking about in the sex trade spot and she heard that he had taken up with another *trans woman*.

The preoccupation with cheating, however, was not limited to being cheated on with other *trans women*. They would worry that their “*maridos*” would end up cheating on them with non-trans women, which was in fact something that some “*maridos*” did. When I first met Julieta/Mateo, she told me she was dealing with heartbreak, because her “*marido*” had cheated on her, and to make matters worse, with a non-trans woman. She said: “With a

trans woman I understand, but with a [non-trans] woman [she swiftly sized me up] I cannot compete.” Similarly, for Vianey, one of the worst things that had happened to her occurred when her “*marido*,” a man she had loved for more than two decades, had cheated on her with one of her non-trans blood sisters and had taken off about two weeks after she had been left grief-stricken from the death of her beloved mother. This was something she never forgave; when I met her she still remembered it as “the worst blow I’ve had in life.”

At the same time, sometimes the prospect of their “*maridos*” having relationships with non-trans women was an opportunity to express amusement. Vianey’s “*marido*” had a simultaneous non-trans wife. Vianey was often hurt by it, but she would also express vengeful amusement at the fact that she, too, could “*me como a mi marido*” (lit. eat her husband; have sex with her lover) from time to time. Similarly, Mariana, with the habitual intent she had in testing my mores, once left me inside her bedroom, not without first striking a mischievous smile across her face, so that I could do my “research,” or so she said, with a 19-year-old “*chacal*,” a neighbour and former client who had become her “*marido*.”

However, not all *trans women* had “*maridos*.” A few of them, primarily activists, had “*novios*” (lit. boyfriends) who were appreciated for their soft and normative handsome qualities instead. Lucy, for example, would often gush over her “*novio*,” a much older man who accompanied her to many activist events and let her be herself and be by herself. Still, a few *trans women* also had other types of relationships not straightforwardly defined by *heterosexual* desires. Jeannie, unlike most *trans women* I met, and in contravention of the folk wisdom surrounding them, had taken up another transperson as a “*pareja*” (lit. partner; live-in lover or spouse). Jeannie’s partner sometimes presented herself as a female-

gendered subject, but at other times her femininity would be less emphasized by only curling her eyelashes while wearing short hair and no facial makeup. According to Jeannie, her partner allowed her to be herself and was supportive of her doing what she pleased, so they had been together for a long time. Kim, in turn, was not known to have an actual romantic relationship during my fieldwork. But she defined herself as “*bisexual*” (lit. bisexual), telling me she felt erotic desire for men and for women. Natalia, as recounted earlier, lived with her wife Esther. Esther had been her wife for over two decades when Natalia decided to “transition” and, after a turbulent process that Esther braved with courage and wisdom, she had come to the conclusion that “love knows no genders” and continued their relationship and tenderly looking after her. During my fieldwork, they got legally married for a second time, in a media-attracting civil ceremony attended by more than three dozen people and with white flowers adorning the registry, not as a heterosexual couple like the first time around, but as a lesbian couple.

Yet overall, many of the *trans women* I met had or sought to have “*maridos*.” For those who had them, “*maridos*” were important and for many of them the central relationship in their lives in Mexico City.

At the same time, “*maridos*” were not the only significant relations I found that existed among *trans women*. Family members, friends, “*comadres*” (lit. co-mothers; fictive female-gendered kin acquired through ritual celebrations), children, nieces, nephews, and even pets were also part of those interrelations that made up their daily lives.⁷⁶ Michael

⁷⁶ In classic anthropology’s kinship studies, the term “fictive kin” often refers to kin acquired not through blood or marriage. The adjective fictive, however, wrongly implies that these relationships are less real or significant, or that they do not carry the same level of commitment expected from consanguine or affinal kin relationships. Using “social kin” instead would misleadingly suggest that some kin relationships are not social, when that is what kinship is all about (see Wood 2002). Given the shortcomings of both terms, I have

Higgins and Tanya Coen (2000, 2002) have pointed out such diversity of family formations and relationship arrangements among urban poor “*travesties*” in Oaxaca, Oaxaca (southern Mexico). Mariana was a case in point in Mexico City. She would often look after children whenever she could, including the children of one of her non-trans woman friends. During my extended fieldwork, her friend’s husband was in prison, and thus Mariana would soothe her godchildren, a girl and a boy, with great care, taking them places, making them food, asking for them, and addressing them sweetly while speaking to them as “my child.” Her godchildren appeared to love Mariana deeply, as they often sought her attention and embrace. Mariana also was particularly fond of her own nephew, her brother’s son. Whenever I hung out with her and her family at her grandmother’s “*vecindad*” unit, she would affectionately tease her brother’s little daughter. Mariana was similarly close to her mother, a young retired police office administrator, and particularly to her mom’s mom, Dona Cruz, an older woman known in the “*vecindad*” for her fierce “doesn’t take shit” character, her deep love and commitment to weekly public street dancing, and for her fierce loyalty and affection towards her kin.

Similarly, Paloma often hung out with her nephews, gave them presents, and took them places, such as the time she took them to have a Christmas photo taken with Santa Claus and the Three Wise Men at the Alameda, a central park located in the downtown area of Mexico City. Likewise, towards the end of my extended fieldwork, Valentina, also known as Rana, began calling a little girl “my daughter” and consistently fed and dressed her, offered her presents, and bragged about her by posting numerous pictures of her little

chosen, even if warily, to use here the classic kinship term to try to better translate and explain what *comadrazgo* involves in Mexico City.

“daughter” online. I later learned she was looking after the daughter of her “*marido*,” whom he had had with a non-trans woman.

In turn, Vianey had one daughter who turned 15 years old during my extended fieldwork. Vianey had taken care of her daughter since birth, when her bio-mom did not want to look after her and gave her to Vianey.⁷⁷ When I met her, she was also looking after a younger boy whom she taught to also call her “mom.” Her live-in “*marido*,” the legendary man who left her initially for her sister and later returned, had an official wife, a non-trans woman who also lived with them. While her *marido*’s wife spent time in jail, Vianey was looking after one of two small children—the other one had gone to live with her own mother. During that time, the child grew closer to Vianey, and she would insist, amusingly, on calling him “son” and treating him as such. When the child’s bio-mom was released from jail, Vianey continued doing so. The living situation was prone to generating rages of jealousy, especially in Vianey, but they had remained together as a family unit. By May 2014, Vianey was taking great care of her grandchild, a newborn boy that her nearly 18-year-old daughter had recently birthed. Because the relationship of her daughter with the father of the child was unstable and involved physical violence, Vianey had gladly taken her daughter and grandchild back in and had even slept on the floor for a few days until they were able to buy a mattress for her daughter and grandson, despite the discomfort that sleeping on the floor generated on the “*infiltraciones*” she had all over her body. Other *trans women* had similar close connections with children, either their own or someone else’s. Lucy, as mentioned earlier, had two bio-children. Her ex-wife, however, had kept

⁷⁷ I use the term bio-mom and bio-children inspired by US sex advice columnist Dan Savage (1999), who amusingly narrates the “biokids” speak that he and his boyfriend encountered through the process of adopting a kid.

them from her since she had “transitioned” into who she was now. This was something that pained Lucy deeply, but at the same time, had allowed her to become closer to her mom since moving back in with her.

Proximity to family members, and the ensuing difficulties stemming from such proximity, were not uncommon. Osa, for example, had a close relationship with her mom, with whom she lived, though she also had a somewhat strained relationship with her brothers, with whom she also lived. Mariana would sometimes be alienated from her brother. Mariana and her mom would, in turn, often have strained relations with Mariana’s sister-in-law because she, her husband, their son, and by the end of my extended fieldwork, their newborn daughter, as well as one of Mariana’s uncles, all lived with Mariana’s grandmother, Dona Cruz, in a small “*vecindad*” unit with only two rooms of approximately 3 by 3 metres, a living arrangement that caused daily difficulties and tensions.

Having other *trans women* as “*comadres*” was not unusual either. Mariana became a “*comadre*” of Vianey when Vianey’s daughter turned 15 years old, and Mariana contributed towards the payment of the birthday costs by purchasing the glasses used during the party. Similarly, Paloma became Vianey’s “*comadre*” when she paid the rental fee for the room in which the party was held. Mariana, in addition, acquired at least two godchildren over time through her involvement in the religious ceremonies of her many non-trans friends’ children. Similarly, she had acquired kin for herself by asking some of her friends “to dress” her Niño Dios (lit. God Child; a ceramic baby figure representing the God Child) in February every year.

An aspect that I have not read about in any of the published studies on transpeople in Mexico are the kin relationships that *trans women*, particularly those involved in the on-

street sex trade, forge with their low-income peers. There are some *trans women* who address others as “*madres*” (mothers) and some who are addressed as “*hijas*” (daughters). A “*madre*” is a *trans woman* who socializes another, usually younger, *trans woman* into the on-street sex trade. An “*hija*” is the *trans woman* who is socialized by a “*madre*” into female-gendered, street-based commercial sex. Valentina, also known as “Rana,” was the mother of Melissa, who was also known as “Fey.” Julieta/Mateo, who was friends with Fey, was the daughter of Giselle. Valentina and Giselle were in their late 20s and they were known as the leaders of the Cacala Spot, one of the two on-street “*puntos*” where most of the low-income *trans women* I met sought a living. Fey and Julieta/Mateo were younger *trans women* who would solicit sexual services in the Cacala Spot. Expectations between mothers and daughters were reciprocal. Mothers would provide a space in the “*punto*” to work, teach them useful skills of the trade informally and on the go, and occasionally protect them from abusive clients, passersby, or police officers harassing them on the street. Daughters would offer payment to work in the “*punto*” and were expected to be loyal and grateful to their mothers. Mothers of *trans women* and leaders of “*puntos*” expected their daughters and others working in the Spot to act as their support base. Rana, for example, would ask the *trans women* working in the Cacala Spot to show up at events where she would speak or to serve as a support base for events organized by the street-vending association, The Warriors, led by Paloma García.

In addition to socializing their “*hijas*” into the street smarts and negotiating skills involved in the trade, “*madres*” often fulfilled mentoring roles outside of the “*puntos*.” Giselle, for example, “*infiltró*” (lit. infiltrated; injected oil fillers) her daughter Julieta/Mateo on the cheeks during my extended fieldwork. While Julieta/Mateo had talked

to me on the phone, initially mortified about having her face botched by the folk procedure, Giselle remained her mother throughout the time I interacted with them. Fey, in turn, had received a money advance from Rana to get silicone breast implants done, also during the course of my extended fieldwork. The money was to be used to pay for the surgery up front, but also for Fey to be able to feed herself and pay rent while she recovered from the procedure and was not able to make it to the Spot for work.

Several scholars have shown the centrality of kin and network relationships for nurturing and community survival among marginalized and socioeconomically precarious populations. For example, Carol Stack (1974) found that, among low-income African Americans in The Flats, a Midwestern US neighbourhood, forging kin relationships they could count on was a crucial strategy to survive. Kath Weston (1991) documented transformations in kinship practices and the centrality of families of choice among gay and lesbian people in the USA's San Francisco Bay Area. Janet Carsten (1995) found that those with whom Malays shared food were part of their kin, and that relatedness takes on different forms in specific times and places. In Mexico City, relatedness relationships were part of the everyday life of *trans women*, particularly low-income sex workers, and daughter–mother kin relationships were indicative of the ways in which precarious people go about finding ways to nurture and fend for themselves in life.

Not everyone had been socialized into the female-gendered on-street sex trade by a mother. Some had been given the sex trade skills and feminizing bodily practices from their “*íntimas*,” peer-to-peer best friend relationships like the one Mariana had with her late “*íntima*,” who even gave Mariana her female name. Similarly, not every low-income *trans woman* working the trade had a mother or daughter on the streets. Of those who did, neither

the loyalty, nor the expected gratitude were granted with blind deference or interactions that were free of roughness.

Likewise, not of all the “*puntos*” were organized under mother–daughter relationships, and not all the workers and managers fit within such a kin model. In the Panotlán Spot, for example, Tostada and Bellota were instead known as “*madrotas*” (madams, female pimps), and the Panotlán Spot’s workers rebelled constantly against any expectation of payment, deference, or loyalty from any of them. At the time of my extended fieldwork, Jazmin was beginning to take on this role in the broader Panotlán sex trade area. Yet, as Mariana one day explained to me, “*soy yo la que paro el culo*” (I’m the one who sticks her butt out), and most workers there refused payments or obligations to other *trans women*, even when that involved resisting intense pressure and fighting with their fists.

In any case, the existence of mothers and madams would appear to be sociohistorical reminiscences of the system of state-regulated brothel prostitution in effect in Mexico City between the late 19th century and until the late 1930s when it came to an end, as I explained in Chapter 2. Even though a “*matrona*” or “*madam*” was initially a woman appointed to look after a brothel and to fulfill nurturing obligations with their workers (Bliss 2004: 166; Lamas 2016b), by the first decade of the 21st century things appeared to be changing. Jazmin and Bellota, for instance, were incarcerated in early 2011, and are still serving sentences in jail, presumably, for the trafficking of people. This would seem to suggest that, unlike managers and third-party labourers in labour sectors under neoliberal capitalism free from the whore stigma, “mothers,” “madams,” or madam-like figures in the (on-street) sex trade might well be increasingly recast as “traffickers.” If future research supports this trend, Mexico would see parallels to what is occurring in

Canada, where “pimps” and “traffickers” are being collapsed into the same category, and where valuable services provided to precarious sex labourers by a wide range of third parties are being dismissed and criminalized (Bruckert 2017).

Regardless of their position as mothers, daughters, or “*íntimas*,” low-income *trans women* refer to each other as “*hermanas*” (sisters). This was a form of address largely used when talking to other *trans women* who also worked the streets as sex workers. I was never referred to as a “*hermana*,” but rather as a “*mana*” (lit. sis), a short form for sister that is often employed by female-gendered low-income populations, but ridiculed in TV shows due to its gendered working-class usage. Sisters were those *trans women* who were also involved in the trade, and non-trans women were excluded from those kin relations. On one occasion when Vianey called me “*hermana*” by mistake, she frowned and immediately corrected herself. Better-off *trans women*, especially those not involved in the sex trade, often used the term “*amiga*” (lit. friend) for their female peers, and I was often referred to in that way.

Like many sisters, low-income *trans women* constantly displayed their wit and verbal skills by putting others down with a practice they knew as “*bufar*” (lit. bull bellowing; taunting, mocking). *Bufar* consisted of put-downs about someone’s physical appearance, behaviours, qualities, or worth. These were a form of socializing that shaped their everyday interactions. One midnight, for example, Giselle was giving me a “*recorrido*” (field trip) through the Cacala Spot. Fey was on the lookout for clients, and as she passed by us she said, “*huele mal aquí*” (lit. it stinks here), suggesting that Giselle and I reeked of urine and excrement and had not had the diligence or means of showering on that day. Another form of *bufar* had to do with the presumed rural, and thus backwards,

background of low-income *trans women* working the streets. They would not miss the chance to taunt each other by saying, “*de allá de por dónde vienes tú*” (from where you come) or “*no sé tú de dónde vengas*” (I don’t know where you come from). They sought to stress that they likely came from dull, “out-of-the-way places”—to borrow a term from Anna Tsing (1993)—and were associated with indigeneity and marginality since they were far from urban places.

In this, they reflected the broader socioeconomic class dynamics of Mexico and Mexico City that cast the centre and urban places of Mexico, and specifically Mexico City, as progressive and developed, in contrast to seemingly conservative, indigenous, impoverished, or less developed northern and rural sites of the country (Bartolomé 1997; Domínguez-Ruvalcaba 2010; Lomnitz-Adler 2001; Sariego Rodríguez 1999; Wright 2001). Don Kulick (1998b: 259) has argued that transgender practices and identities arise in specific social contexts and assume specific forms “that reflect the structures that structure them.” In other words, we can probably extend such an argument beyond the limits of sex–gender practices to speak about the subtle and not-so-subtle ways in which social class dynamics and histories are manifested constantly in everyday life in Mexico City.

Often, when low-income *trans women* would “*bufar*” each other, they would say that the person doing the mocking or taunting “*estaba de perra*” (was being a bitch). It was an expression used to fend off criticism and taunting. Raúl Arriaga Ortiz (2011) conceives of the term “*perrear*” (lit. bitching), as a verb rather than as a noun, as a genre of dialogue and interaction between “trans” and “gays,” or among “trans.” Antonio Marquet (2010), in turn, thinks of “*perrear*” within the gay milieu of female drag impersonators, which draws on acerbic verbal humour meant to put someone down. According to Marquet, “*perrear*” is

a strategy of those on the margin to marginalize others. The low-income *trans women* I met in Mexico City used the noun “*perra*” and the verb “*bufar*” instead. *Bufar* among contemporary low-income *trans women* in Mexico City appears to be strikingly similar to the “campy” kind of humour that “fairies,” the gay female drag impersonators that Esther Newton (1979 [1972]) carried out research with in Kansas City and Chicago during the 1960s, displayed.

On several occasions, I heard trans activists frown upon *bufar*, as this acid taunting and often sexualized kind of humour was considered aggressive and inappropriate. However, for as long as I have interacted with low-income *trans women*, they continue to *bufando* each other relentlessly. I have at times been on the receiving end of their *bufidos*. A marker of their acceptance of my presence throughout the extended fieldwork came one day, in the fall of 2010, when I regrettably made a comment about the physical attributes of a male police officer standing by the door of one of the activist event venues we had gone to in a northern borough of the city. Mariana (I was eventually seen by others as “her cousin”) did not miss the opportunity to loudly remark to everyone that I was learning quickly how to *bufar* since I was now criticizing others. Don Kulick (1998c) explains how “*travestis*” in Brazil were overly mean and violent towards each other. Annick Prieur (1998b) portrays some tensions among “*jotas*” and “*vestidas*” in central Mexico, but also highlights how they help each other craft their femininity. I found that *bufar* consisted of constant put-downs exchanged among low-income *trans women* in Mexico City. *Trans women’s bufidos* featured those who were their sisters, mothers, daughters, and intimate friends in the female-gendered sex trade; they were the subjects of their daily entertainment and scorn.

Beliefs and Practices

Many *trans women* had tattooed their bodies, another form of body beautification they would engage in. During the time of my main fieldwork, Mariana had a tattoo done in a street market that spread across one of her shoulders and upper arms. Some, like Paola and Ashley, had hearts and names tattooed on their breasts. Still other *trans women* like Giselle and Jazmín chose, as a sign of their religiosity, to tattoo their full backs, or part of their backs, with the image of the “*Santa Muerte*” (lit. Saint Death) instead.⁷⁸

Santa Muerte is a full-body skeleton figure dressed in a monk’s habit or a dress, with a wide hood covering her head. This figure is an object of religious worship that may take the form of a sculpture, a painting or a drawing, a stamped print, an embroidered cloth, or even a skin tattoo. The long robe she wears makes the Santa Muerte figure appear angelic, closely resembling the iconography of the Virgin of Guadalupe, except that Santa Muerte shows her fleshless bones. Most times, the Santa Muerte figure is endowed with paraphernalia, such as a tiara over her head or a scythe in one of her hands. Some representations of Santa Muerte present her with large, pointy wings growing out of her back. These were the kind of representations that *trans women* like Jazmín and Giselle had inked in black on their backs.

There has been growing debate about the historical origin and rapid diffusion of the worship of Santa Muerte (Malvido 2005; Perdigón Castañeda 2008), but scholars agree this

⁷⁸ Pilar Castells Ballarín (2008) and Blanca Estela Bravo Lara (2013) translate the worship of the Santa Muerte in the abstract as the “cult of the Holy Death” or the “Holy Death cult.” Employing the term “holy” draws attention to the sacred nature of this religious practice to its devotees, but fails to account for the coexisting meaning of “saint.” In their translation, the parallel that the Santa Muerte worship evokes with (other) Catholic Saints (*santoral católico*) is thus no longer immediately perceived. This is why I have chosen to translate it as “Saint Death” instead. In any case, this is a female saint.

became more prominent towards the end of the 20th century (Bravo Lara 2013; Castells Ballarin 2008).⁷⁹ José Gil Olmos (2010) holds that, by 2009, there were an estimated 1,500 public altars to Santa Muerte in Mexico City and about 10 million worshipers spread out throughout Mexico. This worship has received intense media scrutiny where it is often associated with organized crime, and its devotees are cast as petty or major criminals, drug dealers, and prostitutes (see Baena Crespo and Morales Nava 2014; Camacho Servín 2007; Román 2008). Blanco Estela Bravo Lara (2013) notes that in Mexico's undercurrent of collective imagery, Santa Muerte is seen for all deeds and purposes as the patron saint of criminals. Gil Olmos (2010) points out that, in the detentions of people famously presumed to be kidnappers or leaders of drug cartels in different parts of Mexico, the press releases focused on the presence of altars to Santa Muerte, blood from animal sacrifices, and objects associated with Santería (Way of the Saints) and Yoruba rites.⁸⁰ This author further states that in Nuevo Laredo, Tamaulipas, and Tijuana, Baja California—states in the north of Mexico—the military had been instructed to destroy any shrines or objects associated with Santa Muerte worship as part of the state-implemented strategy against organized crime. But it was often less known that, in many of these high-profile detentions, altars to the Virgin of Guadalupe, Saint Judas Tadeo, and other Catholic-sanctioned saint figures stood

⁷⁹ Both José Gil Olmos (2010: 61) and Blanca Estela Bravo Lara (2013: 13) mention, in passing, that Oscar Lewis (1961) had already documented, in his famous book *Children of Sánchez*, worship of the Santa Muerte among impoverished inhabitants in Mexico City during the 1950s and 1960s. If that is true, this worship could then be seen as part of the folk Catholic practices that, according to Oscar Lewis, were one of the prototypical cultural and behavioural traits of the “culture of poverty,” the concept that made him famous and that also included the presence of an authoritarian, violent, “macho” figure and a self-sacrificing, submissive, yet resourceful and hardworking wife.

⁸⁰ Religious practices incorporating African (presumably of Yoruba origin) and Catholic elements are known differently in different parts of Latin America and the Caribbean. In Cuba, for example, they are commonly referred to as Santería, in Haiti as Voodoo or Vodou, and in Brazil as Caboclo or Candomblé (see Apter 2002; Brown 1991; Landes 1994 [1947]; Wirtz 2004). In Mexico, due to close proximity with Cuba, these practices are usually known as Santería (see also Aguirre Beltrán 1958).

alongside Santa Muerte shrines. Linkages of this worship with violence and criminality were additionally fueled when, in 2011, one of the Santa Muerte leaders was incarcerated and accused of money laundering, extortions, and kidnappings (see Cruz and Gómez 2011; Redacción 2011, 2012; Román 2008).

For the participants in my study, the Santa Muerte and other religious practices associated mainly with criminals and impoverished people in the media and in government campaigns against organized crime often had meanings absent in common representations. One day, for example, in the early fall of 2010, Jazmín reminisced about the time when she had migrated to Mexico City from the eastern state of Veracruz. Peppering her account with occasional invocations of the Santa Muerte, Jazmín explained that upon arrival in the city, she had stayed in a hotel near a subway station in the broader Panotlán area. She related how she had initially been afraid of everything and that it had taken her an entire year to brave the new place and finally make her way towards different areas of the city. During the time I knew her, Jazmín would often invoke the Santa Muerte in her daily whereabouts, sometimes as a form of protection and comfort, sometimes to make requests for everyday life, and sometimes to explain how she had overcome difficulties.

Jazmín and other *trans women* were not alone in the positive, protective meanings they bestowed on the Santa Muerte. In an ethnographic study about Santa Muerte devotees in Guadalajara, Jalisco, Blanca Estela Bravo Lara (2013) found that even though worshippers are oftentimes berated by Catholic church officials and in the media, the Santa Muerte plays a crucial role in the daily lives of its supporters; she is believed to be more effective in her concessions than other saints. Similarly, in a study about Santa Muerte

devotees in Central America, Pilar Castells Ballarin (2008) found that worshippers invoked the saint in hopes to be shielded against violent death.

The presence of public altars to Santa Muerte was growing in low-income neighbourhoods throughout the city during my fieldwork. The downtown area of Mexico City was one of them. So was the Chililiapa neighbourhood, where The Warriors' headquarters was located and where many of the low-income *trans women* I met would frequently gather. The public manifestations of this growing worship, however, did not replace the embodied and more personal and private ones. Jazmín's and Giselle's large Santa Muerte body tattoos, in essence, worked as walking shrines on display, as they would not hide them from view. Giselle was known for attending and practising elaborate rituals in honour of La Santa Muerte inside sanctuaries and homes. These included the display of large fruit offerings on altars that combined the seven colours, one for each force or Orisha, commonly associated with Santería. Jazmín, specifically, had a wall-long altar in honour of, as she would affectionately and respectfully call her, "*Mi Santísima*" ("My Saint," using a superlative and feminine gender marker) in the apartment where she lived. Diligently, Jazmín would set out to bathe and rock her Santísima every Tuesday. The ritual consisted in cleaning and changing the clothes of her doll-like Santa Muerte figure. In addition to her Santa Muerte, her altar had other objects of significance to Jazmín, including votive candles, coins, bills, stamps, and her Federal Electoral Institute (IFE) voting identification card (ID). The altar was set on a long rectangular bureau covered with a white-pink lace tablecloth. It was located in the living room area of the apartment, where anyone visiting her would see it. When I first visited Jazmín's place—big as she was on sizable material displays—the altar competed in size only with a stereo system that, though slightly smaller

than the Santa altar, was still fairly large. Her stereo system was one of the main reasons Jazmín had become infamous in her building. She would crank the volume to the maximum, making the speakers look as if they were palpitating when the music was on, and the neighbours had grown irritated and had been seeking for some time, without success at the time I met her, to have her evicted from the apartment. Neither the altar, nor the speakers lost their spatial significance when later, midway through my field research, she placed her canopied, double-sized bed, wrapped with translucent white sheets, in the living room. The Santa Muerte altar was still located in the same central spot in the living room and still open for anyone's view.

The types of petitions that one could make to the Saint were varied. But saints, including the Catholic-sanctioned ones, are known among their devotees to have specialties. Saint Martin Caballero, for example, is better known for his powers to bring about good business, and thus is taken up as patron saint by many merchants. Saint Antonio is recognized for his powers in love matters, and as such is usually sought after by young women who light a candle and turn him upside down to attract love or a loved one. La Santa Muerte was sought after for different types of pleas. Protection from harm and help finding love were among them. Yet, the Santa Muerte enjoyed a peculiar nature that brought her closer to the gods and goddesses of the Greek mythologies than to the well-behaved or redeemed saints of the Catholic hagiography. Where Zeus would not have hesitated to throw his enraged lightning and thunder, and Aphrodite would not have shied away from her sensuous longings, Mary was venerated for her immaculate virginal purity and the Virgin of Guadalupe for her selfless protection and endless benevolence towards her devotee children. La Santa Muerte was known to be more into conceding earthly

favours. Among some of the *trans women* I met, I heard her being invoked in petitions involving resentment and vengeance, or the desire to bring a person into meekness. One of them, for example, told me of a time in the past when La Santa had helped her successfully “*picar*” (“stab”) one of her perceived enemies. When physical fights broke out in the “*puntos*,” La Santa would also be invoked to help the aggrieved person take revenge. In other words, some of the petitions to La Santa that I heard being mobilized were worldly and, coinciding with Bravo Lara’s studies (2013: 23), they were sought-after enjoyments for this life, not for the afterlife.

Beliefs and practices from different origins were also found among some of the other *trans women* I worked with. Mariana was a devout Catholic, fond of participating in the annual religious festivities around the *Día de la Candelaria* (Candlemas Day) when, as briefly noted earlier, she would ask one of her friends to dress her *Niño Dios* (God Child). Celebrated on February 2, the festivity consists of asking a close friend or family member to dress their *Niño Dios*; this means providing the clothes with which the *Niño Dios* will be presented at mass for blessing with holy water. The *Niño Dios* is usually a ceramic chubby baby figure with white skin and rosy cheeks and arms and legs resembling the unstoppable kicking and movement of babies (see also Amador Tello 2016). Mariana’s *Niño Dios* was the size of a small newborn, but the figure can be much smaller. During the time of my extended fieldwork, hers had been dressed by one of her non-trans female friends in a white baby robe, and it stood placed on a dresser she had, in the two different “*vecindad*” units where she lived, in the space that worked as her living room.

In another place where Mariana lived towards the end of my extended fieldwork, she would also have palms hanging from one of her walls near her entry door. A votive

candle stood lit on the floor below the palm, and her little dog seemed to understand that, in spite of all of his ongoing barking, he could not put the candle out. In the place where she lived when I first met her, Mariana also had a table in the dressing area, right by the entrance to her bedroom. On it stood several small water vases, miniature colour figurines, lit candles, and coins. When I asked her what that was, she simply said that it was her Santeria. In May 2014, her Niño Dios was still part of her living room paraphernalia, standing still on the dresser, but this time she had had him dressed in a yellow sewn gown.

Still other *trans women*, like Vianey, Melissa, and Francis, were fervent devotees of Saint Judas Tadeo instead. They had shrines in his honour in the places where they lived, consisting of the figure of “*San Juditas*” (“Saint Judas,” using the diminutive) as they would often refer to him; the figure was between 20 and 30 centimetres long and votive candles were lit by his feet. Melissa’s stood on a small shelf placed on the top of one of the walls in her one-room unit. Vianey’s was in a space of her apartment that had a couch in it and served as a TV and entertainment area. Francis had her “*San Juditas*” in her bedroom. In early 2011, Francis explained to me that she would pray a “*Padre Nuestro*” (Lord’s Prayer) and “*la oración de la Magnífica*” (the Magnificat prayer) before going out to work and that she would carry San Judas Tadeo stamps in her purse and wallet for protection.

In the Roman Catholic Saints calendar, Saint Judas Tadeo, together with Saint Simon, are patrons celebrated on October 28. This yearly celebration follows suit with other patronage festivities in which the saint venerated at each church is the patron for whom a party is thrown every year. However, between 2005 and 2010 things had changed, and when I returned to Mexico City to carry out doctoral fieldwork, Saint Judas Tadeo had gained enormous significance among many of the people I met. This meant, for instance,

that Saint Judas was now being celebrated on the 28th day of every month. I learned of many people, including *trans women* living in the peripheries of Mexico City, who would make a monthly pilgrimage to the Saint Hipólito Church, a church located in the central area of the city, instead of only once per year. A *trans woman* in her 30s, whom I met for a very short time before she passed away and who went by the nickname Flaca (lit. Skinny), was known to join in these monthly festivities. Similarly, I was told that in the areas where the patronage to the Santa Muerte was all the more prominent, in the eastern peripheries of Mexico City for example, similar festivities were celebrated in her honour on the 29th of every month. In the areas of Mexico City where many of the *trans women* I met lived and worked, one could also find San Judas Tadeo mobile altars consisting of a youth carrying half-metre to metre-long sculpted images of Saint Judas Tadeo in his or her arms, and walking through the streets asking the passersby for monetary offerings to the saint.

Just like not everybody in Mexico practises Roman Catholicism, not all *trans women* were devotees of La Santa Muerte or Saint Judas Tadeo, or engaged in rituals inspired by or associated with Santería. According to the 2010 National Census of Population and Housing, in Mexico there are roughly 93 million Catholics, out of a total of 112 million Mexicans. Approximately another 14 million are devotees of different Protestant Christian denominations, with a small fraction recognizing Judaism, Islam, and other Eastern doctrines. In the previous National Census, carried out a decade earlier in 2000, about 88% of the population were Catholic, and the percentage had dropped down to about 83% by 2010 (Instituto Nacional de Geografía y Estadística 2011b). Catholicism is not, and has never been, a monolithic, changeless religion in Mexico. The practices around La Santa Muerte and Saint Judas Tadeo, practised by some Catholics, but definitely not by all of

them, demonstrate the extent to which religious variety is the norm in contemporary Mexico.

Still, some *trans women* practised rituals closer to the institutionalized Catholic doctrines. Samantha, for example, a young *trans woman*, took me to a damp Catholic church one hot day when we were walking through the streets of one of the neighbourhoods where I spent considerable time. Unlike in many places, in Mexico City Catholic churches do not have set opening schedules. Catholic churches are open every day of the week and remain open throughout the day, even when there are not scheduled masses or sacrament services. Samantha was not known to be a devotee of a particular saint. She told me she had been a male street child for a number of years. Having lived on the streets in the northern part of Mexico City with a group of other kids, she became fond of visiting churches because they offered a place of refuge. She could get inside and find not only some respite from the harsh outside, but also literally lay down on the pews of the church to sleep for a bit. She recounted this calmly and softly, while the two of us sat next to each other on one of the benches and observed the church's high ceilings, the images in the main altar, and the few other people who were quietly praying. Over the course of my interactions with Samantha, I later learned that despite many *trans women's* gasping surprise, she was also fond of reading the Bible, a practice that while not in conflict with Catholic orthodoxy, is most commonly associated with the practitioners of Protestant Christian denominations that in Mexico are simply known as *cristianos* (Christians).⁸¹

⁸¹ While in Catholicism one's relationship with God is mediated through the priests, religious cardinals, bishops, and the Pope, in other Christian denominations this relationship is more direct and unmediated. Consequently, the promotion of reading the Bible is not actively taught in Catholic churches or schools in Mexico City, making it rare to find people who profess Catholicism and also read the Bible.

The diversity among *trans women* did not end there. Natalia Lewis, for example, was a nonbeliever, a staunch atheist who was critical of influence-peddling and widespread cases of pederasty among the Catholic hierarchy. She refused to endorse the practices or beliefs of the Catholic church. She and her wife Esther had gotten into “reiki” instead, and they used hand warming techniques, which Esther had studied in the evenings after work, to heal and seek physical and spiritual comfort. Natalia was part of the 5 million people who, according to the 2010 National Census, said they did not practise any religion, joining the ranks of the disaffected Catholics or merely cultural Catholics who have sought other forms of religion-sanctioned and non-religion-sanctioned practices to attain spirituality (Instituto Nacional de Geografía y Estadística 2011b).

On the whole, the diverse religious practices and beliefs of *trans women*, particularly the low-income ones, were socioculturally and politically associated with impoverished people and low class in Mexico. A key “controlling image” (Collins 2009 [2000]) affecting low-income female-gendered transpeople was that of criminality, even those who were not worshippers of Santa Muerte, Santería, or other folk Catholic beliefs, as a sheer result of the neighbourhoods where many of them lived, worked, and gathered.

Housing and Neighbourhoods

Some of the low-income *trans women* I met worked in the Panotlán Spot, and some in the Cacala Spot. Many of those who worked at Panotlán also lived in or nearby the greater Panotlán sex trade area in the Zacualtipán neighbourhood, but many of those who worked in the Cacala Spot lived in the Cosapa neighbourhood. In the Panotlán

neighbourhoods, many *trans women* would live in rental units inside “*vecindades*” (lit. vicinities), impoverished housing complexes in which each unit had independent washrooms and cooking facilities, however small the space. In the Cosapa neighbourhood, many *trans women* would live in old houses which had been informally and clumsily divided into different small rooms. Each room would work as a rental unit and a washroom would be shared among all the inhabitants of the chopped-up house. *Trans women* in Cosapa would rent rooms individually, but many of them would end up living in the neighbourhoods and even on the same street and in the same partitioned house where those they worked with at the Spot also lived. This was the case for Giselle, Fey, Libia, Michelle, Yadira, Rana, Julieta/Mateo and others, who lived nearby in the Cosapa neighbourhood. Francis, Mariana, Jazmín, Alondra, and Ashley, among others, lived in the broader Panotlán area, including the Zacualtipán neighbourhood.

Both the Cosapa neighbourhood and the greater Panotlán area are located in a central borough of Mexico City with a concentration of the highest numbers of the itinerant population, street vending, drug distribution, and prostitution. The socioeconomic development indexes of the Zacualtipán and Cosapa neighbourhoods show that their housing quality and space is considered to be “low,” with access to health and social security considered “very low,” and the “*rezago educativo*” (lit. educational lag) “high.”⁸²

Others, however, lived in other areas of the city. Osa lived in the eastern outskirts of the city, Samantha in the western outskirts; Vianey lived closer to the Tepeoco district,

⁸² Socioeconomic development indexes for neighbourhoods are developed by the *Consejo de Evaluación del Desarrollo Social del Distrito Federal* [Council for the Evaluation of Social Development in the Federal District]. See: <http://www.evalua.cdmx.gob.mx/>

where The Warriors managed one of the street-vending streets, and Paloma García lived in the Chililiapa neighbourhood, where many more of the street-vending streets under the control of The Warriors were also located.

Both the Chililiapa neighbourhood and Tepeoco district were similarly located in a central borough with a concentration of numerous socioeconomic difficulties. The Chililiapa neighbourhood also had “very high” educational lags, “very low” health access and social security, and “low” housing quality and space. With the exception of the housing quality and space set as “medium,” the Tepeoco district fared similarly in socioeconomic indicators.

However near or far low-income *trans women* lived from each other, they tended to congregate in the same areas of the city, and they knew of each other. Nevertheless, this did not mean that they necessarily visited with each other or were deeply intimate with each other. Several times, it was pointed out to me that I probably knew more about each of them than they knew about each other, despite the fact that they tended to cluster either for work, entertainment, or living in specific areas in Mexico City.

This was certainly not the case among the trans activists I met during my fieldwork. Unlike their low-income counterparts, trans activists lived independently and separately in different areas of the city. For example, Lucy Bartolomé and Natalia Lewis lived in two distinct southern parts of Mexico City; Graciela Jiménez lived in the eastern part; and Jeannie Belgrano, Ángela Navarrete, and Kim Fernández lived in different central parts of the city. They, too, knew of each other, but through different means. Their acquaintance with each other stemmed largely from their interactions at trans and sexual diversity activist events that took place in different parts of the city and country.

In sum, we know that many transpeople in the country are sexual labourers, yet we know very little about their “miniature” on-the ground naming practices, their on-street kin relationships, or their religious beliefs. I have highlighted some of the omissions present in the published studies on transpeople in Mexico. More broadly, the published literature suggests but generally fails to elaborate on the broader social class dynamics and histories that their interactions and practices both evoke and reflect (for an exception see Prieur 1998b). Nevertheless, this more “gigantic” dimension impinging on the lives of *trans women* and others bears significance because many of the imaginings about female-gendered transpeople (to which I return in Chapter 5) and their socioeconomic circumstances (which I address in Chapter 4) are structured within those frames.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I have looked at the sociocultural milieus and lives of *trans women* I met in Mexico City. I have looked at their naming, last naming, and nicknaming practices, as well as the gender pronouns they use to refer to themselves and others. I have also examined some of the most significant dimensions of *trans women*’s embodiments and beautifying practices. I have sought to show that the embodiment and embodied practices of *trans women* were varied and went beyond narrow accounts of genital transformations. Similarly, by looking at the religious practices and beliefs of *trans women*, I have sought to demonstrate that variety persisted among them and that, as Roger Lancaster (1998) rightly argues, scholars cannot homogenize the differences, even if persistent structural conditions shape their lives similarly, something that I explore further in the next chapter. Associations between folk Catholic practices and non-sanctioned Catholic beliefs, such as the Santa

Muerte worship, opened a way for me to explore the spaces in which *trans women* live and work, as well as the classed associations of criminality and backwardness that are implied in these discussions, and that in turn shape some of the structural vulnerabilities that all low-income female-gendered transpeople face in Mexico City.

In spite of the structural challenges, the ways in which *trans women* formed relationships with their loved ones and acquaintances show that they did not live in isolation, despite the belief that they are nothing but an ostracized community that is marginalized from the rest of Mexico's society. Their lives are affected by long-standing dynamics and histories of social class in the country, but their daily wit and verbal humour show resilience in the face of difficult socioeconomic circumstances. In the next chapter, I explore the socioeconomic strategies of *trans women*, paying particular attention to the informal, on-street nature of their employment, and their intermittent associations with The Warriors. I discuss their relationships to this street-vending association to highlight the ways in which many *trans women* stand on the streets alongside a number of other precarious informal labourers in Mexico City.

4. On-Street Informal Livelihoods and Contexts

Introduction

In this chapter, I delve into the ways in which *trans women* went about living and making a life for themselves in Mexico City during the period of my fieldwork. I look at the kinds of socioeconomic strategies and activities they engaged in and the kinds of circumstances that formed part of their daily living. In particular, I pay attention to the on-street, informal daily lives of the *trans women* I came to know.

Like in Chapter 3, my ethnographic findings support the claim that diversity and complexity shape *trans women*'s lives in Mexico in general, and in Mexico City in particular. Comparing my findings with other published studies suggests that the parallels in their structurally vulnerable lives and inequalities are remarkable (see Castillo et al. 2010; Colchero et al. 2015; Córdova Plaza 2007; Howe et al. 2008; Infante et al. 2009; Prieur 1998b; Ronquillo 1994). Yet, it is worth noting that the literature on transpeople in Mexico shows an almost unanimous focus on issues around sex work and the coinciding failure to document whether—and if so, how—trans sex workers' livelihoods are enmeshed in a broader range of livelihood strategies employed by those seeking to make a living in Mexico's widespread informal economy. This is a striking omission because, according to conservative estimates, the informal economy makes up at least a third of Mexico's gross domestic product and over half of Mexico's workforce are employed in the informal sector (Schneider et al. 2010).

I examine here the ways in which low-income *trans women* were informal vendors of sexual services and other goods in the streets of Mexico City.⁸³ My description of their on-street informal livelihoods seeks to serve as an entry point to a broader discussion about the existing representations of transpeople in Mexico, and to help refine prevailing narratives about the critical issues affecting transpeople in Mexico.

Informal Labour and Street Vending

The informal economy is the economic sector that does not translate into direct tax revenues for and administered by the state, which in theory are redistributed through social welfare programs benefiting the population in general.⁸⁴ I conceive of informal labourers as those who resort to self-employment, semi-employment, or underemployment as a strategy to generate revenue when formal employment options are either inaccessible, unavailable, scarce, or unattractive to the workers as viable means of livelihood. Thus, they generally do not count on fixed, relatively stable working agreements or formal employee benefits, such

⁸³ In this chapter, I use “services” to refer to those less tangible and permanent commodities that are exchanged for money on the streets of Mexico City, and I use “goods” for those artefacts that have more permanence and materiality. Roughly, in economics, the distinction between services and goods is one that sees the possibility of the latter to be consumed or used more than one time: while education or a haircut are often seen as services, a fruit can be seen as a good. However, someone might also argue that a fruit, with all the labour involved in producing it and selling it, could also be seen as a service. On the whole, I think of the boundaries between them as tenuous, and possibly in some cases either non-existent or not crucial for the purposes of this dissertation. I thus tend to refer jointly to the “goods and services” circulated in the informal economy of Mexico.

⁸⁴ It is out of the scope of this chapter to elucidate the analytical, economic, and sociopolitical distinctions, if any, between formal and informal economies within neoliberal capitalism (see Denning 2010; Maloney 2004; Wilkinson and Webster 1982). However, several ethnographic studies have highlighted the gendered dimensions of the informal sector, and the often messy boundaries between formal and informal, and productive and reproductive, gendered labour (see Arizpe 1977; Babb 1984, 1985; Cross 1998; Fernández-Kelly 1983; White 1990). In speaking about informal labour, my intention is not to reify a clear-cut boundary, but rather to underscore the precarious nature of on-street informal sexual labour in Mexico City.

as state-subsidized healthcare benefits, paid sick days and holidays, pension plans, or Christmas bonuses.

According to a 2010 World Bank Study, between 1999 and 2007, 30 percent of Mexico's gross domestic product (GDP) came from the "shadow" economy (Schneider et al. 2010).⁸⁵ According to the Instituto Nacional de Geografía y Estadística (2015a), an institution that produces Mexico's official figures, in 2007 the informal economy made up 25 percent of the GDP, or the value of what was produced in the country in that year. What the INEGI figure tells us is that, out of the total nation-wide GDP, a quarter of its value, or about 25 cents of each peso, was produced in the informal economy.

In 2010, the year in which I began my extended fieldwork, the figure had slightly risen to about 26 percent of the GDP (Instituto Nacional de Geografía y Estadística 2015a). The national statistics showed that, during the first trimester of 2010, 59.51 percent of the total working population were informal labourers, out of which men accounted for 62.02 percent, while women accounted for 37.98 percent (Instituto Nacional de Geografía y Estadística 2017).⁸⁶ In Mexico City, only taking into account the Federal District, 49.45

⁸⁵ Friedrich Schneider et al. (2010: 3) acknowledge that different terms, such as "shadow," "underground," "informal," "second," "cash," or "parallel" economy, have been employed to account for "all currently unregistered economic activities that contribute to the officially calculated (or observed) Gross National Product" (4–5). Schneider and co-authors (2010: 5), however, narrow down their definition to include only estimates of "market-based legal production of goods and services that are deliberately concealed from public authorities." Since they leave out criminalized activities such as "burglary, robbery, and drug dealing" (5) their estimates about the size of the informal economy in Mexico are conservative.

⁸⁶ In 2010, the total nation-wide working population was 45,524,339. There were 27,092,146 informal workers. To help appreciate these numbers in a broader perspective, 27 million people represent about 75 percent of the entire population of Canada. Additionally, as explained in Chapter 1, official statistics in Mexico are gender binary.

percent were informal labourers in 2010. Men made up 43.78 percent and women made up 56.21 percent of those informal workers.⁸⁷

By the first trimester of 2017, the numbers were still staggering. According to a representative sample in the National Survey of Occupation and Employment (ENOE), 57.17 percent of the total working population in Mexico were informal workers.⁸⁸ Men accounted for 61.58 percent, while women accounted for 38.42 percent (Instituto Nacional de Geografía y Estadística 2017). In Mexico City, informal workers accounted for 48.38 percent of the total working population, with men and women making up 57.03 percent and 42.97 percent, respectively.⁸⁹ While the informal sector in Mexico City is substantial, it is important to point out that the figure still stands at a lower percentage than at the national level, and at a considerably lower magnitude than in Oaxaca, Chiapas, and Guerrero, where the informal economy makes up 81.92 percent, 79.81 percent, and 77.63 percent of the total working population, respectively (Instituto Nacional de Geografía y Estadística 2017).⁹⁰

Some economists have argued that the informal sector can be a vibrant economic growth alternative in developing countries (see, for example, De Soto 1989 [1987]). However, many scholars consider that the informal economy in Mexico is often a last resort for workers without better alternatives (Organización para la Cooperación y el Desarrollo

⁸⁷ There were 3,960,254 working people in the Federal District, of which 1,958,202 were informal labourers in 2010.

⁸⁸ The results of this national survey are both designed and widely thought to be representative because, unlike wealthy families who do not open their doors to pollsters, those in the lower socioeconomic strata most often do.

⁸⁹ In 2017, there were 2,005,094 informal workers in Mexico City. The total working population in that year was 4,144,054.

⁹⁰ There is an overall pattern where the southern and southeastern states fare much worse than the northern states, which as a whole have the lowest informal economy figures. Chihuahua, for example, stands at 35.72 percent, and Nuevo León at 35.72 percent (Instituto Nacional de Geografía y Estadística 2017).

Económicos 2012; Ros 2013). Ethnographic studies of Mexico City generally support this view (Arizpe 1977; Lewis 1961, 1975 [1959]; Lomnitz 1977 [1975]). Indeed, the socio-economic welfare of workers continues to fare better within the formal economy; the high levels of informal labour in Mexico have left workers and their families in precarious conditions (Organización para la Cooperación y el Desarrollo Económicos 2012; Ros 2013).

The low-income *trans women* I conducted research with who lived in the Panotlán, Zacualtipán, and Cosapa neighbourhoods, and who for the most part worked as vendors of sexual services and other goods at the Panotlán and Cacala Spots and in the Chililiapa district, were part of this sizeable number of precarious informal workers. The literature on transpeople in Mexico has consistently and unanimously documented transpeople's participation in the sex trade (see Castillo 2006; Castillo et al. 2010; Colchero et al. 2015; Córdova Plaza 2006, 2007; González Pérez 2003; Higgins and Coen 2002; Howe et al. 2008; Infante et al. 2009; Lewis 2012; Liguori and Aggleton 1998; Liguori and Ortega 1990 [1989]; Prieur 1998b; Ronquillo 1994). If we read these works between the lines, we gather that, regardless of the indoor and outdoor nature of their work, the portrayed trans* sexual labourers were all informal labourers. Yet, with the exception of a passing note by Ana Luisa Liguori and Peter Aggleton who state that “male sex work falls outside of the formal economy” (1998: 166, my translation), we do not find an explicit conceptualization of sex work among transpeople as informal labour.⁹¹ In light of the staggering numbers of informal workers across the country, this appears to be a notable omission.

⁹¹ Some of the early published studies on the subject speak of “male” sex workers because (among other reasons) the conceptual category “trans” came clearly to the fore in Mexico in 2008 when the trans law was approved in Mexico City, as I explained in Chapter 2. When one reads these materials, one often learns that

Moreover, only Rosío Córdova Plaza (2006) explicitly points out that in Xalapa, Veracruz, street-based sex work is the only industry with a concentration of female-fashioned trans sex workers, because other types of “male” (male-fashioned) sex workers are also found working as masseurs in massage parlours and as strippers in nightclubs (Córdova Plaza 2005). In other words, Córdova Plaza would appear to suggest that the subjects she studied were all equally informal workers, but that those who were female-fashioned or female-gendered workers tended to be concentrated in street-based labour. In her study, workers gathered specifically on a highway intersection located on the outskirts of the city of Xalapa. My research did not set out to compare indoor and outdoor sexual labour niches tapped by trans sex workers. All the *trans women* I met made the streets of Mexico City their main site of vending goods and soliciting sexual services. The streets figure as key sites for sexual commerce in Mexico City in both primary and secondary documentation on the subject, as I have explained in Chapter 2. Nevertheless, just like informal labour has a conspicuous absence in the literature, the street vending dimension is highly overlooked despite on-street sexual labour and other types of vending being highly featured in these studies.

Street vending in Mexico City is regulated by the state in certain parts of the city and tolerated in others (Federal District Assembly of Representatives 1993). Since the *Markets Act* was first issued in 1951, several on-street trade bylaws have been introduced in

some of them were “*vestidas*” or “*travestis*,” both presumed to be and self-identified as men at the time, who worked as female-fashioned subjects. I do not want to project a contemporary trans* identity onto the past, especially because it is not always possible to tell whether the portrayed subjects’ female fashioning was related to their sexual labour or a more permanent feature of their daily life. Yet, the overlapping sex–gender terminologies and conceptualizations I found among low-income female-gendered transpeople during my research has led me to consider these scholarly materials with a broad, non-normative sex–gender or trans* lens. See the Introduction and Chapter 2.

Mexico City. On the whole, they have required “*comerciantes ambulantes*” (street vendors) to enroll in street-vending registries handled by government officials and have expressly prohibited street vending outside of the authorized areas or times. Since 1975, street vendors, such as shoe cleaners, mariachis, musicians and singers, street artists, plumbers, tinsmiths, construction workers, painters, car cleaners, lottery ticket sellers, and second-hand book and outdated magazine sellers, are formally recognized as “*trabajadores no asalariados*” (non-waged workers) and are given a license to perform their work (Federal District Legislative Assembly 1975).⁹²

The zoning and regulation of “*comercio en la vía pública*” (commerce in public thoroughfares) has become tighter since the turn of the 21st century, when the local government began undertaking several urban renovation projects in several parts of the city (Slim 2011; Torrijos 2011). The “regularization” and “reordering” of street vending has both contributed to the growth of street-vending associations seeking to negotiate with government officials for a place to work (Cross 1998), and workers displaced from the places that provide them with their livelihoods in an attempt to “clean up” historic and touristic streets of the city (Crossa 2009, 2016; Meneses-Reyes 2013; Meneses-Reyes and Caballero-Juárez 2014).

In spite of this, many workers continue labouring on the streets of Mexico City all year round, both in authorized and unauthorized areas. There is no official breakdown about the percentage of informal workers in the country who make a living on and off the streets. Numerous people involved in street vending are always visible throughout Mexico

⁹² Notably, the definition of “non-waged workers” appears to include those who sell informal services on the streets, but not those who sell products or goods such as food vendors.

City. In certain parts of the city, such as in the downtown area, several streets are permanently filled with street vendors. Both makeshift and more permanent vending stalls are found on the sidewalks and roads. John Cross (1998: 101–103) documents that, in Mexico City, available official data on street vending depends on the type of vending (public markets, *tianguis* and markets on wheels, etc.) and on whether the type of vending is tolerated or not. Since 1985, there has been an effort to account for the number of street vendors in Mexico City, but the number of mobile street vendors remains a guess. Cross (1998: 102) estimated that, in the late 1990s, under a conservative estimate there were over 120 thousand stalls or street vending “retail units” in Mexico City.

Rodrigo Meneses-Reyes (2013) states that, between the end of the 1990s and the beginning of the 2000s, there were 705 formally constituted street-vending associations in Mexico City, and that 120 of them represented over 30 thousand people working as street vendors in the downtown area. The sizeable female-gendered leadership of many of these street-vending associations in Mexico City is well known and documented (Ziccardi 2010). In this, street-vending leaders resemble the broader city patterns of women spearheading sociopolitical grassroots mobilizations that have brought about land regularization and provision of basic services, such as water, in other low-income neighbourhoods (Gutmann 1996).

The low-income research participants in this study formed part—though inconsistently, at different times, and for different purposes—of The Warriors, one of the many street-vending associations existing in Mexico City. Female-gendered transpeople were generally on-street vendors of sexual services and other goods. The ethnographic

profiles of three low-income *trans women*, a trans street-vending leader, and a street-vending association in Mexico City serve to drive these issues home.

Osa

Dulce, who was mainly known as Osa (she-bear), liked to wear long, dyed-blond, wavy hair that contrasted with her dark olive skin. She would usually wrap her robust form under loose t-shirts and jeans that, nonetheless, suggested small breasts underneath. During my extended fieldwork, in 2010–2011, Osa was 40 years old, though she confidently believed she looked younger than her age. By the time I met her, Osa had been a street vendor for approximately 25 years; she had first begun working at a young age collecting people's garbage, cleaning cars, and helping people in the markets.

Osa lived in what was described to me as a two-bedroom apartment, with a separate kitchen and washroom, located in the eastern outskirts of Mexico City. She paid \$1,000 pesos in rent per month.⁹³ Her household was composed of her, her mom, two teenage brothers, and a nephew. Osa had a relatively trouble-free relationship with her mom; she was a quiet-looking middle-aged woman with short, curly, dyed-brown hair that, nonetheless, revealed stubborn grey hairs. Of her relationship with her mom, Osa explained: "I tell you, I've always helped my mom; we've helped each other out. Though we have our arguments, really ugly ones, I've always worked."

Osa's relationship with her "little brothers," as she would affectionately call them, however, was often fraught with conflict, even though she contributed in large part to their

⁹³ In 2010, the value of the peso in relation to the US dollar was about \$12.64 pesos per unit.

subsistence by paying most of the household expenses and helping to put them through some school years. Osa's mom had conceived her two brothers with a married man when Osa was already an adult. The father, despite simultaneously having another family, would occasionally contribute about \$300 pesos per week for Osa's mom to offset some of the two children's expenses. Even though Osa's mom would pitch in both monetarily and with her labour, Osa remained largely responsible for paying the apartment's rent and other household expenses, and for "putting the tortillas on the table," a phrase of pride she employed to express that her earnings were spent on bringing food home. Thus, Osa's economic contributions played an important financial role in her family. This brings to mind Lionel Cantú's (2003 [2001]: 260) argument about "family-economic interdependence" helping queer Mexican immigrant men in the US gain acceptance from their families of origin in Mexico.

The household's arrangements and responsibilities—underpinned by the small size of the space in which they all lived—were, as Osa would often relate, one of the major sources of constant friction. Similar to findings shown in earlier ethnographies about impoverished people in Mexico City (e.g., Lewis 1961, 1969; Lomnitz 1977 [1975]) and in other parts of Mexico (e.g., Behar 1993; Fernández-Kelly 1983), as the household's main income-generator, Osa sought to determine how things should be run around the house. She was, however, often frustrated by not being able to exert enough power to get to sleep on the living room's main sofa, which would end up being taken by one of her brothers by the time she returned home well into the evening at the end of her work day. She was also embittered by her siblings idling about the couch and not doing much to contribute to the household's chores or expenses. Of her brothers, Osa would state: "I already told my

brothers: ‘the little peso you make, the little peso you throw away in the arcade game machines.’ If there aren’t tortillas and they have money, they don’t buy them. No, no, no, no, no!” She thought this was partly a result of her mom overprotecting and overindulging them. Osa would also get upset at her frequent inability to bring home the boyfriends or lovers she met while partying for sleep-overs. The lack of space and privacy, as well as some sense of respect for her mom’s presence at home, worked as deterrents to doing this as often as she wanted.

During the day, Osa sold LGBT paraphernalia and trinkets, as well as smoking utensils, in a makeshift street-vending stand. The stand was near the exit of a subway station, in a busy part of a larger street-vending section located in the Tepeoco area, one of the business, office, and entertainment areas of Mexico City.⁹⁴ Her selling space was about 90 cm long and 45 cm wide. In it, Osa would set up a makeshift, knee-high table made with a plastic box as a base and a rigid, flat board on top. Her stand was next to a wall, and thus, leaning against the wall and behind the table, Osa would also set a rack about 160 cm high, from which she would hang a rainbow-coloured flag and some of her merchandise for display. Above the stand, Osa would create a roof with a blue plastic cover and rope that would protect her, her mom, and her merchandise from the rainy or extremely hot days. While some of the vendors nearby would find ways to power lightbulbs from the city’s power poles, Osa’s stand did not have its own lamp. But to spend the day selling her goods, Osa would improvise a small chair with one of the boxes in which she stored her products and place this next to the display table.

⁹⁴ As with names and nicknames, specific place names in this chapter and throughout the dissertation are pseudonyms.

From Osa's display rack hung rainbow-coloured sewn bracelets and necklaces. On the table, she would also lay bracelets and necklaces, as well as different kinds, colours, and sizes of pipes for smoking, cigarette rolling papers, and tobacco cigarettes by the piece. The prices of her products ranged between \$2 and \$300 pesos. But she would most often sell products in the \$2- to \$20-peso range, which included the single cigarettes, rolling papers, and bracelets. Osa would most often stock her products in the downtown area of Mexico City, one of the most well-known commercial areas for bulk sales, and she would then resell them in her vending stand at the Tepeoco area. Many days, after a 12- to 15-hour work shift split between her mom and her, Osa would make at least \$600 pesos. She felt grateful for being able to have her street-vending stand:

If it wasn't for this vending stand, I'd work, true, but it wouldn't be the same, because, how much is the salary? \$600 per week, sis! Before this vending stand here, I worked in an office. I'd make \$600 per week cleaning, and it was fucking heavy, horrible. I couldn't buy a thing on the street. How strange this thing, because when you have money, you don't crave anything, but when you don't, then, oh! You want everything. It'd be different. But the two of us working, my mom and I—you already know that—in these cases, when you rent, most of your money goes on rent.

The larger street-vending section in which Osa worked was made of about two short street blocks with stands of about the same size arranged in three lines—two on the outer sides of the street and/or wall and one in the middle of the walking path. While Osa sold knickknacks and smoking gear, other vendors next to and around her offered a range of different products, including clothes, candies, food, pirated movies and music, and electronics. The vendor placed right across from her stand sold pirated CDs and DVDs, which spared Osa, other sellers, and passers-by from going without loud music of different kinds all day long.

Osa would try to arrive at her selling point after mid-morning. It would take her about one and a half hours on public transit to make her way from the eastern outskirts of the city into the area of work. On days when she would stay out partying until late in the evening, her mom would make her way to the area first and put up the stand. Most often, Osa would be the first one to the street-vending area and meticulously set up the stand. One could not miss where the stand was to be precisely set up on the street, as hers was located right next to a street section where the mildly upward path had a small step. At some point during the early afternoon, Osa's mom would arrive at the selling point and take over. Osa would then use the free time to either make her way downtown to purchase more merchandise or to spend time with her friends. Then, still early enough in the day for an unaccompanied woman to be thought to be able to return home safely, Osa's mom would make her way back to the eastern side of the city, and Osa would again be solely in charge of the vending stand.

Prior to her vending stand in the Tepeoco district, Osa worked for many years selling candies independently—without paying street fees or being part of a street-vending association—outside a private school located past the western side of the Federal District, in a posh area located just inside the boundary of the neighbouring State of Mexico.⁹⁵ As a teenager, Osa had not been successful in the entry exams to public high school after

⁹⁵ As mentioned in Chapter 1, the greater metropolitan area of Mexico City spreads across two geopolitical jurisdictions: the Federal District and the State of Mexico. In early 2016, the political configuration of the Federal District changed, and it became officially and legally known as “Mexico City,” granting it status as fully independent “state” with its own governance like all the other 31 states in the Mexican Republic (see Agren 2016; Romero and Vargas 2016).

finishing secondary school.⁹⁶ After a two-year gap she had managed to get in, but the school she was placed in was located far from her candy-selling place of work. Having to cross the city from where she lived and studied on the eastern side of the city to where she worked on the western side every weekday to sell candy had prevented her from passing the first year of high school studies.

At around that time, too, Osa had sought to make a living off the selling of sexual services by “*pararse*” (standing) in two of Mexico City’s on-street sex trade spots: one located near the area where she lived and another located in one of the central avenues criss-crossing Mexico City from north to south. She told me that, back then, a worker did not have to pay a fee to work the streets, or when a fee was required to be allowed to “stand on a street”—the colloquial expression used for someone who solicits sex clients on public thoroughfares—she would try to arrive, work, and leave the spot before the established workers of such sex trade spots showed up. Osa recounted that her income-generating time in the street-based sex trade was short-lived. After a violent incident in which she was badly beaten, tied up, and threatened to be locked in the sewer, she had resolved to carry on mostly selling candy on the streets. Since then, Osa would explain, she would stand on the streets only when she was “partying” or “just having a good time, but not picking this up as work,” since she already had work selling non-sexual goods.

Her day in the organized Tepeoco street-vending area would be spent selling LGBT-related products, talking to the neighbouring sellers, and checking out handsome

⁹⁶ In Mexico, basic education consists of primary, secondary, and high school education. Primary School is 6 years long and students are usually aged 6 to 12 years old. Secondary School is 3 years long and students are aged 12 to 15 years old. High school is 3 years long and students are aged 15 to 18 years old.

passersby. Osa was very sociable and had solid street smarts. Since this was a business and office area, there were many relatively affordable small restaurants nearby that sold home-cooked meals consisting of two courses—a soup and a main dish—for about \$50 pesos. There were also restaurant-bars, which sold fix-priced menus or tacos during the day, and in the afternoon and evening easily turned into socializing and dancing joints filled with loud music and alcohol. Osa would sometimes go to eat her afternoon meal in one of these sites, especially when her mom was around. Other times, she would get food ordered from people walking through the vending area offering to deliver food for vendors who did not have anybody else able to look after their stand while they went away. Osa and her mom would use a coin-operated public washroom located nearby.

Osa would stay in the stand well into the evening, most often until 11 p.m. but sometimes past midnight. She would play it by ear: it would all depend on how much she had sold, but also on if her friends had stopped by to say “hi,” distracting her from putting things away, or if young men were around, encouraging her to spend time flirting with them.

Many of the young men hovering around the street-vending area approached Osa during the day and evening. She seemed to know them either from drinking together, having sex with them, or employing them to run errands for her or her mom. Most of them were in their late teens and early twenties and a few of them were still boyishly thin. Most working-class *trans women* I met said they liked “*chacales*” (lit. jackals), rough-looking, usually muscular and physically strong, brown-skinned men. Some of Osa’s friends indeed looked rough, but Osa did not seem to bother with hanging out and picking up more effeminate-looking men as flings. Sometimes, she would invite them for food and

beverages during the day—something she would frame as motivated by pity for their not having money due to their youth—but after work, she would also hang out and go out partying with them.

At the end of the day, putting her products and makeshift stand away took some time. Laboriously, she would wrap her products in fabric and store them in two plastic boxes sitting on a dolly, which she would then wrap with a plastic cover and tie firmly with rope. Her wrapped merchandise would be stored in one of the makeshift storages for street-vendor sellers located nearby. The dolly itself was not particularly heavy. Yet, Osa would often hire one of the young men hanging out in the street-vending area to take it to the storage. She would pay between \$10 and \$20 pesos for that work. If some garbage had accumulated during the day—garbage in the area came mostly from disposable plates and cups, plastic candy wrappers, and soda cans—some vendors would pay to have it cleaned up. Most often, however, they would leave it in the area assuming the government-employed street cleaners would dispose of it at some point during the night. While during the day one sees many people walking by in this busy street, towards the evening the groups of floor-sleeping, glue-sniffing, and street-involved groups of ragged homeless children and teenagers who gathered in nearby underpasses would become even more visible.

None of the sex trade areas where most of the *trans women* I met worked were located in this street-vending zone, yet many of them knew the Tepeoco area well. Some, like Osa, spent the day in Tepeoco selling goods, but in the evening some others would arrive at the district to dance, drink, socialize, flirt, and hook up in the area, sometimes at “Celebrities,” an aspiring-middle-class nightclub where, unlike many other clubs across the

city geared towards clientele from the “*comunidad de la diversidad sexual*” (sexual diversity community), *trans women* were said to be welcomed regardless of social class, dress, or bodily appearance.⁹⁷

Like many low-income people, Osa sought to make a living by selling merchandise on the street. But by the time I first met her, she and others selling goods nearby her did so under the auspices of The Warriors, one of the existing street-vending associations in Mexico City in charge of organizing informal street vending. Osa had been selling goods as part of The Warriors for only a few years. In the Tepeoco street-vending area, The Warriors counted about 80 to 100 “*agremiados*” (lit. affiliated members). She would pay about \$100 to \$200 pesos weekly—which could fluctuate depending on the collector and the association’s changing needs—to maintain both her right to sell on this street and to keep her street-vending membership with The Warriors.

Out of friendship and respect for Paloma, The Warriors’ leader, as well as a sense of owing reciprocity and loyalty to The Warriors, Osa would sporadically help with property invasions. These were illegal occupations of empty or ruined properties, taken by a group of people by force. Towards mid-2011, Osa had been involved once in the occupation and squatting of a property with other members of the street-vending organization. Things, however, had not turned out so well for her, and after only a few days of squatting the property, the squatters had been forcefully removed by the local police. Osa had been taken to one of Mexico City’s detention centres. She said she had been really scared in the

⁹⁷ “Celebrities” is a pseudonym I chose after a nightclub located on Davie Street, the main street in what is largely known as the gay neighbourhood of Vancouver, Canada. As with participants’ names and nicknames, this choice attempts to reflect the language and festive “taste” of the original nightclub name.

detention centre. She had not been sure she would receive help from The Warriors to be released, but after what appeared to have been negotiations to let out everyone who was detained, she had been freed. When she told me this news, Osa was still visibly afraid. She expressed having been worried about not being able to support her mother and family financially, and about the potential costs to her family to set her free. As with her earlier experience of violence while seeking to sell sexual services on Mexico City's streets, Osa's recent squatting experience had seemed to deter her permanently from ever participating again in property seizures.

Only a little over a year later, by August 2012, some things had changed for Osa. She was still selling LGBT-coloured trinkets and smoking paraphernalia in the Tepeoco area. However, The Warriors had lost practical ownership of the street-vending area in the Tepeoco stretch, and the streets where Osa's vending stand had been were now "cleansed" of street vendors. Pedestrians now came and went in this public area without having to sort through the vending stands. Some of The Warriors' affiliates had been given new vending places in other areas of the city. But not everyone had experienced the same luck; some were still waiting to be placed elsewhere. Osa had chosen not to seek relocation. Instead, she began doing it alone. Having been displaced, her vending stand was now a one-by-one metre plastic cover placed on the ground. She had moved a couple of blocks away from where she used to be located, and Osa was now the only vendor on that section of the street. She told me that fewer pedestrians walked through this area, as it was slightly farther away from the subway station entry. She would still be able to use the same public washrooms, overnight storage, and food outlets. When I saw her again and spent time at her new vending stand, Osa did not appear to be overly concerned with police raids, a threat that

street vendors faced daily in other parts of the city that did not have street-vending permission or where the local government was less tolerant (see Cruz Flores 2011; Gómez Flores 2010b; Llanos 2011). Often, news would break about street vendors fighting violently against police members seeking to remove them from their on-street places of work in several parts of the city and the country more broadly (see Martínez 2012a, 2012b). The removal of The Warriors' stands from their previously-assigned area in Tepeoco had indeed been involuntary. Yet, it had likely been somewhat agreed to by the association's leader, as it seemed to have been done largely peacefully. In her new street-vending area, Osa would still be visited by friends who would stop by to chat. She was still on good terms with The Warriors, but she was now braving the streets through her own means and networks. The changing circumstances meant she had—like she always had throughout her life—to adapt. Even displaced, Osa remained hardy.

Francis

Francis was in her mid-40s when I first met her in 2010. Having adopted a shorter female version of her legal male name, Francisco, Francis would often wear a ponytail with a wide hairband holding her shoulder-length, dyed-black hair. Thick black eyeliner and mascara would make her dark eyes look bigger and her eyelashes larger against her dark brown skin. Francis would almost always wear the same clothes: a darkly coloured print blouse tucked into her light-blue jeans, white sneakers or shiny flat black shoes, and a worn-out black purse. She was always neatly made up and her hair tightly held to the back. She would often wear a black cap with a few silvery sparkles on it.

Francis lived in an old building with narrow stairs leading up five storeys—some apartments had half-broken windows, some had steel latticed protection doors. One of the sides of the building faced a busy street overlooking the greater Panotlán sex trade zone, one of the open areas in Mexico City made up of several streets where female-gendered trans and non-trans sex workers solicited the patronage of passersby, drivers, and neighbours. Located near a subway station, the street area was filled with numerous entryways to buildings, established small-scale food restaurants specializing in homemade food, informal food-vending stands, and other small street businesses offering candy, clothes, cell phone cases, batteries, chargers, and soft drinks, among many other goods. Services ranging anywhere between \$1 and \$30 pesos were also offered for fixed and negotiable rates on the nearby streets. These included cleaning cars, coaching a driver on how to park his or her car, and looking after parked cars to prevent break-ins, robberies, and towing while owners were absent.

Francis' apartment had two separate bedrooms, a small living room and kitchen area, and a washroom. The apartment was sparsely furnished: the living room had two small, green sofas with worn-out, poufy cushions that compressed when one sat. The kitchen did not appear to have many kitchen utensils. One of the bedrooms had a large mattress laid out on the floor and a few scattered clothes.

Francis shared her apartment with other transpeople to be able to pay the apartment's monthly rent, which I estimated to be in the \$1,000 to \$1,500 peso range. At some point during my extended fieldwork, Francis was sharing her apartment, I was told, with a group of about four young individuals who had recently arrived from a southern state in the country looking to make a living off the sex trade. In addition to sharing her

apartment with them, Francis was informally teaching them the ropes involved in soliciting sexual services in the street. As an experienced sex trade worker in this area of the city for a number of years, Francis was also seeking to gain acceptance for the newcomer workers into one of the Panotlán sex trade zone's "*puntos*." Yet, she was not heavily invested in the task, and seemed to largely be taking a hands-off approach by letting them sort out their entry into the sex trade area on their own.

Francis told me she had had a steady "*marido*" for a number of years. She described him as a man of about her age who would come to see her and with whom she would share either money or partying. At some point during the time I knew Francis, she was saving money to buy a pair of sneakers for her boyfriend. Everyday gossip spread relentlessly about and among those working the Panotlán sex trade zone, and had it that Francis liked to drink alcohol and was beginning to become fond of smoking synthetic drugs and staying out in the zone until the early hours of the morning. Francis' drug consumption was, according to other *trans women* who knew her, associated with her "*marido*." She told me her "*marido*" had been the one who suggested she reduce her rental expenses by hosting newcomers seeking to enter the street-based sex trade in her apartment.

During the time I met her, however, Francis had attempted to cut down on the number of days and hours she would stand on the streets of the Panotlán sex trade zone by becoming a personal aide to Paloma and a semi-formal, though still precarious, employee of The Warriors at their office base. Francis, a mid-sized and not necessarily younger-looking *trans woman*, was having trouble getting enough clients on the street. Yet, in keeping with the general strong sense of pride and dignity I encountered among all street-based trans sex workers, Francis would hardly talk about these struggles and would instead,

almost nonchalantly, try to cheer herself up by trusting that her beauty and skills would help her hustle clients the next day. In spite of Francis' resilience, the truth was that sometimes she would end the day without having been able to offer even one sexual service in exchange for pay in the Panotlán zone. While work at The Warriors' headquarters was long, tedious, and ridden with petty conflict, intense spite, competition, and ceaseless office politics, it provided Francis with a modest but relatively fixed income. During the time she began working during the day for The Warriors, she would be paid about \$1,000 pesos in cash per week, or more than double what the minimum weekly salary was set at for waged work in Mexico City in 2011.⁹⁸

Francis' work would consist of showing up at The Warriors' headquarters sometime between 9 am and noon during weekdays and sometimes on Saturdays. From time to time, depending on Paloma's scheduled personal meetings and agenda for the day, Francis would have to show up earlier or later, or make her way to another part of the city. The Panotlán sex trade zone, where Francis lived, was not very far from the Chililiapa neighbourhood, where The Warriors' quarters were located. She would make her way by public transport, either taking the subway or a bus. Once in the office, the day would most often be spent waiting for instructions on what had to be done, where, and how.

Francis was a patient person; a flexible one too. Many of the other *trans women* affiliated at times with The Warriors would come to the office or contribute to its activities for brief periods of time and would leave when they saw other employment and social

⁹⁸ In 2010, the minimum salary for a waged worker in Mexico City was \$57.46 pesos per day (Notimex 2009), and in 2011 it was set at \$59.82 pesos per day. In 2016, the national minimum-wage salary for workers in the formal economy was \$73.04. It was set to increase to \$80.04 pesos during 2017 (Vergara 2016).

opportunities or when they got bored. During my extended fieldwork, however, Francis went from aspiring to keep the timetable of The Warriors' leader Paloma, to being one of Paloma's sidekicks in trans and sexual diversity events, to contributing to the promotion of The Warriors' street-vending activities more broadly.

Initially, it had been Jazmín, a *trans woman* known for her strong devotion to the Santa Muerte, who kept Paloma's agenda. On a square notebook, she would write, often with coloured pens, the names and numbers of the people who had called Paloma and the daily trans-related meetings she had to attend. But midway through my extended fieldwork when Jazmín was imprisoned, Francis took charge of the agenda notebook—an activity that, despite its seeming triviality, afforded these two *trans women* a sense of office work—related efficacy, personal worth, and, more importantly, being Paloma's favourite employee and friend.

Being in Paloma's good books translated into being taken places across the city as Paloma went about her often packed agenda of trans- and vending-related scheduled meetings and site visits. It also meant having transportation and food paid for by the Warriors in low- to low-middle income established chain café-restaurants. Occasionally, Paloma would have work meetings with folks who had political aspirations and other people of interest in wealthier restaurants, and those tagging along would be able to have a separate table set for them, where sometimes they would be able to order food or coffee served in bright cups, and for which Paloma would later have Madga—a non-trans woman in her early 40s whose job it was to follow Paloma everywhere she went—pay in cash. These were restaurants, even the less expensive ones, which otherwise they could not afford, and which in their minds were associated with successful business and office

people. Working for Paloma also meant being in the know about any emerging gossip, which gave her workers a sense of pride and meaning. Francis strove to be in Paloma's good books.

The street vending advocacy work carried out at The Warriors' headquarters involved meeting and lobbying local government officials and other urban street-vending stakeholders and collecting fees from street vendors affiliated with their organization. The trans-related work carried out by The Warriors was unsteady, partly because oftentimes work carried out there was impromptu, but also because street vending took precedence in Paloma's schedule. The Warriors' street-vending organizational work never ceased, and in fact, it sustained the organization. The Warriors' trans-related work was financed through street vendors' membership payments to the association. Thus, while Francis had initially been invited to join The Warriors to support its trans-related line of work, the trans advocacy activities at the quarters would wax or wane on occasion. Francis had, nevertheless, stayed on. Over the course of my extended fieldwork, other *trans women* had swiftly come and gone, or would return occasionally when they were in need of short-term work or support. As the months went on, Francis began helping with street vending-related activities, such as attending meetings, showing up at events when The Warriors needed to demonstrate their numbers, running errands, and generally being open to helping with whatever was needed as the day went on.

At The Warriors' quarters, there was no set start time. Neither was there a set time for the work day to end. Waiting or working could go well into the evening and sometimes into the night. Working for The Warriors involved no formal signed contract with employee benefits. The work agreement was constantly negotiated and renegotiated. Getting pay for

working for the Warriors was steadier than on the streets. Yet, at times the weekly pay would become open to discussion, depending, for example, on others' perception of someone's work.

As I explained in Chapter 3, *trans women* of working-class backgrounds would relentlessly engage in “*bufar*,” the persistent taunting and mocking of other *trans women*. Accusations and bickering among *trans women* were thus a particularly salient feature of their work at The Warriors. Francis, like many low-income *trans women*, had a strong sense of pride in knowing how to fight and fend for oneself. At times, she would initiate quarrels about what someone would do, say, wear, or present herself or himself. But more commonly, Francis would be ready to merely fight back. However limited, work at The Warriors translated into Francis' ability to alternate, or at times replace altogether, standing on the streets of Panotlán in the afternoons and evenings.

Samantha

In 2011, Samantha, a young research participant I grew particularly sympathetic towards, had roast chicken for her 22nd birthday. She and her best friend lived in the western outskirts of Mexico City, in what was described to me as a housing structure with a few separate rooms and a common shared washroom. In Mexico City, purchasing roast chicken from take-out shops is usually a relatively inexpensive pre-prepared meal. Cooked in bulk during hours of being turned on roasting sticks that dripped with grease, rotisserie shops offer whole prepared chickens, but also leftover roasted chicken feet, necks, and wings heavily dipped in spicy sauce by the piece for as little as \$2.50 pesos each. Samantha

recalled eating an entire rotisserie chicken with her friend as one of the highlights of her life.

Samantha was a thin, even frail-looking *trans woman*, with dark skin, a prominent jaw, a thick nose, and painted stylized eyebrows that gave the appearance of having almost no space between them. Compared to other *trans women* of about her age, Samantha's bodily transformations had been more limited: her facial hair was often visible, without the aid of fill-in toilet paper her chest was flat, and she did not display the pronounced buttocks that seemed characteristic of the aesthetic canon among most of her peers. Still, Samantha attended carefully to how she looked. She would take care in adding a burgundy dye to her trimmed, layered hair. She would, at times, change her usually loose, plain black clothes for a dress or a purple skirt. She would sometimes don a frilly, sleeveless white top that accentuated her narrow frame. Even when she appeared to be physically worn out, Samantha would wear abundant mascara and pink blush on her bronze cheeks.

She sought to make a living as a street-based sex worker in the Cacala sex trade spot located in a central area of the city. However, during the time I met her, Samantha was also seeking to supplement her meagre and highly unpredictable sex worker income by carrying out odd jobs for The Warriors and other people she would meet at the sex trade spot. Once, for example, she took me to a northern borough of Mexico City, where she was house-sitting a room inside an old-looking house structure with a dried-out garden in the front. The bleak, reddish structure of one storey had a dim porch, and seemed to be abandoned. She did not tell me what she was caring for, but softly prevented me from going in and preferred to make me wait for her in the dim corridor. Samantha said that she was being paid to look after the place for someone.

The northern borough was an area of the city Samantha was familiar with, since she had lived there for a few years with a group of other disenfranchised children and youth. It had been there where, living on the streets and still socially recognized as a boy, Samantha had picked up a liking for sniffing solvents when she first immigrated into Mexico City from a rural part of Veracruz, an eastern coastal state in Mexico. When I met her, however, she was no longer living on the streets. Yet, Samantha was barely able to make a living from the on-street sex trade. The Cacala Spot was mostly worked by extremely well made-up, younger-looking *trans women*. A few of them who were actually younger had even begun getting silicone breast implants for about \$10,000 pesos, instead of having industrial or domestic oil fillers injected directly into their skins. While Samantha was definitely among the younger workers, she could not compete with many of the workers who wore revealing clothes, high stiletto heels, heavy makeup, and had toned-looking bodies. Never openly accepting this fierce competition or her lower place in the on-street sex-vending hierarchy, Samantha had resorted to running errands and doing favours for people in exchange for some money. Thus, at Cacala's spot she would spend most of her time close to a gas station. Rumour had it—and rumours were a constant feature of *trans women's* lives—that she was running errands for clients who wanted to purchase drive-through drugs at the sex trade spot.

In August 2011, towards the end of my main period of fieldwork, I learned that Samantha had died a few weeks earlier. Samantha's best friend, another *trans woman*, told me the tragic news while we were on the streets of a central borough of Mexico City, marching in protest of the violent murder of Joel Mendoza, a homosexual man, emerging politician, and activist known to The Warriors. Samantha's friend said that her family had

come to Mexico City from Veracruz to get her corpse. She said she missed her. Valentina, most commonly known as Rana (frog), the leader of the spot where Samantha sold sex and possibly other types of services and goods, confirmed the news. She said that Samantha's "lungs had exploded" and that she died in the public General Hospital of Mexico. This hospital serves people without health insurance.

Samantha was visibly sick in June 2011 when I last saw her: she was bony, as usual, but with low energy and a remarkably slow walk. She was almost dragging herself around. If Rana's folk explanation for Samantha's death was accurate, it is possible that Samantha might have died from a form of pulmonary disease, precipitating the "lung explosion" that Rana spoke to me about. The exact cause of Samantha's death remains unknown to me.

Whatever the reason, premature death and shorter life expectancy—or "preventable morbidity and escapable mortality," as Paul Farmer (2005 [2003]: xvi) calls them—are known to be direct expressions, and more precisely consequences, of the socioeconomic determinants structuring the pathologies of power that disproportionately affect the poor (see also Farmer 2002, 2014). The global distribution of chronic obstructive pulmonary disease mortality, for example, indicates that it is not associated with high smoking rates, but rather with low vitality, which is in turn associated with poverty (Burney et al. 2014). To my knowledge, Samantha did not smoke. One could feel tempted to turn attention to Samantha's solvent sniffing, which, according to my conversations with her, may have spanned over a decade of her life. Glue sniffing presents a wide range of health complications (Meadows and Verghese 1996). Yet, as Farmer (2005 [2003]) demonstrates, risk and risk factors, far from being shaped by mere individual circumstances, respond to structured risk—a risk produced by an increased exposure to pathogens and decreased

access to services that disproportionately affect the poor. It is thus important to draw attention to who sniffs solvents like glue and paint thinner. Ethnographic studies on inhalant use in Mexico City (e.g., Gigengack 2014) and drug use in other parts of Latin America (e.g., Wolseth 2014) show that it is often the most disenfranchised children and youth. Unlike the march to protest the murder of Joel Mendoza, the premature death of Samantha went publicly unnoticed. Yet, Samantha's death was, and remains, heartbreaking and shocking to me.

The Warriors

Like Osa, Francis, and Samantha, many of the low-income *trans women* I met formed part—for different ends and in varying degrees—of The Warriors. The Warriors is an organization primarily devoted to the organizing of informal vending in a few of the streets of Mexico City. It generates its funds through vendors' membership fees. When I met Paloma García, The Warriors' leader, she and her political advisors had set out to establish what they imagined would be the first trans foundation in Mexico. Over the course of fieldwork in 2010 and 2011, I was able to document some of their attempts to establish this trans-focused association, as well as the rising role of Paloma as a "trans activist." However, even though Paloma and her employees had in mind setting up a formal registered association that would provide legal aid, health support, and housing programs for transpeople, and particularly for impoverished *trans women* in Mexico City, The Warriors' "trans work" was tightly nested within the association's street-vending advocacy structure and arrangements.

The Warriors' headquarters was located on Felipe Ángeles Street in the Chililiapa neighbourhood. The office itself was on the third floor of a building that had been a lively dancing locale for a number of years, where on Fridays people would gather to dance to sensational live salsa bands. By 2010, however, the building had changed. On the main floor, there was a small commercial plaza. The merchants were non-trans men and women affiliates of The Warriors who had been selling or were still selling on the streets. When about a year earlier the association gained practical possession of the building, they had been able to get a 2-metre-wide by 1-metre-deep fixed vending stand inside the plaza. There were about 20 stands in the plaza. They were spread out on each side of a T-shaped corridor paved with clear tiles. One would find clothes, freshly squeezed juices, watches and jewelry, shoes, and ice cream among the goods offered in the place, as well as artificial acrylic nails and hairstyling services. Warm, home-cooked meals of two or three courses, as well as *tortas* (a baguette-like sandwich), *quesadillas*, and *guisado tacos* (entrée tacos) were also sold in The Warriors' commercial plaza. Towards the end of the corridor, there were two washrooms, one for women and one for men, that anybody could use by paying a woman sitting by the entrance a \$5 peso fee. The washroom woman would make sure that the toilets were clean, and would also try to sell chewing gum, candy, and cigarettes. Most vendors in the plaza had stayed on in their vending stands throughout my fieldwork, though occasionally, a new vendor would begin selling in a stand where another had been assigned before. Vending stands inside the plaza were thus relatively stable places of work for the vendors who were allowed to sell in one of these spaces. However, from time to time vendors would change their line of business, beginning to offer new goods or services while remaining in the same vending stand.

The second floor of the building where The Warriors office was located was now a dilapidated, unused space. Where before one would find an elevated stage for live musicians and a bar for thirsty dancers, there was now a damp, dark space with some accumulated garbage and remaining debris from the structures that had formed the dancing locale. Many of its windows were broken. Towards one of its ends, there were structures that gave the impression of being separate rooms, and some *trans women* visiting The Warriors' headquarters would, at times, use them to make out with lovers and impromptu clients they met while in the building. At some point, Paloma had the idea of rebuilding the floor and making separate rooms to offer *trans women* affordable housing, a plan that she envisioned would be one of the leading themes in her planned trans association, but this housing project never materialized.

To make it to the third floor, where the offices of The Warriors were located, one could take a shaky old elevator or the indoor stairs. On the first floor by the elevator entrance often stood a uniformed man who worked as the building's security guard. He would ask anybody wanting to make it to the third floor what one wanted to do in the upper levels of the building. There were no visible signs announcing the locale as The Warriors' quarters. A simple commercial plaza visitor would not have necessarily considered that an office was located on the top floor of the building. This made it easier for the guard to tell who was in the know about the quarters, and he would only allow regulars entry. For one-off or unknown visitors, he would ask that they sign in a bound record book and leave a piece of ID while they made their way in. The indoor concrete stairs were dark. It was better to take the elevator, even if it would often break down and was not very well lit

inside. From the second to the third floor, the building also had a flight of outdoor metal stairs. These overlooked a sort of courtyard in which almost no activity ever occurred.

The third floor of the building was not really a floor, but rather the roof of the building. On it, The Warriors had built a stable structure made of concrete that had a small but well-furnished private office at one end, a rectangular space for meetings with plastic foldable chairs and tables that fit about 30 to 40 people. At the other end was a small waiting area where Pati, the main receptionist, would perform her duties with a phone line, a notebook, and a pen in hand. Pati was a tough, though affable, short, robust, middle-aged non-trans woman. She, like Paloma and many of her personal assistants and workers in The Warriors, resided in the same Chililiapa neighbourhood and had known Paloma for a number of years; like the rest of the people closest to Paloma who worked for The Warriors, Pati had lived in the area for all or most of her life.

Pati's primary job was to answer the constantly ringing phone, a task she would efficiently perform, sometimes while knitting. As the first point of contact for anybody visiting The Warriors' headquarters, Pati would also triage the several visitors who would stop by the quarters either requesting a meeting with Paloma, paying their membership dues, asking for help, or reporting a street problem. Pati's duties required her to be rugged. She knew her job was to be on at all times. She was, for example, very efficient in anticipating when she had to tell people off by pretending that Paloma was either busy or not in. Yet, she would effectively master the task of not getting into trouble by speaking to visitors politely and softly and offering them a brief smile, while remaining tight-lipped with any information she would provide.

Like others at the quarters, Pati did not have a fixed time when she was done work. Finishing time would often depend on how the day had been going, and the activities or tasks that had to be arranged as they came up during the day. Like others, Pati would eat her meals from restaurants and shops nearby, sometimes having them delivered to the third floor from one of the eateries in the first floor. But work was close enough to the place where she lived that she could give instructions about things that needed to be done at home and check in with her children over the phone throughout the day. Pati's family members were also easily able to stop by the quarters and get whatever they needed from her—money or instructions—so they did not have to wait until she left work, often late in the evening.

Pati held the keys to a washroom that also stood as a separate concrete structure on the third floor. It had some broken windows, cheap, blue-ish, unfinished floor tiles, and what seemed to be an incomplete shower. Sometimes, there would not be toilet paper in the washroom and Pati would send someone to bring some. Most times, one had to fill water from an outdoor faucet into a miniscule bucket to flush the toilet. On this floor also stood a third room that I never saw opened, but it seemed to contain a few arcade games and casino-type machines.

During the period of my main fieldwork, Paloma had two main political advisors: Juan Ramírez and Kim Fernández. Early in 2010, The Warriors had hired Juan, Kim, and occasionally others due to their previous experience in *LGBTTTI* issues and expertise in political advocacy. By August 2011, Juan's role as political advisor had been broadened to include advisor and strategist on electoral or political party politics and the grassroots organizing of The Warriors' affiliated street-vending force. Kim, in turn, had succeeded in

making Juan recede from the trans work—something she forcefully and adamantly stated a “gay man” had no place doing, and Juan, in particular, was in no way capable of actually doing—and had taken it upon herself to do the advising and organizing in this area.

Paloma also had a group of core personal aids whom Vianey, a close friend to Paloma and a trans on-street sex worker in her 40s, would light-heartedly call her “*secuaces*” (sidekicks), for they were a group of folks who tended to go wherever Paloma went. This was particularly true of Magda and Manuel, Paloma’s respective personal assistant and driver, as well as of Pancho, Paloma’s *marido*. Manuel had also grown up in the same *vecindad* (impoverished housing settlement) as Paloma. Manuel’s family unit had been located right across from the unit where Paloma and her siblings had been raised, and now, having been turned into a “house” by successive construction add-ons, was Paloma’s place of residence alone. Manuel, a non-trans man himself, had gotten married to someone from the neighbourhood and had thus left the *vecindad*. But his wife worked in a street-vending stand located in one of the streets managed by The Warriors in the Chililiapa neighbourhood. He was also Paloma’s personal driver, so he would come to the area daily to pick her up and drive her to meetings.

Magda, in turn, was a non-trans woman who had also grown up in the area and had become, in essence, Paloma’s closest personal assistant. She would spend most of her day, and sometimes also her night, assisting Paloma. But Magda would sporadically mention that she spent some time also with her husband in the same neighbourhood, and paid occasional visits to one of her children, who was serving time in jail and for whom she was providing financially so that he would be able to subsist while in prison. Magda was a woman ashamed of her lopsided bodily features, which had gone uneven in her early teens

due to—she told me—her bad character and forceful fits of anger. But she was sturdy, like everyone else, and prone to joking around, also like everyone else. While she did not seem to be accustomed to receiving signs of affection, such as getting phone calls or text messages from friends, she would truly enjoy them when they happened.

Paloma's "*marido*," Pancho, was a tall, often neatly dressed non-trans man who would silently accompany Paloma. On the odd day that Paloma took off from work, usually a Sunday, Pancho took her and some of her little nieces and nephews out to the movies, to get pictures taken with *Los Reyes Magos* (The Magic Kings) or Santa Claus during Christmas, or to hang out somewhere in the city. Pancho was a quiet man who—until he was later incarcerated in 2014—did not shy away from holding hands with Paloma or affectionately placing his hand on her leg. None of the association's core aids ever expressed much about this relationship. However, Paloma's close trans friends—those she had met during the time she had, like many other *trans women*, turned to the streets to sell sexual services for a few years, and who had thus become Paloma's "*íntimas*"—would at times allow themselves to be slightly laxer and joke around the fact that Pancho was having everything paid for while sitting around. Paloma would most often just smile.

Becoming a Warrior Leader

Paloma García was in her late 30s when I first met her in mid-2010. I met her at a nation-wide feminist conference held in central Mexico, where she, Kim Fernández, Linda (an early non-trans political advisor for The Warriors who would later quit her job) and Valentina, Yadira, and Pablo Martina (a few of the *trans women* who would later become

my research participants) were promoting “trans” issues to both feminist-identified colleagues and non-feminist-identified participants.

I later gathered that Paloma’s participation in the trans, feminist, and sexual diversity activist movements was developing. I also came to appreciate that this feminist meeting had been one of her first forays into the realm of this kind of “activism.” During the conference, Kim—a fairly experienced trans activist by then—had been keen on doing most of the speaking and lobbying, but since, I later learned, The Warriors had paid for her and the others’ trip expenses, she was also teaching Paloma what it entailed to do trans activism and to put “trans” issues forward in the public discussion. In spite of her then-inexperience on trans and feminist issues, Paloma was well regarded as an organizer of street vendors across many of Mexico City’s thoroughfares.

Paloma had grown up in a *vecindad* (impoverished housing settlement) located in one of the streets of the Chililiapa neighbourhood. She came from a family of people dedicated to vending on the streets of Mexico City. Thus, from an early age she had learned the ropes of street vending and of street vendors’ organizing from her family. Paloma’s mother had been a prominent street-vending leader in the Chililiapa neighbourhood and eventually in other areas of the city as well. Like Paloma, her mother had also come from a family of street vendors. While she had been a street vendor throughout her life, Paloma’s mother especially gained prominence as a street-vending leader after the mid-1990s, when one of the major leaders of street vendors in Mexico City died.

The deceased street-vending leader—a then-middle-aged woman who remains known to vendors in the neighbourhood to this day—had been able to amass large numbers of vending affiliates for her organization. By the time this leader passed away, Paloma

calculated, the number of vending affiliates in her organization was an estimated 7,000 people. It was said that she had been able to do this because she was a fierce, but generous woman.⁹⁹ According to Paloma, the deceased leader who preceded her mom had owned a restaurant, and anybody who approached her would get both food and a locale to work on the streets:

And she'd help them. She had a restaurant, and it's said that it was where she'd serve people. She had her apron on and sold food. Then someone would arrive: "Excuse me, ma'am, help me." "Listen, you, give a taco to this kid," she'd order, "This girl, give her a taco." And they'd eat and then she'd say: "Go and place them somewhere." I mean, she'd give them food in that moment, and then she'd order that they'd be given a little place to work.

Paloma's mother was already one of the existing leaders across the streets of Mexico City at the time, but when the major leader died, the remaining street-vending groups, including the one the deceased woman had been in charge of, were reconfigured. Just as street vending as a trade tends to be taught and learned within families, street-vending leadership is often inherited from family members, most often passed from parents to their offspring. It was then assumed that one of the children of the deceased leader would inherit the association's leadership and membership. But the heir struggled to position herself as incoming leader due to what was said to be her aggressive personality, an alcohol addiction, and being imprisoned along with one of her sons, so some of her workers "betrayed" her. Other smaller groups emerged, gaining their own independence.

⁹⁹ As other scholars of street vending in Mexico City have stated, for those familiar with the dynamics of Mexico City, many of these events may be easily identifiable (Crossa 2009). I have kept the names anonymous. Even though I did not work with any of the members of the larger organization whose leader died, if I name her it would be easier to identify who Paloma's mother is, and in consequence, who Paloma is. Again, this may be easily identifiable information to those in the know of street-vending politics in Mexico, but I am still making an effort to keep my research participants' identities confidential.

With vendors seeking to make decisions about their continued work in the larger association or with a new one, Paloma's mother, in turn, had been able to seize the opportunity to increase her own association's affiliates. Paloma explained: "following the death of [the until-then major leader] and when all the leaders turned against [her child], well, the leader that remained strong was my mom." While at that time it was estimated that Paloma's mother already had about 2,000 affiliates, the disbanding of affiliates into existing and emerging associations helped her further expand her geographical and political reach across several boroughs of Mexico City.

Paloma was not prone to elaborating on her mom's life or occupation. But the few times I heard her speak about the subject, she would always describe her mom's work with praise and respect, thanking her for having taught her and her seven siblings how to work. One of those times, Paloma said,

My mom always taught us how to work, during all our life she taught us work. She always taught us good manners. She taught us to not depend on anybody ... Because my brothers were men, she'd tell them, "It's just that if you get married and you get a lazy wife, you'll be all dirty and all dishevelled." She taught all of us how to iron, to do the laundry, to sew.

Paloma grew up in an environment where street vending provided the ways and means of living. Initially, all eight children helped their mother keep the association working and thriving. Paloma recounted that, as soon as they had grown up a little and had been able to work, she and her siblings had begun working the streets as street vendors. One of her earlier tasks had been "*torear*" (lit. to bullfight) a street, consisting of selling goods in an area of the city where street selling is tolerated, though technically prohibited, and vendors carry on selling while remaining constantly aware of potential police raids.

Coordinated “bullfighting” of a street was one of the early strategies used by vendors to force the local government to tolerate and eventually negotiate consent for selling in certain street areas. Domain over a larger number of streets allows an organization to place more of their vendors on the streets. It also enables a street-vending association to expand its geographical presence across the city and increase the number of affiliates. This, in turn, generates more revenues from membership fees. The local government, on the other hand, is usually forced to either negotiate permission or informally tolerate street vending because it lacks the public force to expel the vendors from the streets; they are usually ready to put up fierce fights to prevent dislocation and displacement and to be able to preserve their places of work and sources of livelihood. Generally, too, there would be a political negotiation involved. A street-vending leader agrees with the politician holding local office—usually at the borough level, but also at the broader city level—that authorization to sell on the streets will translate into members’ direct votes for him or his political party in the next local or federal elections.¹⁰⁰ In essence, street vendors of a given organization are thus turned, through negotiation, into the support base for a given political party. Most often, the presence of vendors on certain streets throughout Mexico City results from a combination of vendors’ determination to bend the rules to make a living, the lack of an effective public force, and the presence of political agreement. Stories about “toreros,” detentions, and street vendors’ fights with police officers appear often in the newspapers (see Cruz Flores 2011; Gómez Flores 2010b; Llanos 2011). As other ethnographies of Mexico have documented, the poor participate in a

¹⁰⁰ I use male pronouns to refer to politicians purposely. The intention is not to suggest a specific male politician here, but rather the broader gender disparity still existing in the political ranks of the local public administration office.

wide range of income-generating strategies, even if they are informal and fall within the criminalized economies (Enrigue 2014; Lewis 1961, 1975 [1959], 1982 [1969]; Lomnitz 1977 [1975]; Muehlmann 2013a, 2013b).

While growing up, Paloma had also tagged along with her mother for work-related meetings and activities. She had observed how her mom dealt with her organization's management and had seen her negotiate with affiliates and authorities. With the help of the children and her own hard work, Paloma's mother's association increased its membership to about 8,000 or 9,000 people during the rest of the 1990s and into the 2000s. While many smaller organizations co-existed, some of them with substantive membership draws, Paloma's mother's association continued to have a weighty presence throughout a few of Mexico City's streets in 2010.

Paloma's mother had approached her role as street-vending leader—following in the steps of other leaders, including the deceased one—as an opportunity to make a good living and gain local community and political status, while providing social welfare services to her affiliates. As a leader, for example, Paloma's mom had implemented a housing project to benefit her organization's affiliated members. Paloma recounted,

My mom began having a housing escrow, and she'd tell her affiliates: "Contribute for your home." And then, when we'd see abandoned properties, old ones, like very demolished, ugly ones—many of them had been abandoned—well, we'd research them and the owners wouldn't appear. And we'd go in, clean them, we'd put people in, and instead of paying rent, we'd put in modules, like, beautiful, made of tin sheet, and things like that, as if these were guest houses, with shared kitchens and washrooms, like that. And the people would live there, and we wouldn't charge them rent or anything, but rather it was to help them be able to contribute [to the association] with more ease and stop paying rent. And that's how we began looking into those projects. Then the owners would turn up, we'd negotiate the property sale, and that. When it wasn't possible, well, they'd despoil us, they'd put us out of the property. But in general, almost always—the owners never appear, it's very rare. Of course, we'd grab really ugly properties, eh, ugly, collapsed ones, full of trees, I

mean, when they were entirely in total abandonment, and at that very moment we'd regularize the property, and we'd build homes, I mean, we'd do beautiful things.

The housing escrow project helped the association grow rapidly. Yet, they would also seek to provide other kinds of benefits to the affiliates. Out of the escrow money, for instance, they would be able to contribute part of the cost of funeral expenses when an affiliate's family member died. Similarly, they would, on occasion, organize grassroots dentist corps to provide affordable or sponsored dental work for the association's members and their families. For female affiliates with children, they would similarly provide subsidized local childminding services, where vendors' children would be looked after from 8 in the morning to 4 in the afternoon, and the members would only have to pay for their children's breakfast, lunch, and diapers. All of this helped strengthen the presence of Paloma's mom's association in the streets on which it was already established, and expand its influence into new ones.

Paloma had learned many of the aspects involved in the street-vending trade under the guidance of her mother's association. She had sorted and "bullfought" the streets. Likewise, she had specialized in the selling of Christmas tree ornaments—something that she spoke in awe of due to their beauty and also the care that went into their manufacturing. She had even ventured into the import business by travelling once to China—without speaking Mandarin or English—to import large quantities of goods for sale and distribution on the streets.

While still part of her mom's association, she was able to "win" a street. "Winning a street" means taking domain over a street by putting forward the physical presence of vendors in an otherwise "empty" or prohibited street, or else displacing leadership in an

already spoken-for street and imposing a new leader by physical force—meaning being able to face physical violence from other leaders and the authorities, who often work together to displace people and to make money out of them. On what it means to win a street and how one “wins” a street, Paloma explained,

Ah, because you also go in a struggle against the authority, right? And I did it together with some neighbours. The neighbours went looking for me to give them a space. And I told them, “Well, just sprawl [your vending stand] there, no? The street belongs to nobody. The street belongs to whoever works it.” And it is the necessity that makes people go out into the public streets to sell. And that’s how I worked this out with the neighbours. The authorities told me, “No, they aren’t neighbours.” I said, “They’re neighbours.” “No, they aren’t.” “I bring the census, and let’s go to their homes, if you want coffee, tea, refried beans, or what, so that you see that they’re neighbours and they live there on that street.”

Paloma first took possession of one street, which gained her original 20 affiliated members, and that was how she started off as a leader. From there, she expanded onto another street that won her another 60 to 70 affiliates. It then began expanding, following the same logic of taking control by negotiating with authorities or by force. Paloma explained,

And there I, all on my own, went to get in. And, for example, there was a leader who did bad things to his people. He stole from them. He wasn’t able to give them [their places of work]. And I went through a year of struggle with them. A whole year: I was detained, the police beat the shit out of me, everything. But I remained in the struggle, I was in the struggle, I was in the struggle. And I managed to have the places returned to their people, and make sure the people were all good, in order, easy and everything. Because yes, it was a horrible mess there.

She thus went onto creating her own street-vending association: The Warriors.

Paloma had certainly inherited her mother’s zest for leadership and independence, and sought to become a street leader of her own accord. Becoming independent was not necessarily something that had caught her mother completely by surprise. Paloma recognized that her own mother had educated her and her siblings to know how to fend for

themselves. Four of her seven siblings had indeed become independent from their mother's association and had gone onto launching their own street vendors' groups. Still, Paloma's rising street-vending leadership had been a source of struggle between her and her mom:

Before my mom fell into [went to] jail, I was already beginning, I was already beginning to become independent. Because I remember that she'd scold me. That she'd tell me: "You think it's easy! You'll see! And I don't know what else!" Because I was already beginning to rebel against her. When someone is a leader, people would say "One of their children went out of their control," you see what I mean? It'd be said, "Ay, but how come they'd leave, how come they want to walk without me?!" And things like that, right? [...] It was also because she'd say that it wasn't easy. That she was afraid because of everything that she went through, right? Because, for example, she always, for defending the people, she also suffered jail,¹⁰¹ beatings.

Paloma's free-spirited and independent character had led her to establish her own group.

Yet, her emerging leadership had been fostered by the circumstances of her mom's incarceration. Other street-vending leaderships emerged in a similar fashion: when the leader had been incarcerated, emerging leaders took over. Even though Paloma had an arrest warrant issued against her at some point, she had managed to continue working on the streets and positioning herself as a rising leader by the mid-2000s.

Her mom had remained nonetheless worried about what Paloma would have to face as a leader:

No, she [Paloma's mom] faced really tough stuff. So, she'd always tell me "See, it's not easy, you could get hurt, and *even more* because of the orientation that you have," right? She worried a lot about this: that people would make fun of me, that I had to be beating people up because they'd insult me. She'd say, "If I, if I as a woman, it was really hard for me, now you, they'd be making fun of you, they'd be

¹⁰¹ Paloma and others used the expression "falling into jail" ("*caer a la cárcel*") when someone went to jail. This caught my attention because it stood in contrast with the expression I knew, and I would have used, of "being put in jail." I often heard them speak of jail as "falling into" it. Here, Paloma also uses the phrase "suffering jail" ("*sufrió cárcel*"), in which jail is the noun that a person suffers from.

wanting to disrespect you.” That was the part she was really worried about. [...] She wanted to protect me.

According to Paloma, her mom remained concerned about her daughter’s “orientation,” as Paloma started to call her trans* expression during the course of my extended fieldwork:

So, I’d realize that she didn’t know how to tell me, “I want to protect you, I want to...,” right? She’d only say, “It’s just that I worry that they’d do something to you; it’s that just I worry that... that...” To this day, when she calls me, she says, “And how do they treat you? And what do they tell you? And don’t put up with anything! And don’t let them humiliate you! And, if anything, here you have a fuck of a lot of mother, and I don’t know what else!”

Paloma added:

And yes, for example, for me it was really hard, no? Heck yes, for example, the zones where I’d help my mom were the zones on the [rough side of Chililiapa]. I was right next to [the rough side of Chililiapa]. And you associate with criminals, with jackasses, those I’d see stealing on the streets, and I had to get tough, and all of that. I, for me, it was very tough because you know that in the barrios they don’t tell you, “Ay, you’re a *trans woman*!” They say “Ay, you are a fucking faggot!” So you have to be twice as, like impose yourself twice as tough, double everything. [...] So, yes, it was hard for me, it was really tough for me to win a space in... like people would have it, the barrio.

It is unknown to me how Paloma’s mom spoke of or conceived of Paloma’s trans* expression. One of Paloma’s older sisters, Sylvia, had also decided to become trans* after—it was said—she had seen Paloma’s determination and defiance around the issue. While Sylvia remained a worker with their mom, Paloma had become independent. The mother had chosen to use Sylvia’s chosen female name to refer to her, but she kept using Paloma’s male nickname to refer to her. Yet, it was clear that she remained fiercely protective of Paloma throughout adulthood.

Despite their mutual affection and support, rivalries and disputes over domain and ownership of streets among family members—including Paloma’s mother and siblings—were not absent. Paloma would not shy away from supporting a different political party than the one her family members had vouched for over the decades. Neither did she necessarily back away from competing with them for streets, political support among potential affiliates, or selling goods and services on the streets.

But Paloma was mirroring her mother’s style of work as she was establishing her own leadership. While fierce and brazen, she approached her leadership work, in her own words, as “*labor social*” (lit. social labour or social service):

They [affiliates] pay a voluntary share to an escrow [...] they give to the escrow, and from the escrow you’d get, like, money to go pay, for example, the secretary, the light, the property tax, all of that. Well, there are leaders that work by hand, who don’t have an escrow. There are leaders and leaders, I mean, I don’t know what they think, or I don’t know what they offer. But, for example, there are definitely different social costs. There are leaders that, I’ll tell you, for example, they say, “No, we’ll charge by hand,” but they don’t give you any benefit. And on top of not giving any benefits, if their streets get picked up, then they’re real wretches at times, because they respond to people, “Give me this much to fix it,” per person. Then they ask \$10,000 or \$5,000, “I’ll go fix it, give me [money],” and they don’t fix anything. They take people to other streets, there, that the government gives them, oh ... well, it depends on who picks you up, the borough or the government. They’re given really shitty streets that the leaders don’t negotiate well, and they don’t care. They say, “Well, then, I already made this much money now, with that I can get by,” and they are like that. I mean, there are leaders that think really [...] they don’t offer anything.

While following in her mom’s footsteps, Paloma was also setting her own leadership style. Paloma would, for example, bid for projects with the government to have street vending reorganized—providing a better image of and among street vendors while still functioning in the existing model of getting people a place of work in the street-based informal economy. She would hire young consultants—many of them with some university

training—to put forward projects that appealed to the tourist industry in Mexico City. These were conceived of in a similar vein as the ones set around “*Pueblos Mágicos*” (lit. magical towns) across the country, where contemporary vendors had been jointly organized by state and private industry to rebrand an entire town in a way that evoked rurality or long-held local traditions and customs to visually appeal to and attract tourist clients.¹⁰² For Paloma, having a “project” meant managing a street, and “bidding for a project” meant putting forward a proposal to own a street for street vendors, while also articulating “a proper image for the Chililiapa area.” She complained that all her projects would be refused. But her idea went in tandem with coexisting revitalization projects that took place in other parts of the city, where renewal and renovation of the urban landscape began taking place massively from 2007 onwards, particularly in the downtown area of Mexico City (see, for example, Slim 2011).

As one can infer, domain over streets in Mexico City for the purposes of informal street vending would fluctuate depending on the ever-changing sociopolitical and economic climate. Street-vending association memberships were thus not stable. Gaining spaces at times and losing others at times, Paloma had nevertheless been able to increase her number of affiliates over the years. By the time I first encountered her, she had amassed about 1,500 affiliates distributed in a few streets in two different neighbourhoods. She was also managing two “housing projects” and was in the process of taking full legal ownership over another initially-occupied property that was about to be deeded to her association. As she

¹⁰² The *Pueblos Mágicos* (Magical Towns) program consists of the revitalization of small rural towns to attract local and international tourism. The federal government created this program in 2001. Thirty-two towns had been declared “magical towns” by 2008 (Elizondo Torres 2008), and there were 111 by June 2017. See: <http://www.pueblosmexico.com.mx/>

had begun doing trans* work, Paloma had positioned herself as “a businesswoman and street-vending leader.” Her idea was to contribute to increasing the level of life for “her people,” her affiliates. The Warriors association was, in that sense, an association that enabled her to do the significant social labour of helping secure places of informal street trade for her affiliated members.

Like Osa, Francis, Samantha, and Paloma, most *trans women* I met, and certainly all low-income *trans women*, have been vendors of sexual services and other goods at some point in their lives. Many of them belonged, at different times and for different purposes, to The Warriors. In emphasizing the informal on-street nature of low-income *trans women*’s labour, I do not aim to downplay the sexual labour of *trans women* which has been profiled in virtually all existing studies on transpeople in Mexico. Rather, I seek to point out that they at times formed part of, and at times coincided with, a broader regulated network of street-based informal vendors. This is to say that, while *trans women* are most often sex workers, keeping a focus strictly on sexual labour would downplay the reality that most low-income *trans women* in Mexico City are, together with many other impoverished working people, street vendors of services and goods within the informal economy. Conversely, subsuming *trans women*’s work under the informal street industry would omit the reality that sexual services are an economic niche that provides livelihood to most *trans women* in Mexico City at some point in their lives.

My ethnographic findings suggest that existing representations concerning transpeople in Mexico have rightly emphasized one facet of the livelihoods and contexts of low-income female-gendered transpeople, but that a significant and explicit discussion about the broader informal and on-street context in which sexual labour and vending takes

place has been largely overlooked. Given the large number of informal workers across the country, it is not implausible to imagine that on-street sexual labour is and has been nested within, or happening alongside, broader street-vending trade and organizing, like in Mexico City. My findings thus help refine dominant accounts about the critical issues affecting transpeople in Mexico. By paying close attention to the contexts and livelihood strategies of *trans women* in Mexico City, I situate them as on-street informal vendors of sexual services and other goods, and thus open a deeper understanding of the precarious labour and sociopolitical conditions in which they operate within Mexico City's informal economy.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I have described ethnographically what *trans women* did for a living and the contexts in which they lived and worked during my field research. I have emphasized the broader street vending networks and settings in which *trans women* went about working and living to underscore some of the crucial omissions present in the literature on the subject. The low-income people I worked with formed part of and coexisted with street-vending associations in charge of informal vending on the streets of the metropolitan area of Mexico City. These wider street-vending configurations provided the broader setting for the social organization of sexual labour. I have advanced the argument that, rather than framing impoverished transpeople solely as sex workers in the abstract, depictions of transpeople in Mexico may benefit from exploring the local settings and politics of livelihood in which they are enmeshed.

In the next chapter, I turn my attention to the dynamics of horizontal hostility and trans respectability found within mainstream trans politics in Mexico City. Informal on-street sexual labour shapes the lives of many *trans women*. Yet, trans activism primarily conceived along sex–gender lines leaves aside the central, but—for many—thorny issue of class-bound sexual labour among female-gendered transpeople in Mexico.

5. Controlling Images, Horizontal Hostilities and the Politics of Trans Respectability

Introduction

In this chapter, I examine the place of trans sex work and trans sex workers in contemporary trans activism and in the popular imagination in Mexico. I draw on Patricia Hill Collins' (2009 [2000]) concept of "controlling images" to discuss the widespread imaginings about female-gendered transpeople in the city and the ways in which trans activists have attempted to deal with these circulating assumptions. The classic feminist concepts of "horizontal hostilities" and the "politics of respectability" as well as Viviane Namaste's (2015) notion of "oversights" help make sense of the thorny place of sex work in trans activism in Mexico City (see Davenport 2010; Rueda Castillo 2011).

I suggest that several important dynamics are at play in Mexico's contemporary trans politics. First, the street-based sex trade in Mexico City has grown visibly since the late 1990s. As on-street commercial sex soliciting "*puntos*" (spots) have multiplied across the city, so has the visible presence of *trans women* offering sexual services within them. The growing presence and unavoidable visibility of *trans women* in many of the sex trade "spots" spread across Mexico City have contributed to the production and reproduction of a "controlling image" of the "*vestida*," or the trans person, and particularly the *trans woman* "standing" (selling sex) on the public thoroughfares in contemporary Mexico. In this widespread imagery, *trans women* are posited as trouble-makers, criminals, exhibitionists, female made-up prostitutes (see Federal District Legislative Assembly 2001, 2004b;

Gómez Flores 2007; Ripoll 2002). These uncritical yet widely circulated representations have had harmful material and symbolic consequences for transpeople, and more notably for low-income *trans women* (Davenport 2010; Lewis 2008).

The stigmatizing quality of these current assumptions has not escaped the attention of trans activists, most of whom are *trans women* without on-street sexual-vending backgrounds. To fend off the effects of these conflation, trans activists have either played down or overlooked the central place of on-street sexual labour in many *trans women's* everyday lives. Their activist efforts have largely centred on issues of gender identity and its medical managements (see Barrios Martínez and García Ramos 2008; Lamas 2009, 2012; Saro Cervantes 2009). In these hegemonic trans activist efforts, sexual labour has been relegated to an outlier issue, if it is addressed at all, despite its fundamental prominence in many *trans women's* livelihoods and daily experiences. I thus explore the horizontal tensions existing among *trans women* as a result of the differing structural positions they occupy in Mexico's socioeconomic strata. I look into the symbolic logics underpinning such uneven socioeconomic positions. I examine the respectability efforts of self-identified trans activists to protect *trans women* from the controlling "whore stigma" regulating female-gendered individuals and low-income on-street sex workers. I conceptualize the limits of these dynamics as intersectional gender, labour, and class "oversights" existing within contemporary trans politics in Mexico City. This helps me explore the ways in which sexual labour is present in Mexico City's mainstream trans politics, and the ways in which the livelihoods of low-income trans sex workers bring the limits of gender identity and sex-gender activism into sharp relief.

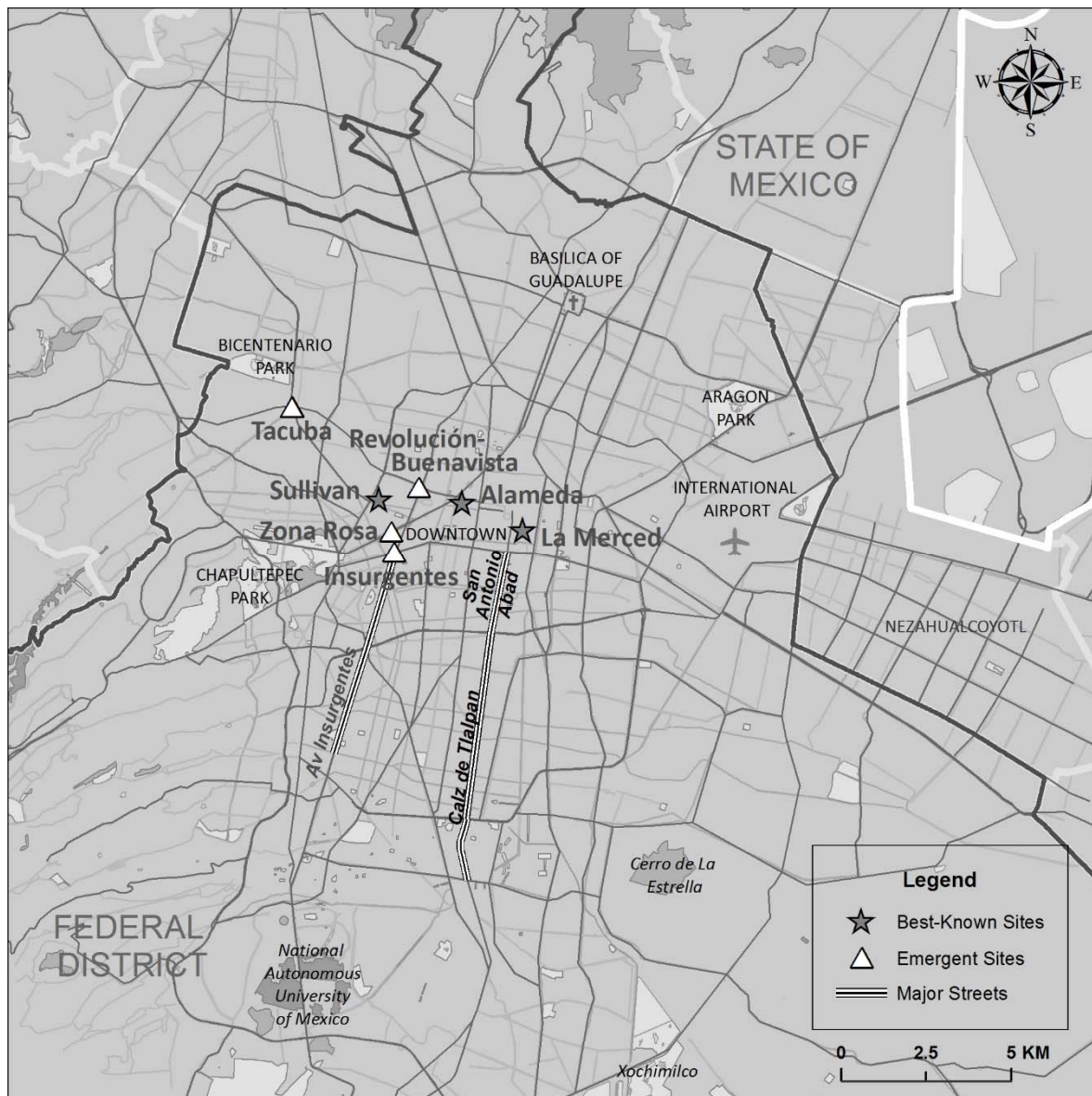
The “*Vestidas*” Standing on the Streets

The presence of *trans women* as on-street sex workers in Mexico City has become more noticeable within the last few years. This growing visibility has not escaped the attention of Mexico City’s inhabitants. Calzada de Tlalpan stands as one of the most significant sites reflecting the broader hypervisibility of trans sex workers in the on-street sex trade areas because, as well-known trans activist Gloria Hazel Davenport (2010: 106) suggests, “The Calzada de Tlalpan, in the Federal District, is one of the principal areas where transgender people exercise sex work.”

Calzada de Tlalpan (part of which is named Calzada San Antonio Abad) is a principal street of approximately 23 kilometres that connects the downtown area with the southern reaches of the city. (**Figure 7**) Until a few years ago, the visible on-street trans sex trade spots on this major avenue had been mostly limited to the downtown periphery. They were in the San Antonio Abad area, as a sort of overflow of the non-trans female-dominated spots in La Merced. However, over time not only Calzada San Antonio Abad, but also its long continuation to the south as Calzada de Tlalpan, became significant on-street sexual commerce sites. Thus, whereas in the early 2000s there had been a limited number of outdoor sex trade sites on this major avenue, a decade later several streets and intersections along the entire road had become emblematic places for sexual commerce. Most significantly, these on-street sex trade sites were predominantly *trans women*’s spots. And what may have been a nightly form of labour became a daytime occurrence, with some sites sporting workers in the morning and afternoon.

Together with numerous street-vending stalls, Calzada de Tlalpan has scores of “*hoteles de paso*” (transit hotels), known for renting rooms by the hour to both sex workers

Figure 7. Several on-street sex trade “spots” are found along San Antonio Abad and Calzada de Tlalpan. These streets connect the downtown area with the southern exit of Mexico City.



SOURCE: Field observations and conversations with research participants. Map created by Jayme Taylor, using base geodata from OpenStreetMap. Conceptual design by the author.

and lovers seeking privacy (Tuckman 2014a). Additionally, one of the busiest subway lines in Mexico City runs along Calzada de Tlalpan. While most of the city's subway lines run underground, this particular line, the number 2 subway line, has 10 subway stations at ground level, beginning in San Antonio Abad. The trains have transparent windows. From them, a large number of daily passengers—estimated at close to 7 and 8 million in 2010 and 2011, respectively (Instituto Nacional de Geografía y Estadística 2015b)—can easily observe *trans women* soliciting clients for sex during the day and well into the night, when the subway system shuts down at midnight.¹⁰³

This is to say that not only have on-street sex trade spots proliferated around the city, as I have also described in Chapter 2, and the presence of trans sex workers in them multiplied, as I am further explaining now, but Mexico City's inhabitants have increasingly perceived these changes in the public urban landscape. In other words, as the geographies of the on-street sex trade have reconfigured in Mexico City during the first two decades of the 21st century, images of *trans women* within and as a substantive part of the sex trade have also become widespread.

I find it pertinent to conceive of these images about female-gendered transpeople as “controlling images.” Patricia Hill Collins (2009 [2000]) explains that controlling images are socially constructed ideologies that serve to justify the intersecting oppressions affecting structurally marginalized subjects. Collins focuses, for example, on four entrenched controlling images affecting black women in the United States: the mammy, the

¹⁰³ In 2010, 46,368,179 passengers used the subway transit system, and 52,431,605 passengers in 2011 (Instituto Nacional de Geografía y Estadística 2015b). It is estimated that 15 percent of those passengers used the number 2 subway line.

matriarch, the welfare mother, and the jezebel. Black women's sexuality is the common theme across them, and they play an ideological role in upholding the prevailing unequal political economy. As controlling images fostered by the slave era and lingering post-slavery, not only are they an expression of the dominant ideology concerning black women, but they also provide ideological justification for interlocking systems of race, gender, and class oppression in the US.

In my view, one of the central outcomes of the widespread presence of female trans labourers in the on-street urban sex trade, particularly in the highly visible, city-wide street of Calzada de Tlalpan, has been the emergence of the “controlling image” (Collins 2009 [2000]) of the *vestida* “standing”—the word used in Mexico to express when someone is a sex worker—on the streets of Mexico City. The controlling image of “*vestidas*” as on-street sex workers has been compounded by the image of “*vestidas*” as criminals, trouble-makers, exhibitionists, and “made-up” prostitutes.

This imagery has been produced in and through extensive media coverage about female-gendered transpeople. As Dorothy Smith (2006: 65) has explained, texts—words, sounds, images that leave a material trace of some kind—coordinate “people’s subjectivities, their consciousness”; in other words, texts mediate relations of ruling. In the early 2000s, for example, Lara Ripoll (2002) documented the perspectives of a few sex work experts and a few “*vestidas*” on “*prostitución masculina*” (masculine prostitution) in Mexico City.¹⁰⁴ Ripoll reports that the advisor of the Mexican Network of Sex Work held that:

¹⁰⁴ As I have explained earlier, female-gendered transpeople and trans sex workers were, until not so long ago, and at times even today, understood to be “men,” even if effeminate, and “male sex workers.” The existing

Another face of masculine sexual commerce is done by men who have a public image of women, the ones known as *vestidas*, different from travestis who work in bars. The *vestidas* are independent workers. They work the sex trade on the streets or on the highways, and they are the ones who most suffer from extortions because, for the authorities, being men, dressing up as women, and working in the sex trade are synonyms to thieves [*“rateras”*], drug addicts (para. 20, italics in the original, my translation).¹⁰⁵

Ripoll (2002) also states that the general coordinator and secretary of a cooperative of “*vestidas*” in Mexico City held that:

Nowadays, the *vestidas* have grown aware of their rights, and they admit to the fame of troublemakers [*“desmadrosas”*]; it is not because we are being paid that they have to treat us like an object. Women are more submissive; as *vestidas* we grew up like men, and we are stronger, nobody can force us to do anything we don’t want (para. 23, italics in the original, my translation).

Thus, Ripoll’s article includes statements in which emerges an image of “*vestidas*” as men who dress up as women, who are “*desmadrosas*” (troublemakers), and are “thieves” and “drug addicts” because they are involved in the sex trade. Moreover, while the title of Ripoll’s news article suggests that “They Too Charge a Lot for Their Love,” the associations presented in the text suggest otherwise. In the quoted text we learn, for example, that “*vestidas*” work on highways or streets, unlike their “*travesti*” counterparts who work in bars. The imagery that emerges, then, is that of “*vestidas*” who likely sell cheap sexual services since they have to work in public spaces.

academic literature on transpeople in Mexico, including that co-written by “*vestidas*” themselves (see Liguori and Ortega 1990 [1989]), shows that this was the case. As I have explained in Chapter 2, this stems partly from the historical emergence of the term “transgender” in the US in the early 1990s (see Valentine 2002, 2007), and its more recent introduction into Mexico City’s socio-legal arena with the approval of the local trans law in 2008. Additionally, as I have also suggested, this supports the fact that, in spite of the Global North push towards the conceptual separation of gender and sexuality (Valentine 2004) and of gender identity and sexual orientation (Waites 2009), sex–gender systems in Mexico City remain articulated from the ground.

¹⁰⁵ In Mexican Spanish, the word “*ratero*” to refer to thieves comes from “*rata*” (lit. rat) so it has a repugnant connotation.

In the context of the 2007 discussions about a proposal to regulate sex work, an article by Laura Gómez Flores (2007) further illuminates how controlling images of “*vestidas*” standing on the streets are rooted, among other things, in a wider disregard for sex work as a social problem. At a forum in which sex workers refused to have sex regulated, a sex worker who is referred to by a female name and a male name in parenthesis is said to have explained the reasons that the government wanted to remove them from the streets in the following way:

The reason is that we make the city ugly, and also the businesses that this mister [presumably Carlos Slim, the richest man in Mexico] is going to launch in these areas and where he has even already bought some properties, and since we are a cancer of society, we have to be extirpated, not taking into account the four thousand people who work in this trade and lack a real alternative to work in other activities, due to ignorance, lack of education, appearance, or age” (para. 3, my translation).

Gómez Flores’s (2007) article also shows that sex workers refused to be removed from the principal road on Calzada de Tlalpan and Anillo de Circunvalación, the area spilling off the downtown sex trade zone where trans sex workers are known to work. In reading the article we gather that because they are considered as “*un cancer de la sociedad*” (a cancer of society) they had to be relocated off the main streets and that they would only be permitted to stand in the newly designated area within permitted times.

The controlling imagery of “*vestidas*” as on-street malaise extends to them as criminals, alcoholics, and drug users, and these controlling images appear to have national reach. For example, Rosío Córdova Plaza (2008), who conducted research with trans* subjects in Xalapa, Veracruz, acknowledges that in addition to the stigmatization of homo-erotic relationships—let’s remember that female-fashioned trans* subjects were conceived until no long ago as male sex workers—there is:

an old perception about prostitution as a dishonorable [*“deshonrosa”*] activity, which continues to be present in our country, and it permeates the conception that society has about sex workers, which is exacerbated by its association with sordid aspects of social life, such as crime and addictions, as well as alcohol and drugs (88, my translation).

Hence, trans sexual commerce is an activity almost always carried out by “marginal subjects” (Córdova Plaza 2008: 88), even though there are middle-class men who work as masseurs and companions for more selective clientele. Similarly, in Villahermosa, Tabasco, Oscar Hernández (2010: para. 3) reports that local activists demand that the government does something about the “worthless activity” (para. 3) performed by transgender sex workers.

In sum, the increased visibility of on-street trans sex workers in Mexico City and other parts of the country has had symbolic and material consequences for transpeople, and particularly for low-income *trans women*. On this issue, Vek Lewis (2008: 2) asks whether “symbolic presentations have material consequences for specific groups of people” such as “*travestis*.” Lewis answers affirmatively. He argues that representations of transpeople—or perverse “cross dressers” as they are oftentimes imagined—in soap operas and well-known criminal cases cast transpeople as violent, criminal, and marginal, and instill a certain kind of “popular consciousness” about them. Similarly to Lewis, but paying particular attention to how “*vestidas*” are often framed, I argue that controlling images inform the dominant ways in which female-gendered transpeople are rendered both legible and hyper visible in Mexico City.

Parallel controlling images concerning gender and sexual beliefs and practices have historically been attached to other racialized, impoverished, and colonized communities at times of marked socioeconomic and political transformation (see McClintock 1995; Stoler

2002). Mexico and Mexican people have not been spared from these dynamics (see Lewis 1961, 1975 [1959]; Paz 1961 [1950]; Ramos 1951 [1934]; Riding 1989 [1985]). The controlling images of Mexicans' barbarism, subservience, fanatic religious fervour, closeted homosexuality and bisexuality, low value of formal education, and little motivation to improve the standard of living have persisted inside and outside of Mexico until the present (see Enrigue 2014). The images of the Latino, or more precisely Mexican, macho man and the submissive woman still uncritically pervade the literature concerning Mexicans' gender and sexual beliefs, practices, and arrangements, and several scholars have set out to provide more nuanced accounts about a vastly diverse group of people and a constantly shifting country (see, for instance, Alarcón 1989; Bartra 1992 [1987]; Glantz 2001; González-López 2004; Gutmann 1996; Hirsch 2003; Hirsch and Nathanson 2001; Wentzell 2011).

While there have been broader imaginings about all Mexicans and all of Mexico, at the time of my extended research the controlling image of the “*vestida*” had become attached to transpeople, and in particular low-income *trans women* who worked as sexual labourers in the streets of Mexico City. This circulating imagery cast *trans women*, by definition, as trouble makers, criminals, alcohol, and drug users. The imagery of social malaise—the “cancer of society” that a media article referred to—is furthermore compounded by the idea of female-gendered transpeople “standing on the streets” as exhibitionists or “made-up” prostitutes.

This idea is encapsulated in the very gendered and classed elements of the notion of “*vestida*” itself. The ways in which low-income *trans women* referred to themselves are indicative of these gender and class dimensions. Many of the *trans women* I met used to

identify themselves as “*vestidas*” prior to learning the “*trans woman*” label. A *trans woman*

I met, for example, told me:

I started being a *mujer transgénero* [transgender woman] when I was 15 years old. I liked dolls since I was little. I liked all that fashion stuff. When people would ask, “What are you?” I’d would say, “*vestida*” [dressed-up female person or someone who dresses up as female]. When I was 15 years old I began dressing up with woman’s trousers and all of that, at first without make-up, and then I began wearing make-up. (Gómez-Ramírez and García 2012: 70)

Paloma García, The Warriors’ leader, also used the term “*vestida*” to refer to herself in the past. When she recounted how she had sought and eventually found the acceptance of her parents for being “*vestida*,” she explained:

I wrote a letter to my mom: “I leave because you don’t love me like I am.” I didn’t know how to say the term *transsexual* [transsexual] or *transgénero* [transgender]. I’d say, “I am *vestida* [someone who dresses up as female],” which is how it’s said vulgarly in the *barrio* [neighbourhood], “Ay, there goes the *vestida*.” Do you understand? So, I didn’t know the terminologies. I didn’t know any of that. [...] In the *barrios* everyone would say “*vestida*” and “*cuca*” [dolloed-up person] and such. *Cuca* was also used, but only so that people would understand you. We’d use *cuca* among us, “Ay, I’m *cuca*, sis,” and to the *heterosexual* [heterosexual] people we’d say that we were *vestidas*, because we didn’t have any knowledge. Isn’t it like that?¹⁰⁶

In these accounts, “*vestida*” reflects both its still common usage to speak about effeminate men who are “made-up” as women and the poor class background of those who use the term.

Moreover, the term “*vestida*” conveys at once artifice and appearance—a more external and possibly temporary fashioning of the self rather than an inner, core,

¹⁰⁶ Paloma used the formal form of address “*usted*” when recollecting her direct speech to her parents. This is a layer of meaning lost in the English translation, but it is an important, if subtle, marker of socioeconomic standing. Using the polite address to speak to one’s parents is often an indication of being from an older generation and/or from a conservative, rural, and/or lower class background.

overpowering subjectivity or identity. Low-income female-gendered transpeople employed the term “*vestida*” throughout my fieldwork, even if they began alternating it with terms such as “trans women” as they gained exposure to self-defined trans activists who, in workshop settings, actively sought to correct the vernacular terminologies that low-income female-gendered transpeople used to speak about themselves. A few *trans women* continue to use the term “*vestida*” today. However, “*vestida*” as a popular controlling image does not convey a respectful stance that seeks to acknowledge trans* subjects by their chosen designations. Rather, the controlling image of the “*vestida*” is a shorthand term imbued with a denigrating tone.

First, the word “*vestida*” was the product of a broader denigrating feminizing environment in which subjects seen as “men” were emasculated. In this widespread view, male subjects were fashioned—and more specifically “dressed-up,” as the literal meaning of *vestido* (with male gender linguistic marker “o”) suggests—as female. They were contrived. The fakeness of their female “customs” was highlighted, and their feminizing move was mocked with the use of a female linguistic gender marker “a.” The derision, however, had a specific class dimension. Not only were *vestidas* contravening the expected masculine patriarchal order by fashioning themselves as female subjects, but they were doing it with the cheap gimmicks of the low-income people who do not have access, knowledge, or interest in engaging in more sophisticated gender-crafting surgical and social technologies that would allow them to “pass” as women.

Significantly, the controlling image was also a shorthand. It unavoidably posited *trans women* as female-dressed male subjects “standing” on the streets. Once cast as on-street sex workers, “*vestidas*” were further locked into the classed dynamics of Mexico City

as nuisances in public space, scantily-clad individuals, and lawbreakers who could easily steal or beat a client or a passerby. In a few of the continuous attempts to bring sex work under socio-legal control, for example, there are explicit prohibitions for female and male sex workers to conduct their business being “merely dressed with lingerie” (Federal District Legislative Assembly 2001: 43), or for dressing “merely in fully or partially transparent clothing” (Federal District Legislative Assembly 2004b: 48). While the socio-legal regulations explicitly include both female- and male-gendered sex workers in their prohibitions, one can presume that they may be guided by an overall idea about transpeople, as more non-trans female sex workers are known to work the streets in a more covert, demure-looking manner to try to disguise what they are doing. Furthermore, the images about “*vestidas*” standing on the streets also include the widely-held idea that they customarily steal from their clients. This may be true, but Rosío Córdova Plaza (2006) explains the robberies her participants engaged in as the only resources left to those who are routinely abused under societal aggression.

In the images of public lawlessness and unruliness that exist in the popular narratives about *trans women*, the dynamics in Mexico City appear to reflect those in other latitudes. For example, the works of Lohana Berkins, Josefina Fernández, and Soledad Cutuli with *travestis* and transsexuals in Argentina show that they are despised for exhibiting themselves and inciting people to carnal practices (Berkins and Fernández 2005; Cutuli 2011). These authors hold that *travestis*’ “scandals” in public space are used to define, subdue, and incarcerate transpeople regardless of their actual involvement in the

outdoor sex trade.¹⁰⁷ The works of Don Kulick and Charles Klein with *travestis* in Brazil indicate a similar situation (Klein 2002; Kulick and Klein 2009). Kulick (1996: 4–5), in particular, affirms that “there is an extremely salient link in the Brazilian popular imagination between travestis and violence. To be a travesti, so the story goes, is to lead a violent life, live in a violent, criminal milieu, commit violence against others, and risk being the victim of violence oneself.” Kulick and Klein (2009) argue that commotions, battles, and scandals in public space serve to force a client to pay more, while also being a form of individual micropolitics that can be seen as a form of resistance of the weak.

In Mexico, the circulating images of transpeople, and particularly *trans women*, are often rendered under this controlling lens. In an analysis of the ways in which transpeople are depicted in mainstream TV programs, Hazel Gloria Davenport (2010) finds a number of significant elements. First, transsexuality is seen as a manifestation of homosexuality, thus cross dressing is seen as an expression of homosexuality and being gay is seen as the antecedent of cross dressing. There is wide scorn towards *travestis* that are exaggeratedly masculine, not feminine. Characters are depicted as overly masculine, overly feminine, or more often, as contradictorily gendered, for example, as hairy *travestis*. Female transpeople in the sex trade are mocked as people with penises, and their male clients as people who seek penises to swallow or as people who are not seeking these kinds of encounters but are faced with them anyway. Calzada de Tlalpan, recognized as a major street for transpeople to work in the sex trade, is a site of televised spectacle and morbid fascination for TV

¹⁰⁷ Please note that here “*travestis*” and “*transexuales*” (lit. transsexuals) are local Argentinean terms. The same Spanish terms are used in other places in Latin America and the Caribbean. “*Travesti*,” in particular, is also a Portuguese term used in Brazil. However, their specific local meanings and uses should not be flattened out or overlooked (see Barbosa 2010; Barbosa 2013; Berkins 2003).

viewers. In this street, as the TV shows go, *travestis* are hairy, fat, masculine, and can even have “three breasts” (Davenport 2010: 105). Lastly, in soap operas, *travestis* are depicted as murderers and they are murderers because they are *travestis*.¹⁰⁸

The associations between transpeople, on-street sex trade, and trouble have long been present in Mexico’s popular imagination. Those linkages were becoming so frequent that by the time my extended fieldwork took place, low-income, sex work-oriented trans life was also beginning to be depicted in prize-winning novels (see Reyes Ávila 2009). Aware of these prevailing imageries, Osa, one of my research participants, one day lamented that many *trans women* would often complain about not being loved by their families, but that they often badly misbehaved and were not good daughters:

[Often people say] “In my house they don’t love me, or anything.” Then I say, “How could they [parents] love them [trans children], if they sleep in until very late, come back drunk, then!” I mean, do you think a family, a mom, a dad [would tolerate that behaviour]? Even if they’re your kid! What’s up?! How can they think that?!

I found similar views internalized among other transpeople. Yesenia, a 40-year old trans* person who identified at times as “*vestida*” and at times as “*gay*” and worked at a beauty parlour in the eastern outskirts of greater Mexico City, for example, rationalized the help she provided to her boyfriends when she would pay for their school books, transportation, or clothes by saying that her in-laws would at least be able to say that she had helped them improve in life: “It’s gay, but he lifted them up.”¹⁰⁹

¹⁰⁸ The meaning of *travesti* here, in local Mexican usage, goes back and forth between cross dresser and transgender.

¹⁰⁹ Yesenia spoke of herself at times in feminine, at times in masculine terms. For the most part, she would use masculine identifiers when referring to how others would speak about her. I keep the masculine gender she used to speak about the hypothetical in-laws’ speech about her.

Nevertheless, these were views existing more broadly in Mexico's society. A widely broadcast scandal concerning the players of the national male soccer team in the fall of 2010 brought many of these controlling images and prevailing attitudes towards transpeople into view during my extended fieldwork. It was rumoured that, in early September, after a winning match against Colombia, the national team players had hosted a celebratory party in Monterrey, a city located in northern Mexico. It was said that the soccer players' party had been attended by female prostitutes, "14 of them," and to make matters worse, "even a *travesti*" (Ramírez 2010: para. 16). When news of a party in which there had been "even a *travesti*" hit the mainstream news, the National Soccer Federation was compelled to investigate and eventually handed hefty fines to several players and suspended others for a few months. The Federation's argument was that the players had not conducted themselves with respect, seriousness, and the spotless behaviour required of anyone representing the national soccer team. In the popular lore, however, this "sexual scandal," as it was framed, came from the fact that a famous soccer player had kissed, and had possibly done more with, a "*travesti*."¹¹⁰ The "scandal" showed that derision and stigmatizing attitudes about sex work, sex workers, and sex work clients prevailed, and that female transpeople were often rendered legible only through the lens of sexual labour. Likewise, since transpeople are seen as sex workers, they are rendered as troublemakers and as scandalous.

¹¹⁰ My hypothesis is that the transperson was not called "*vestida*" in this article for two reasons. First, because *travesti* is also a common term to talk about transpeople in Mexico, and second, because the article was published in an established newspaper. The term "*vestida*" is considered "*barrio*" (ghetto, low, marginal) and trans activists have made great efforts in stabilizing trans* experiences under the mainstream "*TTT*" category, which comprises three "trans populations" identified by the ephemeral or permanent nature, and extent, of their body modifications, and not by the labour niche in which transpeople seek to make a living.

Not only do these circulating images mark the ways in which *trans women* are framed a priori, but also contribute to the ideological work required to uphold their societal exclusion and oppression. These controlling images had both symbolic and material repercussions for the people to whom they get attached. My fieldwork, for instance, showed me that a number of the *trans women* I came to know, their family members, lovers, and friends, had been incarcerated at some point in their lives. To me, this largely stems from the fact that *trans women* and their impoverished milieus are both socially produced and popularly imagined as crime-laden, lawbreaking, and troublesome (see Ávila 2017a).

Moreover, while I, fortunately, did not carry out research with any *trans woman* who was eventually murdered, it is my contention that these prevailing imageries work to foster a climate of structural vulnerability affecting transpeople, and in particular low-income *trans women* or “*vestidas*” standing on the streets of Mexico. The landmark journalistic investigation of Víctor Ronquillo (1994) about the serial killings of *travestis* in sex work and cruising contexts in Chiapas, a southern state in Mexico, and more recently, Rodrigo Parrini Roses and Alejandro Brito Lemus’s (2012) analysis of newspaper coverage of hate crimes in Mexico City, help me support this point.¹¹¹ A close inspection of these works leads me to suggest that the murders of transpeople in Mexico are largely gendered and classed: they have been committed against female transpeople and have overwhelmingly occurred in street-based sex work contexts. I find a similar suggestion in

¹¹¹ Ronquillo’s (1994) account is both chilling and significant not only because it is virtually the only one of its kind, but also because it lets us see some of the historical shifts in sex–gender systems’ conceptualizations and terminologies, and more importantly, the context that many of those despicable murders happened to female-gendered people who were possibly also sex workers. To my knowledge, there has not been any other investigation focused exclusively or systematically on the murders of transpeople in Mexico to date. Parrini Roses and Brito Lemus (2012) devote only four pages to the murders of those “*vestidos como mujeres*” (dressed up like women) or “*trans*” (trans), and conceptualize their discussion within the broader banner of homophobic hate crimes committed against the LGBT collective.

the scholarship on homophobic violence and hate crimes carried out in Brazil (see Carrara and Viana 2006), Costa Rica, Honduras and Nicaragua (see Centro por la Justicia y el Derecho Internacional 2013), and Peru (see Runa 2007). Similarly, in the United States and Canada, a parallel horrific trend has been taking place in the past 5 years, in which the murders of trans women of colour in sex work have taken place (see Sheldon 2015; Snorton and Haritaworn 2013).

“We Aren’t Only Sex Service Providers”

Controlling images are fiction-like boxes with non-fictional symbolic and material consequences (Collins 2005; Said 1989). Yet, the increasing visibility of *trans women* in the urban sex trade carried the challenge of dealing with the undiscerning quality of circulating assumptions about transpeople as well as the numeric presence of transpeople in the stigmatized and “low-value” activity of on-street sexual vending. Self-identified trans activists in Mexico City dealt with this conundrum by either playing down or overlooking the critical place of on-street sexual labour in many *trans women*’s lives. Consider the following accounts.

In the spring of 2011, Alejandra Hurtado and Lucy Bartolomé performed in a play about female transpeople’s experiences in Mexico at the auditorium of the local Human Rights Commission. After the performance, both trans activists engaged in a talkback with the audience, a group of about 150 people who seemed to have some general familiarity with the topic of the performance and discussion. The play presented three first-person *testimonio*-like stories, each representing one of the Ts of the “*TTT* community.” A young

woman in the audience, who identified as part of the “new generation of transsexual girls,” stood on the left side of the auditorium and asked what they would advise for those who were beginning “this process.” She acknowledged that Alejandra and Lucy were more seasoned in these affairs, and that the younger generation “was fortunately benefiting from the great battles that you’ve put forth for all the transsexual community.” In a relaxed yet firm tone, Alejandra, a *trans woman* in her mid-40s, shared the following:

What I can personally say is that my experiences, all of them, have been written into this play. What I can also say is that we, as *chicas trans* [trans girls], should stop having prejudices against our own selves. We can work not only in the *sexoservicio* [sex service] or putting on shows. But we’re *profesionistas* [university educated people].¹¹² We have bachelor’s degrees, we have master’s degrees. So we can contribute *everything* we are to society. Right? We’re not only the trans label. We’re citizens. We’re citizens of this country, and we have so much to offer. Unfortunately, sometimes the doors are not opened to us, but we have to continue insisting: knocking on doors, holding the door until it’s brought down because we’re very important people. And it’s not only self-importance, no, but what was said [earlier] the ignorance, the disinformation about us. Enough! Because if we get walking, one after the other, we’ll forge a chain—even if it sounds cheesy—we can do it. Yes, we can. An individual effort sometimes isn’t enough.

The idea that female-gendered transpeople were not only sex service providers and that the “trans label” often carried this connotation was clearly expressed in Alejandra’s statement.

Echoing Alejandra’s overall sentiment, Lucy then went on to enumerate the several activist and scholarly efforts she knew about, including my research, that were contributing to their struggles: as she explained, these efforts all converged in the battle for the socio-legal recognition of their trans gender identity.

I knew them both from previous contexts. Lucy had invited me to see the play. Neither Alejandra nor Lucy had engaged in on-street sexual vending, in particular, or in

¹¹² *Profesionista* is a common noun referring to someone who has university education.

informal street vending, more broadly. However, when I first met Lucy in 2009 during my pilot research, she said, half-jokingly, that she was desperately looking for a (formal) job, and that since she was not having any luck, she was beginning to consider sex work. She did not specify whether she hypothetically had indoor or outdoor sex work in mind. At the time of my extended research, both Alejandra and Lucy had paid formal jobs. They had become *trans women* at later stages in their lives. In 2011, Lucy, for example, was in her early 50s—an age range I had to estimate because she firmly refused to tell me her age as that was not a question, she said, one should ever ask a woman; she told me she had begun her “transition” in the early 2000s. Both Lucy and Alejandra were university educated, and Lucy had attended a private university, which meant that her degree was highly valued socially and that she had the economic means to put herself through private school.¹¹³ They had gone to university while they were still socially recognized as men.

Earlier in my fieldwork, I had asked Lucy during a formal interview if there was a conference I could attend that would bring together people working on activism for the rights of transpeople and sex work. She said:

Look. This issue. It’s a really interesting issue. This is my opinion, I can obviously be wrong. In the trans world, the major activism in the United States is of sex workers. In the *DF* [Federal District], no. In the *DF*, it’s of middle classes with a certain level of formal education, and in which virtually none, or very few, have ventured into sex work.

Lucy added that she thought that one of the few, and perhaps the only, well-known trans activist who was also a sex worker activist was based in Jalisco, a western state in Mexico.

¹¹³ In Mexico “public” universities are fully funded by the state. So, the distinction between “public” and “private” education in Mexico is not equal to the same distinction in Canada, where one pays tuition fees to attend “public” universities.

Lucy thought that in other states in Mexico, unlike Mexico City, trans activism was more directly associated with sex work. When I asked her to speculate on why this might be the case, she explained:

Look, I don't have anything conclusive, nothing conclusive, eh. I don't know, I don't know, more than a hypothesis this is something on the fly, I haven't thought about this much. But, I don't know, one possibility is that maybe in the *DF* [Federal District], eh, there'd been, it's interesting, I don't know if there's been a conjunction of like more protection, more health campaigns, eh, a disapproval or less permissiveness to police raids, to the raids, more sensitivity towards issues of human rights violations since there's more awareness of them because it's the city. This and the last decade, well, the Human Rights Commission of the *DF* was created in '93, it's been 15 years of complaints. That on the one hand. On the other, perhaps in the *DF*—this is another hypothesis and I may also be very wrong, I have to admit, on that issue I have to admit—trans sex work is more of the escort type.

Lucy then spoke about escorts as trans individuals who spoke different languages, had formal education, and could afford to have costly professional photographs taken to advertise their services online.

During my fieldwork, Kim Fernández, another self-identified trans activist in her late 40s, had two key campaigns for her trans activist work. One was to get the mandatory professional assessments involved in the legal change of name and “sex” in birth documents waived; the other was to have the local HIV Clinic decentralized.¹¹⁴ Similar to other mainstream trans activists, Kim did not have a background in on-street vending or on-street sex work. However, she once told me that she would occasionally and independently turn paid tricks as a dominatrix. Like Lucy and Alejandra, Kim was university educated and had attended university while still being socially perceived as a man. When I met her, she

¹¹⁴ The two most important official ID documents in Mexico, the voting card and the passport, state “sex,” not “gender.”

recognized herself as a “transsexual woman” and had semi-formal employment that allowed her to make trans activism the main activity she did for a living at the time.

In Kim’s view, there was a direct causal link between transpeople not having the right to a legal identity, due to the fees associated with the legal procedure, and transpeople turning to the sex trade. Regarding the lack of legal documents, Kim said:

Ultimately this leads to, like, this leads to a great incursion of transsexual women into sex work. I mean, people who have, and I include myself in it, who’ve had the possibility of studying, the possibility of generating ideas, and all of this, and we cannot gain a living in a different way but from sex work. And so you find that like, that you see a marine biologist, a journalist, an engineer, standing on the street. Right? Because nobody is going to give them jobs, so they wind up prostituting themselves, they wind up, we end up in sex work.

Most mainstream trans activists I met had been able to obtain official documents attesting to their lived name and gender. Many of them had been able to obtain such documents as a result of their incursion into the LGBT activist world. Their links to this world had allowed them to meet lawyers and health professionals who often provided the required professional assessments for them pro bono, or at very low rates. Conversely, none of the on-street trans sex workers with whom I carried out research had a university-level education. At best, a few had been able to obtain some high school education, and most had not always been able to finish secondary school. Needless to say, my study, like most sociocultural anthropological studies, was an ethnographic study with no pretense of harnessing a representative sample. Nevertheless, in the course of my project I did not ever meet or hear about any low-income *trans woman* who were marine biologists, journalists, or engineers working in the on-street sex trade.

When I first spoke to Kim about my research in the fall of 2010, she insisted I should keep in mind that there were *trans women* who were involved in the sex trade and those who were not. If I was going to carry out research with transpeople, she recommended, I had to be careful about how I would approach my questions, especially those around sex work:

How are you going to ask? Right? You have to also see if you're going to speak to transpeople who don't engage in sex work like, I don't know, I don't, I don't see how you could contextualize that if you're going to talk about sex work, and then you'll talk to trans who aren't involved in sex work. Maybe you can add a bit of contrast or something?

Understandably, Kim, as a non-on-street sex worker trans activist, was more aware of “those people who I told you haven't been in sex work.” While sex work cannot and should not be conflated with trans life, on-street sex workers were certainly the most visible segment of the trans population in Mexico City's popular imaginary and social space. This is perhaps why Kim could not easily overlook the incursion of many *trans women* into the sex trade, but whenever she spoke to me about this issue over the following months, she would often resort to generalizations:

There's another really interesting thing. There's a vicious cycle that we can see in the trans experience: your parents reject you for being a trans woman. They shut the door on you in moments when you need them. So you go, you turn to sex work and two things can happen. First, they, the parents, see income coming, and automatically they welcome you back, but they welcome you back with the wallet open. Or else, they disown you twice for being a sex worker, right?

Kim herself had been shunned by her family for her transsexuality, and yet she had not turned to on-street sex work as a result. By contrast, low-income *trans women* like Mariana and Vianey—whom I have featured prominently throughout these pages—were on-street

sex workers, and had been for a number of years, yet had remained an appreciated and central part of their families throughout their lives.

Interactions with other mainstream, self-defined trans activists similarly supported the finding that most were not and had not been on-street sex workers. For example, in June 2011, I spent an afternoon at Jeannie Belgrano's "Party House," a trans entertainment venue—mostly catering to *travestis*—initially located in the eastern part and then in the central parts of Mexico City. Jeannie was in her mid-40s. She also refused to tell me her exact age. She identified herself as a "transgender person" and a "homosexual" because, she would explain, "I was born as a male, and I like men, I mean, I'm a male by genetics, and since I like men, then, my orientation is homosexual. And my gender identity is transgender." In addition to running Party House, Jeannie would perform as a cabaret entertainer, at times with trans-related stage performances for a mostly inebriated male audience. When I asked her about sex work, Jeannie acknowledged that she respected sex workers, but she could not possibly see herself working in the sex trade:

Though I admire them a lot—and I say, what big [balls you have]!—because I can't get used to the idea of being a sex worker, for example, because I don't, I don't see myself being with someone I don't feel attracted to, no? I don't imagine myself getting aroused with someone I don't feel attracted to.

I asked if she had ever worked in the sex trade. She firmly replied: "No. No, certainly not."

Karina Olivares and Ángela Navarrete, two other self-identified activists I interacted with, also had their views about transpeople and sex work. Both identified simply as "women" and explained that they were no longer "trans" or were not interested in categorizing themselves as "trans" any longer. Both had been formally employed at different times in their lives but were not at the time of my fieldwork. On the issue of trans

sex work, Karina, in her 50s, would often tell me that sex work was a “regrettable condition affecting everyone, or almost everyone” or that “for the transsexual gender, sex work is very customary.” She once told me a story she had heard about *trans women* not being allowed entry into a meeting dealing with sex work issues, which crystalized some of the dominant views about “made-up,” scandalous, trans sex workers:

To be honest, I wouldn’t have allowed them [to enter] either, because they were—and it’s not a prejudice—almost in work clothes. It wasn’t a sex work schedule. And a woman who goes exhibiting her body as merchandise to a place where it’s not purchased, that’s complicated.

Ángela, in her early 40s, had a more nuanced perception of trans sex workers, as she was working in the “*sexoservicio*” (sex service) when I met her, though she was involved in indoor sex trade, and she worked on her own. She was involved in several trans activist and cultural projects. She would also contribute to trans health and HIV prevention and evaluation projects for local non-governmental associations often funded at least partially by the state. In the past, Ángela had ventured into the street-based sex trade for two nights, but she had felt really exposed and vulnerable. She had also felt the pressure from her sex worker peers to engage in heavy alcohol consumption and felt fearful about the on-site local drug distribution. So, for a few months, she had decided to pay \$1,500 pesos monthly to promote her sexual services online instead. Of the *trans women* I met, only Rana, the leader of the Cacala Spot, was able to afford to advertise her services online. However, unlike other transpeople who advertised their services on the same site Ángela had chosen, she was not “*activa*” (lit. active; able or willing to anally penetrate a client) and could not put up with the competition. Nor was she interested in doing so. She would bitterly say:

But I was advertising for only 8 or 9 months. And I left. For one because that is not like the target clientele for me because the great majority of the girls there are

active. If you see them, they're your classic transsexual with boobs this big, long nails, with turned-up nose. They have a lot of transformation; they get lots of oils injected. And they do all of this precisely to avoid taking hormones and to be able to work from there [the penis]. I, since I'm all hormone, don't work correctly from there. I don't like it either. Like I say, "Now it turns out that I'm a woman to penetrate men! I'm screwed!"

In other words, virtually all mainstream trans activists I carried out research with lacked any or substantive on-street sex trade background.

Paloma García—The Warriors' leader of whom I have spoken about at length in earlier chapters—was the exception. Then again, Paloma was not a typical trans activist, but rather a street-vending organizer. Virtually all well-known trans activists I spoke to were university educated and had become trans individuals as adults. Paloma was once more the exception since, as I have explained, she had become a "*cuca*" at an early age and was seeking to emerge as a trans activist. The activism of the self-defined trans activists I got to know revolved around improving, at least discursively, the lives of all transpeople. Yet, their "trans" activist efforts—what was branded as such in collective organizing milieus and LGBT and *TTT* forums—focused largely on socio-legal issues of gender identity and their medical management. I did not encounter an explicit and unabashed articulation of on-street sex work as central to *trans women's* lives, and thus as central to the trans activist agenda, despite occasional on-the-ground efforts to prevent STIs among on-street sex workers, such as by distributing condoms.

If anything, sex work—and, I would argue, especially on-street sexual labour—was overwhelmingly considered to be irrelevant to their cause because not all transpeople were (on-street) sex workers. I contend that this was the case because of prevailing whore stigma

and the ways in which this was compounded by a broader trans repudiation that trans activists were seeking to address in trans and sexual diversity activist events.

In October 2010, for example, I and a few low-income *trans women* attended the First Symposium on Trans Identities held in the southern part of Mexico City. There, discussions focused on legal aspects of trans identities, the issues facing trans men, and there was a photographic display with images depicting “*TTT*” pride. During one of the Q&A periods, there was a heated argument about the “inappropriate” use of the term “*vestida*” which someone had used while making an intervention. Then, in March 2011, I and a few low-income *trans women* attended a forum marking International Women’s Day that was held in the downtown area of the city. The trans activist who was part of the panel compellingly helped audience members expand their conceptions about “women,” but no substantive discussion about trans sex workers was held. In another instance, in May 2011, I and a few members of The Warriors made our way to the Mothers Monument located in a central part of Mexico City to commemorate “Diverse Mothers’ Day.” We got photos taken with a rainbow flag. Vianey, Francis and others were there. They held red flowers in their hands. During this event, the issue of on-street trans sex work was also not discussed. The Labour Day March, in May 2011, however, was an “activist” event I went to that departed from this trend. In it, sex work was framed as “as worthy as any other job.” Tellingly, this was an event that was led by non-trans female sex workers and was not attended by any of the self-identified trans activists I knew who regularly made appearances in sexual diversity and trans activist events.

Key concepts developed by feminists of colour and trans feminists appear to be particularly pertinent to shedding light on some of these oversights that I encountered in

Mexico City's mainstream trans politics in relation to on-street sex work. For one, I turn to Audre Lorde's (2007 [1984]) formulation of the notion of "horizontal hostility." Writing in the 1980s, Lorde used this notion to explain the hostility existing among black women and between black and white women in the United States, who were pitted against each other to gain male recognition and approval, which served to deflect attention away from the economic and sociopolitical forces of sexism, racism, heterosexism, and homophobia. Lorde compelled women to move past suspicion or competition as, in her own words, "This is essentially unconstructive resentment because it extends sideways only" (Lorde 2007 [1984]: 47). Lorde (2007 [1984]: 48) added that this "can never result in true progress on the issue because it does not question the vertical lines of power or authority, nor the sexist assumptions which dictate the terms of that competition."

Following this line of argument, one can hold that a similar dynamic of horizontal hostilities was at play among *trans women* in Mexico City, and that sexual labour was the line that marked the animosities among what the "TTT community" would suggest were trans "peers." More particularly, the thorny issue at stake appeared to be on-street sex work. The sense of sameness promulgated by trans activists in mainstream identity-based trans politics delineated similarities among transpeople along gender identity lines. In formal "trans" activist politics, this view, however, was premised upon overlooking and downplaying sexual labour as a significant labour niche for many *trans women*. More particularly, the low-income nature of informal on-street sexual vending, and all the symbolic and cultural associations around this precarious form of labour, seemed to be a significant point of difference between these apparent peers. This is certainly not specific to transpeople in Mexico City; similar horizontal hostility dynamics among stigmatized sexual

minorities have taken place elsewhere. Becki Ross and Rachael Sullivan (2012: 616), for example, offer a poignant example of the “miopia of liberationist social movements” in Vancouver between 1975 and 1985, which pitted white gay men against outdoor sex workers, many racialized, rather than seizing the opportunity to put forth an encompassing sexual liberation campaign at a time of socioeconomic change. In other words, as I have explained at length, the controlling images of “*vestidas*” permeate Mexico City’s popular consciousness; it is the negative controlling associations with artifice and on-street sexual labour malaise mainstream trans activists were seeking to distance themselves from.

What is more, many of the horizontal hostilities among *trans women* in Mexico City appeared to have been tainted by the widely demobilizing strategy known as the “politics of respectability.” Evelyn Hammonds (1997) explains that up until the late 1990s, silence largely permeated black women’s sexuality in the United States as a result of the lingering prejudices and inequalities fostered by slavery. Since sexuality was a centrepiece in the ideological justifications of control and abuse committed against black people, black women responded by refraining from the debate and upholding hegemonic values around promiscuity and morality. In Hammonds’s (1997: 174) own words: “The appropriation of respectability and the denial of sexuality was, therefore, a nobler path to emphasizing that the story of black women’s immorality was a lie.” Yet, these gendered sexual ideologies were underpinned by political and economic subordinations that respectability politics failed to challenge.

The contemporary politics of trans respectability in Mexico City appear to involve shunning the on-street sexual labour of many of the formerly self-identified “*vestidas*” within mainstream trans activism. Strikingly, this would appear to be an expression of age-

old, gendered whore stigma within an explicitly trans context. Pheterson (1990) defined whore stigma as “a social and legal branding of women who are suspected of being or acting like prostitutes” (397), and she considered the stigma attached to women prostitutes as a general “female gender stigma” with harmful legal, social, economic, and political ramifications (398). I argue that this female gender stigma regulating female subjects’ genders and sexualities is extended to both trans and non-trans female-gendered individuals. The whore stigma is a gendered controlling image, and as I have demonstrated in this chapter, it has affected *trans women* in Mexico, particularly low-income, on-street sexual labourers.

It would appear as though the oversights I have described in this chapter were not only classed, but also deeply gendered. They affect female transgender individuals, and they affect those female transgender individuals who seek to make a living from the on-street sexual informal labour niche. Observing, more broadly, how LGBT activist collectives fall into traps of respectability politics in the demands they put forward, Gloria Careaga Pérez (2001) has conceptualized these dynamics as the moralization of LGBT movements in Mexico. Such politics and the limits they impose on social movements have similarly been observed by queer (e.g., Butler 2002) and trans activists and scholars in other North American contexts (see Irving 2013; Spade 2012; Spade and Willse 2000). Trans scholars have poignantly raised a critique about the homonormative erasures of transpeople within queer politics (Stryker 2008). The developments in Mexico City could suggest that symbolic and material inequalities affecting female-gendered, low-income “*vestidas*” standing on the streets are being overlooked in mainstream trans politics. A normative trans lens framed along sex–gender concerns may be working towards the

erasure of those trans subjects who have been greatly affected by the exacerbation of socioeconomic inequalities in Mexico. It is my contention that differing symbolic and material positions between trans activists and trans sex workers, expressed in their differing socioeconomic standings and employment backgrounds shape these oversights in mainstream trans politics. It would appear that trans repudiation has been battled against without substantive consideration of the ways in which, for low-income transpeople, this repudiation is deeply compounded by whore stigma. The debates about the HIV Clinic further exemplify this point.

Mexico City's HIV Clinic

The uneven material and symbolic positions existing among transpeople were a result of their disparate educational and employment backgrounds. These were possibly best exemplified by the often-ardent debates over Mexico City's HIV Clinic, where a year after the approval of the local 2008 trans law, some health care services for trans individuals began to be provided.

As explained in Chapter 2, in Mexico City, a reform made to the local Civil Code in August 2008 effectively allowed transpeople to change their name and sex on birth certificates. This legal change received positive comments from trans communities because the new birth certificates did not have marginal annotations leaving a trace of the change. It was also praised because, even though it required hormonal and psychological professional assessments, a person did not need to undergo sex reassignment surgery to apply for name and sex change on official documents.

A year later, in August 2009, further changes were introduced to the *Health Act* of Mexico City, resulting in the creation of a health program for transpeople based in Mexico City's HIV Clinic (Federal District Legislative Assembly 2009).¹¹⁵ This clinic has existed since 1938, but it became an HIV- and STI-focused clinic in 2000. Nine years later, and after undergoing extensive renovations, the clinic also became the site where Mexico City's Trans Health Program was to be based. The program aimed to provide hormonal treatments and psychological counselling, as well as prevention and treatment programs for STIs and HIV/AIDS among the trans population. No provision was made in regards to sex reassignment surgeries, and trans health was understood to comprise only hormonal treatments, STI prevention and treatment, and psychological care. This was the case because, as the expert legal opinions on the trans law demonstrate, the costs of providing other health services were thought to be untenable for the state (Federal District Legislative Assembly 2008b).

Despite the fact that the reforms to the Civil Code opened the door to obtain official documents and thus legal recognition for transpeople, the changes to the *Health Act* resulted in the creation of a trans health program delivered in the HIV Clinic. The fact that the trans health program was both defined in relation to HIV and STI prevention measures and medical treatment, in addition to the location where it was set, sparked a heated debate among trans activists. The major point of contention among activists revolved around whether the trans healthcare program should or should not be based out of the HIV Clinic, a location that, for many, underscored associations with disease and conditions needing to be

¹¹⁵ This was stated in Article 24, section XXI.

cured. Supporters and detractors were embattled in a bitter feud that popped up at every stage during my fieldwork.

The debate was particularly strong among those trans activists who held markedly differing views and strategies around transpeople, HIV, gay men, sex work, and healthcare. While all activists considered the creation of a Trans Health Program in Mexico a success, they differed on the impact of this development on the general wellbeing of transpeople. Some activists acknowledged the limitations of the program but saw it as a hard-won achievement that they had to fight for. Others were profoundly dissatisfied with what they saw as an equation or almost automatic association of trans health with HIV/AIDS, and by association, with gay men and sex work. They argued that trans identities were not synonymous with the HIV/AIDS epidemic. They rightly claimed that being a transperson was not an illness, and the mere idea of having to go to a hospital to receive care caused distrust and pain. As a result, this group of activists forcefully advocated for the removal of the Trans Health Program from the HIV Clinic, and proposed its decentralization instead, with wider availability of services in hospitals and clinics throughout Mexico City.

At the root of these debates lay complex intersections of class, gender, and sexual stigma associated with being a trans individual, a gay man, an HIV-positive person, or a sex worker. This was expressed in the differing views trans activists held toward the delivery of a health program for *trans women* in the HIV Clinic. Those aware of the limitations of the program supported the expansion of the services out of the walls of this clinic, but also supported the delivery of medical care for transpeople in this setting. Many of them, in fact, sought and obtained their own hormonal treatments in this space, and while generally not being HIV positive, they did not feel that the stigma and discrimination affecting HIV-

positive people affected them directly. In fact, many trans-related workshops and activities geared towards transpeople were held in the clinic. One may argue that by making the HIV Clinic their own space for trans health and social services, thus expanding the meanings associated with that space to include other kinds of health care, these activists indirectly contributed to the destigmatization of HIV-positive people.

By contrast, activists opposing the use of this site for trans health services and social activities emphasized the harmful associations between trans identities and HIV/AIDS in the provision of health services. They argued that this sustained the generalized view that trans individuals suffered from a mental or physical illness. They made it clear that transsexual and transgender “conditions” were not illnesses, and that transpeople’s health needs were neither reduced to, nor defined by, HIV/AIDS concerns. This view was solidly put forward by Kim Fernández, for instance. Consequently, she and similarly minded activists put forward a more comprehensive health care proposal that sought to decentralize and expand these services to all the clinics in Mexico City.

These opposing activists also sought, albeit not always explicitly, to challenge other prevalent stigmatizing associations made between HIV and gay men, and between HIV and sex work that were, by virtue of the trans healthcare program being based at the HIV Clinic, tainting transpeople as well. As I discussed in earlier chapters, one of the major demands of *trans women* in Mexico City was to be recognized as such, and thus as distinct from “homosexuals,” “gay men,” and “men who have sex with men.” Conscious of both the view of sex work as degrading and the quotidian conflation of *trans women* and sex worker, trans activists actively sought to remove the stigmatizing shadow of commercial sex from their sociopolitical and legal demands. This is also why they saw it as crucial to actively

lobby against the presence of the trans health program in the HIV Clinic, even at the risk of losing the healthcare provision of indispensable services, in an attempt to expand health services to other hospitals in the already frail and underfunded public health care system in Mexico City.

Self-identified trans activists did not agree with each other on any of this. Lucy, for example, often expressed sophisticated analyses of transpeople's circumstances, and both received her hormonal treatments and attended events in the HIV Clinic. Yet one day, she spoke of the HIV Clinic as a sex work-oriented clinic: "In the case of the *DF*, we now have lots of good things. There's the [HIV] Clinic, which is a centre for sex work, for [female-gendered] sex worker, I think." When she told me this, Lucy framed it positively. Yet, later on, she joined the choir of trans activist voices seeking to "decentralize" the trans healthcare program into the many clinics spread out throughout the city and sponsored by the government of Mexico City's Health Secretary. In contrast, Graciela Jimenez, who identified as "*travesti*," and Ángela Navarrete—whom I have mentioned earlier—held workshops and activities for the trans population in the HIV Clinic, received hormonal treatments there, and disagreed with the decentralization of the trans healthcare program. In a polite yet public exchange, Ángela told Lucy:

I definitely disagree with seeking the decentralization of a unique space! It's totally absurd, Lucy. And even more with the thing about the stigmatization because of the HIV. Nobody stigmatizes me there or anything like that. What we've been promoting is the *strengthening of the centre that we already have*! Oh my god! All that we've done for this to work, and we're still trying to take shots at it. Of course, I don't agree, and I never will.

Likewise, these dynamics were sharply expressed when trans activists debated over the appropriateness of holding events during the fall of 2010 in support of the international

campaign “Stop Trans Pathologization” (STP) in the HIV Clinic.¹¹⁶ Two different sites were chosen for actions seeking to support the same goal. One group took the HIV Clinic as space for their demonstrations. Even though the demonstrators at the HIV Clinic openly expressed the need to expand trans services beyond this clinic, and to broaden its focus to include surgeries and side effects derived from long-term hormonal ingestion, such as testicular cancer, they also acknowledged that male-to-female individuals were among the populations at greater risk of HIV infections in Mexico. Thus, they saw a reason for the program to remain in this space.

The other group, in contrast, demonstrated in the downtown area of Mexico City and argued that the insistence on maintaining the Transgender Health Program in the HIV Clinic was an expression of institutionalized transphobia. They insisted that hormonal and psychological programs had to be made available to trans women in all health centres. Moreover, they expressed concern with the stigmatizing and pathologizing effects of situating trans health delivery in this centre, because being a transperson was not equivalent to being an HIV-positive person. According to them, stigma and discrimination against transpeople were reinforced by the continuous association of trans identities with the virus, and such an insidious link was yet one more expression of the pathologization they were trying so hard to address.

The politics of trans activism around the clinic translated differently for low-income trans sex workers. Francis, for example, saw the HIV Clinic as a source of free condoms

¹¹⁶ In 2010, the international STP campaign sought the depathologization of trans identities by promoting the removal of the categories “gender dysphoria” and “gender identity disorder” from the American Psychological Association’s *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (DSM) and the World Health Organization’s *International Classification of Diseases* (ICD) (see also Suess et al. 2014).

that she could later try to sell to her peers in the “spot” as a supplement to her limited income as a sex worker. Mariana had occasional HIV tests done in the HIV Clinic, and during one of my follow-up research trips, I learned that she had accessed some of the endocrinology services and had initially sought care for a testicular cancer scare.

For the most part, I would hear on-street sex workers not wanting to go to the HIV Clinic, partly because they had been in contact with an activist who stood firmly against the delivery of the trans healthcare program in the HIV Clinic, but also because many of them did not necessarily seek the medicalized aspects of the healthcare program, as they did not want to jeopardize their ability to have erections. Rana, the leader of the Cacala Spot, for example, saw erections as central to her pleasure but also as crucial to her sex work. This was the unstated reality for most low-income trans sex workers I met, since their only competitive advantage over non-trans female-gendered and male-gendered sex workers was their potential ability to offer penetrations, or the allure of penetrations wrapped in a female-fashioned package, to their clients.

However, many trans sex workers said they did not go to the clinic, and if they did, they were afraid because they feared being seen as HIV-positive people. This is not surprising, since this could have brought negative social and labour consequences into their lives. Their labour opportunities were already limited, and the competition on the streets was intense. They certainly could not afford to be associated with, thought of, or found out to be HIV positive, something reflected in a common form of *bufar* (taunting) among trans sex workers; they would say or spread the rumour that someone had “*bicho*,” a term which literally means “insect” but derives from the spelled pronunciation of “V-I-H” (H-I-V) in Spanish.

Despite this heated debate, trans activists affirmed that the trans population was particularly vulnerable to HIV infection. Until recently, existing studies included *trans women* in the categories of “men who have sex with men” or “gay men.” They indicated that trans sex workers were at high risk of HIV infection (Infante et al. 2009). This has been supported by a more recent representative sample study of over 500 “transwomen” in Mexico City, which found that they had an overall HIV prevalence rate of 40 percent when the prevalence in the general population is less than 1 percent (Colchero et al. 2015). Trans activists who chose to work within the HIV Clinic sought to make this specific vulnerability visible so that transpeople could access prevention and treatment options.

In addition to shedding light on mechanisms around stigma (Goffman 1963), I am also proposing that the debates among trans activists over the HIV Clinic showed two disavowals at play. One was related to the now-novel way of thinking about trans* experiences and subjectivities in the sex–gender system as something to do with gender identity rather than sexual orientation, which studies about previous and coexisting historical and working-class configurations in Mexico suggest was once the more common frame for discussing these issues (Carrier 1995; Carrillo 2002; Gutmann 1996; Prieur 1998b). This disavowal involved refusing to be labelled as “gay,” one of the groups with the most HIV prevalence in Mexico. The other disavowal had to do with sex work, a labour form still imagined to be filled with STIs and social trouble; more particularly, this disavowal had to do with low-income, on-street sexual labour, a niche that conjured up images of criminality, artifice, and trouble.

Oversights

In Mexico City, existing horizontal hostilities between *trans women* appeared to have been shaped by key intersectional oversights. In the dual meaning that Viviane Namaste (2015) highlights, as overly-seeing and overlooking, “oversights” structure visions of trans politics in regard to on-street sex work in ways that are exclusionary. On one hand, we have the overdetermined, hyper visible presence of *trans women* on the streets of Mexico City working as sexual labourers; on the other, we have their sexual labour being largely overlooked or under-articulated among self-defined trans activists and in sociopolitical events that are marked as trans or sexual diversity activism. These oversights prevent trans activists from fully realizing, acknowledging, and understanding the sociopolitical, cultural, and symbolic dynamics faced by their low-income peers in their daily contexts. In other words, the symbolic and material differences existing among differently located *trans women*, as well as trans gender identity-based demands as the main form of Mexico City’s trans activism, appear to leave mainstream self-identified trans activists largely unable to nurture and sustain solidarities with on-street trans sex workers.

While it would be simplistic and misguided to fault activists for the production of Mexico’s unrelenting inequality structures, the concept of oversights allows us to embrace an intersectional analysis to understand the material and symbolic processes involved in their continuous reproduction. As William Roseberry (1982) points out in reference to anthropological analysis, we need to account for “the presence of social and cultural differentiation, even within an apparently uniform text” (1023) because this brings to the fore relations of power and domination, and ultimately an understanding of culture as formed by “material social process[es]” (1023). My ethnographic fieldwork suggests that

this is still true. Further, a few trans activists, such as Mirha-Soleil Ross (in Namaste 2011 [2005]: 117–39) in eastern Canada, have articulated a similar critique when they question the notion of trans “peership,” or the idea that all transpeople are peers of one another because of their trans identity. Lines of transgender sameness overlook class-related disparities and circumstances concerning imprisonment, detox programs, and sexual labour. The notion of oversights compels us to move away from analyses focused strictly on sideways visions and into analyses that illuminate intersecting gender, labour, and class dynamics within a specific group.

Then again, thinking of these dynamics in strict individual terms would run the risk of assigning individual responsibility for issues that are structurally underpinned. This is what Lila Abu-Lughod (1990) was seeking to argue when she convincingly held that acts of resistance are apt diagnostics of power. More specifically, Abu-Lughod explained: “If the systems of power are multiple, then resisting at one level may catch people up at other levels” (53). In depicting the material and symbolic positionings of transpeople in Mexico, I have sought to show that interlocking systems of class, gender, and sexuality were at play, and that a limited view of issues of gender inevitably led to disregarding crucial issues of sexuality and class. Likewise, if stigmatized and marginalized populations tend to have the same values of dominant groups, as Erving Goffman (1963: 138) has claimed, a great deal of cultural and conscious political work would be needed to uproot such harmful ethos, both within and outside trans communities. Even though gender- and sexuality-based mobilizations are often conceived of as unified in their struggles, my research supports the thesis that these movements are shaped and guided by differing moral and political visions

grounded in different material realities; moreover, these may only be expressions of the broader structural constraints under which people find themselves.

Conclusion

I opened this chapter with a depiction of the ways in which the expansion of the on-street sex trade spots in Mexico City has also brought about a hypervisibility of *trans women* working the streets. At the time I carried out my extended field research, trans sex workers were everywhere in sight, during the day and at night, in many of the urban public thoroughfares. I have suggested in previous chapters that the hypervisibility of *trans women* as on-street sex workers partly reflects a palpable sociocultural reality: the multiplication of spots, the increasing number of *trans women* working them, and the recognition of trans* individuals as transpeople in a shifting sex–gender system. Their hypervisibility likewise stems from the material and symbolic production and reproduction of the “*vestida*” as a controlling image of female-gendered transpeople, and particularly low-income *trans women*, as made-up—in the sense of external artifice—sexual labourers, trouble-makers, and criminals.

Self-defined trans activists did not—and in my view, really could not—fail to notice the frequent links between female transpeople and sexual labour. Those I spoke to responded to these habitual connections from their overriding position as individuals who lacked informal vending—specifically on-street sexual vending—experience; they played down or overlooked the significant place of on-street sex work in many *trans women*’s lives. Trans activist events similarly fail to bring about a sustained discussion about the

central place that sexual labour occupies in many low-income *trans women*'s lives. Fending off a controlling image unwittingly worked to disavow sexual labour as central to the realities of their low-income trans peers. Sexual labour cannot and should not be amalgamated uncritically with trans life, and yet, perhaps most strikingly exemplified by the number 2 subway line moving along the length of Calzada de Tlalpan, on-street sex workers were the most visible segment of the trans population in Mexico City. Mainstream identity-based trans politics failed to illuminate the realities of low-income *trans women* whose livelihoods and contexts were not shared by better-off trans activists to claim as their own. Intersecting gender, labour, and class oversights were at play in the respectability repudiations that trans sex workers faced.

I now move into the last section of this dissertation, the Conclusion, where I recapitulate the arguments I have made throughout this work, elaborate on the contributions, significance, and contemporary relevance of my work, and point to future directions for research. I also provide an update on some of the sociopolitical developments that the research participants featured in the preceding chapters have encountered since I last saw them.

Conclusion

Intersections and Refinements

In this anthropological feminist ethnography, I have documented some of the sociopolitical, economic, and symbolic tensions existing between self-identified trans activists and trans on-street vendors primarily of sexual services in Mexico City. I have employed a critical feminist framework to consider the struggles for transpeople's rights and recognition, and the socioeconomic circumstances and livelihoods of *trans women*, particularly of low-income female-gendered transpeople in contemporary Mexico.

In Chapter 1, I considered the site and temporal frames where I carried out research: Mexico City at a time of bicentennial celebrations and the increasing ravaging effects of a nation-wide, state-led “war on drugs” that, by 2016, had left an estimated 150,000 people murdered and 28,000 people disappeared (Pardo Veiras 2016). I sought to depict Mexico City as a site where complexity and multiplicity prevail despite mainstream imaginings of the city as an overwhelming, delirious place. I also considered the ways in which the circumstances of those with whom I carried out research, as well as the conditions that framed this study, shaped differing research methodologies as my project was underway. Similarly, drawing on the impetus of feminist scholarship to recognize and discuss the politics of our locations, I laid out my structural positioning as a cisgender woman with no experiential background in the sex trade, and the resulting in-built systemic privileges that have largely spared me from the material and symbolic effects of compounded whore stigma and trans repudiation. These are structural privileges that substantially set me apart

from many of my research participants, for whom informal on-street labour, low-income socioeconomic standing, as well as precarious mortality and ubiquitous incarcerations, are part of their daily lives. Lastly, also following feminist scholarship, I explained my intention to portray events in an anti-essentialist and anti-culturalist vein. This intention appears to be even more significant now as I wrap up this work, because a rising anti-Mexico and anti-Mexicans rhetoric has renewed in intensity in North America (see Dreyfuss 2015; Neate 2015), and persistent racialized, classed, sexualized, and gendered narratives about Mexico and Mexicans continue to be fueled through hatred and division, and recycled for political purposes, private capital gain, and imperial hegemony (see Hill 1993; Mendoza-Denton 2017).

In Chapter 2, I examined the historical and contemporary production of sexual labour as a social problem that needs to be addressed. Mexico City underwent a shift from state-regulated brothel prostitution to tolerated sex work between the mid-19th and mid-20th centuries. While sexual labour is not considered to be a criminal activity, current civic law leaves sex workers susceptible to administrative offences that “infringe on the tranquility of people” (Federal District Legislative Assembly 2004a). Continuous regulatory attempts in Mexico City have been introduced, and I shed further light on those that have been put forward since the early 2000s. Sex work is often perceived as a sprawling problem taking places on the streets of the city. In Mexico City, the streets are imagined through socio-legal interventions and debates as quintessential places where paid sexual labour occurs. While a few studies have shown that sex work in Mexico City takes place in different on- and off-street venues (Uribe-Salas et al. 2007), on-street sex work in Mexico City has dominated the literature (Allen et al. 2003; Infante et al. 2009; Lamas

1993, 1996, 2002; Prieur 1998b). This likely stems from the fact that on-street sex work is the most visible of the sex trade. At the same time, the *trans women* with whom I conducted research largely turned to sexual labour as their main source of income and they largely solicited on the streets. As the geographies of the on-street sex trade have shifted within the recent past, *trans women* have gained rising visibility within them. It is against this backdrop that the approval of the local trans law came about in 2008. The conceptualization of the “sex–gender concordance” legislation rightly sought legal recognition for transpeople along sex–gender lines. Yet, I also pointed out that on-street sexual labour, a crucial issue shaping the livelihoods of low-income female-gendered transpeople, did not figure in the socio-legal debates around transpeople’s rights.

In Chapter 3, I illuminated some of the broader social class dynamics and histories impinging upon the naming practices, embodiment aspirations, sexualized humour, and relationships established by *trans women*, particularly the lower-income ones. In the studies of transpeople in Mexico and other parts of Latin America we learn a lot, for example, about their sex–gender bodily modifications and paid and non-paid sexual practices and preferences. Yet, we have seldom learned about the ways in which their names reflect the wider processes of socioeconomic privilege they are seeking to tap into (for an exception see Vargas Cervantes 2014). We seldom learn about the sexualized humour they know as “*bufar*,” or the kin relationships between “sisters,” “mothers,” and “daughters” they forge with others involved in the on-street sex trade. I sought to emphasize those more “miniature” sociocultural developments, following Dorothy Ko’s (2005) conception, while also shedding light on the ways in which these developments are structured by more “gigantic” socioeconomic, political, and historical processes that frame, for example, their

religious practices and the neighbourhoods where they tend to congregate, as criminal and classed. Mexico City is a society deeply marked by socioeconomic differences; some of these differences are reinscribed at the regional and national levels (Bartolomé 1997; Domínguez-Ruvalcaba 2010; Lomnitz-Adler 1992; Sariago Rodríguez 1999; Wright 2001). While local government officials and left-wing intellectuals often imagine Mexico City as pinnacle of socioeconomic development and freedoms, the lives, beliefs, and practices of transpeople—impoverished female-gendered ones in particular—remain classed within these broader dynamics.

In Chapter 4, I continued the exploration of the omissions present in the literature on transpeople in Mexico. Here, I focused on the emphasis on sex work in the published studies and the coinciding failure to substantially discuss the informal and largely on-street nature of such sexual labour. I pointed out that this omission was striking considering the extent to which the informal economy has been and continues to be central to the production of economic value in the country, and the extent to which over half of the working population in Mexico seeks to make a living in the informal sector. I illustrated this point using ethnographic profiles of three on-street vendors of sexual services and other goods and their ongoing, as well as differing, relationships with The Warriors. I likewise presented an ethnographic description of the headquarters and activities undertaken at the street-vending association called The Warriors, as well as the work of its leader, Paloma García.

On-street informality shaped the livelihoods of most participants in this study. One of the implications from my account is that trans street vendors should be reconceived as informal labourers rather than simply as sex workers in the abstract. Their precarious

informal on-street labour, despite the almost unanimous focus on issues of sex work in the literature, has gone largely overlooked. It is not implausible to entertain the idea that, in other parts of the country, low-income transpeople are, also, like many others in Mexico, street vendors of sexual services and other goods. Far from uncritically seeking to remove the “sex-work taint” related to whore stigma from my participants, I have sought to reconceive them more specifically as precarious informal on-street workers. In my view, this move will help us reconsider future representations of transpeople in Mexico. This will hopefully be so because the way in which sex work among transpeople has been explored largely works to portray sexual labour as an almost quasi-identity that gets attached to low-income female-gendered transpeople in Mexico. This narrow frame may ironically prevent the depiction of trans sex workers as workers, and with it the sociopolitical mobilization of transpeople for sex workers’ rights.

Lastly, in Chapter 5, I explicitly employed Namaste’s concept of “oversights” to illuminate the issues that are profiled and conceived of as “trans issues” in dominant trans activist events and among self-defined trans activists. In these efforts, sexual labour has been shunned or overlooked, and as a result it has remained uncritically tainted with stigma. In my view, dominant activism identified as trans activism has reproduced, albeit unwittingly, the broader stigma facing sex workers and HIV-positive people. Horizontal hostilities (Lorde 2007 [1984]) and the politics of respectability (Hammonds 1997), to use two classic feminist concepts, have been at play in the oversights of sexual labour as critical to low-income *trans women*’s livelihoods. While “*vestidas*” remain highly visible on the streets of Mexico City, such as in the city-long Calzada de Tlalpan, their on-street sexual labour remains understood through the controlling images—using Collins’s concept (2009

[2000])—of criminality and trouble. Because of the on-street sexual labour connotations attached to “*vestidas*”—those who “dress up” as women “to stand on the streets” of Mexico City—they have largely remained outside of the concerns of transpeople that are considered to be legitimate. I suggested that legal reform and sociocultural campaigns focused on single issues dominated by preoccupations with gender subjectivities are important activist efforts. Yet, these efforts have failed to account for the intersectional challenges of sex–gender, socioeconomic class, and informal sexual labour that female-gendered transpeople, particularly low-income *trans women*, continue to face.

In depicting some of the life circumstances, socioeconomic contexts, and collective organizing efforts of *trans women* in Mexico City, my dissertation contributes to current discussions within trans studies and sex work studies. Specifically, it brings together two fields of scholarship that have, many times legitimately, been understood as distinct areas of critical inquiry. There is merit in compartmentalizing each of these fields. For one, neither are all transpeople’s livelihoods related to sex work, nor are all sex workers transpeople. However, my research leads me to claim that in some contexts—such as in contemporary Mexico City—the articulation of both trans and sex work frames together is necessary to gain analytical comprehension of trans politics and transpeople’s experiences. I found that past or continuing participation in the on-street sex trade shaped a sizable number of *trans women*’s lives and livelihoods and that this participation, in turn, was shaped by the extensive informal street-vending trade in Mexico City. By the same token, even the views and agendas of those trans activists who had never engaged in paid sexual labour were informed by the existence of the sex trade as a visible economic niche in Mexico City’s thoroughfares, and by the hyper visible participation of transpeople in it.

Most low-income *trans women* I met had been on-street sex workers at some point in their lives. The pervasive image of the “*vestida*,” the trans sex worker, as a trouble-maker, criminal, exhibitionist, and “made-up” person “standing” on many streets in Mexico City, and the material and symbolic consequences for all transpeople emerging from these harmful confluences, posed still unrecognized limitations for dominant trans activism and trans activists seeking to bring about justice, wellbeing, and legitimacy for transpeople in Mexico.

In this dissertation, I have attempted to examine the intersections of trans realities and sex worker realities by portraying their on-the-ground articulations in each of my chapters. Conceptually, I have similarly tried to bring together key insights and debates from both critical trans and sex work studies to account for such complexities. My work contributes specifically to critical trans studies by underscoring the constant need for feminist intersectional frameworks (see Crenshaw 1991) to better understand transpeople’s circumstances. My research findings echo those of Viviane Namaste (2000, 2011 [2005], 2015), Dean Spade (2009, 2012, 2015 [2011]), and David Valentine (2007), among other scholars (see also Irving 2013), in the reaffirmation that transpeople’s lived experiences are not merely circumscribed by issues of gender identity or sex–gender stratifications, as mainstream trans politics and earlier scholarly propositions suggested (see Butler 1999 [1990], 2001; Rubin 1984). In Mexico, transpeople’s issues intersect with sex workers’ issues, informal labourers’ issues, and impoverished people’s issues, as much as they also at times overlap with gender and sexuality issues. My doctoral dissertation has paid attention to how transpeople’s lives and sex work intersect in Mexico City, despite local trans activists’ efforts to overlook and downplay a reality that, at this time in history and in

this geopolitical juncture, is widely prevalent and visible. My work argues for the relevance of taking labour, and in this case, sexual labour, into account in the emergent field of critical trans studies (Namaste 2004).

My doctoral work contributes specifically to sex work studies by showing that the broader socioeconomic context in which sexual labour takes place is important. Studies by Teela Sanders (2016) and Kate Hardy (2010, 2016) have shown the crucial significance of wider socioeconomic contexts in other geopolitical research locations. Research on trans sex workers in Mexico (Castillo et al. 2010; Córdova Plaza 2007; Howe et al. 2008; Infante et al. 2009) has tended to employ a narrow sex work framework that unwittingly reproduces an essentialist idea of sex work as an individual's quasi-identity—what Gail Pheterson (1990) influentially conceptualized as a pervasive “prostitute” or “whore” lens—rather than as a flexible, present-day labour niche. My fieldwork with The Warriors and several *trans women* affiliated at various times with this street-vending association shows that sexual labour is a niche that poor and disenfranchised transpeople in Mexico City utilize to try to make ends meet.

Notably, the *trans women* with whom I carried out research were not just any kind of sexual labourers, but specifically on-street sex workers, and their paid sexual transactions were nested within, and alongside, other forms of informal street-vending trade. Some scholars have found that among impoverished people, sex work is a rational decision between formal but inflexible and low-waged job opportunities and the informal and equally lowly paid but flexible employment options available to them (Rosen and Venkatesh 2008). Future studies should inquire into how these choices play out in contexts where the options for formal, even if low-waged, employments are very limited and where,

instead, different informal labour options (criminalized and non-criminalized) may well be all that structurally impoverished individuals are able to access. What this means is that paying attention to the broader socioeconomic contexts in which sexual labour occurs opens up the space to understand the stratified gendered and class-based sex industry, as other studies in this field have consistently shown (see Brock 1998; Gall 2006; Lamas 1993; Lewis 2000). In the case of Mexico City, my research uncovers the circumstances on-street trans sex workers face that stem from the precarious, informal nature of their employment and, more specifically, from the vilified place of the sex trade within Mexico's already-condemned street-vending trade.

The tensions I show throughout my dissertation serve as a springboard for future discussion about the ways in which both omissions and spotlights are present in the literature and in collective organizing efforts. This is what Viviane Namaste (2015) compellingly conceives of as "oversights," and these oversights may simultaneously contribute to and hamper the ongoing struggle for the recognition of sexual labour as a legitimate form of employment. Consequently, oversights can also affect the pressing battle to improve the precarious conditions of the sex trade in Mexico in which on-street informal workers, some of them *trans women*, seek to subsist. My ethnographic fieldwork with *trans women* in Mexico City has led me to the conviction that trans sex work should occupy a central place in destigmatizing efforts within trans politics. The continuing struggle against whore stigma, compounded with a continuing struggle against trans repudiation, may help precipitate this shift in the near future. The study of transpeople's experiences in Mexico requires an understanding of the socioeconomic on-street informal contexts in which sexual labour occurs. Under this interlocking frame of trans and sex work studies, self-defined

trans activists may find themselves in need of forging strategic alliances and intersectional advocacy programs with unforeseen, but important collaborators to achieve socioeconomic justice for all transpeople in Mexico. My research demonstrates that some of those at first unexpected, yet ultimately logical allies turn out to be street vendors and informal workers. One avenue for future research would be to examine the place, if any, of transpeople (as a trans-identified group of people) in the organized labour movement of workers in Mexico and elsewhere who seek better and fairer working conditions. Several studies have taken on this task in different places around the world (Gall 2006; Hardy 2010; Misra et al. 2005; Zangger 2015); it is important to know more about these developments in Mexico, too (for a recent sex worker-led initiative in this direction, see Madrid Romero et al. 2014).

Ethnographically, my dissertation contributes to the refinement of existing portrayals of Mexico, Mexico City, and Mexicans. Taking up the long-standing anti-essentialist spirit at the heart of feminist anthropology (see Behar and Gordon 1995; Checker et al. 2014; Di Leonardo 1991; Reiter 1975; Rosaldo and Lamphere 1974), I have sought to write against culturalism, exoticism, and radical mystical difference (see Abu-Lughod 1991; Keesing 1990; Trouillot 1991). I have sought to take to task existing stereotypical portrayals of transpeople, sex workers, activists, on-street labourers, as well as Mexicans, Mexico City, and Mexico. Stereotypes are controlling images—the imaginings about a group of people that confine them to fiction-like boxes with considerable non-fictional daily material, symbolic, and social consequences (Collins 2005; Said 1989). My goal in each chapter has been to help dismantle existing culturalist, exoticist, othering imageries. I have thus sought to bring the unexpected corners—if I may use a metaphor here—of Mexico City into my ethnographic account.

Many years have gone by since Alan Riding (1989 [1985]) first published his influential book, *Distant Neighbors: A Portrait of the Mexicans*. In it, Riding employed a far-reaching, at times psychologizing stroke to depict some of the macroeconomic and sociopolitical issues shaping Mexico's history and circumstances. It made Porfirio Díaz's 1847 famous quote, "Poor Mexico, so far from God, so close to the United States," known to broader audiences.¹¹⁷ More significantly, it marked a renewed era of seeking to make the Mexican Other "accessible" and intelligible to an Anglo–North American readership. Oscar Lewis's (1961, 1975 [1959]) ethnographic works had previously garnered much interest in the lives of "impoverished Mexican Others" south of the US border. Yet, in Mexico too, the all-embracing line of reasoning present in the works of Samuel Ramos (1951 [1934]) and Octavio Paz (1961 [1950]) had already laid out key archetypal tropes about "Mexicans" and the "Mexican character" that feminist scholars later made efforts to disrupt (e.g., Alarcón 1989; Anzaldúa 1999 [1987]; Glantz 2001).

In 2017, despite time's passing and the many changes underway, we appear to be still roaming around the same place in some fundamental ways. I write as a Mexican woman at a time when the backlash against Mexicans seems to be on the rise, and as such some of the conundrums of this particular "insider" location—as Patricia Zavella (1993) called it—have become acutely apparent to me throughout this work (Dreyfuss 2015; Enrigue 2014; Mendoza-Denton 2017; Neate 2015; Peña 2015). As I wrote this dissertation, I felt even more compelled to take up Lesley Bird Simpson's (1966 [1941]) 76-year-old call to account for the "many Mexicos." I have thus attempted to remain aware

¹¹⁷ Some have argued that the quote belongs to Nemesio García Naranjo instead (see González Gamio 2013).

of historical and geopolitical diversity in my ethnography. More specifically, my aim has been to help refine existing understandings and representations about transpeople and sex workers in Mexico City. I sincerely hope that by portraying complexities, contradictions, tensions, symbolic disparities, uneven distribution of wealth, as well as what I see as Mexico's poetic humanity, my work has responded, at least partially, to Simpson's invitation.

My dissertation both builds on and contributes to feminist anthropology by employing analytics and sensibilities characteristic of the field. Specifically, I have sought to put forward an anti-essentialist critique and make use of an intersectional lens to grasp issues of hegemonic activism, sexual and informal labour, and income disparities. While feminist anthropology could be said to have emerged as a critique of androcentric bias in sociocultural understandings (see Mead 1950 [1935], 2001 [1928]), the intersections of gender with sexuality, race, class, and labour, to name a few, have been at the centre of this field throughout its development (see Hurston 1978 [1935]; Landes 1994 [1947]; Leacock 1978; Parsons 1916). The parallel field of queer anthropology has devoted particular attention to non-hegemonic sexuality and non-binary gender articulations (e.g., Boellstorff 2007; Lewin 2016; Weston 1993). Yet, as Carla Freeman and Donna Murdock (2001: 424–25) have claimed, the history of feminist anthropology in general, and the trajectory of Latin American and Caribbean feminist ethnographic work in particular, have “moved from an anthropology of women to a wider range of methodological and analytical approaches including greater attention to discourse, and symbolic expression, more reflexive modes of writing, and a movement toward gendered analyses of identity” (see also Montoya et al.

2002; Nash and Safa 1976, 1985). My work is part of these contemporary diversifying approaches within feminist anthropology.

In my view, long past are the days when essentialist understandings of “women” in anthropology prevailed, and earlier intellectual seeds have produced more fruitful crops in the present. My dissertation is situated within the contemporary line of works in which gendered analyses are highly sensitive to geopolitical and historical contexts, and in which attention to salient interlocking markers of socioeconomic stratification is essential. While I do not see this as an attempt at a theoretical elucidation at the expense of people’s embodiments, subjectivities, and labour opportunities (Namaste 2009), I believe feminist analytics are pertinent to account fairly for both transpeople’s and sex workers’ realities. I see this work as a continuation of long-standing dialogues. Ultimately, my research strives not only to further illuminate the different ways in which old insights have turned into new questions (Wolf 1990), but also to reiterate that feminist anthropology, similarly to all fields of anthropology, has been less characterized by consensus than by a refinement of the discussion (Geertz 1973: 29).

My contribution more specifically to feminist ethnographies has consisted of demonstrating the utility of classic feminist concepts to understand shifting intersecting realities, explicitly engaging with issues of power imbalances and adapting research strategies and goals accordingly, and refusing to conflate understandings about trans and sex work issues in Mexico with those found in other contexts. In this sense, I see my work as both building upon and contributing to a long-standing postcolonial and anti-imperial impetus found in feminist scholarship, from which I have sought inspiration and instruction

(Abu-Lughod 1991, 2002; Ko 2005; McClintock 1995; Mohanty 1988 [1984]; Namaste 2011 [2005]; Narayan 1998, 2000).

In sum, throughout the chapters of this dissertation, I have explored some of the complex ways in which ideological and material class-based tensions between on-street trans sex workers and self-identified trans activists manifest themselves in contemporary Mexico. By zooming into the lives, contexts, beliefs, and practices of a group of street-based labourers and militants in Mexico City, I have sought to shed light on the recent state of sociopolitical and economic affairs shaping transpeople's and street-based workers' experiences in Mexico City. William Roseberry's (1996: 22) adage that attention to material conditions and sociohistorical processes is "never sufficient" but "remains necessary" to anthropological analyses proves to be current. The findings yielded from my participant-observation with *trans women* in Mexico City—self-defined activists and on-street sexual labourers—support this claim.

Directions for Future Research

As I have written this dissertation, two potential directions for future research have come to the fore. First, we would benefit from well-founded population and demographic research developed from a critical trans and sex work perspective. Today, there are no official estimates about the number of people involved in the sex trade, nor are there official statistics about the size of the trans population in Mexico, and Mexico City in particular. The absence of this kind of demographic data poses limits to being able to situate "miniature" qualitative findings within a broader demographic footing. We would

benefit from having well-developed estimates about the people working in the sex industry by sector, gender, and region. Estimates should take into account services offered indoors, on the streets, and in “tolerated zones”, and should also account for the varied sectors within the sex industry, such as prostitution, “*teibol*” dance strip clubs, “*fichera*” dancing bars, cabarets, brothels, pornography, live sex shows, escort agencies, “*edecán*” models’ companion services, sadomasochist services, online shows, massage parlours, public baths, phone sex lines, etcetera.¹¹⁸ Estimates by gender should include trans and non-trans female-gendered and male-gendered sexual labourers.¹¹⁹ Regional variation should also be a factor in these estimates, as different socio-legal regimes shape the sex industry across the country, and in turn, this likely impacts sex industry demographics. One way to move towards this direction is by lobbying for the inclusion of sexual labour within national and regional surveys of population, occupation, and employment.

Similarly, ethnographic researchers would benefit from having a clear sense about the size, genders, and labour specificity of the trans population in the country. As I have explained throughout my dissertation, a sizeable number of female-gendered transpeople are visibly involved in the on-street sex trade. On the other hand, established trans activists often emphasize that “they are not only sex service providers” and often recount their professional involvement in non-stigmatized occupations and labour niches for which they acquired formal education. It is certainly true that transpeople work in diverse segments of

¹¹⁸ Just like in window prostitution, walk-in *tippelzones*, or sex drive-ins are specific to the Netherlands; here I have listed some of the forms that the sex industry takes in Mexico. The list does not aim to be comprehensive, but rather to highlight the multiplicity of commercial sex enterprises that could be taken into account (see Monsiváis 1998).

¹¹⁹ To my knowledge, explicit gender non-binary and agender subjectivities have not yet coalesced into recognized categories in Mexico City, but it is not impossible to imagine that, under the influx of Global North developments, they would eventually emerge as distinct sociopolitical realities.

the labour market, and that sex work is only one of them. Unpublished research with trans activists and transpeople who tap into trans activist networks in Mexico (e.g., Gutiérrez Martínez 2015; Lamas 2012; Sandoval Rebollo 2006, 2011), and published studies and media reports about professional transpeople in other parts of the world (e.g., David 2015; Jenkin 2013; Vitulli 2010) solidly support this claim.

At the same time, developing estimates assessing sex work and transpeople's population and demographic characteristics would require an explicit refusal to engage in a politics of trans respectability that uncritically reproduces the widespread whore stigma affecting sex workers and those presumed to be or act like them. Thus, it would be important to assess the extent to which Mexico's precarious economy shapes the manifestations of the informal sex trade in general, and on-street sexual commerce in particular. In Canada, for example, as I touched on in Chapter 2, before the 2014 criminalization of clients under Bill C-36, the on-street sex industry was estimated to account for 10 to 15 percent of all sex work exchanges (Benoit and Shaver 2006; Ross 2003; Shaver 1994).¹²⁰ Statistics Canada (2015) reports that the "underground economy" in Canada has remained relatively stable since the 1990s, and it has never accounted for more than 3 percent of the gross domestic product. What happens in a country like Mexico where, under conservative World Bank estimates, between 1999 and 2006 the "shadow economy" accounted for 30 percent of the gross domestic product (Schneider et al. 2010)? What does the sex industry landscape look like in Mexico where, as I have explained in Chapter 3, the INEGI reports that, in the first trimester of 2017, over 55 percent of the

¹²⁰ Frances Shaver (2017) more recently stated that street-based sex work represents only 5 to 20 percent of the sex industry in Canada.

working population in the country were informal workers, and close to 50 percent were informal workers specifically in Mexico City (Instituto Nacional de Geografía y Estadística 2017)? How does gender—without whore stigma, trans repudiation, or a limiting politics of trans respectability—play out in the configurations of the informal on- and off-street sex trade, given this macroeconomic context?

Scholars and activists sympathetic to LGBT populations have been puzzled over the existence of “homosexual occupations” (Murray 1991), or as in Mexico City’s case, of reduced labour niches largely tapped by female-gendered trans and non-trans people. Stigma has figured prominently in the explanations for this phenomena (Murray 1991; Padilla et al. 2016), but stigma, as Richard Parker and Peter Aggleton (2003) aptly conclude, is connected to the production and reproduction of structural inequalities and social difference. Thus, there remains a question about the broader political economy processes shaping racialized, gendered, classed, and ethnicized informal sexual labour niches that people, including low-income female-gendered transpeople, tap into to make a living. One could begin addressing these issues by developing population and demographic estimates about the sex industry and transpeople that is framed within intersecting critical sex work and trans lenses.

A second area of potential future research is the qualitative examination of premature mortality and the ubiquity of incarceration among low-income people, some of whom are female-gendered transpeople (see Ávila 2017a, 2017b). One of the issues that most caught my attention during fieldwork was the presence of prisons and imprisonment as part of the daily life of most people I met. Incarceration was not one of my research objectives for this project, but the spectre of incarceration among low-income transpeople,

their lovers and loved ones, and those in their social networks and neighbourhoods became appallingly visible to me. This spectre intentionally runs through the pages of this dissertation. In addition, the issue of the precarity of life itself was something that some of my participants hinted at when they would occasionally warn me that I would not find elderly transpeople to interact with, or when one of them made the point once of introducing me to the one elderly transperson she knew. Yet, it took the painful unexpected, premature, and quite possibly preventable death of my dearest Samantha, a research participant I have featured prominently in Chapter 4, to realize full-on and in the skin the instability of low-income female-gendered transpeople's human lives.

I think both mortality and incarceration would need to be approached jointly, as they are both expressions of structural violence and pathologies of power that are palpable in preventable morbidity, escapable mortality, and the prison industrial complex (Davis 2003; Farmer 2005 [2003]). As Paul Farmer (2005 [2003], 2014) has consistently demonstrated, preventable human suffering is structured unevenly, is not random in its distribution, and disproportionately affects the poor. This direction of research should still keep the analytical lens aimed at the intersection of class, labour, and gender, and not on gender identity and sexual orientation alone because as Achille Mbembe (2003), C. Riley Snorton and Jin Haritaworn (2013), and Angela Davis (2003) argue, structural power configurations shape who lives and how, who dies prematurely more often, and who is most often incarcerated.

In other words, it would be important to examine whether transpeople seem to die earlier and be more vulnerable to incarceration because they are transpeople, or because they are transpeople who may also happen to be low-income, female-gendered, on-street

workers and sexual labourers. Research in other historical and geographical contexts, including Mexico, Brazil, Argentina, Peru, Ecuador, and the UK, would appear to suggest that some of these intersecting dynamics may be at play (see Camacho Zambrano 2009 [2007]; Carrara and Viana 2006; Kinnell 2006; Piccato 2001; Ronquillo 1994; Rucovsky 2015; Runa 2007; Walkowitz 1992; Wattis 2017). An intersecting critical trans and sex work studies lens would help explain and work against these complex dynamics.

Aches: Uncertain Prospects

Time moves forward. Some things metamorphose. Others remain more or less the same.

Among those things that have changed since I carried out ethnographic fieldwork in Mexico City between 2010 and 2011 is “Mexico City” itself. In early 2016, the geopolitical region until then known as the “Federal District” had its name legally modified to “Mexico City” (Agren 2016; Romero and Vargas 2016). Mexico City had already been widely known and spoken about as such for some time, but this label had certainly not been transhistorical. It had become more evident during the 2006–2012 period, when former “Head of Government of the Federal District” Marcelo Ebrard had embarked upon the rebranding of his government in media and non-official communications as the “Government of Mexico City.” Ebrard’s move, after all, had likely just been a presage of a much sought-after jurisdictional independence of the Federal District from the federal government, which is also physically located in Mexico City. Yet, during his time in office Ebrard had put forward a palatable form of outwardly left-leaning politics prone to visual

displays of good taste and refinement. He was fond of presenting himself as a neatly combed and dressed politician who would pose with his younger-looking, fashionable, most-recent wife on the cover of the tabloid *Revista Quién*, one of the most famous “*revistas de corazón*” (lit. heart magazines; celebrity magazines) circulating in Mexico.

Since the first directly elected Head of Government, Cuauhtémoc Cárdenas, took office in 1997, Mexico City has been governed by politicians affiliated with the Party of the Democratic Revolution (PRD). Rosario Robles (1999–2000), Andres Manuel López Obrador (2000–2005), Alejandro Encinas (2005–2006), Marcelo Ebrard (2006–2012), and Miguel Ángel Mancera (2012–present) have been, at least during their time in office, members of this self-proclaimed left-wing party. However, in the 2015 intermediary elections for Heads of Boroughs (*jefes delegacionales*), the PRD lost 8 of the 14 boroughs they had governed until then (Arroyo 2015; Sánchez 2015). A year later, during the first elections to designate the Constituent Assembly deputies who would take part in the discussion and penning of the first Constitution of Mexico City from mid-2016 onwards, the PRD lost the majority in 10 of the 16 boroughs constituting Mexico City (Guazo 2016). The National Regeneration Movement (MORENA, Spanish acronym), a left-leaning political party created in 2010 that sought to portray itself as a non-corrupt branch-off of the PRD, has continued to gain political prominence in the city. It is not unrealistic to imagine that the until-recently constant PRD governmental presence in Mexico City could come to an end during the next local elections in 2018. Some have even begun anticipating that MORENA could gain in the federal presidential 2018 elections as well (see González Alvarado 2017). Influential sectors of the population who self-identify as left-leaning researchers and journalists in and outside Mexico appear to see this potential change

optimistically. For many, Andres Manuel López Obrador, the leader of MORENA, stands as the only viable alternative to start a process of change that, within the present violent and crooked political climate, would help to fix the alarming socioeconomic and political climate in the country. Yet, broad sectors of the Mexican population in and outside Mexico remain wary and grow warier of the capacity for existing political parties to bring about positive change to a pervasively corrupt and riddled political structure. Thus, some things have changed, and many have not.

Mexico City became officially named “Mexico City,” and its Constitution has just been completed (Llanos Samaniego 2017; Redacción 2017). Then again, for many, this piece of land is still “the monster,” “the urban stain,” “the valley of Mexico City,” “the metropolitan area of Mexico City.” It is still “the DeFectuoso,” the acronym-inspired designation for the Federal District evoking the DeFects of a sprawling city with endless half-finished and incomplete construction, numerous potholes and bumps, broken governmental structures and systems, and the combined affection and resignation that comes from knowing that, as well-known journalist Cristina Pacheco says, “*aquí nos tocó vivir*” (this is where we were fated to live) despite the growing difficulties that are still endured everyday in Mexico City (Pacheco 2003 [1984]).¹²¹

In this beloved monstrous place where many of us loved and were loved for the first time, journalists reported 247 murders of “*personas transexuales*” (transsexual people) in

¹²¹ Christina Pacheco has said that “[the phrase ‘*aquí nos tocó vivir*’] tells me where I am, the reality, what I have to do, the dreams that have been laid in this place, that this is my home and my people, that this is where my life is” (Redacción 2003; Vértiz de la Fuente 2013).

Mexico between 2008 and April 2016 (Redacción 2016c).¹²² In the fall of 2016, the murders of two *trans women* in Mexico City made the news, pointing once more to existing, full-blown contradictions. How can it be that inhabitants of Mexico City live in a place where they can rejoice in legal freedoms and possibilities such as same-sex marriage, legal pregnancy interruption, or sex–gender concordance reassignment, while brutal violence marks for death the bodies of those whose informal labour lies in the pleasure-giving trade (see Butler 2002; Mbembe 2003; Snorton and Haritaworn 2013)? Despite proper media attention and condemnation of these heinous events as murders aimed at “transgender people” and the “*LGBTTTI* community” (Lucario 2016; Redacción 2016a), these were not just murders of *trans women*. They were killings of trans sex workers (Juárez 2016a, 2016b, 2016c). One of them was shot inside a car while working at one of the on-street sex trade spots spread across the city; the other was strangled in a hotel room located in one of the working-class neighbourhoods of the metropolitan area. These were the dreadful killings of *trans women* as they were working in the sex trade. These murders are part of the historical violence that non-trans female sex workers also continue to face as it has been recorded in urban chronicles (Pacheco 2013 [1998]), or during the May 2011 Labour Day March in a powerful handwritten banner that demanded that there was not one more murder of a sex worker and that the assassins be brought to justice. Sex workers demanded “neither pardon nor oblivion” for the murderers of those in the sex trade who had fallen before them. **(Figure 8)**

¹²² A rise in murders of transpeople have been similarly reported in the US and Canada (see Fairbank 2016; Sheldon 2015).

Figure 8. "Neither Pardon Nor Oblivion," photo by the author, 2011



On November 1, 2016, the trans activist who urgently spoke about these “crimes of hate,” as they were framed in the newly founded TV channel *Imagen Televisión* (Image Television), inadvertently erased this sex work specificity, and chose to depict these unspeakable crimes in more general “trans” terms (Sierra 2016).¹²³ The interviewed trans activist was introduced as a journalist and spokesperson from a newly formed trans association. She referred to the two recently murdered trans sex workers as her “*compañeras*” (lit. comrades, female peers; fellow *trans women*), and about their murders as resulting from the pervasive efforts of “negating the identity of transpeople.” The activist then focused the rest of her discussion on a series of transphobic YouTube videos in Mexico, which were “compelling viewers to disavow [their trans] identity,” and about the complaints she and the members of her trans association had filed with both the local and national Councils to Prevent Discrimination (respectively COPRED and CONAPRED, Spanish acronyms) to have the videos removed. The murders of two trans sex workers were thus swiftly put aside and inadvertently subsumed under a broad “wave of violence against trans women.” In this framework, they had been killed because they were “*personas con orientaciones transgénero*” (people with transgender orientations). As a result, low-income *trans women*’s jointly embodied and material realities within the wider socioeconomic context of Mexico City were effectively overlooked. Once more, Namaste’s (2015) concept of “oversights” appears to be awfully pertinent.

Trans activists advocating from the margins of trans politics in the United States and Canada, such as Jamie Lee Hamilton, Mirna Soleil-Ross and Miss Jones, have rejected

¹²³ “*Imagen Televisión*” broadcast network began transmissions on October 17, 2016 (see Redacción 2016b).

generic views of violence against transpeople (Hamilton 2014; Namaste 2011 [2005]; Stern 2011–2012). These are best exemplified by the systematic omission of the disproportionate experiences of violence faced by trans people of colour, trans inmates, and trans sex workers. For many, the “Transgender Day of Remembrance” memorial campaign has come to crystalize these erasures (Lamble 2008). Mirna Soleil-Ross, in particular, rejects the pernicious obscuring of the gendered, sex work–specific layer of most violence against transpeople memorialized in the remembrance campaign when she states, “This is not an issue of ‘violence against transgendered people’ but an issue of violence against transsexual women and against male-to-female transvestites who are mostly prostitutes” (cited in Namaste 2011 [2005]: 125). I continue to see a parallel sex work erasure from hegemonic trans politics at play in Mexico City. That has not changed. A sharper view of interlocking oppressions in the analysis and action platform of trans activists in Mexico would need to be introduced to be able to foster a solid movement for trans justice in the future.

The murders of trans sex workers in the fall of 2016 were deeply shattering to me and others. The tragic news made it to mainstream news outlets, and low-income *trans women* working in the sex trade spots heard of the events. Sex workers at the Panotlán sex trade area made sense of the two murders through practical concerns. Mariana, for example, developed her own understanding of the events. In one of our phone conversations following the events, she told me, “The mafia is set loose, sis.” Then she added, “It’s fucking tough this. But we just have to take care of ourselves and work hard. There’s no other way.” Vianey, in turn, displayed her characteristically humorous and sarcastic tone when she saw in this the opportunity to mock the media coverage of one of the murders. It had been suggested that the man who had been detained for murdering a *trans woman*

working the streets claimed in his defense to not have realized that the sex worker was a *trans woman*. To the dismay of many people, he was set free almost immediately after what turned out to be a brief detention. Vianey deplored that under the man's logic, he could have even dared to suggest that the deceased *trans woman* had killed herself; when we talked, Vianey took on the presumed voice of a murdered trans sex worker who feels lost because a wretched man, poor thing, "found out" that she was a *trans woman*. She caustically mocked, "I'll take my life! He discovered me; I'd better take my life!" Exasperated, she added, "Don't fucking suck [my dick]!" Despite her obvious and understandable irritation, Vianey found some solace in telling herself and others that she was grateful she still went back home alive every day after work. The fall of 2016 brought some harsh days to those working the streets. So, she insisted that she was fortunate to remain alive even on those days when she had not been able to make a "*ratito*" (lit. a little chunk of time; a sexual service, which for trans sex workers most often means providing a blowjob inside a car).

Then again, certain things remain unchanged. In the fall of 2016, the struggle to secure clients was still prevalent in the sex trade spots. Back in June 2011, I took Samantha to a radio interview to which I had been invited. In preparation for the interview, Samantha had told me she did not want to be asked or speak about sexual service fees on air. I made this request to the radio hosts, and they complied. Her motivation for not wanting to talk about service charges had been that non-sex worker people often thought that being a sex worker was an easy way of making a living and that sex workers had tons of money to spare. This false belief, she reasoned, could put her at risk of being robbed, extorted, or kidnapped. For that reason, she had likewise chosen to use a different name for herself

during the radio interview. Making our way to the radio station on public transit had been a hurdle. Samantha was walking slowly and seemed to be having to drag herself around. This happened just a few weeks before she died. However, Samantha's refusal to speak to the issues of clients and fees had not been limited to the context of the local radio show. I found a similar evasiveness in most of the trans sex trade labourers I came to meet during my extended fieldwork.

The truth was that many of these *trans women* were not selling sexual services like hot *tamales* (sweet or savoury corn dough dish) with warm *atole* (sweet corn beverage) on a chilly morning. The recurrent complaints about the short supply of clients and the omnipresent rationalizing of this scarcity as a temporary losing streak abounded during my extended fieldwork, and this continued to be the case in the fall of 2016. Vianey told me, "The street is very slow." I reminded her that she had said business was slow a while ago, too. She added, "Even more now." When I asked why she thought things were the way they were, Vianey said, "This month is like that. It's close to the children starting school and, well, the expenses [associated with the beginning of the school year]. It [business] goes down a lot." Yet, she said this in early October 2016, and the elementary, secondary, and high school year had started in late August. I chose not to push the point further. However, I had heard similar explanations all year round back in 2010 and 2011: it was September and people had spent money on children's uniforms and textbooks; it was Christmas and people had spent on presents and holidays; it was The Magic King's Day on January 6 and people had spent on toys and treats for children; it was Easter and people had spent on spring vacations; it was a regular or long weekend and people had spent on this or that. I had learned to see such explanations as an expression of their pride and as a touching, face-

saving effort that I always sought not to shatter. Why would I contradict the group of *trans women* I had come to appreciate when they made sense of the structural inability to make a decent living using the folk explanations at their disposal? Despite the fierce resilience of on-street trans sexual labourers, their plausible explanations back in 2010 had not come to an end in 2016, and the little income available to trans sex workers had not increased.

At the Panotlán Spot, some of the *trans women* I knew in 2010 and 2011 remained on the line. They still crafted their relentless taunting with verbal wit and skill. By the fall of 2016, Francis had been fired from The Warriors because, it was said, she had taken to drinking heavily and would arrive at work reeking of alcohol and not being presentable. She had returned to “the *putería*” (lit. whoredom; on-street sex trade) in the Panotlán sex trade zone. She had apparently lost some of her front teeth—something that other *trans women* had been easily prone to *bufar* (bellowing) about: “She’s back to the *putería*. But she doesn’t chew it [penis], only sucks it.” Paola, Azuzena, and Azuzena’s sister, Claudia, were still at work in the area. I was told about a few new *trans women* were also standing in the Panotlán Spot now.

Vianey and Mariana, too, still stand in the Panotlán Spot. I have managed to remain close to them, and I often hear from both of them. Ever since the man who was my spouse at the time of my extended fieldwork left, both Vianey and Mariana have remained adamant that I should take up another husband. They taunt me at every opportunity: “Screw your office’s doorman. It’ll rot. You’ll get bats, a dead dog down there,” says Mariana. “It hurts more when you get older. You’ll need a plumber to get rid of the spider webs,” says Vianey. They invariably manage to make me laugh loudly.

By the end of 2016, Mariana had gone to live on the eastern outskirts of the city. She said the rent for the small apartment she used to live in near the greater Panotlán sex trade area had gone up. During the preceding two years, Mariana had lived in a separate unit located in the same *vecindad* (impoverished housing complex) where her beloved grandmother, her brother, sister-in-law, niece, nephew, and maternal uncle also lived. But now, she would have to make her way to work by subway, as the Panotlán Spot was far from where she lived. She still did not follow a fixed work schedule and chose her working days and hours as she saw fit. Despite their distance from her new residence, Mariana's family members were still a central part of her life. In 2014, when the threat of testicular cancer loomed over her, her family had firmly stuck by her. In 2016, she was still close to her grandmother, Dona Cruz, who was alive and well, and to her mother, who continued to live with her long-term, loving husband also in the neighbourhood. Mariana's grandmother continues to enjoy dancing on weekends at public park dances, and Mariana's mom and her husband recently made a foray into the dancing competition realm. Mariana was fond of telling me her family's updates. She recounted proudly that her mom and her husband had won second place in a dancing competition in Los Angeles, for which "[her mom] had been given \$10,000 pesos!"

In 2016, Vianey's daughter was now 20 years old. After a brief period when her daughter and her grandson returned to live with her because of a few repeated incidents of physical domestic violence, she had decided to file a legal complaint with the help of her long-term friend Paloma. Shortly after her daughter decided to return to her partner, Vianey would only see her daughter and 3-year-old grandson on her days off work. Vianey still shared an apartment with the man she continued to think of as "the love of her life."

However, she also still lived with the love of her life's non-trans wife and their two children. Vianey's legs still felt "heavy." The "*infiltraciones*" she had had on her legs in the past were taking a full-on toll on her emotional and physical health. She had sought to get the injected oils out of her body, but she was told that the chemicals were so enmeshed within her body tissues that extraction was impossible. All she could get were pain killers. She put her legs up while lying down in bed hoping to ease the pain. In contrast to Mariana, Vianey continued to be as methodical as when I first met her. She worked in the streets only mornings and afternoons, went back home before 10 p.m., and would religiously continue to take Saturdays off. Especially on Saturdays, Vianey was up early in the morning and, ready to seize the day, she would soon venture out to visit her family and friends. Until now, Saturdays are usually the days Vianey calls me on the phone.

It has been harder to know much about what has happened with the *trans women* from the Cacala sex trade spot. As I have recounted throughout my dissertation, Samantha—the one I was closest to—died as my extended fieldwork was nearing its end. The Cacala Spot reminds me of her. I do not reach out to the *trans women* there. To make matters more complicated, I do not use any of the tools—Facebook, WhatsApp, Vado—that would make it easier to track them down, given their ever changing phone numbers and addresses. However, in the fall of 2014, I accidentally learned that Libia, from the Cacala Spot, had also died. I did not want to find out how; I did not ask. She was a relatively quiet, stunning, bronze-skinned *trans woman* in her mid-30s when I first met her. Months after her death, one of her cousins told me, briefly, that they were still mourning the loss. I was not brave enough to contact her direct family members, including her mother, who lives in one of Mexico's southern states, to express condolences. In the late summer of 2016, while

watching a documentary film on *muxe*’ people (gender variant and/or sexual dissident people within indigenous Zapotec culture) that my parents recommended to me, I thought I had seen her in it, and I rejoiced in that brief Libia sighting. Then again, it may have been a mere apparition—one of those shadow presences that the people who are gone tend to leave behind for those still living.

In 2014 too, I learned that *trans women* hailing from Central America had been making their way into the Cacala sex trade spot. This had created an increased competition that local *trans women* at the Spot begrudged. Gisele had appeared to have begun co-managing the Spot together with Rana by the end of my extended fieldwork. She was one of those who expressed bitterness at the frictions, and at times physical altercations, that the foreign competition presented. But she continued to be always ready to fight. In 2014, Gisele continued to keep busy with the simple things of daily life that many of the other less well-off sex workers desired, which were becoming Gisele’s way to signal her nascent better-positioned status as one of the managers of the Spot: going out to the cinema, eating in restaurants, spending time with friends at established nightclubs. When I first met Gisele, she had inadvertently disclosed herself to me as a working-class person when she said, “We are [transpeople] of market dances.” She had made reference to the low-income public markets’ festivities, celebrated yearly in honour of the market’s patron saint (each market has one), usually with public street dances. However, Gisele’s days as a public market–dance person seemed to have gone by, and she was then fond of going out dancing to places like Celebrities, which charged entry covers and had bartenders and fixed strobe lights set on the hall roof.

Things would often change rapidly at The Warriors. Some people would be employed there one day and not be seen there the day after. Some people would come and visit regularly for a few days or weeks, and then not show up around the office at all. The structures on the third floor at times underwent rapid change. By July 2012, another rectangular structure had been set up on the third floor of The Warriors' quarters. Unlike the other concrete structures, the newer one was made of modular walls with tin sheet roofs that would make the inside really warm. There were four offices lined up on one side of the structure and a few blue-padded folding chairs outside along a narrow corridor. Pati, the front desk assistant, had to have a fan turned on at all times to be able to withstand the heat. But she still held onto her notebook and pen, answered promptly any incoming phone calls, and fended off the many visitors who would come demanding to see Paloma, use the internet, or get help from an on-site lawyer who, by then, had also joined the staff. Despite the changes both Kim and Juan, Paloma's advisors, were still doing their work. Kim now had her own small office cubicle and Juan now had access to a desktop computer with internet in one of the office cubicles at the end of the modular structure. Francis, together with another middle-aged *trans woman* unfamiliar to me, was still working alongside The Warriors' team. In 2016, the Warriors' headquarters were still located in the Chililiapa neighbourhood. Paloma, the leader, was still involved in street-vending and trans political ventures. Her street-vending leadership still served as the source of financing that enabled her to participate in mainstream trans activist spaces and events. Her political work continued to be closely tied to and framed by local political party politics, and her organization continued to help organize and regulate informal street vendors according to the interests of the politicians in local office. When Paloma initially agreed to let me spend

time with her and her organizations' affiliates as part of my fieldwork in 2010, she asked me to write a dissertation that would “*tocar los corazones de la gente*” (touch people’s hearts). I hope that I have honoured her request.

During the years between my initial extended fieldwork and today, a few legal changes have also taken place. Miguel Ángel Mancera, the incumbent head of government of Mexico City, proposed a reform to what is known as the 2008 trans law. The official stenographic transcript of the November 13, 2014 regular session held at the Federal District Legislative Assembly (2014: 22)¹²⁴ recorded Mancera’s proposal as seeking that:

the procedure to recognize gender identity that must be carried out through a trial in front of a Family judge in order to be solved, should instead become an administrative procedure to be solved by a Civil Registry judge, without having to conduct professional assessments that could damage the human rights of the *trans* community (italics in the original, my translation).

The legal reform meant that people petitioning a trial to have their name and “sex” changed in birth certificates would no longer have to undergo the previously required medical and professional psychological assessments (Pantoja 2014; Villafuerte 2014). These assessments had been financially onerous and, in practice, had deterred most transpeople I knew from doing this, except for a few well-connected activists who counted on lawyer friends and political contacts to obtain official documentation that reflected their chosen names and genders. It also meant that a formal “*juicio de lo familiar*” (family law trial) was no longer required, since the process was now seen as a “*procedimiento administrativo*” (administrative procedure) instead.

¹²⁴ I obtained this official stenographic transcript through an Access to Information request (folio number: 5000000093416) submitted to the Legislative Assembly of Mexico City.

Vianey had been able to benefit from the recent legal reform. Jokingly, she said, “I now have the IFE [electoral ID card] of a girl.” She explained that she had gotten her new papers a few months after the reform had come into effect, and insisted that she had only paid \$60 pesos for her new birth certificate: “I didn’t have to file a lawsuit. Paloma fought [for us]. We had a reform with Mancera, and Mancera signed it off. The reform appeared in *The Gazette* [official local government publication, upon where publication, a law goes into effect]. And a month and a half later everything was free, because before it’d been \$45,000 pesos.”

This is a legal victory for transpeople that cannot and should not be easily discounted. Yet, Vianey and other low-income, trans, informal workers continue to be vulnerable to the heightened socio-legal efforts to control their on-street sexual labour, and the precarious working conditions that those efforts create and reinforce. In the fall of 2016, four public hearings were held at the local Legislative Assembly to discuss the possibility of legally recognizing sex workers as non-formally waged labourers, similar to lottery ticket sellers, shoe cleaners, mariachis, street baskers, car parking aides, and other street-based workers (Aranda 2014; Lamas 2016a). Earlier in 2014, a group of sex workers had won an “*amparo*” lawsuit¹²⁵ that recommended that they be recognized as non-formally waged workers and to be given a license that recognized such a status (Aranda 2014). Judge Paula María García Villegas was quoted as saying that:

¹²⁵ I could not find an exact equivalent of “*amparo*” lawsuits in English. In Mexico an “*amparo*” is a form of legal protection. It often protects an individual from the immediate effects of a sentencing decision given by a lower-circuit judge. It might be similar to how *habeas corpus* provides a means for deciding if a detention is lawful.

The problematic around prostitution is much more complex than the mere moral qualification or simplistic disqualification of this job as work that cannot be considered as honest, worthy, and socially beneficial work (Aranda 2014: para. 4).

The judge argued that sex workers should not be stigmatized on moral grounds that disregarded the complexity of the vulnerable and marginal situations in which sex workers worked (para. 3).

However, the official records of the public hearings held in late 2016 showed that only 170 non-formally waged workers' licenses had been granted by Mexico City's Secretary of Labour and Employment Advancement (SPFE, Spanish acronym), and that only 70 of those workers had returned to pick them up (Federal District Legislative Assembly 2016).¹²⁶ Moreover, the public hearings also showed that, by 2016, the debates had shifted and support was growing for a perspective that connected sex work to trafficking, and a criminal abolitionist approach was introduced at the local level. One present-day proponent of abolition and criminalization insisted, for example, that the "*amparo*" did not set "*jurisprudencia*" (broader legal precedent), and thus it was only applicable to those who were part of the 2014 trial litigation process. This proponent also invoked international law to state that "no international institution recognizes prostitution as work" (Federal District Legislative Assembly 2016).

The debate over whether all on-street sex workers in Mexico City can benefit from this "*amparo*" lawsuit is thus still ongoing. If eventually successful, the proposal will not solve the economic precarity of on-street sex work, which is caused by its unpredictable

¹²⁶ I obtained this information through an Access to Information request (folio number: 5000000223416) submitted to the Legislative Assembly of Mexico City.

informal nature. However, it would be a step towards formally recognizing on-street sex work as informal labour within the parameters set out by Mexico City's SPFE. It would also likely help sex workers to no longer be the target of police or government officials' extortions. Yet, the documentation that emerged from these public hearings demonstrated that those who now resort to the internationally circulating, gendered discourse on "trafficking" that equates sexual labour with oppression and advocates for prohibition and eradication were vocal, and that this view was spreading. It is not surprising, then, that the newly approved 2017 Constitution of Mexico City, considered by many to be a "progressive" piece of legislation, ultimately did not include a framework of legalization or decriminalization for sex workers to carry out their work in Mexico City (García Martínez 2016; Stettin 2016).

Meanwhile, I am heartened that many of the *trans women* I met are still alive and have not been imprisoned or murdered. Yet, I have also grown constantly anxious over their lives. Over the last year, I have virtually stopped initiating contact with those research participants with whom I was closest during the field research—I mean, with those I grew closest to who remain alive. I think of them often. Two of these surviving *trans women* call *me* now and then—sometimes on their days off, sometimes from the sex trade spot where they are idling about in hopes a client will turn up. The conversation goes something like this:

Oralia:	Hello?
Vianey:	Is this where one can get oral services?
Oralia:	(laughs) What's up? (laughs)
Vianey:	Is this the phone line where one can order oral services?
Oralia:	(laughs)
Vianey:	Is this where one can order services done with the mouth?
Oralia:	No. (laughs) Hey. (laughs)

Vianey: Well, then go and rinse your mouth. (laughs)

I enjoy their persistent “*bufidos*” at over 3,900 km of distance. The equalizing move in Vianey’s suggestion that I, too, could offer sexual services for pay makes me feel fonder of them. Their teasing unfailingly gives me a good laugh. When they call, I am encouraged to let them know the next time I’ll be back in Mexico City so that we can “*hacer una comidita*” (host a lunch gathering). I am reminded of them often. I text them Hellos, I-Love-Yous, and I-Hope-All-Is-Wells now and then; I get to read their affectionate Hi-Beautifuls. I send them Vancouver postcards sometimes. I know they enjoy the feeling of receiving a piece of paper from what they imagine to be a better-off, distant land. A few of them have even imagined coming to visit me in Canada sometime.

A set of auspicious coincidences brought this research project into my path. I gained at least a few deeply cherished friends during the fieldwork for this study. It is hard to imagine carrying out long-term research on heart-wrenching issues again. This is a prospect that, at the moment, for personal and political reasons, I would not like to imagine myself embarking on in the near future. The dread of loss grows sneakily in my insides. They call, but my throat remains tight with fear that I will learn that one more of them is forever gone. A project carried out with structurally vulnerable people surely breeds interrogations about accountability, beyond the limits of these bound pages, to the living, to the imprisoned, and to the dead. Coming to face the precarious living and working conditions, fragile aliveness and freedom, and premature mortality of these endearing people still aches. It should. I remain uncertain about what else could be done next to improve the livelihoods and circumstances of low-income *trans women*.

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