A right to the city? Virtual networks and ephemeral centralities for lesbians in Paris and for female domestic workers in Beirut

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Cities, and in particular the largest, have long been considered as places where relations are anonymous and which allow for encounters with Otherness. City life allows for freer expression of difference, in terms of behaviour and identities. In the past two decades, a large body of literature documents male’ and in particular male homosexuals’ ability to appropriate parts of the city to gain both urban and social visibility. Conversely, most work on female and lesbians spatial practices points at their relative invisibility.

The presentation looks at places in Paris that, since the 70s, have been opened for parties and outings for lesbians. It also analyses places in Beyrouth that are frequented by Sri Lankan female domestic workers. Though these may be few in number and frequently instable, a degree of social networking establishes other geographies for lesbians’ and Sri Lankan’s "right to the city". Though invisible to mainstream society, they testify to lesbians’ and female domestic workers ability to overcome spatial injustice.

Lesbians’ and domestic workers' visibility in the city can boast of alternative territorialities, as exemplified in particular by itinerant parties for lesbians in Paris and itinerant mobilities for Sri Lankan in Beyrouth. Ephemeral centralities or what Nadine Cattan calls trans-territory contribute to specific forms of urbanity. They give places of reference for lesbians and for Sri Lankan and allow for the construction of identities, thus contributing to the creation of a "community" of sorts. These ephemeral centralities and trans-territory construct a network of places in both cities where lesbians and Sri Lankan women can negotiate their access to the city.

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