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## International Mobility, Erotic Plasticity and Eastern European Migrations

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### Abstract

*When individuals cross a border and settle in a new social environment, they become migrants. People come here to work, improve the family conditions, restore a lost status. They work, send remittances, strive to adjust their legal status, learn how to cope with a new way of living. But they also make new friends, new lovers, reunite families. They also encounter new sexual cultures, new erotic narratives and norms. Migration is consequently a good test for contemporary theories of erotic plasticity. Are adult migrants, that have acquired and practised for decades a given erotic habitus, able to change it in depth during emigration? And which are, if any, the dimensions of these change? Eastern European women pioneers in Italy – women who have migrated alone, outside of any recruitment program, to areas with no previous history of immigration from their lands – provide a fascinating case of sexual change.*

**Keywords:** *Erotic plasticity; female migration; Eastern European migrations; lovescapes.*

### Introduction

For those who want to study sexual life, international migrations represent excellent strategic research material and allow researchers to study many important problems in innovative ways (Merton, 1987). Exploring the migration and sexuality nexus means dealing with one of the key problems of social science: how do actions and norms change when does the context change? To what degree do adult migrants reproduce in the new location their internalized normative models and their established preferences? To what degree, and under what conditions, is mobility a factor associated with increased erotic plasticity (Baumeister and Stillman, 2006)? Which elements of the available sexual subcultures are appropriated by migrants, and which ones resisted?

In the studies of the migration of women, a large body of research is concerned with the fate of transnational families and the care practices – often mediated by ICTs – necessary to manage the parental relationship spanning two or more locations (Carling et al., 2012; Parrenas, 2015). Another important body of work has explored how the migration of women alters the conjugal norms and practices in both sending and receiving areas, often in an egalitarian direction (Gonzales-Lopez, 2005; Hirsh, 2003). Migrant women, however, do not experience change only as mothers or wives. Their mobility also affects them as “women”, lovers and – in the essentialist conception endorsed by many of the women here studied – “females” (Cvajner, 2019). In fact, one of the main drivers of contemporary female migration systems is precisely the increasing number of women who migrate outside of conjugal decision-making, as single, divorced or widowed (Donato et al., 2014; Hofmann and Buckley, 2013)

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In this contribution, I will analyze the changes in sexual practices and symbols that have taken place within a group of Eastern European migrant women pioneers during their settlement in North-Eastern Italy. I will argue that the migration experience has had a strong impact on their erotic plasticity, modifying not only the set of practices enacted but also their symbolic association with the image of the sexual good wife. Even if the migrant women here studied were relatively mature at the moment of emigration, their age has not inhibited important and deep transformations, concerning the very same criteria of what is pleasurable and what is not. The women have built during their emigration new types of sexual personhood that have played a role in their integration strategies and the overall outcome of the migration process.

To pursue such analysis, I will use here a triangulation between three different data sources on the Eastern European women pioneers that have arrived from 1998 to 2004-5 in the North-Eastern city I will call here Alpinetown. The first is the field notes of an ethnographic project that started serendipitously in 1999, became professional in 2003 and is still ongoing in various forms. The ethnography has followed the women pioneers from their very first experiences – indeed, days if not hours from their arrival – to their definitive settlement (Cvajner, 2019). A second source is a quantitative survey concerning the sexual attitudes and sexual behaviours of Eastern European women migrants – at the time of the survey and retrospectively - that was carried out in 2007 in Alpinetown (Cvajner, 2008). A third, independent, source is provided by a secondary analysis of the interviews collected in the LIL database, a set of biographical interviews with foreign domestic workers in Italy carried out by several interviewers using a comparable protocol.<sup>2</sup> This analysis has thus clearly all the limitations of a local study, unable to claim a national or global validity. The richness of the data, however, and their triangulation provides an unprecedented wealth of information in a field usually marred by scanty evidence.

## **The Migration and sexuality nexus**

The fact that erotic desire and behaviour - perceived as the most intimate, natural, and authentic human drive - is, in fact, strongly structured by cultural and social cleavages has been claimed since the very origins of contemporary social sciences (Malinowski, 1927). Very early, Alfred Kinsey himself made clear that sexual practices are strongly differentiated among diverse social groups. In his path-breaking research, he highlighted how social groups belonging to different social classes and statuses – what he called “socio-cultural groups” – were differentiated, among many things, by very different sexual mores (Kinsey et al., 1948). Subsequent research has further confirmed both the existence of marked differences between the sexual life in various parts of the world and the existence of a plurality of differentiated – and often opposed - sexual fields within each society (Mulhall et al., 2008; Mackay, 2001; Wellings et al., 2006; Laumann et al., 2005).

Sexual research, however, has also highlighted the fact that internalized models of sexual desire and practice are far from being written in stone. Human sex drives are highly responsive to situational, social and cultural influence (Baumeister, 2000). Although actors usually develop across their life span a stable pattern of desire, practice and preferences, such erotic habitus may be modified in-depth in reaction to social and cultural change (Green, 2008).

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<sup>2</sup>. The LIL database, hosted by the Università di Trento, contains currently 862 interviews, collected in various periods and places. The interviews - collected in 2003-4, 2005-06 and 2015-16 – have been coded in Atlas.ti using a consistent coding system. For more information, see <http://www.livingintegrationlaws.it/en/tools/>. The LIL database is open to all interested researchers (for access, write to [paola.capuana@unitn.it](mailto:paola.capuana@unitn.it)). I will focus here on the 55 (out of a total of 86) interviews of women pertaining to post-Soviet migrants that (a) have arrived or lived in the area of Alpinetown in the «pioneer» period, from the late 1990s to the early 2000; and (b) have talked in the interviews about sexual change.



Erotic plasticity, however, is essentially a socio-psychological concept (Baumeister, 2000; Benuto and Meana, 2008). It has little to say on how the changes in the internal organization of desire are intertwined with socio-cultural transformation. To fully understand migration as a driving force for sexual change, we need to complement it, as it is argued in the introduction to the present special issue, with a more systematic socio-cultural framework.

Only then we may ask how the experience of migration and the experience of different ethno-sexual boundaries are part of the broader process of social integration. Very roughly, immigrants may converge toward the mainstream sexual subculture of the new location, participating in the same dating and mating networks of natives; they may converge (or even give birth) to specific sexual subcultures, where their participation is defined at least in part by their migration background. Or they may enforce and maintain a specific and distinctive sexual style, as a form of resistance (Espiritu, 2001).

### **Eastern European Women Pioneers**

The analysis here presented derives from a long-term ethnographic project with a group of women that have migrated from the former territories of the USSR to North-Eastern Italy at the turn of the millennium. Post-soviet women, particularly from Ukraine and Moldova, have been the migration pioneers of one of the largest migration systems involving Italy: until 1998-9, there were basically no recorded migrants in Italy from the territories of the former USSR. Only a few years later, it had become one of the largest groups of migrants in Italy (Sciortino, 2015). The post-soviet migration system has been able to expand – although at a reduced pace – even during the years of the economic crisis. Today, more than two decades later, this migration system maintains its original strong gender imbalance: post-soviet migrants in Italy are mostly women. It is a migration system where settled women sponsor the further arrival of other women (Cvajner, 2018).

The group of pioneers I lived with was in many senses migration's absolute beginners. They migrated towards a country that had no previous history of arrivals from their lands. They had often no previous migration experience, although many of them had practised some form of shuttle trade in the soviet period or in its aftermath. Their migration was remarkably atomized, with very little support from recruitment programs, established migration chains or family networks. Being employed nearly only in live-in care work – usually for elderly people with some disabilities – they lived scattered across the city, with very little opportunities to monitor each other. In this sense, the women experienced a strong decrease in informal social control. Another important element was the demographic profile of the migration pioneers. Above all, they were all middle-aged women, from the mid-thirties to the late fifties. Nearly all of them were mothers, and sometimes grandmothers. They had left their children to the care of their parents or sisters, and become the main breadwinner for their families. They had been, with very few exceptions, *de facto* or *de jure*, divorced for years (Vianello, 2009). And they had been, in the years before emigration, excluded from all forms of respectable mating and dating, owing to economic scarcity, insecurity and – above all – their 'old' age.

An important discovery during their emigration was precisely that, in Italy, their age did not disqualify them from romance. Such a discovery has triggered a set of ramified changes in the sexual lives of the women. It has made possible the development of a new sexual field (Green, 2014). In the case of the group here studied, such a field is defined by strongly exogamous sexual stratification that employs unabashedly criteria of race, health and wealth – but not age – to allocate sexual desirability. Moreover, in order to compete in this new and unexpected mating market, the women had to experiment with the perspective of an expanded set of sexual practices desired by the



prospective Italian partners (in many cases, it means ‘anticipated as desired’ by the women themselves).

## Dating as an Incorporation Process

Early after their arrival, many women realized that in Italy they were considered – at least by some men – as “women” (Cvajner, 2020). For example, Alina arrived in Italy when she was 44. She considered herself a mother and a mature woman, who after her divorce had resigned herself to a sexless status. Walking in the streets, however, she discovered she was looked at and appreciated. Nadia, smilingly remembered that in Italy *they run after you. You know ... when you walk they would [sound] a horn. Especially [mimicking a shout in the street]: blonde, blonde! They were insistent!*<sup>3</sup> Emigration, in other words, is undoubtedly an opportunity that allows for experimentation and innovation for those women who succeed in establishing sentimental and sexual relationships in the new context.

In a context marked by a deep sense of downward mobility, loneliness and humiliation, the discovery of potentially participating again in the dating scene was one of the very few bright novelties in their lives.

Moreover, they also discovered that there was an unlikely (but far from negligible) niche of Italian men who could be romantically interested in them. Long-term bachelors, widowers and elderly, divorced males (and quite a few unhappily married). These men were usually less educated and markedly older (but still healthy). Although most of them were working-class natives, they had, nevertheless, important economic resources if compared to the women. Moreover, they were often willing to commit to some kind of stable relationship, as shown by the fact that this is the demographic profile of nearly all the mixed marriages with a Eastern European wife (Guetto and Azzolini, 2015).

After a while, I started noticing that the women were increasingly joking among themselves about the possibility of finding an Italian partner. Sofia, one of the very first Ukrainian women to arrive in Alpinetown, was known for greeting all other women with *did you not find a nice Italiensk yet?*. Sofia was playing on the sense of pressure triggered by two common perceptions they all seemed to hold. First, the women tended to consider sex – more precisely, heterosexual coitus – as a key element of health. Vika, a former Ukrainian teacher, liked to provide me with motherly advice, kept repeating that *without sex... you get ill*. Marika, another woman shocked by the fact I was not yet married at my age, stressed that my headaches were the consequence of my denial of the fact that *the body of a woman needs a man*. A second sense of urgency derived from the fact that the women quickly realized that their dream of leaving live-in care work for working-class elderly would have never happened thanks to their education, skills or increased control of the Italian language. Except in very few cases, finding a new partner was the only way to be included in the network of his friends and relatives, access new job opportunities and leave the live-in care work sector. Mating was the way in which Eastern European women could become *signore*. This term, originally used to refer to the (women) employers that gave them orders, had quickly been appropriated by the women to define those of them who could aspire to a somewhat lower-middle-class lifestyle, deemed decent and honourable (Cvajner, 2019).

Gina, a 60-year-old Moldovan grandmother, once explained why these new love opportunities had to be applied in a rigorously exogamous way. She contrasted “our” men – that she labeled depreciatively as *sovok* - with the “Italians”. The first was associated only with *alcohol, debts ... he*

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<sup>3</sup> Excerpt from the interview n. 724, Living Integration Laws Research.



would spend it all [whatever I sent]! I don't need [somebody] like that. On the contrary, she would now need somebody who walks [with] me, buys flowers, tells me I'm beautiful. And fucks me, eh. The strength of such an exogamic norm was such that, at least according to some women, it has become accepted even in the sending communities. Iryna, once explained to me that if you are in Italy for many years ... it is important that in Moldova it is said that [you] have found an Italian. And if there is no relationship yet, the natural expectation is to assume one wanted it.

When the women started to feel 'settled' in the new environment, its lovescape became one of the most talked-about elements in their lives. Such a change reverberated also in the ways in which they confronted the frequent stereotypes that stigmatized them: the image of the poor, traditionalist, submissive, devoted woman willing to do literally anything to get and keep a man, and the «Slavic gold-digger» interested only in acquiring as many economic assets as possible, cheating the naïve male partners. Even if still resenting them, they often mentioned them as «proofs» that they were indeed desirable, feared by Italian women as competitive alternatives (Näre, 2014).

### Migration and Sexual (re-) socialization

Where do they meet their potential partners? In the beginning, the overwhelming majority met them either at the workplace or thanks to people directly related to it. Some women started a relationship with the elderly they assisted or – more often – with one of their relatives. Some others started something out of random encounters in the street. For a long initial period, the women developed an internal interactional norm: the fact that many of these men were actually married had to be treated as a minor nuisance. Only when the networks had widened enough, and the opportunities for meeting Italian men had increased, did the civil status of the prospective partner become an important piece of information.

The interaction with these men, however, brought to light the existence of important sexual differences that the women often discussed among themselves. First, the very first women who had been dating Italian men reported to the group that their new partners were not exclusively focused on the coitus. Rather, Italian males were described as paying quite a lot of attention to foreplay. Moreover, they also took for granted that both receiving and performing oral sex were stable elements of any sexual act<sup>4</sup>. Finally, they expected women to openly look for sexual pleasure. These novelties appeared immediately controversial to the group of migrants. Some women welcomed them as highly positive, evidence of the fundamental kindness of their men that cared – contrary to the *sovok* – about their pleasure. They felt *more cuddled in Italy*<sup>5</sup>. Some others, on the contrary, did not particularly appreciate it. For Vika, a fairly outspoken woman, [one] *had to skip the foreplay and get straight to the meat ... he is sweet and always speaks to me when we have sex. ...he talks to me and tells me he loves me, that I turn him on ... shit fuck me right now bljad*.

None of them, however, considered the possibility of not conforming to the preference of their Italian partners. In fact, the first period was clearly marked by the power asymmetries between Eastern European women and Italian men. The survey carried out in 2006 reveals that, among the women who had had some kind of relationship in Italy after emigration, the number of sexual practices performed had significantly increased. Most of the increase, however, was in practices they had performed even if such were not necessarily desired.

Another change involved the coitus itself. Most women, at least in their retrospective accounts, had mainly practised the missionary position and, rarely, the *more ferarum*. The latter had never

<sup>4</sup> These elements are highly compatible with the sexual survey of the Italian population carried out in the same years. See Barbagli, Dalla Zuanna, Garelli (2010).

<sup>5</sup> Excerpt from the interview n. 760, Living Integration Laws Research.



been particularly liked, as many women defined it as *beastly* and told candidly that they had done so only at the insistence of their husbands. In Italy, the women discovered that their men practised - on relatively equal terms - at least three positions: the missionary, the *more ferarum* and the so-called *Pompeian* (with the female partner on top). Here the reception of the novelty was more mixed. The use of the Pompeian was highly appreciated as it was seen as a sign of respect. They praised Italian men - again, against the sovok - for having understood their strongly passionate natures. The use of *more ferarum* remained definitely less appreciated but nevertheless practised regularly.

The importance of power asymmetries is also particularly visible in what did *not* change. Most women were living alone, isolated, in conditions of involuntary solitude. Many of them spent six days a week, often around the clock, in strict contact with the reality of physical decay and senescence. They often claimed that they needed sex to stay healthy. I consequently expected that the incidence of masturbation in the group would have been high. A first surprise was to discover that they had never masturbated before, not even in the years following their divorce. Actually, they were nearly offended by my question, as they regarded - fully in line with the soviet sexual subculture - masturbation as a filthy and unhealthy habit (Kon and Riordan, 1993). A second surprise was that none of them ever admitted having started in emigration. Here - as there was no request by the partners to anticipate or satisfy the demand of the practice - the strength of the previous erotic habitus could remain strong.

The role of power asymmetries, however, is far from permanent. Some of the practices the women were originally sceptical about - such as the extended foreplay - become over time cherished rituals. Other practices were quickly renegotiated. The process of sexual learning, although substantial, was rather short, and stabilized quickly in a new sexual style, similar or compatible with the expectation of Italian partners. As in any field, changes have stabilized in a shared definition of the situation, a taken-for-granted evaluation of what is desirable, what is practised and what is expected. Over the years, possibly due to the ageing both of the women and the partners, the migrant women have started stressing much more the dimension of intimacy in comparison to the search for variety and experience.

## **Conclusion: Strength and Limits to Erotic Plasticity**

Until now, I have written of the “women” as they were a unified group going through a universal experience. This would be, of course, completely wrong. As matter of fact, the analyses carried out in the previous pages apply only to the women pioneers - roughly half of the total - that actively looked for or had a relationship in Italy during the first five years of emigration. The other women were dubious about these relationships and tended to question the «real» motives of the prospective Italian partners. They considered sexual experimentation as - at best - a distraction from their sacred duty as mothers and daughters. They could engage - and some of them did - in short term sexual encounters, but they could not conceive of more stable forms of relationships. Over time, the group slowly split in half. The women interested in dating Italian men created their own cliques, participating mostly in events where also friends of the already existing partners could participate. The women who were not interested in dating maintained the traditional sites of makeshift sociability (Cvajner, 2019).

When I tried to grasp the difference between the two groups, I have to surrender to the fact that all obvious explanations were unsatisfactory. The women not interested in dating were not the oldest, nor those in the worst physical shape. They had arrived more or less at the same time of the others, and their families were not particularly troublesome. They were not even more religious than



the others<sup>6</sup>. The only significant difference I found was in the migratory project of the women themselves. Those women who dated Italians were usually persuaded they would not return to their homeland or they would return only when very old. They were consequently more willing to undergo new sexual socialization. The women who were not interested, or even opposed, to the birth of sexual liaisons regarded their emigration as strictly temporary (although unable to state a precise deadline for the return). They were not interested in sexual change – indeed in any kind of socio-cultural change – because they regarded emigration in Italy as a period of suspended animation. They perceived themselves as birds of passage, to use Piore's felicitous term (Piore, 1979).

## Conclusion

The analyses here presented converge in documenting how migration *may* be a powerful factor in the activation of erotic plasticity. In the sexual lives of the women, there have been several important changes that have taken place even if the migrants were middle-aged and had already formed a rather solid habitus through an extensive period of sexual socialization in a very different field. The analysis, however, should not be read as offering unqualified support to the thesis of erotic plasticity. First of all, the case of the women who did *not* experience significant sexual change, document how erotic plasticity may be held in check by deeply felt norms or normative projects. If the women migrants think of their emigration as temporary, the pressure to confront the ethno-sexual boundaries is remarkably weakened. To be effective, erotic plasticity, as a psychological concept, has to be integrated with a socio-cultural analysis. As has been seen, moreover, erotic plasticity does not mean that everything changes. As it has been documented, while many things have changed, others have remained rather stable, and even reproduced inter-generationally. It is correct to say that migration may increase the variety and heterogeneity of sexual practices experienced by immigrants. This increase in variety, however, takes place selectively. The enrichment of compatible sexual activity models is functional to the control of the new sexual scripts embedded in the dating and mating networks of the new location.

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<sup>6</sup>. On the contrary, the birth of the first small Orthodox and Greek-Catholic churches was made possible not by the presence of a sizeable number of single women. The necessary infrastructure was secured by the women who had been able to mobilize their Italian partners to reach the goal.



## 520 *Mobility, Erotic Plasticity and Eastern European Migrations*

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