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women’s travel narratives
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Title: 'Skanky Stories': Breaking boundaries of sexual taboo in women's travel narratives

Author Bio

Dr Emily Falconer is a Lecturer in Sociology at the University of Westminster. Having completed a PhD in gender and tourism at Manchester Metropolitan University (2012), Emily's research explored the embodied and emotional experiences of independent women travelers. Her research interests focus on feminism, affect and emotion, incorporating theories from across the disciplines of sociology and human geography, and especially how changing feminist identities link with emotional and embodied encounters and relationships

Abstract

This paper argues that women travelers engage with and subsequently re-tell stories of taboo sexual encounters as part of a wider discourse in securing cultural capital through independent, global travel and adventure. Using data from my research *Emotion and embodiment in the experiences of independent women tourists (2009-2012)*, I give examples of sexual etiquette in travelling discourse by re-positioning the 'shocking' boundaries of sexual taboo through travel stories, analysing the performances of 'pleasure-seeking' discourses of third-wave feminist sexuality, and moving discussion beyond this to explore white privilege and fetishising the 'Other'. Many women's travel stories display a heightened heterosexuality that radically differs from some feminist concerns that female sexualisation is geared towards the fantasy male gaze (Pritchard and Morgan 2000) and these stories are integrated into her travelling journey of exploration, experience, stimulus, whilst providing some entertaining 'fodder'. Of further note is how these pleasure-seeking discourses tie into adventure narratives so prominent in backpacking literature; that of 'rough', 'dirty' and 'skanky' immersive experiences. The narratives of women travelers as they re-tell stories of sexual behavior throughout their travels reflect the desires for extreme experiences to enhance their stories. The language and sexual vocabulary of the women as they discuss sexual identity whilst travelling play with racial

privilege, and cross the boundaries of classed, gendered and cosmopolitan ‘respectability’ in a conscious manner.

Introduction

This paper focuses on reflective ‘travel stories’ describing predominantly heterosexual sexual encounters during women's travel experiences. In short, this paper argues that women engage with and subsequently re-tell stories of taboo sexual encounters as part of a wider discourse in performing particular identities through independent, global travel and adventure. The origins of this argument are based on a wider project from my doctoral research *Embodiment and emotion in the experiences of independent women tourists* (2009-2012), yet this paper will focus particularly on the intersection between collective, performative travel narratives, sexuality, gender, race and class. Contextualising this argument within a broader field of tourist studies, this wider research explored the embodied and emotional experiences and reflections of women who engage in independent global travel. This form of tourism, which incorporates long term exploration of global destinations, low budget accommodation, ‘local’ transport and a flexible itinerary, has been characterised as ‘backpacking tourism’ in academic tourist studies (Richards and Wilson 2004, Hannam and Ateljevic 2008). Backpacking travel originates from earlier forms of ‘drifter’, alternative tourism (Cohen 2004) where individuals travelled extensively through a variety of destinations, carrying their sparse luggage in backpacks. Despite its recent mainstream popularity, backpacking is still widely perceived as distinct from the mass tourist industry. As a rite of passage, it is argued that the backpacker uses ‘this limited period for unlimited freedom and hedonistic quest for intense, heightened states of exaltation and experience’ (Cohen 2004:51). There has been a significant rise in solo women engaging in this form of tourism (Wilson 2004). Gendered approaches to backpacking research have intended to address the gender-blind nature of previous literature, yet are similarly centered on women’s self-empowerment and ‘journeys of independence’ (Obenour 2005). Myers and Hannam (2008) refer to

the association between women's growth in independence and their 'empowerment', highlighting the benefits of travel to women's identities as free and liberated individuals. Meanwhile, postcolonial critiques of backpacking travel associated with western privilege, whiteness and a fetishism for the 'Other' has been long established (Teo, P and Leong, S 2006; Lozanski 2010). There has, however, been limited research that draws together knowledge from tourist and backpacking studies with feminist theories on the (material) body, the politics of emotions, and the changing role of sexuality and feminist identities. Importantly, a further key characteristic of backpacking travel is the desire for close, embodied encounters with 'dirt' (hot sweaty 'local' buses, filthy toilets, grubby accommodation, cheap street food; Edensor and Falconer 2012). This quest for sensual immersion is linked to a perceived authenticity, and tolerating the hardship of 'rough' travel is crucial to maintaining a cosmopolitan identity (Moltz 2006). This latter point is central to this paper, as it is this 'skanky' travel environment that feeds into women's 'vulgar' narratives of filth, sexual taboo and crossing boundaries, as well as reproducing the racial stereotypes inherent in sex tourism.

Specifically, the focus of this paper explores how women negotiate - and break through- embodied and sexual shame and taboo as a key part of their temporal process of learning to become an experienced traveler, creating particular forms of distinction (from both mass tourists and other women who do not engage in such sexual practices) through narrating their experiences. Transient sexualities within travelling spaces have been explored where we have seen that sexual behavior during travel is both often perceived as radically different from everyday life (Berdychevsky et al. 2010) whilst also proving (somewhat disappointingly) not as different to casual sex in non-travelling spaces as perceived (Frohlick et al 2016). Either way, the expectations of sexual adventure in women's travel stories display a heightened sexuality that significantly reflects their journeys of exploration, experience, stimulus, whilst providing some entertaining 'fodder'. The narratives of women travelers as they re-tell stories of sexual behavior throughout their travels reflect the desires for extreme experiences to enhance their stories. This analysis will largely consider the 'travel story'

performed in focus groups, where women are able to perform a parody of 'vulgar' sexuality as, by already being able to perform 'tasteful' feminine sexuality (Skeggs 2001), they cross the boundaries into what could be perceived as taboo language. This performance enhances their perceived roles as temporary sexually deviant within travelling spaces.

Capturing the 'Travel Story': Methods

The critical turn in tourist studies has had a profound impact on research methods, and has opened doors to new and innovative modes of critical tourist inquiry (Ateljevic, Pritchard and Morgan 2007). To establish a more comprehensive understanding of the emotional, affectual and embodied experiences of women travelers required a methodology that both captured the performance of and worked alongside the narrative of the travel story. Four research methods were used to acquire the data for this thesis: qualitative interviews in the field (37 participants), participant observation in the field, four focus groups (16 participants) carried out in the UK with women who had returned from a recent period of travel and sensual diaries. These data draw upon two periods of fieldwork in popular backpacking enclaves: three months of travel in India in 2009 and three months of travel in India, Thailand, Malaysia, Australia and New Zealand in 2010.

Recruiting participants for the research required me to question my rationale with regard to what constituted suitable participants, and to what extent 'traveling women' are a homogenous group (Mason 2002). Identifying exact criteria for what constitutes 'backpacking' or 'independent' travel is problematic. However, as a starting point, participants recruited in the field were required to be travelling alone and independently (not as part of an organised tour, package or organisation) for a minimum of three months. This was the only set criteria for participation in the study, allowing for any remaining diversity of women to emerge organically. This was a deliberate rationale, in order to accurately reflect the predominant demographics of those women who engage in this form of tourism,

and who are willing to participate in this research. As such, my sample demonstrated that those who were most likely to engage in this form of travel were predominantly of white ethnicity (89%), heterosexual, and educated to at least University degree level (95% held a University degree). 77% were European, 13 % North American, 5% Antipodeans (Australia and New Zealand). 48 % were between 24-30 years of age, with 18-24 year olds as the second highest age group (47%). Only 2% were over 40 years of age, and just 5% held no University degree. Most participants were relatively wealthy, able to live for many months- and even years- without any income from employment, commonly using accumulated savings or inheritance. They did not have caring responsibilities or any dependents. That this sample personified a high degree of socio-economic, white and classed privilege is relevant to the overall argument of this paper; that such privileged women have a greater degree of freedom to break boundaries of sexual taboo in both travel space and reflective narrative. Furthermore, the term 'travel space' is used throughout this work to signify the symbolic locales in which these privileged forms of mobility take place. Therefore 'travel space' is not always destination specific, but those spaces 'in between'- such as backpacking hostels, transport, airports and other transitional spaces.

This paper will, for the most part, engage with data derived from the focus groups with women who were recruited in the UK who were collectively invited to reflect upon a period of independent travel, as this is where the humorous 'travel sex story' was most apparent. Storytelling is central to both exploring personal and intimate practices in everyday life (consider Plummer's *Telling Sexual Stories* 2002) and- most crucially- in relaying to others exciting and entertaining tales from incidents 'on the road' during backpacking travel. Plummer notes that telling sexual stories is part of a 'wider discourse and ideologies abroad in societies, and they have much in common with all manner of other stories with differing foci- detective stories, travel stories, life stories, near death stories' (Plummer 2002: 6). Simultaneously, reflective narratives and storytelling has been researched in tourist studies as an integral part of how backpackers perform and make sense of their experiences (Noy 2004). The

'Travel Story' becomes a scripted narrative, both through casual face-to-face interactions with friends, family and other travelers ("*One time when I was on a night train in India.....*"), and increasingly more publically through online travel blogs, social media and digital forums (Lean 2012, Moltz 2012). As such, when exploring the academic significance of backpacking travel, travel stories make up the significant body of narrative data for research into the experiences of participants. This is especially the case when drawing on reflective narrative methods, such as qualitative interviews and, moreover, focus groups. In contrast, data derived from participant observation and sensual diaries revealed more complex, and often difficult emotions and experiences of sexual (and other) experiences, capturing affective moments as they occur, rather than rehearsed, retrospective storytelling where participants maintain a degree of control over their narrative performance.

Individual interviews, while more nuanced at times, often portrayed large sections of practiced, sexual travel stories as the participants wished to tell them. Yet the sexual travel story was nowhere more apparent than in the four focus groups, where sexual stories became increasingly intensified as the women interacted with each other. The retrospective and at times competitive travel story is a safe and legitimate space in which boundaries of sexual taboo are encouraged be broken. Focus group methods have long been argued to address feminist ethical concerns about power and the imposition of meaning in feminist research (Wilkinson 1998) and have more recently been fore-fronted as suitable for 'opening up' intimate discussions when researching sex and sexualities (Frith 2000; Berger and Lorenz 2016). Frith argues that focus groups not only reveal how participants engage with sexual activity, but how these activities are understood and made sense of within similar social groups (language used, emotional meanings). Recent attention to focus groups have shown suitability for articulating sensitive, taboo and potentially shameful topics such as intimate and embodied practices, dirt and 'dirty topics' (Bowne 2016). Browne claims that the shared space of the focus groups allows such stories to flow, often cushioned by laughter, humour and 'gossip' (2016: 199). The role of humour in the focus is therefore crucial to articulating the sexual travel story, and worked well as a collective exercise. Engaging with 'dirty' topics both strengthens the role of the cosmopolitan

embodied traveler and is central to the performance of travel narratives through the entertaining travel story, and the focus group provides a space where an amalgamation of sexual and travel stories can occur in particular ways. This is not to say that the focus group method was free from problematic ethical considerations, and I will reflect on the potentially exclusionary and competitive nature of these group methodologies in the concluding discussion.

Sex and travel.

Whilst research into 'sex tourism' has tended to focus on male tourists who engage in commercial prostitution in tourist destinations, there has been a growing body of work that seeks to problematise this preoccupation (Ryan and Hall 2001). Whilst 'western women travelling unaccompanied by men have historically been linked to non-normative sexualities' (Frohlick, Gragojlovic and Piscitelli 2016: 235), women engaging in sexual activity during periods of travel have become a growing area of research for tourism research. The key paradigms of this focus have shifted from an analysis of 'female sex tourism' from the model of gendered, racial and economic power dynamics, to the complex interplay of the role of casual sex in women's backpacking experience and the affective and embodied influences of spaces of travel on women's sensual and intimate relations.

The umbrella term 'sex tourism' has come to be understood to describe other forms of sexual relations in a tourist context which do not necessarily adhere to the politics of commercial exchange. Part of this research follows the highly contested debate about whether 'female sex tourism' can fit into postcolonial, exploitative models of male sex tourism (Sanchez Taylor 2000, 2001, 2006, Pruitt and La Font 1995, Jeffreys 2003, Jacobs 2009, 2010). Sanchez Taylor (2006) argues that a double standard is applied by feminist academics to male and female tourist's sexual behavior. These claims assert that economically powerful travelling women engage with new gender roles and identities, but by doing so often reproduce the patriarchal structure of tourism (Pruitt and La Font 1995) by enjoying their dominant positions. More recently, Sanders-McDonagh (2010, 2016) has carried out research

into female tourists in Thailand and Holland who have increasingly become consumers of the large scale sex industry.

There is an additional body of literature that focuses specifically on the complexities of women's sexual agency in a tourist setting. These more recent studies explore the importance of casual sex during the backpacking experience and how spaces of travel both facilitate and/or inhibit women's sexual behavior (Berdychevsky et al 2010). Constructing themselves as 'liberated, cosmopolitan feminist travelers' (Frohlick 2008: 131), it has been argued that women who engage in sexual activity in tourist spaces often equate the freedom of touristic mobilities with an intensification of their sense of sexual agency and empowerment. Travelling mobility provides a space for alternative sexual behaviors that require debates on female sexuality to be expanded into these different temporal and spatial dimensions.

Research into women's sexual encounters during the travelling experience requires significant theoretical contributions from debates on the changing role of female sexuality and sexual liberation in feminist politics, to enquire about the extent to which women's sexual behavior during independent travel mirrors or contrasts with these changes and concerns. Theorising the sexualisation of culture in a post-modern era, Attwood notes that sex and sexuality reflect the broader conditions of our social world, that is:

the injunction to be authentic, spontaneous, involved, hedonistic, a sensation-seeker, and yet to maintain control of our sexual selves; to self-fashion, remain detached and forever open to offers (2006:89)

The above characteristics of sexual self bares resemblance to the existing literature on backpacking tourism, where we have seen that 'authentic', 'hedonistic' and pleasurable sensations are key motivations for this form of travel. It is necessary therefore to critique theories of the changing characteristics of sexuality within current trends in tourism, specifically with regard to backpacking tourism, from a feminist perspective. Carr and Poria (2010) put forward the necessity to widen the

study of sex and the sexual in tourism and leisure studies in order to more accurately examine the wealth of sexual experiences, yet whilst they connect the 'moral straitjacket' to origins of Catholicism (2010:6) they do not make full use of feminist debates surrounding sexuality, or provide enough insight into the restrictive frameworks in which this 'straitjacket' of morality operates, who is resisting it, or how. Carr and Poria (2010) attempt to provide a refreshed analysis of the sex and the sexual in tourism that move beyond the boundaries of 'conventional morality', allowing research into leisure and tourism to emerge that transcends the shameful histories and taboos associated with sexual pleasure. The 'agency pendulum' (Gill 2007) continues to provoke tensions within feminist debate, yet replacing women's sexual shame with discourses of pleasure and resistance remains a central to feminist debate. Most recently, the work of Frohlick, Dragojlovic and Piscitelli (2016) illustrate a highly nuanced picture of foreign travel and transnational sex, arguing for greater complexity of insight into how these practices challenge heteronormativity. It is argued that western women as sexual subjects especially distort the boundaries of heteronormativity by exhibiting 'unruly and non-conforming' behaviors (2016: 327).

Breaking the boundaries of sexual taboo

Many reflective stories of the body incorporated overt sexual encounters during women's travel experiences. Women's impetus for independent travel spans across multiple motivations, from self-discovery to filling in a time in their lives between jobs, relationships and homes, and it would be wrong to suggest that the vast majority engage in casual sex with multiple partners. For those who do, however, the stories in my research highlighted sexual agency as a key element of their personal journey:

Kelly (INT): [describing her sexual satisfaction with a young Indian man in Goa, India] We are both in our primes as someone was saying the other day. A women's prime is about 38 and for a bloke about 21! So fantastic! I mean you don't need to know the details but yeah...!

Exactly. If you are both adults and no one is getting hurt. Consenting adults. Fuck it. (Kelly, 38, White British, Interview in field)

Roxy (FG): [discussing how sexual promiscuity during travel results in different levels of sexual satisfaction, yet the primary goal is carefree fun]: Because we were drinking all the time, and you are meeting new people all the time, and so it's kind of like the excitement of 'Oh you're new! Ooh actually you're great! Oh let's shag let's shag. Get in the hut! Get in the hut!' Or even, 'Let's not bother getting in the hut!' [Roxy, 28, White British, Focus group in UK].

Here we see the 'up for it' sexual expressions that Evans et al admit 'at first glance seem to fulfil much of the ambition of second-wave feminism for an acceptance and celebration of active and engaged female sexuality' (2010: 115) but which also have provoked such powerful feminist concerns (McRobbie 2009). Levy outlines the powerful, unrepentant aggressive masculinity that comes with women who display such overt sexual power in her representation of the 'female chauvinist pig'; 'She is post-feminist. She is funny. She gets it. She doesn't mind cartoonish stereotypes of female sexuality, and she doesn't mind a cartoonishly macho response to them'. (2006:93). Yet the performances of women travelers move beyond the concerns of over-sexualised 'raunch' culture. The 'empowered' sexual assertion in women's travel narratives show a greater reflective critique of the feminist debates than the 'duped' women in the highly critiqued work of Levy and McRobbie, as the following discussions demonstrate.

Sylvia's interview is predominantly story after story of sexual encounters whilst travelling. She explicitly talks of the extreme excitement of 'fucking' in a Catholic Croatian guest-house under paintings of the Virgin Mary, with the owners in the next room. She also tells me a story of self-pleasure:

Sylvia (INT): Oh and one more thing because I think this is a good story and I don't think many people will be as honest with you, and it's repulsive! But not about shit and blood, it's about sex. I took real pleasure in working out weird places that I could masturbate. I only did it a few times, but it was like I just masturbated on an overnight train, or on the toilet of an aeroplane, I joined the mile high club by myself! It was part of the whole independence thing. Or like being on a cruise ship, I stowed away on a cruise ship in Norway at a really reduced fee, so I didn't have a cabin, only the floor, and I took high entertainment at sitting in the spa pool on the back of the cruise ship with all these really rich families and sitting on the spa jet and enjoying it. So it was like I am going to do something really naughty and self-contained... even more so than sleeping with other people... stuff I wouldn't do at home..... So there you go! Some fodder! I can't believe some of the things I am telling you! (Sylvia, 26, White Australian, Interview in field)

Attwood notes that complaints on the objectification of women have 'particular vehemence against images which draw on themes of women's sexual power, for example, those which can be read as expressive of lesbian desire, self-pleasuring or sexual power over men' (2005:398). Sylvia's story displays a heightened sexuality that radically differs from the feminist concerns that female sexualisation is geared towards the fantasy male gaze, and is further integrated into her travelling journey of exploration, experience, stimulus, whilst providing some entertaining 'fodder'.

What is of further note, is how these pleasure seeking discourses tie into adventure narratives so prominent in backpacking literature. The narratives of women travelers as they re-tell stories of sexual behavior throughout their travels reflect the desires for extreme experiences to enhance their stories. The following extract indicates that Alison enjoys re-telling her stories of the uncharacteristic behavior that travelling allows, but acknowledges that this 'madness' is a temporary role:

Alison (FG): It's the wild, novel adventure of it all. Doing things you would never normally do. Like we got on a boat with guys who were coked up to their eyeballs and had mad sex I don't even remember! I mean it's all a bit much when I think back, and thank goodness I'm now home with my boyfriend- he's a doctor and so nice. But I do love talking about these sort of adventures with other girls, we just howl with laughter at the madness of it all. (Alison, 27, White British, Focus group in UK)

The association between outrageous sexual behavior with 'madness' as Alison describes, relates to Walsh's study of women's transient hyper- heterosexuality, where 'some laughed as they told me they 'went a bit mad' in reference to a higher number or frequency of sexual partners in Dubai' (2007: 524). Walsh notes that discourses of mental ill health are often used to describe women's approach to intimacy, where women often struggled between the discourses of healthy and unhealthy emotional (de)attachment in the context of feminine emotional norms in a culture of romance. Attwood has elsewhere celebrated the confident, self-possessed sexuality that challenge the dangers of associated madness, claiming 'that sexual pleasure no longer indicates female evil or madness as it did in the medieval and moral discourses of the past is clearly a sign of progress' (2005:397). Alison however, appears to be using the concept of 'madness' to boost her story telling credentials, adhering to the norms and expectations of backpacking theories and motivation where non-routine, hedonistic and 'crazy' experiences sought after in order to stimulate the body and mind. When spaces of independent travel come together with the post-feminist articulation of sexual power and autonomy, the deep-rooted influences of both these discourses emerge in women's perceptions in a particular way. From the shelter of the focus group, where Alison has returned home to an environment of juxtaposed stability and her professional stable partner, she is now safely removed from her periods of 'madness' to reflect upon discourses of mental health as a source of great humour. This contrasts with the tensions reflected on Dragojlovic's work into women travelers who had to negotiate 'playing family' after having children with Balinese men in Indonesia as part of a travelling romance (2016). Where

the mothers in Dragojlovic's work compete between discourses of heterosexual motherhood and non-normative sexualities apparent in transient sex, no such tension is necessary for Alison who can safely return to 'suitable' relationships and normative depictions of motherhood so starkly separate from her 'mad times'. To enjoy sharing stories of 'madness' with others suggests a solidarity amongst women who have returned from the adult playground-like spaces of travel, where their anxieties surrounding their emotions, behaviors, cultural norms and tensions between the paradoxes of sexuality can be safely attributed to a period of 'madness' that is widely acceptable, even desired, within the confines of travel spaces. Those who return home without a tale of profound madness will lack the relevant stories. Two points emerge here, firstly that they are open about their sexual pleasures and 'crazy' behavior, and secondly are able to transcend the shame often associated with this kind of sexual behavior through the shared language and acceptance of the focus group.

The language and sexual vocabulary of the women as they discuss sexual identity whilst travelling plays with the boundaries of both gendered and classed respectability in a conscious manner. In the focus groups, the women were aware of their changing roles, and able to perform a parody of 'vulgar' sexuality as, by already being able to perform 'tasteful' feminine sexuality, crossing the boundaries into what could be perceived as unacceptable language enhances their perceived roles as temporary sexually deviant within travelling spaces. Consider this narrative performance from Meena:

Meena (FG): I have always been a bit of a whore-bag! [This provokes a roar of laughter from the focus group, who continue to laugh extensively]. But no I would probably say even more....but I think it's...yeah it's great! I think it's easier when you're travelling because everyone's up for it generally. And you don't give a shit really. (Meena, 30, Mixed Race British, Focus Group in UK)

The above quote from Meena took place in one of the focus groups, where sexual stories and behaviors from travelling dominated the discussion. As discussed in the methodology section, the

focus groups provided a forum in which women could tell a story of their sexual encounters, and reflect on that story within the group. What was prominent in Meena's particular focus group was laughter and camaraderie that accompanied the story telling. The laughter to Meena's self-description as a 'whore-bag' indicates a humorous resistance to what could be perceived as a derogatory and offensive term to describe sex workers, women's sexuality and sexual practices. The boundaries of sexual vocabulary are crossed and accepted, first by Meena herself and then confirmed by the laughter from the group. This problematises Attwood's figure of the 'slut' as a sign of low social class and vulgarity among women who have been taught the importance of the 'classy' sexually liberated female from popular culture. It can be argued that the term 'whore-bag' fits into similar language used to traditionally describe women's deviant and classed sexualities, such as 'slag and slut'. Meena is aware of the classed nature of her term, and her breach of legitimate sexual femininity is a conscious act, and one designed to provoke similar reactions of shock, taboo and humor. Similarly, Meena's representation of the 'whore-bag' questions Kitzinger's findings into white, young women in Glasgow (1995) who, she claims, walk the tightrope between sexually desirable femininity and 'sluttish' reputations, where power inequalities are largely absent from their discourses. Challenging this paradox, Meena reclaims the slang term 'whore-bag' from the realm of unacceptable, vulgar feminine sexuality, displaying resistance to what Walsh describes as the 'persistent gendering of morally loaded terminology' (2007: 523). Instead, she reclaims such uninhibited sexual agency through the use of this term, which she is confident will provoke entertainment within the specific space of the focus group, whilst simultaneously distancing herself from this. Frohlick (2008) refers to the tightrope between the 'loose whore' and the sexually emancipated women and the tensions in female sex tourism, yet it would appear Meena is not unfamiliar with these dualisms. It is unknown whether Meena would describe herself as a 'whore-bag' in all social spaces, in fear of evoking the wrong response. Yet it is evident that crossing boundaries of acceptable feminine sexual behavior and language is encouraged within these spaces, with these groups of women, who choose to claim the

space of the focus groups to reflect on their sexual encounters in travelling spaces from the direction of empowerment and agency.

Raquel, Meena and Roxy continue sharing sexual anecdotes throughout the focus group. They relate stories about other travelling women who they met, who had abandoned unsatisfactory sexual experiences during intercourse, deciding they had ‘had enough’, or recalling how easy it is to ‘cop off’ with someone in a beach bar. Each story is met with exclamations of affirmation, such as ‘brilliant!’ and ‘that’s hilarious!’ confirming the humorous potential of such stories. Often, they would introduce an anecdote with wording such as ‘My favourite sex story is.....’, and after one particularly explicit sexual tale Meena jokes: ‘I think that’s a brilliant story, that’s one for the grandkids!’. Aware of the classed and gendered disrepute attached to the sexually explicit nature of their behaviors and stories, these women play with ideas of respectable femininity and attribute travelling spaces to those where the ‘shameful’ nature of female sexuality becomes a game of bravado. The fun derives not just from sexual encounters, but the re-telling of these stories, where pushing the boundaries of sexual taboos becomes in itself the entertainment. It is clear that the focus groups provide a space where great fun can be had in breaking these boundaries, and where the performance of the ‘vulgar whore’ legitimizes their identities as women who have a high degree of power and control over their own bodies, pleasures and sexual freedoms. That these tales are ‘one for the grandkids’ plays on the traditional idea of the famous travel and adventure story which will pass through the generations, by highlighting the irony that women’s ‘shameful’ sexual histories will most likely never be documented through such stories.

The focus group provides the space in which to perform controlled and empowered sexualities in a world that still limits the possibilities of female sexual freedoms. Yet the classed (and often raced) status of women travelers gives them privileged access to such freedoms: to cross the boundaries of subversion without repercussions. Phoebe Waller-Bridge’s BBC Three series *Fleabag* (2016-2019), which follows a nameless upper-middle class, English white woman’s complex family relationships

and lewd hyper-sexuality through dark comedy, has been deemed as the epitome of the postfeminist masquerade (Gill in Matos 2017) and ‘takes pleasure’ in powerfully crossing the affective boundaries of discomfort, disgust and rebellious abjection for its viewers (Woods 2019). Others, through media reviews (Jones 2019: *The Guardian*), have highlighted the deeply classed dynamic and privilege inherent in playing with these depictions of obscenity, and question whether those without such a high degree of raced and classed privilege could play equally. Comparing *Fleabag* to *Chewing Gum*, which follows a working class Black British woman, Woods (2019: 7) refers to the work of Wanzo (2016) suggesting ‘the black precarious-girl cannot revel in debasement, abjection and “grossness” like her white peer. This is because “abjection haunts black bodies as a representational shadow” (2016, p. 45) through racist stereotypes of the black grotesque produced through cultural histories built from white supremacy’. It can be argued that the majority of woman travellers are aware that a temporary dip into ‘grossness’ will not stick long term to their bodies or identities. As Bev Skegg’s notes, ‘femininity is fixed so other can travel’ (2001:300)

Drawing back to the work of Desforges (2000) who notes that the independent and self-sufficient characterises of independent travel are incompatible with femininity, Walsh (2007) argues that exaggerated performances of transient heterosexuality are still highly gendered within tourist spaces, and women’s overt sexual behavior and language is received differently. Parodying what is perceived as *male* sex tourist behavior further became a subject assumed to cause shock and humorous delight within the focus groups. Roxy recalls a sexual relationship with a Thai man in Bangkok during her travels. Prohibited from entering her guesthouse due to the owner's disapproval of sexual relationships between tourists and Thais, Roxy's lover would hire a room in the 'sex hotel', where guests pay an hourly rate. Roxy describes the experience to the group:

Roxy (FG): So we had to go and rent room for an hour! It was hilarious! Quite embarrassing actually, because it was mostly older men and young Thai girls and then us! [Lots of laughter; Raquel: 'Oh that's funny!'] And I remember there was this thing in the room, this weird sex thing, like a sort of contraption.....but anyway so we just like....and then he had a motorbike and we would scoot about and go and visit his family, and we just had such a laugh [Roxy, 28, White British, Focus group in UK]

Roxy's distinction between the other, male sex tourists in the hotel and 'us' (herself and her Thai lover) is particularly significant. Although she enjoys parodying this behavior, it is clear that she remains distant from the image of the male sex tourist in Thailand. It is because of this assumed distinction, that mimicking the sexual conduct of other male tourists who use these hotels for sexual encounters with Thai women and girls becomes an 'embarrassing' story, yet one that is confident will be met with empathetic humour from other travelling women who also maintain this distinction. The origin of the funny story lies in behaving like a notorious sex tourist, and gaining access to these illicit spaces in order to report back the 'hilarious' environments and sexual apparatus other, male, sex tourists' use for their sexual pleasure. This access increases Roxy's exposure to the Thai sex industry, and enables her to gain insider knowledge of these private spaces in order to enhance her own experiences and subsequent travel stories. Roxy crosses the material and geographical boundary of the predominantly male space of the 'sex hotel', yet refuses to embody the shame that accompanies the women's perceptions of male sex tourist behavior. Apart from the brief embarrassment that comes from being associated with these other tourists, Roxy and her sexual partner 'just had such a laugh'. Disassociation with the notion of the sex tourist is paramount in literature into female sex tourism (Sanders-McDonagh 2010, 2016), yet the complexities into the narratives of women who engage in what could be perceived as a form of sex tourism remain limited in these writings. Roxy's story belongs to the theme of the humour and camaraderie of mirroring shocking and shameful behavior, without embodying the actual shame.

Concluding discussion: ‘Skanky Stories’ and Breaking Boundaries

As Martin (1992: 97) exclaims, ‘Every taboo on something shameful has the potential for rebellion written in it’. Independent travel is one such space in which to experiment with these rebellions with regard to gendered and classed perceptions and practices of sexual behaviors. Spaces of travel and the women who move through them disturb the now widely critiqued feminist literature on raunch, sexualised and porno-chic culture (Levy 2006, Walters 2010), as these concerns do not fully capture the complexities and resistances of women's body images when merged with the cosmopolitan codes of the backpacking body. To be eligible for independent travel, the sexualised female body conforms to different representations of class, gender and cosmopolitan distinctions. Gill (2007) argues that for women in post-feminist cultures sexualised self-presentation has become normative, but care should still be taken not to become too sexualised as this is framed in negative sexual discourses. This argument has so far taken an unforeseen turn with regard to women travelers, many who downplay their sexualised appearance in favour of ‘skanky’, unattractive appearances that seemingly liberate them from the pressures of post-feminist sexualisation, whilst simultaneously engaging in overt, autonomous hypersexual practices. Relating to both her personal hygiene 'on the road' and her sexual behavior, Roxy exclaims that travel allows her to be 'skanky in every sense of the word!' This choice of word carries heavy associations of bodies that are dirty, slovenly, ‘nasty and slutty’. Interestingly, the travel story provides a space where any mixed feelings relating to ‘bad’ or dangerous sexual exploits, fears of sexual violence, sexually transmitted diseases, or difficult or unwanted experiences were either omitted or transformed into a different narrative: ‘Bad sex’ becomes yet another anecdote for a hilarious story. The notion that the more ‘skanky’ the better is key, as more seemingly reserved and ‘clean’ women are met with condescending attitudes, mirroring the adventure discourses of backpacking tourism more broadly.

Indeed with regard to female sexuality and breaking the boundaries of sexual taboo, the post-feminist articulation of the pleasures of the body can be simultaneously seen as a form of hedonistic indulgence (Attwood 2005), which is starkly similar to the excessive indulgence identified in the 'experience hunger' of backpackers (Cohen 2004, Welk 2004). On the surface, the uninhibited sexual behaviors of travelling women confirms Cohen's (2004: 51) observation that 'utter hedonism and experimentation' has replaced the original political motivations of the travelling drifter. Yet Cohen's analysis of the shift in travelling behaviors fails to make links with the substantial literature on female sexuality, in which this unashamed and indulged hedonism and experimentation is presented as a key feature of post-feminist, raunch culture (Levy 2006). Neither does this shift consider the breaking of sexual boundaries as part of a different political project: one of resistance itself, where women challenge past notions of passive sexuality in travelling spaces and push the boundaries of public displays of femininity. These sexualities can be perceived as both highly powerful and deeply classed. Feminist literature that has employed Bourdieu and the notion of 'taste' in studies of femininity and popular culture (Skeggs 2001, McRobbie 2009), has aligned tasteful femininity with classed distinction. Maintaining forms of distinction are certainly prominent in the discourses of women travelers. However, my findings show that narratives that evoke disgust through 'vulgar' language and subject matter are an essential part of a parody through which women distinguish themselves from those who have not acquired such cultural capital from travel as well as their more 'tasteful'- and thus less experienced - travelling counterparts. By accumulating these markers of identity from independent travel, women can comfortably afford to play with notions of (dis)tasteful sexuality to enhance their stories. Furthermore, women further play with the concept of 'madness', walking the tightrope between the sane and rational sexualised woman and indulging in 'crazy' travelling experiences, where escaping from their perceived realities seems appropriate and encouraged. The enormity of the feminist debate into female sexuality continues to emerge in the narrative accounts, yet this influence is internalised, resisted, and played with in a variety of different ways when intersected with narratives of travelling identities. Boundaries of classed and gendered sexual

identities become broken and blurred, as women travelers perform their travel stories in conjunction with the powerful privileges that come with being able to travel.

It is of further importance to situate these narratives in a postcolonial context of white neoliberalism. Although less about a 'colonial nostalgia' as Jacobs (2010) would attribute to a western imaginary of 'exotic' heritage, the women travellers in my research sought to obtain a sexual agency which affirms their own privileges as white, heterosexual, western women performing a particular notion of empowered sexual freedom. Jacobs has researched women's sexual encounters in luxury resorts of Sinai, Egypt where the construction of Bedouin paradise meets the seductive imaginary of the lavish Orient for western women. It is here, argues Jacobs, that the 'gendered and racialized objectification of the (Arab) Bedouin man.....can be experienced most directly through the body in a sexual/romantic encounter in the safety of tourist space' (2009: 51). Erotised landscapes and the seductive qualities of tourist spaces feed into the romanticised 'sexual ethnic encounter' (Jacobs 2010: 35), where women are able to perform a particular version of femininity that transports them to an imagined sense of pre-modernity (Jacobs 2010). These studies build upon theories of female sex tourism where the sexual relations between white women and Caribbean (Frohlick 2008) and Egyptian (Jacobs 2010) men are heavily gendered and racialised and work with racial stereotypes of black sexuality, but adds an important multi sensual dimension to these debates, where the spatial, embodied and seductive environment of the tourist space intersects with cultural expectations, influencing women's sexual behaviours from a number of directions.

This colonial imaginary of the Orient has pervaded in films such as David Lean's *Lawrence of Arabia* (1962) as Jacobs notes and, more recently, in Michael Patrick King's *Sex and the City 2* (2010). The latter, which received widespread criticism for depicting racist imaginaries of Arab culture and Orientalism, follows four affluent white women from New York City as they revel in the exotic luxury resorts of Abu Dhabi, getting waited on by humble, male Arab servants and exhibiting a sensuous sexual agency which is starkly contrasted with that of covered, and (seemingly) pitifully repressed,

Arab Muslim women. Indeed *Sex and the City* (HBO 1998-2004) was made notorious for its positive representations of strong female friendship and post-feminist rhetoric of powerful women who ‘have sex like men’ (Meyer 2014). Others have written about the series and subsequent films through a postcolonial critique of a western romantic ideology that reinforces and privileges whiteness, neo-liberal values and commodified lifestyles (Meyer 2014, Wilkes 2015). Situating these white, neo-liberal representations of feminist and sexual freedoms within the geographical backdrop of the Middle East reflects Jacobs (2009, 2010) key arguments that the postcolonial encounter is one where privileged women can play out their racialised fantasies of Orientalism (Said 1978).

Interestingly, the focus groups in my research provided a space where, much like the now well-known scenes from *Sex and the City*, ‘the girls’ can get together to bond over comedic stories of both good and bad sex in a manner that is enjoyable and affirming. These stories were of transient, ‘no-strings’ sex which rebuffed the ‘romance tourism’ attributed to notions of femininity (Pruitt and La Font 1995). As such, the focus group became the space where particular identities emerged and were subsequently reinforced: firstly that of the sexually confident, independent woman, and secondly, of the experienced backpacking traveller who was able to entertain her peers with wild and tantalising stories. The narrative data from the focus groups somewhat contrasted that of the individual interviews, where a more balanced account of travelling experiences revealed a greater multiplicity of feeling, including vulnerability, discomfort and at times fear that emerged during in their travelling encounters and sexual relations.

It is important to remain critical of the focus group space as inherently safe and supportive, despite the general agreement in feminist methodologies that group discussion is appropriate for talking about sex. Frith (2000:284) provides a note of caution: ‘the dynamic and often intimate discussions which take place in focus groups can lead participants to reveal more information than they intended and to say things they later regret. Such over-disclosure may be particularly problematic if members of the group are not strangers but have a continued relationship outside of the group’. The ethics of

encouraging over-disclosure is particularly problematic when a space is specifically set up to share the best and 'most juicy' travel story about breaking boundaries of sexual taboo. This can potentially foster a culture of competition and rivalry (and thus over-disclosure) between those who possess and are willing to perform 'shocking' stories, and act as a means of exclusion and deep discomfort for those who do not. Be that as it may, for the most part- at least on the surface- the focus groups became the site of production for the cultural capital that is so deeply ingrained in travelling identities, as well as reproducing that familiar scene from countless film representations of white, neo-liberal women with much in common bonding over stories of heterosexual, hyper-sexuality in an affirming space.

However, the findings in this paper remain limited with regard to the transgressing of gendered boundaries. Most recent urgings from Frohlick et al (2016) support the need to be cautious in depicting women travelers as sexual transgressors, by focusing on the complexities of their own emotional and embodied accounts. These narratives appear to liberate travelling women from the confines of femininity without the emotional burden of embodied and sexual shame, but only within the new confines of specific spaces, such as the retrospective interview or focus group, in which they have the power to disinvest from particular codes of femininity. Shame is not absent from these performances and narratives, but becomes embodied and re-negotiated as part of a complex emotional cycle. In this way, playing with the boundaries of femininity in travelling spaces is presented as a fun and joyful process of gendered resistance. What is central to this argument is the performative power of the reflexive travel story, where women are able to perform their desired gendered, travelling identities. Yet the non-reflexive, emotional embodied experiences (such as fears or experiences of sexual violence) which contradict these articulated performances do not as yet make it into these narrative accounts. Hopkins (2007) highlights that established critiques of the use of focus groups in human geography include only touching on shallow and limited insights, with certain perspectives being withheld from the group. Yet the providing such a space in the case of the sexual travel story

shows how powerful these stories are in creating women's shared travelling identities and desire to break through boundaries.

Breaking the narrative boundaries of sexual taboo have relocated current feminist dilemmas of female sexualisation to an alternative geographical space; indeed travelling space is one such arena in which a high degree of critical autonomy can be found with regard to breaking boundaries that go beyond the binaries of choices and constraints that emerge in feminist literature. However, these boundaries are not transcended without impediments, and are limited to the narrative performances that women select as part of their reflections and stories of entertainment. Gill argues that 'practices that would have once attracted criticism from feminists are presented as playful, resistant or at least as the outcome of active, knowledgeable deliberation' (2007: 74). My analysis of the playful nature of women's travel narratives remains cautious of this argument, and situates the critical and resistant narratives of travelling women who break multiple boundaries in an alternative context, in order to address the dilemmas of agency and constraint in greater scrutiny.

More importantly, the 'skanky stories' of this paper reflect the postcolonial privilege of backpacking travel more broadly; it is this sensual and intimate immersion with the 'Other' which marks the desire for closer, more authentic experiences (Lozanski 2010). As discussed, backpacking travel has been characterised as closely linked with embodied hardship, tolerance of discomfort and dirt. Notions of backpacking cosmopolitanism and a sense of global citizenship are embodied and performed through a body that is 'flexible, adaptable and literally open to the world' (Molz 2006:7). 'Skanky stories' of the body include not just those of sex, but accounts of illness, bodily fluids, adventurous street food, suffocating humidity, filthy toilets, dirty hard beds and uncomfortable transport that demonstrate how travellers embody a sense of tolerance as a mark of distinction from mass tourists who reside in luxury resorts (Edensor and Falconer 2012: 78). This is also apparent in literature on Slum tourism, where tourists desire a 'dirty', sensual overload of visceral poverty in which they can feel a 'thrilling sense of disgust' (Holst 2018). The crux of these stories connects the 'filth' inherent in this particular form

of travel with the 'filthy' stories of sexual taboo. Multiple boundaries are crossed and broken, yet it is the women who embody high degrees of classed and raced privilege who are the freest to travel, geographically and symbolically, across these borders.

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