

Fictional Representation of Migrant Women Involved in Sex Work in Inner-City Johannesburg: How Does Self-Representation Compare?

By Agnieszka Flak

Abstract

Migration has been represented in a variety of ways, whether within academia, the policy world, the artistic arena or the general public domain. Due to its multi-disciplinary nature, migration is represented in the research/academic space using various or a combination of different analytical and empirical research tools. Equally, the arts have used a multitude of methods – be it visual, audio or performance tools – to represent migration, those involved within it and the politics and society surrounding it.

This study shows how each representation is just one way of telling the migration story. I use the example of migrant women involved in sex work in inner-city Johannesburg because the four characteristics in the women's lives – migration, gender, sex work and urban space – play a key role in identity formation and the representation thereof. Using the contradictions and paradoxes in the way those women portray themselves and how that compares with representations by others, my findings show how looking at different forms of representation – be it primary research or fiction – could complement the picture and allow for a more nuanced understanding of the migrant and sex worker experience.

It is not my goal to argue that fictional forms of representation can be a substitute for academic or policy work on migration. I rather argue for the inclusion of fictional works in the study of migration. I suggest researchers, policy makers and public alike see it as yet another 'proper' or 'valid' representation of migration knowledge, able to offer a different point of view on the migration phenomena, in the position to challenge accepted norms and as a means to inform and engage at a different cognitive and emotional level.