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In the factory of “migratory risk”: Latin American women in the French air border regime

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Based on field research conducted in 2014 and in 2020–2021 at Paris CDG airport, in the various places that make up the “waiting zone” for foreigners not admitted to the French territory, this article proposes to explore the racialized, gendered and sexualized construction of the “migratory risk” category, and its impact on the people thus classified. Through observations and interviews with people prevented from entering France or continuing their journey to another Schengen state, as well as with police officers working in airport terminals and detention zones, particular targets emerge from the interweaving of power and domination relations structuring the border situation: one of these is the “Latina” woman suspected of coming to work as a prostitute. The study shows that this figure is the result of racist, sexist and classist representations of these women and certainly of the circulation of imaginaries and control practices between the Spanish and French border police in the context of joint operations. Comparing the points of view of the women thus assigned and that of the police officers performing the defence of the French-European air border makes it possible to detect the illegal profiling practices and arbitrary power operated discreetly, on a daily basis, at the airport. This gives rise to systemic violence that is invisible but real, marking the bodies and minds of the women apprehended in this way. In this post-colonial context, women, alone or together, have little room for resistance.

KEYWORDS

air border, migration control, border police, airports, gender, race, violence, France

In order to protect the research participants, all the identities of the people mentioned have been made anonymous, using fictitious first names and initials. Where nationality was less common (in the field), the name of the country was replaced by the name of the region, to avoid any possibility of identification. Finally, the ranks of the police officers quoted have not been specified, again in the aim of maintaining anonymity.

1 Introduction

“Why do they use such violence with us? We are Latinas, is that why they do this? I have been mistreated (...). They told me to get on, I said calmly that I refused to get on. So, they grabbed me, the six policemen, they almost put me naked on the plane. Because when I said no, they grabbed me from all sides and stripped me naked. (...) Now I’m lying here on a bed; I cannot even stand up because my body hurts so much. They put the handcuffs on me so tight it was unbearable. I asked them to loosen them a little because it hurt me, but they would not loosen them either. I do not think they can treat people in this way. (...) We are humans, and among them there are women, and nobody knows what they have been through, the sacrifices they had to make. No one knows.” (Message from Alaysha R., Caribbean asylum seeker, deported from Paris-CDG airport, 2021).

The statement of Alaysha R. reveals one of the types of recurring violence that can be experienced at the French air border by women classified as “migratory risk” by the police. Over the last two decades, studies of the French air border control regime have documented the creation and evolution of the *zone d’attente*—literally “waiting zone”—and the related multiplicity of abuses and rights violations associated with this device of deprivation of liberty for foreigners not admitted to the territory (Clochard et al., 2003; Frétny, 2013; Iserte, 2008; Makaremi, 2010; Perrot, 2015; Maréchal, 2022; Palun and Simonneau, 2024). The experiences of violence lived in the frame of the French air border regime have been recounted for more than three decades by an NGO: the National Association for Border Assistance for Foreigners (Association nationale d’assistance aux frontières pour les étrangers), called Anafé, which obtained a right of access to the *zone d’attente*. Intervening directly in waiting zones by conducting legal clinics and visits, Anafé aims to assist people deprived of their freedom, observe conditions of confinement, ensure respect for fundamental rights and denounce violations of rights and illegal practices by the French administration. It is through participating in the association’s activities that I was able to investigate the situation at the air border.

Initially an informal practice of the administration, based on the idea that the persons concerned were not yet on French territory, administrative confinement at the border was ratified by a law of July 1992. The *zone d’attente* was then defined as an area that “extends from the points of embarkation and disembarkation to those where checks on persons are carried out” and which “may include, on the port or airport premises, one or more places of accommodation providing hotel-type services to the foreigners concerned” (CESEDA,¹ author’s translation). This definition has been extended since then. The *zone d’attente* has become an elastic space, extending “without the need for a specific decision, to places to which the foreigner must go either in the framework of the procedure in progress or in case of medical necessity” (ibid); showing the political (re)production of the border, always shifting.

In 2021, the French Ministry of the Interior identified 98 waiting zones, 64 of which are in airports, the rest in ports and train stations serving international destinations. They are placed under the authority of the border police (*police aux frontières*, said PAF), *gendarmerie* (ie: military police) or customs. People who are refused entry to France and the Schengen area because they do not meet the entry requirements and/or are suspected of being a “migratory risk,” and those who apply for asylum at the border, are kept in these said waiting zones. In 2020, 30,794 people were refused entry, and 5,064 were placed in waiting zones (in the metropolis and the colonial overseas territories²). The *refoulement*³ rate was 63% for the Paris-CDG airport.⁴ In one of its latest observation reports, Anafé (2020) underlines that in recent years, the notion of “migratory risk” has gained growing significance. “This is despite the fact that it is based on

discriminatory considerations, leaving a very wide margin of appreciation and thus favouring arbitrary decisions”⁵ of the border police.

The study of the production of the border police targets in Europe has received increasing attention in migration studies (Darley, 2008; Casella Colombeau, 2017, 2020; Guenebeaud, 2017, 2024; Barnier et al., 2019; Tyszler, 2019a; Hills, 2020; Bachellerie, 2020). But less interest has been paid to the air border situation (Crosby and Rea, 2016; Walters et al., 2022) and to the processes of categorization generating the figures—embodiments—of the “migratory risk.” Political scientist Casella Colombeau (2017) has written about the way in which the French border police contributed to (re)defining the target of border controls during the second half of the 20th century. Following on from the work on police autonomy (Monjardet, 2002), and in particular on the definition of clienteles (Jobard, 2010; Mainsant, 2014; Gauthier, 2015), she sought to highlight the successive reformulations of the target of this police service by the practitioners of control. As her research demonstrates, until the beginning of the 1970s, the border police, which had a limited number of staff, did not have the objective of controlling immigration. Border controls had a marginal place in the regulation of migration. Then, preceding the closure of national borders to labour immigration by a few years, the strengthening and institutionalization of the jurisdiction of the border police led to national borders becoming the preferred place for this regulation.

As Casella Colombeau (2020, p. 9) pointed out, “analysis of the discourse around police reliance on their instincts and experience in targeting individuals during border controls has revived a central question in sociology of the police, that of racially targeted identity checks” (Darley, 2008; Guénif-Souilamas, 2010; Gauthier, 2015; Jounin et al., 2015). While identity checks at national borders are supposed to be performed in a uniform manner for all travellers, the border police have latitude to adjust their thoroughness (Crosby and Rea, 2016). Based on extensive fieldwork conducted at Paris CDG airport, this article explores how the air border is performed by border police practices and their impact on those being targeted as migratory threat. The racialized and gendered dimensions of control at the French air border have been underexplored. In this paper I am concerned with the experiences of illegalized women at Paris-CDG. If the nationalities of the people held in the waiting zone are very varied and changing, they are almost exclusively from the global South.⁶ During the different field-research periods, the presence of women from Latin America⁷ in the waiting zone was notable.

Bringing together both illegalized Latin American women’s and French police officers’ narratives, and combining them with ethnographical observations, I seek to uncover both the implicit and

1 French Code on the entry and residence of foreigners and the right of asylum (CESEDA).

2 Such as the Indian Ocean islands of Mayotte and Réunion, the French West Indies (Martinique and Guadeloupe) and the French Guyana.

3 I.e. the deportation by air of people arrested before they cross the border and enter the territory.

4 Figures from the Ministry of the Interior and the Border Police Directorate, taken from the Anafé report (2022).

5 Anafé (2020), p.2.

6 The period of Covid restrictions was an exception to the rule, as for the first-time white Westerners were present in the waiting area in notable numbers – usually due to a lack of Covid testing or vaccination certification.

7 Beyond serving as a concept that defines a geographical area in the world, Latin America is a political designation. “We are not talking about a Latin America that is essentialized and homogenous in its values and cultural aspects, but one that finds its common experience in the violence of its colonial past, the effects of which are still reflected today.” (Hernández Martínez and Vilanova Becker, 2022: 83, my translation).

latent ways and the more direct and materially violent methods by which air border police work produces the label of “migration risk” with racializing and heteronormative implications for those so categorized. I argue that the attitudes observed and narratives heard are embedded in wider power relations rooted in patriarchy and in the coloniality (Quijano, 2007) of the French and European migration control system (Gutierrez Rodriguez, 2018; Davies and Isakjee, 2019; Tyszler, 2019a; Mayblin and Turner, 2020; Freedman et al., 2022b). In this sense, reflections from Latinx Studies help to analyse the brutal management of those that the legacy of empires organizes (Rosas, 2006) here too.

In the first section, I situate my contribution in relation to the field of literature around immigration control in airport spaces through the prism of intersectionality of power relations and oppressions (Combahee River Collective, 1979; Crenshaw, 1991; Hill Collins, 2015). Following a presentation of the *zone d'attente* device in the frame of the French air border regime, I explain my research methodology and my proposal to break with the gender-blindness of the available literature. Starting first from the point of view of the women being controlled, then of the police controlling them, the following sections analyse the empirical data collected exploring the situation of women caught up in the material and discursive production of the “Latina prostitute” figure at Paris-CDG airport—revealing both their experiences of racialisation (Fanon, 1961) and the domination processes at work. The final section documents resistance and sisterhood among Latin American women.

2 Immigration control in airports spaces through the prism of intersectionality

Airports in the global North have been analysed as social spaces of surveillance and control of the flow of people and goods; representing a locus of the sovereign states’ power to maintain order (Salter, 2008). Based on a study of border control practices in a European airport, sociologists Crosby and Rea (2016), suggest that the function of the airport is to control and filter all threats (terrorism, irregular immigration, smuggling, trafficking, etc.) to the country or supranational entity, such as the Schengen area in Europe. The border police must control the real intentions of travellers and ensure the security of the country. They check both travellers who are moving around and those who intend to settle. In this way, they control mobility and immigration (*Ibid*).

2.1 Under the “migratory risk”: profiling practices and “discretionary power”

In its pioneering work on the Paris-CDG waiting zone in the 2000s, anthropologist Chowra Makaremi has pointed out that, when it comes to locking up or moving bodies, the discretionary approach is “neither an accidental overflow nor a sovereign decision,” but a just-in-time management technique, “that opens up its margins of maneuver in the gaps or contradictory overlaps of a tangle of legal and administrative regimes” (Makaremi, 2008, p. 73, author’s translation). Years later, discretionary power, whether individual or organizational, is still considered the cornerstone for understanding border control

processes at the airport (Crosby and Rea, 2016). My ethnographical investigation led me to want to clarify the content of the social relations behind this said discretionary power. The ignorance of race relations tends to reproduce forms of white hegemony by invisibilising these power relations and by making whiteness function not as a particular social position involving structural advantages, but as an implicit norm removed from analysis and critique (Belkacem et al., 2021). Gender relations which are closely linked to the reproduction of racial hierarchies in airport border control practices, must also be taken into account. This article shows—among other things—that the air border regime is part of the continuum (Kelly, 1987, 2012) of instances producing racialized and gendered violence against women from the global South on the move (Tyszler, 2019a, 2019b; Sisic et al., 2024; Esposito and Bosworth, 2024; among others). In the moment and space studied, their capture and mistreatment stem directly from their illegalization as a “migratory risk” by the border police.

According to security researchers (Bigo et al., 2011), in airports, the network-border aims, on the one hand, to accelerate the movement of travellers with legitimate means of mobility (Torpey, 2000), the desirable travellers; and on the other hand, to filter and/or block people trying to circumvent mobility and immigration laws, those who do not have legitimate means of mobility, thus acquiring the identity of undesirable travellers. The actors in charge of border control must act by establishing the “migratory risk” of each individual wanting to cross the border. Crosby and Rea (2016) write that the individual use of discretionary power by the police at the airport always involves a face-to-face interaction. For them, “The decision whether or not to act on a traveller at the first-line checkpoint and, at the second-line checkpoint, after verifying the third-country national’s entry conditions, the final decision, which results in admissibility or inadmissibility, are both expressions of individual discretionary power” (Crosby and Rea, 2016, pp. 75–76, author’s translation). I argue that it necessary to study more in detail what is at stake in terms of power relations in these interactions. Only in this way will we be able to understand in greater depth how certain travellers become a clientele of the border police in relation to the handling of migration issues (Barnier et al., 2019) and grasp the racialization of suspicion (Darley, 2008; Guenebeaud, 2024), which is also highly gendered. Behind *a priori* professional logics and legal criteria, lie racialized, gendered and classist logics of “migratory risk” assessment, that the current literature on air border control still lacks to document and analyse.

2.2 Grasping the racial, gender, and sexual politics of the air border regime

More and more studies analyse borders as a method for reproducing racialized distinctions (Anzaldúa, 1987; Rosas, 2006; Vives, 2011; Walia, 2013, 2023; Moffette and Vadasaria, 2016; De Genova, 2018; Gutierrez Rodriguez, 2018; Tyszler, 2019a, 2024; Yuval-Davis et al., 2019; El Enany, 2020; Parmar, 2020; Danewid, 2022; Achiume, 2022; Bentouhami, 2024, among many others). Gender and sexuality are also a method of bordering and the investment in the regulation and control of sexuality work as a key strategy for the capture, containment and regulation of mobility and movement (Luibhéid, 2002; Ticktin, 2008; Lewis and Naples, 2014; Arab et al., 2018; Tyszler, 2019b, 2021a; Holzberg et al., 2021). While borders are

often presented as a defence against foreign sexual harm and violence, some researchers have pointed out how border regimes actually tend to foster gendered and sexual violence (Tyszler, 2019b, 2024; Freedman et al., 2023). When studying sexuality and borders, colonial histories not only offer symbolic models on which the neo-colonial present is depicted and made comprehensible, they also inform and continue to shape the material parameters of contemporary border regimes (Holzberg et al., 2021). Research on immigration detention centres has shown how gender-based and sexual violence can be an integral part of the daily repressive system (Tyszler, 2014; Perera and Pugliese, 2021, for example). In the last decades, immigration procedures and policies have been increasingly refined to broaden the criteria of eligibility for air deportation and allow easier removal of unwanted foreign nationals; a technique of bodily withdrawal of the illegitimised Other (Ahmed, 2000).

Conceptualizing deportability—as the lived experience of the constant threat of removal, as well as to the ways in which immigration laws and policies render particular migrants legally vulnerable to deportation—anthropologist de Genova (2002) argues that, by appealing to bureaucratic rationality, states transform deportation as a form of racialized degradation into a purely administrative and therefore “neutral” process. The systems of civil aviation have become an indispensable backbone of the contemporary regime of immigration enforcement in Europe, North America, Australia, and in other regions as well (Walters et al., 2022). In their work on the US border regime, sociologists Golash-Boza and Hondagneu-Sotelo (2013) describe deportation as a “gendered racial removal system” because men from Mexico and Central America make up the vast majority of migrants who have been detained and deported by the US government since the mid-1990s. The available literature (mainly in English) indeed focuses on the mass deportation of racialised men (Das Gupta, 2014a; Slack et al., 2018; Hiemstra, 2019), the impact on families (Baker and Marchevsky, 2019), and migrants’ resistance (Unzueta Carrasco and Seif, 2014; Das Gupta, 2014b, among others), in the Americas. This focus on men also exists in the case of research on deportations from Europe and mobilizations, often about African or Asian men (Khosravi, 2009, 2016; Lecadet, 2011, 2018); even if some scholars have proposed queering the analysis of deportability (Lewis, 2021 for instance, in the British context). Recent studies in Europe have pointed to the evolution of deportation at the European level through the organization of charter flights (Chappart, 2020; Zellner, 2022), and highlighted the plurality of mobilisations against deportations (Lecadet and Walters, 2021; Korvensyrjä and Osa, 2022, among others).

In line with research aimed at deepening the study of air deportation (Walters et al., 2022), my research experience at Paris-CDG airport led me to continue dissecting the opacity of the pre-deportation moment, looking closely at the experiences of women from the Global South in the French air border regime. While I’ve been interested in the experiences of all women,⁸ this

article focuses on those of Latin Americans. For several decades, Latinx Studies produced in the Americas have helped to identify the racial and colonial dimensions of the repression of Latin Americans—particularly Mexicans—on the internal and external borders of the United States. But as some researchers are now urging, there is every reason for these reflections to cross the Atlantic to shed light on the continuum of violence affecting Latin American people arriving in Europe (Hernández Martínez and Vilanova Becker, 2022; Milian and Romera-Figueroa, 2024).

Just as, the ‘discrete moment’ of air deportation (Walters et al., 2022, p. 4) offers us a different line of understanding of migration policies,” the moment and space of the waiting zone deserves to be seized, more in depth.

3 The French air border complex: context and methodology

Paris-Charles-de-Gaulle Airport is an international airport located in Roissy-en-France, 23 km northeast of Paris. It is the largest airport in France, the second largest airport hub in Europe and the ninth in the world in 2019 for passenger traffic.⁹ At the airport, three control lines are set up by the border police. The first check takes place as soon as passengers get off the plane. This is a random check, organised as part of targeted checks on flights considered to be at “migratory risk” (Anafé, 2020). The second check is systematic when leaving the so-called international zone and entering the country. All persons must go to the control desks for a “first line” check of their identity and travel documents, to verify their guarantees of residence and departure and to check whether they have been included in various files. When further checks are necessary, people may undergo a final, more thorough check, known as a ‘second-line’ check, at the airport terminal police station. Anafé reveals that, in addition to the objective conditions set out in the French law, there are said to be some twenty criteria that would enable police officers to define what constitutes a “migratory risk.” But the border police refuse to share these criteria, on the grounds that they are confidential, and hide behind what they call “real police sense” or “police flair”—supposedly enabling them to know whether a person represents a “migratory risk” (Anafé, 2020, p. 44). Although the figures for non-admission by criterion are not available, Anafé’s legal support of people detained in the waiting zone shows with certainty that the “migratory risk” criterion is used on a massive scale and undoubtedly in a discriminatory manner.

3.1 The Paris-CDG waiting zone regime and the unthought of gender relations

The waiting zone of Paris-CDG airport concentrates the largest number of people held at the French border. Conceived by the government as a national “showcase” (Makaremi, 2010) for other

⁸ In previous articles, I have discussed the experiences of African women at the air border (see my contributions in Freedman et al., 2022a, 2022b, 2025). I’ve also briefly explored the issue of “migratory risk” figures, mentioning among others, the case of Nigerian women who are inevitably seen by the police as victims of trafficking, and yet are systematically deported from

Paris-CDG. However, my data on this subject is not sufficiently in-depth to draw a solid comparison with the case of Latin American women.

⁹ See: <https://www.aeroport.fr/view-statistiques/paris-charles-de-gaulle>.

waiting zones, the one of Paris-CDG is home to a number of organisations, including Anafé, the Red Cross and a medical service. An annexe to the Bobigny judicial court was specially built in 2017, to serve a fast-track justice on the tarmac (Bisiaux and Doisy, 2018). But in practice, very few of the detainees remain in the waiting zone long enough to be brought before the various courts. According to the French law, a foreigner who, at the border, does not meet the conditions for entry into French territory is first notified of a refusal of entry, and then, when immediate refoulement is impossible, placed in the waiting zone. While a person can be held for a maximum of 26 days, the average length of stay in 2020 was 2,5 days in the Paris-CDG waiting zone (Anafé, 2002). Three main profiles are distinguished: people not admitted to French territory for one of the reasons supposedly provided for by law, people in interrupted transit¹⁰ and asylum seekers. These categories are fluid, since a person initially labelled as not admitted may become an asylum seeker and vice versa.

Detention at Paris-CDG takes place in a said specialised “hotel” type accommodation centre, built for the purpose of border detention and inaugurated by the Minister of the Interior in 2001. This is one of the “lies” always denounced by those detained there: “*the police told me I’d be transferred to a hotel, but it’s a prison*,” declares—like many others—Yessica, a Colombian woman whom I met in 2020. Her commentary echoes what African-American thinkers such as Baldwin (1984) and Morrison (1993) say about the dimension of falsification and lies at the heart of white domination. This accommodation area of the waiting zone is called “ZAPI 3.” An acronym hiding the euphemism of the name given to this place, literally: waiting area for people in pending cases (*Zone d’attente pour personnes en instance*). ZAPI 3 is located in the airport’s cargo area, close to the runways but well away from the terminals reserved for commercial flights. High gates and barbed wire surround a two-storey building, the ground floor of which houses the border police station that controls entry and exit. After passing through an airlock fitted with two armoured doors that open by badge, you enter the section reserved for people held at the border and deprived of their liberty. “The air is immediately heavier here” (Marcou, 2024, p. 45), as the windows are sealed. Most of the rooms and the Anafé office are on the first floor. The communal areas are filled with the incessant sounds of group or telephone conversations, regularly interrupted by a shrill voice coming out of the loudspeakers, giving the names of people summoned by the police—representing the constant threat of deportation (Makaremi, 2010; Maréchal, 2022).

During an interview in 2021, a police officer insisted on the poor image of the waiting zone as police workplace. He explained that for many years, the “cassos”¹¹ police officers were sent to the ZAPI, in other words the “problem police.” On the basis of its observations over the last 30 years, Anafé argues that rights violations are systematic and violence structural in this area of deprivation of liberty. As sociolinguist Maréchal (2022) points, the waiting zone is configured as a place that is both marginal and central to the management of the

spatial and administrative movement of foreigners declared to be in an irregular situation at the border. To understand this hidden centrality, research on French waiting zones has indeed focused primarily on the question of (in)visibility. While I agree with comments on the limits of the (in)visibility prism for studying the waiting zone (*Ibid*), it should be noted that the gender-blindness has affected the production of research on the French air border regime. In existing works, while women are not necessarily excluded from descriptions, they are particularly excluded from theorisations. Issues of gender and sexual violence are only mentioned in brackets or footnotes. My research shows that police officers control women’s bodies, sexuality and femininity at the air border.

In February 2014, while I was working with another migrant rights organization whose office was next door to theirs, Anafé members asked me to collect the stories of Nicaraguan and Honduran women who were being detained at Paris-CDG—because I could understand Spanish. The women I listened to on the phone described how they had been victims of police violence after refusing to board a flight to Mexico. They denounced how six police officers shook, jostled, pulled by the hands, feet and hair, hit and humiliated them for almost an hour. The attempted boarding failed when the captain refused to allow passengers to board under such conditions. Karen, one of the six women, immediately consulted a doctor on her return to the waiting zone, and the medical certificate issued listed eleven lesions and haematomas on the young woman’s body.¹² Some of these women was deported later, the rest sent to detention on the territory. It was through these protesting voices that I entered this field, and continued to follow their struggles and those of other women from Latin America years later.

3.2 Methodology: putting women and gender back at the centre of the analysis

This article draws on ethnographic research, based on long and assiduous visits to the Paris-CDG waiting zone, over two different periods: 6 months in 2014 and 9 months between 2020 and 2021. At the French air borders, the Anafé association, through its partnership with the Ministry of the Interior, makes it possible to gain access to closed security zones. That’s why I volunteered there. Between July and December 2014 and between February 2020 and April 2021, I carried out participant observation, mainly at Paris-CDG. In the first case, as part of a PhD project in sociology; in the second, the fieldwork was conducted as part of the GBV-MIG research project¹³ on gender-based violence experienced by women in migratory contexts and in collaboration with Anafé, as part of an action-research project aimed at helping the NGO better grasp gender issues in its advocacy work. My role in the field was therefore plural. I had to combine my role as a researcher with that of a volunteer for Anafé in order to access to the field. This meant fulfilling the requirements of volunteer work by taking part in the various activities planned: running legal clinics in

10 I.e. people who were stopped in transit for some reasons and whose final destination was outside the Schengen area.

11 ‘Cassos’ is an abbreviation of “social case.” It is a colloquial French expression used since the 1990s to refer to people who are considered unsuitable for life in society, incapable, odd, unintelligent.

12 See Anafé press releases in 2014: <https://anafe.org/breve-2014-violences-en-zone-dattente-silence-au-ministere/> and <https://anafe.org/campagne-contre-les-violences-faites-aux-femmes-version-roissy-silence-on-tape/>.

13 See: <https://gbvmigration.cnrs.fr/>.

the Paris-CDG waiting zone, telephone hotlines, visiting airport terminals and waiting zones in Paris and other parts of France, as well as observing hearings and accompanying some people to asylum interviews (at their request). As with any mode of entry into a research field, the associative approach I had to adopt certainly had an impact on data collection and, ultimately, on the analysis proposed here. Moreover, I set out to do fieldwork as a feminist (Clair, 2012), abandoning the idea of the objectivity of a distant and neutral scientific method, to make explicit biases and positionality (Haraway, 1991); and taking the lives and opinions of women and queers seriously.

Among the hundreds of people I met at the air border, particularly through legal clinics held in Paris-CDG waiting zone, I followed the cases of 112, including 76 women. Two-thirds of them were Latin American women, the others mostly from Africa, and a minority from other regions (Middle East and Asia). The main task of the volunteers who run the Anafé legal aid clinics is to inform foreign nationals about the procedure and their rights, and to assist them with administrative and legal formalities where possible. Anafé also informs and assists asylum seekers held in the waiting zone, preparing them for the interview, and helps them lodge appeals in the event of refusal. To run the legal aid clinics, I was trained by Anafé beforehand (like all volunteers), and in particular I had to learn the basics of foreigners' rights and asylum law—and the specific features of this legislation in the frame of the waiting zones. During the legal clinics, people came freely to the Anafé premises, but because of the initial focus of my research project, I tried to give priority to receiving women whenever possible.¹⁴ Apart from my intention to concentrate on women's experiences, I did not select the people I met at the air border. I particularly received women from Latin America, because there were numerous in the waiting zone at the time and because of my ease in Spanish. As my research approach was inductive, I did not deliberately focus my research on Latin American women from the beginning. It was their visits and their stories that drew my attention to their specific experiences shaped by the interweaving relations of power and domination at work at the air border.

The different qualitative tools deployed contributed to the methodological rigor of this in-depth ethnographic work. In total, over the two fieldwork periods, I carried out 38 legal clinics in the waiting zone, and 15 by telephone. It was at the legal clinics that I was able to suggest to women who had come to denounce abuse on their own initiative that they talk to me about it in more detail, by taking part in an interview as part of my research, or by submitting an anonymous written testimony. In this way, I was able to collect over 50 oral accounts from Latin American women about their experiences at the air border. Discussions about violence were spontaneous because all of them saw their detention and risk of deportation as an injustice. The process of suggesting more in-depth interviews therefore relied on people who came forward to report experiences of violence and who wished to denounce them. The interviews, conducted inside

Anafé office, in a non-directive way—in contrast to the list of questions usually asked of all people receiving legal support from the NGO—were mostly individual, and more rarely group interviews when preferred by the women. The idea was to let their point of view on the border situation and their experience emerge as freely as possible, to break away from the previously imposed associative and legal prism. Few interviews were recorded—when confidentiality conditions in the Anafé office allowed it—and the others were noted down by me. Some women sent me their views once they had left the detention area, either by voice message or by written message. Beyond legal aid clinics, I was able to follow individual cases of women at different stages of their deprivation of liberty at the border: inside the waiting zone, at court hearings, at asylum interviews, and sometimes keeping in touch (by telephone or by meeting again) to follow their experience once they finally managed to cross the border or (more rarely) once they have been deported to their or another country. I explicitly asked the women for their consent to use their oral or written testimonies of violence for my research¹⁵ and the NGO advocacy work. There was no additional risk for them to participate in my investigation, as the interviews were conducted confidentially in an appropriate space, and their accounts completely anonymized from the outset. If one of the rules of research ethics is to do no harm to the people involved in our research, I applied it scrupulously. I also tried, in real time, through legal aid and advocacy by Anafé, to assist these people in their fight against injustice at the French air border.

Moreover, in 2020–2021 I was able to have discussions lasting from several minutes to several hours with around 30 border police officers, often high-ranking, within the framework of the legal clinics in ZAPI and spontaneous visits carried out there, as well as during planned visits to airport terminals at Paris CDG airport—parts of an agreement between the ministry of Interior and Anafé.¹⁶ I was able to carry out 10 visits (some scheduled, others unannounced) during which border police officers were to guide me through all the premises making up the waiting zone and answer my questions. Given the vastness of the airport, the multiplicity of police facilities within it and of possible interlocutors, and the principled aim of discussing numerous subjects with the border police, the visits there lasted several hours each time. As I was unable to record the exchanges with the police, I took brief notes during the visits—mainly police verbatim—, then at the end I made oral recordings, as detailed as possible, of all the elements of police discourse I remembered. I would then produce written reports. The police carried out a background check before granting me accreditation as a waiting zone “visitor.” Thus, they knew I was a researcher as well as a volunteer for Anafé.

¹⁴ This was in agreement with Anafé and the volunteers. This meant that if a woman came into the office, I was the one who should see her first, rather than the other volunteer who also ran the legal clinic. But this was sometimes not possible, given the “tense flow” of people coming to Anafé for assistance. That's why I also received a lot of men. But of course, it was also of interest to be able to make comparisons in terms of gendered experiences.

¹⁵ As there was no ethics committee in France regulating qualitative research methods, I asked for individual oral consent to ensure that each person consented both to taking part in an interview and to the anonymous data being used for analysis and publication. The purpose of the study was fully explained to each woman before oral consent was obtained, to ensure that they understood all aspects of their participation.

¹⁶ Anafé regularly organises visits to waiting areas to obtain information on conditions of detention, applicable procedures and deportation. The main aim is to reveal the malfunctions in these areas and to bring about changes in the law and practices. Since 2004, an agreement establishes permanent access for Anafé to the Paris-CDG waiting area.

Fieldwork at the air border was emotionally and physically intense, especially during the legal clinic days held in ZAPI. The framework in which Anafé operates there makes it structurally impossible to do “good work” and participate in fact in the violence of the air border regime (Makaremi, 2010). The NGO wants to have a permanent right of access and observation in the waiting zone, while campaigning for an end to administrative detention at the borders. In this sense, it refuses to organise daily legal clinics, so as not to act as a guarantor for the Ministry of the Interior in terms of respect for human rights; illustrating the ambivalence of legal intervention by associations in French administrative detention areas (Fischer, 2017). In this context, during legal clinics carried out by pairs of volunteers (on a rotating basis and according to availability), which at best took place two times a week, we were always overloaded and obliged to establish priorities in an arbitrary manner, often giving priority to cases of asylum seekers. Moreover, in 2020–2021, the field research was carried during the Covid-19 pandemic. The chaotic management of the pandemic in the waiting zone¹⁷ is not examined in this article. But fieldwork was of course complicated by Covid-19, which sometimes led to airport closures and/or stoppages in Anafé’s on-site work in the waiting zone. During the same period, my investigative experience was impacted by my pregnancy¹⁸ and then by my early experience of motherhood.

My positionality as a white¹⁹ cis woman, in her early thirties, associated with an activist organization, had, like all positionalities, an impact on my fieldwork. Contact with Latin American women held at the border was facilitated, both because of my gender and the fact that I was identified as a member of a support NGO—and concretely, because I spoke Spanish. On the other hand, my gender and age sometimes had significant effects on my interactions with police officers in the field. Sometimes the effects were positive, in the sense that they enabled the officers to “loosen up” a little from their official posture and discourse when faced with a rather young woman they did not take very seriously. At other times, they were negative, while at the same time making it possible to gain sociological insights. The behaviour of some police officers towards me—and other volunteers—was at times hostile and sexist. For example, in 2021, we were touring airport terminals accompanied by a police officer (who was about fifteen years older than us) and discussing the violence that can occur during forced removals and the use of video cameras by the police. After emphasising cases of false allegations, the police officer admitted that police violence could occur, but that it was precisely the cameras that could deter certain behaviour. The officer then made a shocking digression into the notion of “safe words”: *‘It’s like in the BDSM world: one finger, two fingers are fine, three fingers (simultaneously miming a sexual penetration movement with her hands), you say cornichon! That’s the safe word, cornichon! Well, in the police, the safe word is camera!’* The officer started laughing loudly.” (Field notes, Paris-CDG

airport, 2021). These masculinist attitudes are just a glimpse of the sexualised dimension of border control.

Returning to the field several years after the first fieldwork enabled me to go back and validate elements of interpretation with the people involved, push the questioning further, solicit comments, explanations and the beginnings of theorizing, and do all this repeatedly. This is one of the advantages of anchoring analysis processes in the logic of the field (Paillé and Mucchielli, 2021). To analyse sociologically all my empirical data once field work was completely over,²⁰ I proceeded in several stages.²¹ Firstly, I transcribed in full and translated myself the interviews with women, and analysed them thematically. Then, I analysed my ethnographic observation notes in a thematic way too. In addition, I did an analysis of police discourse on the basis of what I had been able to reconstruct. Thematic analysis began by systematically identifying and grouping the themes addressed in my corpus of data, then tracing parallels or oppositions, divergences, nuances, complementarities, between the themes. The empirical material analysis sections that follow reflect the major themes that have emerged. Confronting the different points of view on the situation at the border helped to produce the most accurate analysis possible. The quotations in this article are chosen because they are emblematic of the practices and experiences of border control documented by the research. In line with the need of epistemic humility of researchers (Medina, 2012), and more, in order to recognize the women who participated as epistemic subjects, the extracts quoting them are deliberately long. A constructivist, inductive method means that the content covered by concepts such as violence, gender, race or intersectionality cannot be defined *a priori*. The aim was therefore to gradually bring out this content through the qualitative analysis of the empirical materials. Intersectionality (Combahee River Collective, 1979; Crenshaw, 1991; Hill Collins, 2015) as a localised and contextualised analytical tool came from the field, through the situated approach to dominance (Viveros Vigoya, 2016) of Latin American women themselves, denouncing their situation at the border as the result of the interweaving relations of power and domination at work.

4 “They call us whore!.” women in the production of a gendered and racialised “migratory risk” at Paris CDG airport

“You know, there are many cases here. Many talk about how the police threaten them at the airport, telling them ‘you are coming to prostitute yourself’... We are treated like trash! They call us ‘negras de mierda’! The police say a lot of racist things to us!” (Interview with Juana, Peruvian, detained in Paris-CDG waiting zone, 2014).

17 Anafé’s press release (2021): <https://anafe.org/les-conditions-sanitaires-ne-sont-pas-respectees-en-zapi-lanefe-suspend-sa-mission-daccompagnement-juridique-a-roissy/>.

18 I discuss this dimension and its effects on the field in a collective article (Freedman et al., 2025).

19 My apparent whiteness is nuanced by my Jewishness, which my interviewees sometimes learn when they ask me about my surname or religion. But this had little impact on this research.

20 I analyzed the data from both fieldwork periods at the same time. I did not use the 2014 investigation data beforehand; my PhD thesis subject having changed in the meantime. It’s because I’m returning to this field from 2020 that I’m taking the opportunity to use them (at last) for scientific publication.

21 The entire analysis process was carried out by the researcher without the use of software or other IT tools.

In the course of my observations and interviews at Paris-CDG airport terminals and in the ZAPI, in different years, one police target stood out in particular: that of the Latin American woman, coming to Paris or stopping over on her way to Spain, suspected of going to work as a prostitute. The profiles of these Latin American women were infinitely varied. “Simple travellers” visiting their families in Europe, students, tourists, would-be migrants looking for work, some seeking healthcare, but also asylum seekers, and many combinations of these categories that fail to capture the complexity of the stories and trajectories of all these women. In 2014, the women I met were mainly Central Americans: Hondurans and Nicaraguans. In 2020–2021, the majority were Colombian and Venezuelan. While I have sometimes had access to many details about their backgrounds and trajectories, the reasons for their departure are not at the heart of the analysis carried out here. Rather, it is what forcibly links them all together, despite the multiplicity of their profiles, that I am interested in looking at here: the state violence that they experienced at the air border, through the arbitrary methods of migration control practised by the police.

In 2021, I met an Argentinian woman in the ZAPI. She was shocked to find herself detained with other Latin Americans, from whom she clearly wished to distinguish herself: “*You can easily see that I have nothing in common with these people.*” The Argentinian was defending her whiteness, and thus her legitimacy to escape from an area of immigration repression concerning racialised people to whom she does not belong, despite her South American passport. This example illustrates the main profile of “Latinas” arrested at the air border, people who are first racialised as Black and indigenous in the Latin American context (Tijoux Merino, 2016; Viveros Vigoya, 2018; Caggiano, 2023), and then, in the European context. From my first days in the research field, I was able to observe the gendered racial categorization already made and in the process of being made (West and Fenstermaker, 2006) at the air border, producing the “Latinas” group in the waiting zone.

4.1 2014: detecting the “whore stigma” attached by border police to Latin American women

In 2014, Honduras was the 4th nationality of the people held in the waiting zone of Roissy CDG (Anafé, 2015). Within 6 months, I was aware of several dozens of cases of women who had all been accused of coming here to work as “prostitutes,” and been refused entry or to continue in transit, despite the fact that many of them met all the legal requirements.

“They asked me why I was coming. I said to go sightseeing. They told me that our country was too poor to be a tourist here. The policeman told me that he would help me if I said I was coming to work. He put a lot of pressure on me, but I refused. He told me that I was a liar and that Honduran women came to prostitute themselves. He said that most of the Hondurans were prostitutes who came to send money to their children in the country because Honduras is a very poor country. ‘Here it is a rich country’ he said. A 17-year-old was also told the same thing, that she was going to prostitute herself.

They blackmailed us: ‘if you say you are coming to work, I will help you’. The policeman mocked and laughed at us. He spoke perfect Spanish. He was a young man. He said that we could not fool him. We cried. (...) I have never been told this—prostitute—and he is a young man, I was older than him.” (Interview with Lourdes, Honduran, ZAPI, 2014).

“The French police, they treated me very badly, like a criminal. They looked like hungry sharks waiting for me to get off the plane to swallow me. Psychologically I feel very offended, they did not even let me speak to defend myself, and it’s not fair that they mistreat people the way they do, they humiliate us. Calling us whores. They make fun of us Central Americans. We are all free to go where we want, they cannot deprive us of our rights. But here they have us tied up with our freedom. It will be scary to come back here because the way they treat us is ugly. Sincerely, a Nica, psychologically abused.” (Written testimony from a Nicaraguan woman, collected in ZAPI, 2014).

It was by listening to this type of account from many women that I began to understand the racist, sexist and classist equation operated by the border police. Honduran, Nicaraguan, sometimes Venezuelan or Colombian, these women had in common that they were all subjected to the same kind of insults and pressure by border police in airport terminals, sometimes even in Spanish: “*Negra puta, vuelve a tu país*” (black whore, go back to your country), “*prostituta mentirosa*” (lying prostitute). Over the months, a repetitive pattern emerged in the field, revealing a specific process of minoritization concerning Latin American women. All their narratives converged on this generic description: the ladies got off the plane and were checked either directly on the gangway or in the arrivals area, then taken to the police station behind for a more thorough check. It was here, out of sight, that several police officers stood over each of them and the pressure began: “*Admit it, say you have come to work,*” “*Honduran/ Nicaraguan women come to work as prostitutes,*” “*if you tell us, things will go faster for you, we’ll help you, you’ll be released.*” And when the women in question objected, the police officers insisted: “*you are a liar, you have abandoned your children,*” “*you are poor, tourism does not exist for you,*” “*you are prostitutes,*” and so on.

The women’s narratives indicate how they feel preyed upon by border police practices. The data I collected in 2014 already showed that the “whore stigma” (Pheterson, 1993) weighs heavily on women categorized as “Latinas” at the French air border. Gail Pheterson questions the stereotype of the prostitute, by analysing the whore stigma as something that is not limited to a definition of prostitution as a transaction in which sexual services are exchanged for money, but also as a tool for the social and political control of women in general. An analysis of the cases of Latin American women detained at this period reveals a certain police logic towards them: non-white, *a priori* poor Central-American women traveling alone to Spain = “prostitutes.” It seems then that the simple conviction that these women come to work as prostitutes makes them bodies that can be locked up and deported, even if they meet the legal conditions for entry into French/Schengen territory, revealing the kind of power relations that shape the “discretionary power” previously described (Makaremi, 2010; Crosby and Rea, 2016). Were these ordinary practices of the border police at the air border or was it the result of specific instructions from the Ministry of the Interior? These questions remained unanswered.

But the systematic experience of abuse of Latin American women at the air border demonstrates that the stigma of the prostitute and the image of non-innocence associated with it legitimize/encourage violent behaviour by border police in the terminals and waiting zone of Paris-CDG airport. In 2015, Anafé indicates that 75% of people who reported discrimination/abuse in the waiting zone were from Latin America and the Caribbean, without specifying their gender. Six years later, the fieldwork carried out enabled me to analyse more in detail the regime of intersectional violence—for sure gendered—at work.

4.2 2020–2021: discerning (again) repeating patterns, dissecting a regime of intersectional violence against Latin American women

“Daniela: You know, when you get off the plane, there are policemen checking your passport, so I was able to get through. And when I got to immigration, the policeman could not understand a word I was saying. He had counted my money and I asked him what was missing, what was wrong. He stayed in front of the computer for a while. Then he called another policeman. I thought it was something about my booking. The other policeman told me no, that I could not come in, and told the first policeman to take me away. So, we set off, walking through the airport, and on the way, I was asked for my travel insurance. So, I gave it to him, and he stopped and said ‘hmm’, I thought he was going to let me go because everything was full. He told me no, that I had to follow him. So, we were in a small police room, they asked me to wait, they made me open my bag, took out my wallet, checked my Venezuelan bank cards (...). Then came the same one who was at immigration. I asked what was missing and he did not answer, he just said I could not come in. The policeman started to get angry because I did not understand him very well and he did not speak Spanish very well. So, he started to get angry. He said the paper I had was useless, that I’d come to prostitute myself. I understood that. So, I started crying and then all the policemen started laughing.” (Interview with Daniela, Venezuelan, 29 years old, ZAPI, 2020).

As in 2014, the violence described in 2020–2021 first took place behind the scenes, in the border police offices located in airport terminals, after passports have been checked on arrival. The women I met repeatedly denounced the same practices of physical and verbal intimidation: the police generally gather in groups around a single woman, and force her to confess that she has come to work as a prostitute in Spain or France. In the majority of cases, the women explain that the police suspected them of coming to work as “prostitutes” simply because they remained silent or cried, as if this were a confession. Daniela, as many others before and after her, was the victim of false statements written on her notification of refusal of entry by the border police, although she met all the necessary conditions to continue her journey to Spain. Exactly as other Latin American women recounted, several officers tried—at the same time—to get her to admit that she had come to Spain to work as a prostitute. Later, an interpreter came and told her that they were just going to ask her some questions, that she had nothing to worry about. The interpreter asked if she had any family in Venezuela, a husband,

children, a job. Daniela replied. The interpreter told her that she was obliged to sign the police papers presented to her. She signed. She ended up with an entry refusal notice stating that she lacked resources and guarantees for accommodation—which was false—and stating that she had declared that she wanted to settle in Spain permanently to work—which was false also. Daniela recounts that on the same day as her, a Honduran woman experienced a similar situation:

“It was worse in her case. The police told her right away that she’d come to work as a prostitute, even though they had not even started asking the questions. They told her straight away. I do not know why they do that to young women... independent...”

The same pattern repeats itself. Central, South, and Caribbean women are placed in the waiting zone, despite the fact that many of them meet the entry requirements for France or Spain. In 2020–2021, the whore stigma continues to weigh heavily on certain women. The interviews reveal that the police do not speak Spanish and only call in an interpreter once they have decided not to admit the women, as Tania, another young Venezuelan, recounts:

“When the translator arrived, I understood that the policemen had put things that never came out of my mouth. As I did not speak French and they did not speak Spanish, it was almost impossible to understand each other. The translator told me that they were going to take me to a hotel and there I could solve everything and continue my trip. Well, I signed in peacefully. The police asked me if I was carrying drugs, I said no and they checked my wallet and my body. Then they put me in a cell. After half an hour they took us out, I was with a Paraguayan and a Nicaraguan. They took us to a police car and transferred us to the supposed hotel.” (Written testimony of Tania sent to the researcher by Whatsapp, 2020).

As in 2014, the women’s narratives highlight the pressure and guilt-tripping strategies employed by the police, notably around maternity.

“During the weeks she has spent locked up at the French border, Alaysha, a Caribbean asylum seeker, has come forward on several occasions to denounce the physical and verbal violence she has suffered from the police. During one of our discussions, Alaysha talks about how much she suffers from having to leave without her children, and the rage she feels at being accused of abandoning them by border police officers. ‘But what use would their mother be to them if she’s dead? Me, dead in [country of origin], I’m no use to them at all.’ she asserts, referring to the high rate of femicide in her country.” (Field notes, Roissy-CDG waiting zone, 2021).

As Alaysha, many women explained to me how police officers, directly or indirectly labelled them as bad mothers who have abandoned their children back home. In this way, we see the gendered strategies of the police officers, rooted in heterosexism, in the way they treat these women. Doing so, they judge their morality as women and mothers, drawing the contours of a racialized bad femininity of these “Latinas” and making it a tool of migration control—echoing the situation at land borders and colonial practices (Sahraoui and Tyszler, 2021; Tyszler and Freedman, 2023; Bejarano and Morales, 2024). This type of violence around good or bad motherhood can also

be reproduced by the judges of the courts where the women appear. This was also the case of Alaysha, who denounced the particularly guilt-inducing remarks made by a judge who stigmatised her during the hearing for having left her children in her country. The supposed “maternal deviance” of these racialised women is used here as a form of social control, not explicitly repressive (Cardi, 2007). From the moment they step off the plane to the transfer to the waiting area and the various appearances they make before the police or at hearings, the women caught up in it describe a veritable continuum of racist, sexist and classist violence. Indeed, violence against women categorised as “Latinas” continues, after police premises in airport terminals, in the ZAPI around the pressure to deport them. This is what Gladys, a Colombian woman recounted:

“I’m not used to this kind of treatment. I mean, my passport is full of stamps, I never had any problems. I know that the situation is hard because of the covid issue. But I had my negative test, I do not represent any danger to society. And then, when they called me to fly back to Bogota, I said ‘no, I’m not going to use that flight, because I live in London.’ The police did not speak Spanish, I had a translator that came after. He barely looked at me because when I said this, one of the police officers became hysterical. All of the police officers started to laugh ‘she comes from Bogota ahaha’. I did not understand why they were laughing. The police woman asked me, through the translator, why I was coming here, and I told her that I was coming to visit my cousin, that I am her closest family and she was physically and psychologically in a bad way, because she had lost a baby. And she told me that ‘this is not tourism’. And I said, but ‘I did not come for tourism, but to support my cousin’. The police started like crazy, so I showed the letter from the lawyer that we had hired and. she picked it up very reluctantly, it was terrible behaviour. The treatment was terrible. because I was Colombian. The other policemen kept laughing and saying ‘she comes from Bogota; what does she think she is?’ I was devastated. I said I do not deserve to be here.” (Interview with Gladys, Colombian, ZAPI 3, 2021).

In all cases, the women denounce the violence of the police suggesting a link with their status as women, their country of origin—categorized as poor countries—and sometimes their skin color. “Why do they use such violence with us? We are Latinas, is that why they do this?” proposed Alaysha, inviting thought to an intersectional reading of the situation at the border. Analysing police discourse is helpful to explore more in depth the interweaving of power and domination relation at work. Beyond the question of nationality, and the administrative requirements to enter France or the Schengen territory, a whole racist, sexist and classist imaginary informs the practices of control and repression of Latin American women at the border and their possibility to cross it.

5 Unpacking police discourse, revealing the weight of racism and sexism in the manufacture of the “migratory risk”

Analysing police discourse allows us to understand how relations of race, class, gender and sexuality, as well as colonial imaginaries and contemporary stereotypes of Latin American women, are crystallized

in practices of non-admission and deportation at the air border. The production of violence seems also to be forged in the exchanges and collaborations with the Spanish police. Guenebeaud (2024)’s work on the police mobilised at the Franco-British border shows how discretionary power becomes arbitrary. He argues that despite the constraints, the border police still have a great deal of autonomy, and this is what gives rise to discretionary power. In his view, it is the gap between “square orders” and “non-square applications” of the control and repression of racialised migrants that gives rise to police arbitrariness. At the air border, the blurred contours of the “migratory risk” category immediately open the door to the routine deployment of arbitrariness, as is particularly well illustrated by the profiling practices described by the border police themselves.

5.1 Profiling the “Latina prostitutes.” between masculinism, “policial instinct” and arbitrary power

The exercise is always the same. We—another volunteer and I—have an appointment with a representative of the Paris-CDG border police, always a senior officer. He must to take us on a tour of the typical “route” taken by people who have not been admitted to France, from the moment they step off the plane, through the various checkpoints, to the police premises in the airport terminals, where the second-line checks are carried out, and often what follows: refusal of entry and the start of administrative detention. For most of the police officers I met, Anafé’s visits were a regular occurrence, and therefore constituted a kind of routinised performance, often mirroring their routine control logics and practices. Latin American women cases were often raised by the police themselves, when talking about profiling practices and “migratory risk.” In one of my visits in 2021, I asked a policeman in charge of the 2nd line check whether the profiles of non-admitted people had changed with the Covid-19 context:

“There are obviously fewer people,” we were told, “but the profiles are varied.” Some are arriving less or no longer. One officer mentions the example of women from Latin America: *“we have had a lot of them,” “of median age—in their thirties—from Honduras or Venezuela, for example.” “We knew exactly what they were up to, I do not need to spell it out for you,”* declares the policeman with a wry smile. I then ask him to explain what he is saying. *“They were all going to the Jonquera,”* he says. *“La Jonquera?”* I ask. As the policeman has been beating around the bush all along, I finally ask if he’s talking about prostitution, and he confirms. I then ask if the women had told them they were going to Spain to work as prostitutes. The policeman replies that no, not necessarily, *“we know how to get them to talk”* and then: *“we know, it’s obvious.”* I ask for clarification. The policeman replies, *“you can tell by the way they dress, and they are very friendly.”* The officer then mentions the indecent proposals that may have been made by this profile of women to border police officers, pointing out that *“this is what they must have been used to doing with police officers in their country.”* The officer goes on to point out that these women generally have children back home. I ask if this is an argument used to encourage them to return. The policeman’s answer to this question is not clear, but it’s not no.” (Fieldnotes, Paris-CDG airport, 2021).

This extract says a lot about profiling practices at the air border and the links between racialisation and sexualisation of Latin American Women's bodies. The discourse on knowing "how to get them" and because "it's obvious" illustrates the margin of arbitrary power the border police officers have to control Latin American women. The phrase "We knew exactly what they were up to, I do not need to spell it out for you" shows the (white) racial connivance that the policeman is trying to create between us (another volunteer and I) by equating Latin American women with prostitutes, as if this were a matter of course, a matter of common knowledge. This is also reinforced by his reference to La Jonquera, without any further explanation, as if we should know this place and what happens there. In an article on prostitution clubs in the Catalonia region in Spain, sociologists [Avarguez and Harlé \(2015\)](#) have shown how this kind of place is key to male socialization and the construction of masculinity in the French-Spanish border area. The town of La Jonquera, on the Spanish side of the border, is well known for its street and clubs' prostitution. This "prostitution supermarket," as La Jonquera is called, mainly targets French cross-border commuters (residents of this region), but they also cater more widely for customers from the rest of France. In their work, the researchers refer mainly to "Romanian, Bulgarian, Nigerian, etc." ([Avarguez and Harlé, 2015](#), p. 14) when talking about sex workers. As well, in a recent book, sociologist Alain [Tarrus \(2022\)](#) focuses on the journeys and experiences of women from the Balkans in the prostitution clubs of La Jonquera. While Latin American women are only marginally mentioned in existing research on sex work in La Jonquera, they are omnipresent in police discourse on the migratory risk associated with prostitution at the Paris-CDG border. The police officers' narratives I collected reveal the basis/criteria for profiling practices targeting the so-called "Latina prostitutes": nationality (coming from a "poor country"), phenotypical appearance, age (rather young), clothing (which would indicate membership of a popular class and/or a "whore style"), behaviour, supposed contradiction between the official reason for the trip and the person's appearance/speech all based on a supposed knowledge/expertise of this typical profile. The police officers' explanations of their control practices are thus congruent with the denunciations made by the women. This is also illustrated by another interview extract from another visit in Paris-CDG:

"These were women from Central America, aged between 20 and 25, who arrive alone, they have paid for a plane ticket that costs between 9 months and a year's salary, and they arrive like that, they tell us they have come to do some sightseeing but they do not have a tourist circuit planned, they do not know what they are going to visit, they do not have an itinerary." The police officer adds that there are also non-verbal signs that the border police officers pick up on: 'they remain silent or start crying, so we know that the purpose of their journey is not what they say it is'. The lieutenant says that these women generally come to Spain to work as cleaners or prostitutes. Another officer said that typically it was the kind of profile where they knew that even if there were all the documents, it was suspicious because they often said they were coming for tourism without being able to justify it orally, or when they confessed themselves that they were going to work in Spain, they started to cry. Later another officer in charge of the second line control spoke about the case of Nicaraguan and Honduran women, who used to arrive in large numbers several years ago and have not been seen in the ZAPI since. According to him, these

networks have been stopped. (Fieldnotes, Paris-CDG airport, 2021).

At the air border, the police perform a state masculinism against sex workers that echoes the one taking place on the French territory. Since April 2016, the government has implemented a prohibitionist and neo-abolitionist law criminalising the demand for sexual services ([Giametta and Le Bail, 2022](#)). This coincided particularly with the persecution of cis Chinese and Nigerian women and the neglect of Latina trans women working in the sex industry, according to racialised and sexist conceptions of victimisation ([Giametta et al., 2023](#)). In Spain, a similar political will to criminalise has increased in recent years, in a state where prostitution is highly associated with "Latina" migrants ([González, 2019](#); [Meneses-Falcón and García-Vázquez, 2023](#)). The research conducted at the air border suggests that these policies and political debates also have a negative impact on women in a more general way. The example of the experiences of Latin Americans in the waiting zone shows how racialised women can experience repression even before crossing the border and whether or not they actually come as sex workers. The police have a double discourse, both criminalising and seeking to shame women, and at the same time supposedly protecting them from future difficulties they would have in Europe and urging them to return home to the children they have left behind.

The question of the "police instinct" to recognise Latin prostitutes "at a glance," is mentioned by all the officers I met during airport visits. As the sociologist Nicolas Jounin and his students write about identity checks based on face profiling in France: "Seen as the manifestation of an autonomous professionalism, based on the certainty of a diagnosis, or even a 'flair' or 'instinct', proactive or 'on-initiative' activity is valued as 'real police work' (...)" ([Jounin et al., 2015](#), p. 5). Indeed, the frequency with which the officers refer to this "instinct" to defend the validity of their profiling practices at the air border shows that, it is a quality of which they are proud and confident, illustrating a dimension of the hegemonic masculinity ([Connell, 2014](#)) at work among the air border police. The investigation reveals that violence against Latin American women seems also to be co-produced with the Spanish police, who regularly visit Paris-CDG and focus on this profile.

5.2 Shared border-hegemonic masculinities. Circulation of imaginaries and arbitrary control practices between Spanish and French police

During the terminal visit, a police officer overhearing a discussion we were having with another officer about Latin American women, tells us that "Spanish police officers come to Roissy every year, under bilateral agreements. They are on the front line with the Immigration Mobil Brigade (BMI), for 15 days. Their objectives are to draw up migratory profiles, and South America is the bulk of the migratory profiles for Spain" he underlines." (Fieldnotes, Paris-CDG airport visit, 2021).

As [Casella Colombeau \(2020, p. 9\)](#) writes: "The stereotypical representations used to establish a typical traveler profile are defined and communicated between colleagues. These informal rules are highly localized, varying from one border area to another according to the economic activities of the region concerned." The accounts of

the French police officers reveal the transnational, transborder circulation of racialisation logics between Spain and France, and the co-construction of their common “clientele” at air borders, notably the one of the “Latina prostitutes.”

“I ask Officer T. about the presence of foreign police officers at Roissy. He talks about police officers from other Schengen States who come for periods of 2 weeks. They come as observers, also to see if the French are fulfilling their contract. He gives the example of the Spanish police officers and takes up the case of the Latin American women to say that, it is often the Spanish colleagues who help the French border police to speak with them. So they can tell their French colleagues what comes out, what they suspect about a person, so they can give an opinion about the migration risk. They notably provide support to the BMI (Immigration Mobile Brigade), which carries out bridging controls.” (Field notes, Paris-CDG airport, 2021).

The interviews done with police officers at the Paris-CDG border confirm that women from some countries of Latin America are systematically seen as fraudulent prostitutes by the police, echoing the hypersexualisation of their bodies in the European context (Hernández Martínez and Vilanova Becker, 2022). This form of sexualised racialisation is rooted in European colonial history in the Americas and its perpetuation in the present in Latin America (Viveros Vigoya, 2009; Tijoux Merino and Palominos Mandiola, 2015) and in the territories where Latin American people live, as in Europe. This also shows the extent to which the figure of the (inevitably) prostituted woman plays a part in the reproduction of hegemonic masculinities embodied by the border police. There seems to be a form of trans-border construction of hegemonic masculinity between Spain and France, forged alongside the perpetual reproduction of a racialised, dominated femininity, always linked to prostitution, reminiscent of the processes studied in the town of La Jonquera. Some of the officers I met in Paris-CDG also defended their own, French, expertise on “Latinas”:

When he mentioned the “Latinas” coming to prostitution, I asked him whether this type of profile was typologised by their Spanish counterparts, who alert them to a particular profile presenting a migratory risk for Spain. He replied that the PAF had had its own expertise for some time. (Field notes, Paris-CDG terminals visit, 2021).

As sociologist Isabelle Clair (2012) has shown, among teenagers in France, the figure of the whore always serves to reaffirm one’s virile masculinity and the patriarchal order. In this sense, the construction and reproduction of border police masculinity seems to be forged at the intersection of heterosexism and racism. Faced with the supposed border police “expertise” on “migratory risk,” which turns into violence against many racialized women, ‘Latinas’ turn the stigma attached to them and try to resist to detention and deportation.

6 Resistances and sisterhood among Latin American women

Vulnerability in resistance (Butler et al., 2016) is tangible among Latin American women detained at the French air border.

Whether arriving together or not at Paris-CDG airport, some women find themselves stranded at the French air border, facing the same police assignment to the category of migratory risk. Locked up and threatened with air deportation, they take care of each other and denounce the attacks on their rights and dignity. In the waiting zone, they deploy multiple forms of agency, both individually and collectively, in an attempt to protect themselves from the violence arising from the border regime. The research carried out shows that resistance can be individual and collective—as in the February 2014 protest—in the face of experienced violence, when women challenge it *in situ*, in interaction with police officers. Moreover, the fact that many women insist on denouncing abuses they individually suffered by border authorities to an NGO/researcher, with the determination/hope “*that this will not happen to [their] Latina sisters*,” shows the collective turn that is often intentionally taken. In this way, forms of sisterhood—in the sense of solidarity between women for their emancipation (Hooks, 2007)—are developed and strengthened to resist violence and try to transcend the racist and heterosexist migratory order. Forming a pair or a group of women is a strategy for feeling/being stronger, defending oneself and trying to move forward. It’s a question of giving themselves the means to resist together the multiple obstacles placed in the way of their mobility or exile projects (Tyszler, 2021a, 2021b, 2024). Following bell Hooks (2017), these women’s resistance can be understood as a refutation of a definition of reality imposed by violence.

In 2021, I met Yuliza G. and Alaysha R. during a legal clinic in the waiting zone. They were two asylum seekers: one had fled a guerrilla war at the Colombian-Venezuelian border, the other domestic violence in a Caribbean country—in both cases, they had experienced sexist and sexual violence. When I suggested meeting them one by one in the Anafé office, to preserve the confidentiality of their respective asylum stories, they said no: “*we came together*,” explained Yuliza, “*we have nothing to hide from each other, we support each other, so we are not going to separate*,” continued Alaysha. They explained to me that they had met in Turkey, the country to which they had both fled after fleeing their homeland. A choice made out of spite, given the difficulty of obtaining a visa for Europe. In Istanbul, the two women were enlisted one after the other in a forced prostitution network that kept them in a building for this purpose. After several months of sexual exploitation, Yuliza suggested to Alaysha that they should organise their escape together. This is how they both ended up at Paris-CDG airport. Within 24 h, their asylum applications were deemed “manifestly unfounded” by the Ministry of the Interior and the police warned them that they would have to return to their country of origin. They were considered “migratory risks” for France and the rest of the Schengen area.

During the weeks they spent locked up at the air border, Yuliza and Alaysha constantly denounced the various forms of racialised and gendered violence against them, which exacerbated the situations of vulnerability in which they already found themselves. Yuliza was convinced that she was pregnant, but the medical service in the ZAPI refused to give her access to a pregnancy test; moreover, she denounced the intimidation of certain police officers towards her as a Colombian woman. Every time I saw them, the two friends invited me to understand the suffering endured by the other. “*She thinks about her children all the time, she cannot even sleep. It’s very hard for her*,” Yuliza told me about Alaysha. “*She might be pregnant and they will not*

let her take a pregnancy test. With all the anxiety she is afraid of losing the baby, with all the things the police have done to her. It's psychological terror," Alaysha said of Yuliza. One night, Alaysha was called by the police for deportation (cf. quotation in introduction). From Istanbul, where she had just been sent back, Alaysha, still in shock, continued to worry about her Colombian friend:

"Even if I shouted, I cried, I asked for help, it was all useless. I was kicked (...), they threw me to the ground; they broke my nails (...). I think it was not their duty to force me like that on the plane. I am sending you this testimony so that you can do something for my comrade. So that she is not mistreated like I was. Yesterday, they (police officers) opened the door to her room while she was naked. They told her that she had to go out, that she could go and fuck herself. Is that right? We have rights too. I hope at least that you can help my friend, that she can get her freedom."

Few days later, Yuliza recounted me how, after Alaysha's deportation, police officers made fun of her:

"When I went to pick up my summons for court, some police officers asked me: 'So where's your [Caribbean] girlfriend?' Then they laughed in my face."

In addition to the reasons that led them to leave their countries of origin and transit, the situations of heightened vulnerability experienced by these women stem from their illegalization by the migratory order in force at this Franco-European border; further illustrating the continuum of gendered violence in which they are caught. For Kelly (2019), rather than levelling out the severity of violence or equating forms and effects, the continuum is a reminder of how domination and appropriation of women's bodies by men constitute a structuring link. While air border control is overwhelmingly performed by male police officers, several women's narratives and my own observations testify the direct participation of female police officers in the violence regime. Also, the data collected show that gendered and racialized violence can also come from actors other than the police. Some (mainly men but also women) judges, lawyers, asylum officers, humanitarians, medical staff, social workers and translators also act as border guards (Freedman et al., 2022a, 2022b). These findings thus underline the need to take race and intersectionality as central components of the continuum of gendered violence affecting women from the global south on the move (Sisic et al., 2024). For Yuliza and Alaysha, forming a pair helps them to feel stronger as they navigate the different regimes of violence, across time and spaces, intimately sharing their experiences and finding comfort and solidarity in each other. Alaysha and Yuliza's stories reveal the daily practices of sisterhood and self-defense deployed by these women in their quest for exile and/or freedom of movement.

7 In conclusion

Having reached the maximum legal detention limit, Yuliza was 1 day summoned by the police in the ZAPI. She was to be taken to the airport, and officers told her that this was to give her freedom. She was held in police custody for 24 h before being transferred to

an administrative detention centre in the suburbs of Paris. This example shows once again how lies and falsifications of the truth are part and parcel of the system of white domination (Brun and Cosquer, 2024) that structures the border regime. "Border control is, above all, a symbolic policy, but symbolic action is at the heart of this policy," write Crosby and Réa (2016, p. 89). Given the totally discriminatory nature of these practices, I support the hypothesis that the mass non-admission of Latin American women—among other people—feeds a policy of numbers in terms of the control and deportation of foreigners. It is most likely a way for the border police to show that they are doing their job properly in terms of the accounts they have to submit to the Ministry of the Interior. This echoes the issue of facial checks carried out in France²² and the quantified targets for arresting undocumented migrants and filling administrative detention centres. The only reason given by the police to justify the automatic categorisation of all these women as "migratory risks" and their mistreatment, even though they comply with all the legal requirements, is that they all have supposedly come to work as prostitutes. Let us say that is perhaps the case for some of these women, as some research has documented (Oso Casas, 2010; Cortés Torres, 2015). But, cannot sex workers travel? As the Global Network of Sex Work Projects shows: "Sex workers' right to move and migrate is often impeded. They are subject to arbitrary questioning and decision-making by officials. They are often refused entry at borders, as border control officers assume they will violate visa conditions by engaging in sex work or that they are victims of human trafficking" (NSWP, 2019). Thinking with Stuart Hall, political theorist Danewid (2022, p. 21) writes that "The imposition of ever more restrictive immigration policies, increased surveillance and heightened forms of deportability are attempts to defend white bourgeois order and to police a (neoliberal) racial formation in crisis" in Europe. The accounts and resistance of Latin American women help us to understand the intersectional dimension of violence and the coloniality of power crystallised in the arbitrary practices of the police performing a white and virile defence of the Franco-European border and territory. They enable us to dismantle the dominant discourse and to see who is actually on the side of (il) legality. The manufacture of "migratory risk" is undoubtedly based on (post)colonial, racist, sexist and classist imaginaries, and on arbitrary illegal practices by the border police—in line with the political orientations of the French government(s) and the member states of the European Union. This article calls for more empirical research into the air border regimes of the global North, in order to understand in greater depth what they entail in terms of processes of domination—and everyday resistance.

Data availability statement

The qualitative datasets are not publicly available for the respect and protection of the research subjects. Requests to access the datasets should be directed to Elsa Tyszler, elsa.tyszler@cnr.fr.

²² See: <https://www.amnesty.fr/discriminations/actualites/controles-au-facies-le-conseil-detat-reconnait-lexistence-du-probleme-mais-refuse-de-contraindre-letat-a-y-mettre-un-terme>.

Ethics statement

Ethical review and approval were not required for the study on human participants in accordance with the local legislation and institutional requirements. Written informed consent for participation was not required for this study in accordance with the national legislation and the institutional requirements. Ethics issues were discussed at all stage of the research with Prof. Jane Freedman, PI and coordinator of the GBV-MIG project.

Author contributions

ET: Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing.

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