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IN A GLOBALISING CITY

Katie Walsh

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Transnational Geographies of the Heart

*Intimate Subjectivities
in a Globalising City*

Katie Walsh

WILEY Blackwell

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Series Editor's Preface

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University of Glasgow, UK

RGS-IBG Book Series Editor

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I am enormously thankful to all the people in Dubai who shared their insights and everyday lives with me as interviewees in the research. I cannot thank you individually, unfortunately, or I would risk your anonymity. I hope that I have done enough to demonstrate both the diversity of perspectives and experiences I encountered, as well as the vulnerabilities of British residents in Dubai individually and collectively. In this book, I have tried to locate myself, however temporarily, as part of your community, not least because I felt a strong sense of belonging to this moment in Dubai, among you, and I am enormously grateful for the friendships I experienced, many of which were life-transforming.

The idea for the ethnographic research on which this book is based emerged during my year as an MA student (2000–2001) on the Cultural Geography (Research) PGT programme at Royal Holloway, University of London. I am indebted to the intellectual environment I encountered there, especially to Philip Crang who supervised my PhD, Katie Willis who mentored my postdoctoral year, and Catherine Nash and David Gilbert who inspired and supported me at various points during my MA year and beyond. I am also thankful to Alison Blunt and Philip Jackson whose feedback on my fieldwork as examiners gave me the confidence to highlight my contribution all these years later. While studying at RHUL I also had the great fortune to be supported by the friendship of fellow students, especially Becky Fox, Fernando Garcia and Hilary Geoghegan. My mother and father deserve special mention, too, not least for providing a ‘boomerang’ home for me in the last few months of writing up my research and again before I started teaching at Sussex.

This book is also a product of reflection in the decade following my PhD. Meeting and collaborating with other people writing on migration and/or British migrants has been especially rewarding and the insights of Anne-Meike Fechter, Anne Coles, Pauline Leonard and Karen O’Reilly have been especially helpful.

I am lucky also to have worked for ten years in the Department of Geography at University of Sussex and in affiliation with the Sussex Centre for Migration Research. Here I have had the privilege of learning both from those who have already shaped the field of Migration Studies – especially Russell King – as well as from doctoral students I have had the delight to co-supervise and whose work has shaped my own. I have appreciated collegial support and encouragement from many others at Sussex and I am especially grateful to those who collaborated with running field classes to Dubai during which my enthusiasm for this monograph was re-booted.

This book draws upon empirical material I have previously published in the following articles and book chapters (Coles & Walsh 2010; Walsh 2006a, 2006b, 2007, 2008, 2009, 2010, 2011, 2012).

Chapter One

Introduction

In late 2002, I flew from London Heathrow to Dubai to join the approximately 60,000 other British nationals living in the United Arab Emirates at the time (Sriskandarajah & Drew 2006). So, ‘Why Dubai?’, I was frequently asked, by academics and British migrants alike. My attempt to explain why I had chosen this city as the site of my fieldwork mixed convoluted justifications of an academic kind with confessions of searching the internet to find information about a region of which I had previously been completely ignorant. Yet, for someone intrigued by migrant subjectivities, temporarily relocating there made sense: Dubai was, shortly afterwards, acknowledged as among the ‘most global’ of cities with over one million ‘foreign born’ residents (Price & Benton-Short 2007). Large and diverse migrant populations, especially from south Asia, were already present by the millennium, yet academic engagement with migration to the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries, at least by those writing in English, was still extremely limited. The United Arab Emirates, and especially Dubai, were undergoing a period of rapid economic transformation, accompanied by a ‘super-fast urbanism’ (Bagaeen 2007), and were showcasing a new mode of globalisation that would be replicated across the region and that continues to resonate with transformations in city-building across the world (Elsheshtawy 2010). In 2002, then, Dubai was not yet the global city it is today, at least not in traditional terms, but it was a rapidly *globalising city* nonetheless (see Yeoh 1999). As such, Dubai was a productive site through which to explore transnational migrants’ ‘intimate subjectivities’ (Constable 2016; Mahdavi 2016) as they lived the global–local intersections of this newly unfolding postcolonial urbanity. Attention to the emplaced, embodied, and emotional production and negotiation of

intimacy, I will suggest, responds to wider calls to examine the ‘stickier’ moments of migrants’ everyday lives, illuminating the processes of reterritorialisation in transnational spaces (Jackson, Crang & Dwyer 2004).

The United Arab Emirates (UAE) is also a major destination for British migrants, equal in 10th place with Switzerland in terms of the number of UK nationals living abroad (Finch 2010)¹. This is all the more remarkable since the nine countries that have more UK nationals living permanently abroad are either located within the European Union – where mobility for British nationals is at the time of writing still relatively straightforward (in the case of Spain, France, Ireland and Germany) – or are Anglophone former British settler colonies (Australia, USA, Canada, New Zealand and South Africa) where we might anticipate long-established patterns of migration to be maintained (see Finch 2010: 29). The British, and privileged migrants more generally, are frequently overlooked in mainstream policy and academic migration debates, especially in media discourses in the UK which almost entirely ignore out-migration. Most Britons resident in the UAE are living in Dubai or Abu Dhabi and are either there to work themselves or to accompany a spouse or parent. Indeed, the *Kafala* sponsorship system, discussed in more detail in Chapter 3, determines that residency in the UAE (as across the GCC countries more generally) is dependent on the sponsorship of an employer or a close family member.

It was only in the late 1960s that, following the discovery of oil and the political independence of the region, economic and infrastructural development started to bring Britons to live in what was, until independence in 1971, a British protectorate: the ‘Trucial States’ (Coles & Walsh 2010). Dubai’s emergence on the global stage as an ‘instant city’ (Bagaen 2007) from 2000 onwards negates the much longer histories of the region, including the ongoing implications of British imperial involvement. The initial communities of British residents remained very small, for example, in 1968, the first census in Dubai recorded only 400 Britons a highly skilled professional migrant group consisting of a handful of advisors to the government, as well as the managerial level staff of banks and trading, shipping, and oil companies and a few teachers, health professionals, and town planners (Coles & Walsh 2010). By the mid-1980s, however, Findlay (1988) identified the Middle East, with the Gulf countries of notable significance, as emerging ahead of the Old Commonwealth countries as a destination for professional and managerial level migrants from the UK. Though British migrants in Dubai are hugely outnumbered by the much larger south Asian communities resident in the city, an analysis of this particular ‘postcolonial’ positionality, and their reproduction of privileged ‘expatriate’ subjectivities marked by nationality, class and race, is an important part of understanding Gulf subjectivities and global mobilities more broadly.

In contrast, the same question, ‘Why Dubai?’, when directed towards the British migrants I had temporarily relocated to interview, received rapid and seemingly straightforward replies: ‘It’s a tax-free sunshine.’ This response would

not be a surprise to anyone who has spent time with British migrants on a personal or research basis. The significance of both income and lifestyle in shaping global flows of privileged migration are well established in a wider interdisciplinary literature (e.g. Knowles & Harper 2009). Indeed, this literature has critically examined the relative privilege of this group as something that migration often amplifies, especially in terms of the racialisation of expatriate identities through whiteness (e.g. Leonard 2010). The phrase ‘tax-free sunshine’ also illuminates the economic diversification strategies that, at the time of my fieldwork in the early 2000s, were transforming Dubai into the global city it has become today. One of these centred on the provision of themed free-zones (for instance, Media City, Internet City, Education City, Healthcare City) set up to attract companies through the provision of economic incentives such as the allowance of tax-free salaries to be paid to expatriate employees (Davidson 2008). Dubai’s government has also actively sought to provide leisure and consumption opportunities to encourage a wealthy, highly skilled, and aspirational middle class to *temporarily* relocate from across the world. Arguably, Dubai has been hugely successful in this aim. Of course, its super-diversity is structured by massive inequalities and, as such, academics have critiqued its migrant labour regime (e.g. Buckley 2012; Davis 2005). From the perspective of British migrants, however, even non-graduates and those with a more modest skill set, ‘tax-free’ equates to more career opportunities and a higher disposable income than they could achieve at home, with the possibility of consuming an elite lifestyle. Meanwhile, highly skilled inter-company transfers and more traditional ‘expatriate packages’ in which accommodation, private healthcare, schooling and flights are added extras enable most families to move on the salary of one household member. This ‘lead’ migrant, whose career trajectory determines household mobility, is usually male so, for some couples at least, relocation to Dubai marks a shift from a more gender-neutral household structure based on the dual-career or dual-income strategies that have become increasingly common among middle-income couples in the UK.

Many of my interviewees suspected my interest in their lives had arisen from an ‘expat’ childhood, but I had never previously lived abroad. I was there to research their sense of home and belonging, prompted instead by questions about materialities and diaspora that had emerged, for me at least, from an academic curiosity fuelled by transformations in geography and cultural studies from the late 1990s. This book is still about those things, but it also departs massively from this primary objective of the fieldwork to consider the questions, narratives and observations that emerged unbidden during my fieldwork and invited me to explore their significance. Domesticity, transnationalism, belonging, home and identity, continue to be threads of analysis that run through this volume – they weave through the production of our intimate selves after all – but my focus is more directly on our geographies of the heart. Intimacy, highlighting personal relationships and the array of closer connections through which British migrants negotiate belonging in everyday life, turned out to dominate other people’s telling

of life in Dubai and my listening. I found myself increasingly exploring the textures of intimacy negotiated and enacted by British migrants in this particular spatial-temporal, and thoroughly transnational, urban site, but without a language for doing so.

Fortunately, geography, migration studies, and the wider social sciences have since been on their own theoretical journeys, providing me with the building blocks to more thoroughly explore these transnational geographies of the heart that I observed. With this analytical focus, I join a number of other scholars concerned with the embodied and emotional dimensions of mobilities (e.g. Boccagni & Baldassar 2015; Conradson & McKay 2007; Dunn 2009; Mai & King 2009) and with the links between globalisation and our intimate lives (e.g. Baldassar & Merla 2014; Beck & Beck-Gernsheim 2014; Padilla et al. 2007; Pratt & Rosner 2012). Accounts of migrants' 'intimate subjectivities' more specifically have largely been conducted in contexts whereby the global commodification of intimacy is more overt – in domestic work, sex work and cross-border marriages, especially – illuminating the power relations involved in cross-cultural intimacies, the restrictions on migrant women's reproductive rights arising from their marginalised status as contracted labour migrants, and the challenges of transnational family life (e.g. Constable 2009, 2016; Mahdavi 2016; Pratt 2012). Nonetheless, while I am focusing on freely established relationships from the perspective of relatively privileged migrants, questions of power and the impact of global work on the reproduction of migrants' subjectivities remain important. In the analysis, I reveal the everyday efforts of the 'doing' of our intimate selves, with attention to how gender, class, nationality and race intersect. I argue that British migrants in Dubai enact intimate subjectivities marked by privilege (in terms of being middle class, white, and heterosexual), but also illuminate the diversity and instabilities of their social locations, the ambiguous impact of their migrant status, the ongoing work involved in the reconstitution of heteronormativity and the interplay of gendered subjectivities.

Existing literatures on intimate subjectivities have tended to privilege one kind of relationship, such as parenting or romance, and often, as a result, one kind of practice of intimacy (especially care). Here I depart from this emphasis to explore instead a range of interpersonal relationships that all inform migrants' intimate subjectivities, including friendship, 'community', and couple relations (both marital and short-term sexual encounters). This is important because the meaning of each of these kinds of relationship is not entirely distinct, but also because our experiences of each kind of relationship are not emotionally separated from one another in everyday life. Put another way, an individual's experience of couple or 'love' ties cannot be isolated from their enactment of friendship or family. Our understanding of the collective norms, shifts, and practices of each of these different kinds of personal relationships in migration thereby benefits from exploring the intersections of intimate subjectivities.

In this book, then, I examine migrants' intimate subjectivities through ethnographic attention to different spaces, practices and accounts of intimacy in

the globalising city of Dubai. In doing so, I argue for the significance of *geographies* of intimacy: this is about an understanding of the spatialisation of intimate subjectivities and the importance of place in their ongoing constitution. I show how multiple sites of belonging work to shape our interpersonal relationships: bodies, homes, city spaces and transnational spaces. For example, the specific racialisation of the city helps to regulate intimacy, serving to entrench the significance of nationality in friendships and families; but these textures of intimacy are shaped also by transnational flows of people, objects and media, as well as by British migrants' embodied performances of 'expatriate' subjectivities. Thereby, we see the significance of a geographical analysis in understanding this multiplicity in how intimacy is lived and imagined. Intimacy, I will argue, is one of the most significant, yet unacknowledged, discursive reference points in migrants' narratives of their belonging and in their everyday navigation of a dialectic of home and migration.

British Global Mobilities

In their study of British migration (Finch 2010), the Institute of Public Policy Research estimated that some 5.6 million UK nationals were living outside the UK in 2008. This extraordinary statistic – equivalent to one in ten Britons – encompasses migrants of varying purpose and permanence, with diverse practices of settlement and mobility. A number of studies of British migration have been conducted and framed by a literature on highly skilled migration. For example, Beaverstock's (1996, 2005) study of inter-company transferees in New York focused on highly skilled migrants relocating within and between financial transnational corporations. Beaverstock (2005: 246) identified these British residents as part of a transnational elite, 'nomadic' workers 'whose ultimate international mobility meets the challenges of international business in globalisation'. Typically they were male (80%), married (60%) and were posted to New York for two years. Their career paths were often already international, however, with 40% having worked and lived in other financial centres for over a year, and with regular business travel maintaining these transnational connections (Beaverstock 2005). Their travel was highly privileged, with expatriate packages including adjusted salaries, generous housing allowances, business flights, relocation payments, and subsidies for school fees, health and personal insurance. These British migrants, like the scientists interviewed by Harvey (2008) in Boston's pharmaceutical and biotechnology sector, are a valued part of the knowledge economy. Indeed, for Beaverstock (2011), 'expatriation' is an important process for world cities to secure 'talented' human capital and he positions British migration as part of this global process. In this way British migrants are figured as part of the 'transnational capitalist class' (Sklair 2000), defined by their global connections and mobilities, agents of a globalising world defined by movement.

(Highly) skilled migration is widely recognised as a strongly gendered process, with the accompanying spouse usually female (Coles & Fechter 2008; Hardill 1998; Hardill & MacDonald 1998; Kofman & Raghuram 2005).

This depiction of British migrants resonates with the professional occupation and privileged global status of many of the British residents I encountered in Dubai, but it is only part of the story. Existing studies of British migrants in global cities have consistently demonstrated that 'expatriate communities' are rarely homogenous and are increasingly stratified by class (as indicated by occupation, affluence, consumption practices and education), age, gender, marital status and length of stay (Knowles & Harper 2009; Leonard 2010; Scott 2006). Further evidence of this stratification is provided by ethnographic studies of 'Western' migrants (Farrer 2010; Fechter 2007). Such studies have focused mainly on cities in Asia, especially Hong Kong (Knowles & Harper 2009; Leonard 2010). In some cases, this research has shown that single working men and, increasingly, women disrupt the heteronormative picture of skilled 'family' migration, making the production of gendered migrant subjectivities more diverse (e.g. Fechter 2008; Willis & Yeoh 2008)². Other research has shown that British migrants' identities in global cities may be further differentiated by lifestyle factors (e.g. Knowles & Harper 2009; Scott 2007). While their perspective on the 'good life' may be constituted rather differently, their prioritisation of 'lifestyle' resonates with studies of Northern European migration to rural and coastal areas of Southern Europe (e.g. Benson 2010; King, Warnes & Williams 2000; Oliver 2008; O'Reilly 2000). For some, of course, these economic and lifestyle factors go hand in hand, intertwined in accounts of disposable income and class mobility, and Knowles and Harper (2009: 11) remind us that the recognition of lifestyle factors as significant need not lead to us deny that Britons are also migrating for work and/or a career: 'Our use of lifestyle migration also acknowledges the inseparability of economic factors like income, and the quality of life it supports. In the global scheme of things, those who are already economically privileged are able to prioritise qualities beyond life's financial elements.'

The role of mobility in the making of the middle-class self is explored more fully by Benson and O'Reilly (2009) in their articulation of the meaning of lifestyle migration. For them, lifestyle migration is 'a search, a project, rather than an act, and it encompasses diverse destinations, desires and dreams' (Benson and O'Reilly 2009: 610). As such, it is 'necessarily comparative' (ibid.: 610) and 'part of their reflexive project of the self' (ibid.: 615, drawing on Giddens). As Scott (2007: 1123) explained with reference to British migrants in Paris, mobility is 'now a dominant feature of middle class reproduction', such that not only migration itself but also the choice of location 'can help to confer status by distinguishing them in a socio-geographical sense from other middle class groups' (Scott 2007: 1124). Conradson and Latham's (2005) notion of 'middling transnationalism' remains salient, then, in terms of describing the status of most British migrants, even while the heterogeneity of their backgrounds, motivations and

social locations are just beginning to be understood. In spite of their relatively privileged status in comparison with many other migrant workers in Dubai, British residents still do not have the right to apply for UAE citizenship. While some have recently gained access to a more permanent form of visa through property ownership or investment in business, most Britons gain residency in Dubai on a biannual basis through the sponsorship of their employer (or as a dependent on the visa of their spouse or parent). Indeed, the *Kafala* sponsorship system and its impact upon intimacies is discussed further in Chapter 3 and then traced through the book. At this point, however, it is relevant to highlight that one impact of their residence being tied to short-term contracts is that a sense of ‘temporariness’ often frames the experiences of Britons in the Gulf, irrespective of their actual length of residence. As a result, it is also useful and appropriate to consider the British through the theoretical lens of transnationalism, since they often continue to orientate their sense of belonging to the UK as well as Dubai. Routine ‘transnational practices’ (Vertovec 2001) such as property investments and the maintenance of interpersonal relationships with family and friends through annual visits and the use of ICTs (Information and Communication Technologies), are therefore relevant to any analysis of their everyday lives. Nonetheless, their ‘emplacement’ in Dubai is also significant, as described in other recent explications of skilled migration (e.g. Meier 2014; Riemsdijk 2014; Ryan & Mulholland 2014). The relative privilege of British migrants in terms of being able to negotiate this mobility–settlement dialectic in terms that suit them is captured by the term ‘expatriate’. This is a term I further explore in the next section.

Postcolonial Histories, Cities, Migrations

Given the relative privilege of British migrants, an analysis of their intimate subjectivities might not seem especially useful or necessary. The location of this study – Dubai – would perhaps further discourage engaging in such an analysis, since of more urgent concern are the impacts of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries’ migration regimes on the human rights of low-income migrant workers, especially construction workers from south Asia (e.g. Human Rights Watch 2006), and questions about the environmental and social sustainability of the modes of urbanisation being produced (e.g. Davis 2005). Yet, the experiences of low- and middle-income south Asians across the GCC countries are now much better understood, resulting from a recent interdisciplinary literature on Gulf migration (e.g. Buckley 2012; Elsheshtawy 2010; Gardner 2010; Kamrava & Babar 2009; Mahdavi 2016; Osella & Osella 2007; Vora 2013). A focus here on relatively affluent, or at least middle-class, migrants in the Gulf, especially those who are racialised through whiteness, complements and complicates this emerging literature. In this section, I make a case for selecting British migrants as my

foci for research on Dubai migrant subjectivities, by drawing on postcolonial theoretical perspectives. Scholars of postcolonial theory emphasise that the ‘post’ should not be used to refer to a specific historical moment, political status, or spatial context of formal decolonisation, rather that postcolonialism might be better understood as a productive set of critical approaches to colonialism and its legacies (Hall 1996). With this in mind, I suggest three reasons why we might be attentive to postcolonial perspectives: firstly, I provide a discussion, albeit brief, of Britain’s informal empire in the Gulf, 1820–1971, focusing on the ‘protectorate’ relationship with the ‘Trucial States’ (Onley 2005). Secondly, I consider the application of a ‘postcolonial cities’ (Yeoh 2001) perspective to Dubai, in order to acknowledge the traces of colonial ontologies of difference that shape the stratification of the globalising city through notions of race, ethnicity and nationality. Thirdly, I consider global British migration itself as one among many differently navigated ‘postcolonial migrations’ (Mains et al. 2013), looking at how ‘expatriate’ subjectivities are racialised through whiteness (Fechter & Walsh 2012; Knowles & Harper 2009; Leonard 2010). The empirical chapters provide evidence for the significance of all three perspectives in exploring intimacy in the globalising city of Dubai in the early to mid-2000s.

Firstly, then, a postcolonial perspective forces us to examine the production of Gulf subjectivities with an acknowledgement of the histories of this region. One of the main issues with much existing Western commentary on Dubai is the way it wipes away any acknowledgement of historical settlement on the Arabian peninsula. Consider, for instance, how Krane (2009) introduces the United Arab Emirates:

The Arabian Peninsula is a sun-hammered land of drifting sands and rubble wastes. Ranges of unnamed peaks slash across the landscape their sun-shattered rock sharp enough to cut skin. Salt flats shimmer in the moonlight night after night, untouched by humans for eternity... the United Arab Emirates sit on the southeastern corner of Arabia, the most desolate corner of a desolate land... History simply happened elsewhere... (Krane 2009: 3–5).

Locating this hyper-modern city firmly back in a ‘timeless’ desert is, arguably, a strategic representational move that allows ‘Western’ commentators and their audience to assume an ethnocentric superiority in their evaluative standpoint. The presumed complete lack of history in Dubai is an idea that circulates in global media and local ‘expatriate’ discourses alike, yet is disputed by scholarly analysis of the region, including archaeological and historical accounts of the pre-Islamic period, the Islamic period, and the tribal society through which the traditional economies, such as fishing and pearling, were organised (Heard-Bey 2001, 2004; see also Al Abed & Hellyer 2001). Had the region been empty desert, it would not have attracted the attention of the Portuguese in the sixteenth century: they were the first European imperial power to attempt to gain control of parts of what was then known in Europe as ‘Historic Oman’. Their motivation

was primarily commercial – to control the spice trade with this vital trading port between Africa, Asia and the European markets. As Heard-Bey (2004: 272) argues:

... it was not just a group of daring Portuguese adventurers who conquered the traditional trade emporia of the Gulf and parts of the Indian ocean; this was the result of carefully prepared strategy at the Court in Lisbon aimed at taking over by any means possible every sector of the very profitable trade between the Indian Ocean coasts and Europe.

Though the Portuguese were expelled from all the ports by the mid-seventeenth century, their presence created conflict with English and Dutch trading companies who wished to replace them, as well as with Persians trying to promote their sovereignty, such that a new Arab power was able to emerge: the Qawāsīm (Heard-Bey 2004). The Qawāsīm Sheikhs ruled from Ras al Khaimah over much of the northern coast of the Arabian Peninsula. British ships using the Strait of Hormuz refused to pay the tolls requested by the Qawāsīm fleet, which responded with piracy (Onley 2005).

As a result, authorities in British India sent a naval expedition to impose an anti-piracy treaty on all the rulers and governors of the Coast of Oman and, from 1820, a Political Agent was headquartered on Qishm Island (Onley 2005), now a popular stopping point for tourist *dhow*s. Onley (2005) describes how this post was amalgamated in the new role of Resident in the Persian Gulf who became responsible for Britain's relations with the entire Gulf region, supported by a naval squadron to patrol the Gulf waters, and how, under this control from British India, a series of treaties or 'Exclusive Agreements' were imposed over the next 150 years (also signed by Bahrain, Qatar and Kuwait). While imperial historians are divided as to whether they view the Gulf states as part of Britain's formal or informal empire during this time (see Onley 2005), either way, British influence was maintained and the treaties served British economic and political interests. As Heard-Bey (2001: 117) explains:

The UAE never was a colony, but its forerunner, the 'Trucial States', was increasingly absorbed into the British orbit by a system of agreements which successive British governments, first in Delhi and then in London, deemed necessary in order to best pursue their particular objectives of the day.

In his life story, *From Rags to Riches*, Mohammed Al-Fahim (1995) is one of the few commentators to present an Emirati perspective on the historical British presence in this region. He described British imperialism as 'unwanted domination' (ibid.: 27), revealing how political events in Europe and colonial goals in Asia 'had a deep and lasting impact on our development'. When the British destroyed the Qawāsīm's fleet of ships and imposed restrictions on the size of new ships, they also destroyed trading and seafaring capabilities, as well as the ship-building industry (Al-Fahim 1995: 37). Another treaty stopped the import and