

An Entrepreneur of Herself: Sex Work in the Age of Neo-liberalism

by Heather Berg

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Thesis directed by:

Rachel Riedner
Associate Professor of Writing and Women's Studies

Todd Ramlow
Professor of Women's Studies

“Woman is neither exclusively object nor subject... under conditions or systems
of domination such as patriarchy, racism, and imperialism, women express forms of
resistance, agency, subjectivity, and self-determination.”¹

¹ Kempadoo, Kamala, ed. *Trafficking and Prostitution Reconsidered: New Perspectives on Migration, Sex Work, and Human Rights*. (London: Paradigm Publishers, 2005), xxiii.

Abstract

An Entrepreneur of Herself: Sex Work in the Age of Neo-Liberalism

Feminist discourses of sex work represent a space in which tensions surrounding sexual politics, labor, agency, race, class, and space come to a head. *An Entrepreneur of Herself: Sex Work in the Age of Neo-Liberalism* explores the ways in which the themes surrounding feminist discourses of sex work interact with neo-liberal ideology, and shows that feminist scholars on both sides of the “sex wars” have been complicit in perpetuating narratives of sex work that represent the best interests of Capital, not workers. As a remedy, *An Entrepreneur of Herself* argues for a strengths-based approach to sex work that focuses on labor, structural analysis, and respect for workers’ own experiences of their labor.

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² Kelly, Patty. *Lydia's Open Door: Inside Mexico's Most Modern Brothel*. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007), 162.

Introduction

A *Guardian* film exposé of a Bangladeshi brothel ends with its narrator's sobering words:

There's so much sadness in this place, it's hard to imagine that the women of Faridpur are ever going to escape their prison... they are destined to stay in their dark world for years to come.³

In the scenes leading up to this moment, the narrator introduces us to the story by explaining that the “girls”⁴ working in the brothels of Faridpur have been “sold into sexual slavery” by their families.⁵ The narrator then takes us through the streets of Faridpur, interviewing brothel workers, a madam, client, pharmacist, and health advocate about the growing trend in sex workers' taking growth steroids designed for cows in order to develop the appearance of fully developed, healthy, adult bodies. The film is haunting, its panning over despondent-looking women, piles of used condoms and garbage, and leering men set to solemn (and vaguely eastern) music. It sheds light on an important health issue and conveys more human concern than is often afforded to sex workers. What it doesn't do, however, is give us a sense of its subjects as whole people with pasts, socio-historical contexts, and futures. Instead, we see hopeless and helpless “girls” who, when faced with uncaring families, greedy madams, and callous johns, have little hope of escaping the prison of their lives.

³ *Bangladeshi Sex Workers Take Steroids to 'Plump Up' for Clients*. Video, directed by Pia Helkkila, Joanne Moorhead, and Leanne Welham. (*The Guardian*). <http://www.guardian.co.uk/society/video/2010/apr/05/bangladesh-sex-workers-steroids> (Accessed 1 April, 2011).

⁴ Most of the interviewed workers are in their late teens to early twenties, one is described as “over thirty.”

⁵ *Bangladeshi Sex Workers Take Steroids to 'Plump Up' for Clients*.

The Guardian's film is not alone in viewing sex workers solely in terms of risk and vulnerability. As I will show in the following chapters, mainstream media, policy makers, feminists (radical, sex-positive, and otherwise), and others share *The Guardian's* inability (or refusal) to view sex workers, particularly those from the global south, as active agents of their own lives. The dominant approach to sex work, then, is a deficiency perspective, which “may create distortions that highlight deficits, overlook strengths, focus on intrapersonal explanations, and obfuscate the meaning of behavior in a cultural context.”⁶ The dominant discourse of sex work does just that, creating social, economic, and legal frameworks that exacerbate problems and limit solutions. It does so by “highlighting deficits” with, for example, the overwhelming assumption that having engaged in sexual exchange renders women irreparably damaged.⁷ It “overlooks strengths,” ignoring, for example, the creative strategies sex workers employ to exert control over their labor environments.⁸ The discourse of sex work “focuses on intrapersonal explanations,” with (male) client sadism, rather than structural violence, appearing as the enemy of sex workers’ wellbeing (note the ways in which this framing lets white, western women off the hook for being party to oppressive global social and

⁶ Waller, M., Risley-Curtiss, C., Murphy, S., Medill, A., and Moore, G. “Harnessing the Positive Power of Language: American Indian Women, a Case Example.” *In Pressing Issues of Inequality and American Indian Communities*. Eds. Segal, Elizabeth; Keith M. Kilty, pp. 63-81. (Routledge: New York, 2001), 71.

⁷ Frederick, John. “The Myth of Nepal-to-India Sex Trafficking: Its Creation, Maintenance, and Influence on Anti-trafficking Interventions.” *In Trafficking and Prostitution Reconsidered: New Perspectives on Migration, Sex Work, and Human Rights*, Ed. Kempadoo, Kamala. (London: Paradigm Publishers, 2005), 136; Montgomery, Heather. “Focusing on the Child, Not the Prostitute: Shifting the Emphasis in Accounts of Child Prostitution.” (*Wagadu*, Vol. 8, Fall 2010), 170-71.

⁸ Dewey, Susan. *Neon Wasteland: On Love, Motherhood, and Sex Work in a Rust Belt Town*. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011), 147.

economic policy).⁹ Finally, the dominant discourse of sex work “obfuscates the meaning of behavior in a cultural context,” in interpreting, for example, sex workers’ labor choices¹⁰ through the prism of western autonomy “which can only occur within western ‘progress’ and modernity.”¹¹

In the following chapters, I will argue for an alternative to the deficiency perspective of the dominant discourse of sex work, one based on a focus on resilience rather than deficit, structural rather than intrapersonal violence, and a non-hierarchical model of agency rather than one limited to perspectives on sex work of white, western, middle class, college-educated and cisgendered women. As this is a work of feminist theory, I will focus on the perspectives of major feminist voices in the discourse of sex work: those who identify as “sex-positive” (many of whom have been involved in sex work), “radical,” and a select few who choose to align themselves outside that binary. In chapters exploring approaches to the question of labor in sex work, sex work in the neo-liberal economy, and the discourse of sex trafficking, I will show that, while thinkers identifying with both sex-positive and radical feminism have made important contributions to the study of sex work, they have failed to articulate models of sex worker agency that genuinely move us past a deficiency perspective. Finally, I will argue that, in addressing human rights and/ in sex work, scholars, activists, helping professionals, and policy-makers should focus more on work, and less on sex (even as that may mean less

⁹ Katsulis, Yasmina. “Youth Sex Workers on the U.S.-Mexico Border.” (*Wagadu*, Vol. 8, Fall 2010), 117.

¹⁰ As we will see, the idea of unencumbered choice is central to these visions of autonomy.

¹¹ I would add that women of color and low-income women in the west are also excluded from this model of autonomy. Agustín, María. *Sex at the Margins: Migration, Labour Markets, and the Rescue Industry*. (London: Zed Books, 2007), 47.

entertainingly prurient media on the subject). This would allow us to discuss sex workers' labor rights irrespective of our personal opinions of the moral meaning of commercial sex, much like we might encourage those involved in discussions of farm worker's rights to focus on labor rather than individual tastes for nightshades.

Chapter One

Por Gusto o Necesidad¹²: Pleasure, Power, and Need in Sex Work

“A decent woman should do [it] with shame.”¹³

-Magda

“I can only hope that writing will be as fulfilling and fun as my fourteen years in the sex industry.”¹⁴

-Veronica Monét

As feminists, policy makers, popular media, and those in the helping professions work to establish coherent positions on sex work, one issue – a certain fascination around the question of what leads women to it – emerges as a constant theme. This is so much the case that the “how I came to this point” disclosure is featured in an overwhelming majority of sex workers’ narratives.¹⁵ The point is also a fixture in ethnographic and other social scientific writing on sex workers, appearing both as a question posed by researchers and information volunteered by subjects.¹⁶ We see this question addressed by the anti-sex work feminists and policy makers with whom sex workers and their advocates are in conversation, the first having (consistently throughout the past 100

¹² Kelly, Patty. *Lydia’s Open Door: Inside Mexico’s Most Modern Brothel*. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007), 162.

¹³ Ibid., 199.

¹⁴ Monét, Veronica. “College Graduate Makes Good as a Courtesan.” In *Working Sex: Sex Workers Write about a Changing Industry*. Ed. Oakley, Annie. (Berkeley: Seal Press, 2007), 128.

¹⁵ See Appendix A: 17 of 20 sex workers included such a discussion in their narrations

¹⁶ Kelly, Patty. *Lydia’s Open Door: Inside Mexico’s Most Modern Brothel*, 121.; Dewey, *Neon Wasteland: On Love, Motherhood, and Sex Work in a Rust Belt Town*, 58; Kempadoo, Kamala. *Sun, Sex, and Gold: Tourism and Sex Work in the Caribbean*. (Lanham, UK: Rowman and Littlefield, 1999), 113.

years) arrived at the conclusion that force and/or pathology alone can explain entry into a sex industry.¹⁷

The discourse of sex trafficking, which occupies a larger portion of the public imagination in the United States than any other aspect of sex industries, is built on one version of the “why would anyone sell sex” theme. It also serves as an excellent example of the danger of a disproportionate focus on why someone might enter a given industry eclipsing other equally if not more important questions. A rights-based approach to sex work, one that I will advocate throughout the following chapters, would ask that we instead focus on the labor conditions faced by people working in sex industries. Not forgetting that the stories behind why people enter sex or other types of work are important, particularly where global economic policy is concerned, a labor-rights approach would acknowledge that, at some point, why someone began to sell sexual services becomes less important than conditions they face in the labor itself. Shouldn’t labor rights be valued and enforced irrespective of why someone has entered a given industry?

First though, to the extent that the “why would any one sell sex” theme dominates discourses on sex work, moving forward requires that we examine how sex workers and scholars have addressed the issue. I will show a central tension in writing on sex work is based on whether or not a scholar or sex worker (some of the writers I will cite are both)

¹⁷ Addams, Jane. *A New Conscience and an Ancient Evil*. (New York: Macmillan, 1912); Dworkin, Andrea. “On Prostitution.” University of Michigan Law School. (Speech, “Prostitution: From Academia to Activism,” at the University of Michigan Law School, Ann Arbor, MI, October 31, 1992). <http://www.nostatusquo.com/ACLU/dworkin/MichLawJourI.html>.

describes the motivations for entering (and rewards garnered from) her¹⁸ work in economic or non-economic terms. In both cases, workers tend to locate pride in the identification they choose, with those who describe the motivations for their work in terms of economic need expressing feelings of moral superiority, and those who describe the motivations for their work in terms of pleasure, fun, or freedom tending to express a sense of being more free, sexually open, and having more progressive (and truly feminist) gender politics. Not surprisingly, this division is frequently drawn along lines of race, class, and place. In both positionings, we see an inordinate and divisive focus on why sex workers do the work they do, and very little attention to the human and labor rights issues that affect all sex workers, regardless of their motivations for entering the industry.

Over the course of extensive ethnographic research with sex workers working in a state-sponsored brothel in Chiapas, Mexico, Patty Kelly spoke with women who entered the *ambiente* (sex industry) for a range of reasons, most economic.¹⁹ Not a single worker discussed pleasure as a motivator for or benefit of sex work.²⁰ Instead, women working in the *ambiente* took pride in working to support families, lift themselves out of poverty, or avoid what they perceived as more degrading work.²¹ For many of the women with whom Kelly worked, a wide rift exists between women who sell sexual services for *necesidad* (need) and those who do so for *gusto* (pleasure), and decency belongs only to the first group.²²

¹⁸ The sex workers I cite identify as female.

¹⁹ Kelly, Patty. *Lydia's Open Door: Inside Mexico's Most Modern Brothel*, 185.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 169.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 200.

A reverse stigma appears in the work of sex workers in the United States who identify as sex-positive; here, it is not decency that is divided along lines of need and pleasure, but feminist consciousness. Of the multiple contributors to *Whores and Other Feminists*, Jill Nagle writes,

[They] reflect a particular historical moment in U.S. culture and particular conditions, largely white and/ or middle class, that afford the opportunity to forge feminisms directly from sex worker experience.²³

I appreciate Nagle's awareness of her race and class privilege. However, her disclaimer speaks to a tendency in sex-positive sex workers' writing to make dangerous connections between privilege and self-awareness; economic need and false-consciousness. What definition of feminist self-consciousness makes it contingent on race and class privilege? The image of feminism that emerges from a majority of the essays in *Whores and Other Feminists*²⁴ is one that assumes choices are available only to women largely unrestrained by circumstance. Sex worker feminists, in this vision, sell sexual services because they enjoy it: sex work is characterized by interactions of care, love, friendship, power play, and service. Noting the conspicuous absence of a discussion of the economic components of sex work, we can begin to understand how sex worker feminisms have come to be understood as the territory of white, middle class workers who have (in this vision) the unique privilege of making choices in life and work outside the limiting context of need. Here, Nagle's definition of sex worker feminisms as class and race specific and her choice to use the plural, more inclusive "feminisms" work against each other. What

²² Ibid., 157, 162, 199.

²³ Nagle, Jill, "Introduction." In Nagle, Jill, ed. *Whores and Other Feminists*. (New York, NY, 1997),1.

²⁴ For examples, see *Working Sex, Nina Hartley's Guide to Total Sex*, and other works by "sex positive-feminists."

Nagle describes is not a range of approaches to sex work that assume full female personhood, but a specific, almost monolithic, feminism that assumes full personhood only for workers who, being able to make labor decisions outside of the context of need, have the privilege to claim *true* feminist agency.

Central concerns of this chapter, then, are: What constructions of sex work lead to the association of sex worker feminisms with race, class, and place privilege? Is it possible to maintain a focus on the importance of public policies that support free choice (in labor and life) without establishing a hierarchy of agency in which those with privilege are imagined to be always, already more actively human? How might feminisms be forged from the experiences of a more inclusive group of sex workers? Where would those feminisms diverge from the privilege-contingent sex-positive model discussed above? And, how can these feminisms facilitate more grounded approaches to sex work, social policy, and global inequality?

Probing the work model

The notion of sex *work*, too, is contradicted by the absence of economic analysis in Nagle and other self-identified sex-positive sex worker's scholarly work. While sex-positive sex worker activists have been at the forefront of efforts to (re)classify prostitution as work,²⁵ their avoidance of an economic analysis of the industry discursively works against that goal. All workers in the neo-liberal economy must negotiate a terrain in which we are at once expected to personally and totally indentify with our work but also find it increasingly difficult to advocate for labor rights if we do

²⁵ Nagle, "Introduction," in *Whores and Other Feminists*, 8.

(and, of course, the identification is wholly one-sided, in that, for the neo-liberal employer, the worker becomes more and more faceless and dispensable).²⁶ In adopting this arrangement, the mainstream productive economy has taken a cue from the domestic (reproductive) economy, which has been highly successful at manufacturing a disposable workforce, in part by manipulating workers' work/ life boundaries.²⁷

Here, the project of (re)classifying prostitution as work emerges as part of a larger effort to establish a work model for domestic labor in general. Like other domestic workers, sex workers write within the context of a long history of conceptions of their work as non-work (instead: slavery, general sluttishness, or behavior symptomatic of psychological ill, for example). Thus, one aspect of the project to gain social and legal recognition for sex workers' rights has involved constructing a narrative of sex work as *work*. To that end, sex workers like Janelle Galazia have described their motivations for entry into the sex industry in economic terms,

With a few notable exceptions, people do not get into the sex industry for reasons that have anything to do with desire for sex, any more than a person enters janitorial work out of a love for cleaning... by keeping the debate about sex work focused on *sex* and not *work*, the true nature of the issue is obscured.²⁸

Resistant to the idea of sex work as a legitimate expression of choice in labor, radical feminists have countered those narratives with theories of agency that preclude free choice where economic need is a primary motivator.²⁹ In response, some sex workers

²⁶ Power, Nina. *One Dimensional Woman*. (Ropley Hants, UK: O Books, 2009), 26.

²⁷ Boris, Eileen and Nadasen, Premilla. "Domestic Workers Organize!" (*WorkingUSA: The Journal of Labor and Society*, Vol. 11, 2008), 420. <http://caringlabor.files.wordpress.com/2010/11/j-1743-4580-2008-00217-x.pdf>.

²⁸ Galazia, Janelle. "Staged." In *Working Sex: Sex Workers Write about a Changing Industry*. Ed. Oakley, Annie. (Berkeley: Seal Press, 2007), 88.

have pushed for recognition of other motivating factors for work in the sex industry, often describing the benefits of their work in non-economic terms such as love for sex, a sense of providing a valuable interpersonal service, and pleasure gained from the power play sexual exchange enables. These descriptions counter the notion that all sex workers are under some form of force (be in interpersonal or economic), but they are unhelpful in advancing the project of insisting upon a view of sex work as *work*. In the following discussion, I seek to parse through those tensions.

A work model for commercial sexual exchange

The push to establish a *work* narrative is not exclusive to the sex industry; in fact, it has been at the crux of domestic workers' attempts to gain legal recognition. Here, the idea of domestic labor as "non-work" has allowed employers, the state, and Capital to exploit domestic workers as the "natural force of social labor."³⁰ The rationale behind the state's denial of legal rights and protections to domestic workers, then, does not rest on the idea of domestic labor as a special, inferior, type of work, but, rather, the idea that it is not work at all (instead: women's natural inclination, for example).³¹ In the case of sex work, the dangers of a non-work model are made clear when prostitutes³² in the United

²⁹ Brownmiller, Susan. "Speaking Out on Prostitution." In *Radical Feminism*. Eds. Koedt, Levine, and Rapone. (New York: Quadrangle, 1973.), 73.

³⁰ Fortunati, Leopoldina. *The Arcane of Reproduction: Housework, Prostitution, Labor, and Capital*. (Brooklyn: Autonomedia, 1995), 40.

³¹ Ally, Shireen. *From Servants to Workers: South African Domestic Workers and the Democratic State*. (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2009), 3.

³² Throughout this text, where necessary, I will use "prostitution" to denote sex work involving the sale of sex rather than other sexual services. This distinction is particularly important with regard to public policy, where different types of sex work are treated differently by law. Otherwise, I will use "sex work" to denote the commonalities between sex industries, respect the self-identification of "sex workers," and avoid the heavy stigmatization of the term "prostitute."

States³³ are routinely left unprotected by rape laws, have no formal recourse when agreed upon payment is not dispersed, and receive none of the labor protections and benefits (occupational health, social security, and disability provisions, for example) attached to formally recognized forms of work.

A work model of commercial sexual exchange begins to correct the widespread assumption that the purchase of a sex workers' time entitles the purchaser to unlimited access to her body, a belief held by radical feminists,³⁴ abusive consumers of sexual services, and unresponsive legal officials³⁵ alike. In reifying this assumption, as in Andrea Dworkin's writing that "[prostitution is] the use of a woman's body for sex by a man, he pays money, he does what he wants,"³⁶ radical feminists have been complicit in an approach to sex work that leaves workers unprotected. In Dworkin's articulation, client perpetration of violence, non-agreed upon sex acts, and refusal to use worker-requested prophylactics are all unexceptional occupational hazards of sex work, a framing that leaves little room for workers' arguments for labor and civil rights. Understandably, that framing has been a central point of division between radical feminists and sex-positive feminist sex workers like Carol Queen, who insists,

We are not selling our selves or our bodies (a reprehensible turn of phrase repeated, often as not, by feminists, who ought to have more concern for the power of language to shape reality) any more than any worker under capitalism.³⁷

³³ With the exception of Nevada, where prostitution is legal.

³⁴ Dworkin, Andrea. *Life and Death*. (New York: Free Press, 1997), 140.

³⁵ Almodovar, Norma Jean. "The Consequences of Arbitrary and Selective Enforcement of Prostitution Laws." (*Wagadu*, Vol. 8, Fall 2010), 241-257.

³⁶ Dworkin, *Life and Death*, 140.

³⁷ Queen, Carol. "Sex Radical Politics, Sex-Positive Feminist Thought, and Whore Stigma." In *Whores and Other Feminists*. Ed. Jill Nagle. (New York, NY, 1997), 135.

Queen's choice to align work in commercial sex exchange with other forms of labor in Capitalism (exchanging specific services for pre-negotiated sums) touches on an undercurrent in radical feminist anti-sex work writing that, were it not fixated on sex work, could function as a powerful indictment of Capitalist labor relations as a whole. Thus, there is an argument against radical feminist constructions of sex work that does not simply counter radical feminist assumptions of victimhood with the suggestion that sex work is liberating at its core: in focusing on sex work rather than work more generally, radical feminists have missed a critical opportunity to engage with the dehumanizing effects of labor in Capitalism for all workers. Likewise, Queen's attention to the possibility of shared labor politics between sex and other workers is the exception rather than the rule in sex-positive writing, as calls to address exploitation in sex work as indicative of labor under Capitalism have been ignored in favor of efforts to counter framings of sex work as inherently exploitative. The result is sex-positivism's refusal to engage with the sexual and labor exploitation in sex (and other) work, all in the name of celebrating worker agency.

A departure from the work model

In response to dominant framings of sex work as inherently exploitative, sex workers (particularly those who identify with sex-positive feminism) have made efforts to refocus attention onto the benefits of their work. In these narratives, care, love, friendship, power play, and service emerge as predominant themes. Some sex workers describe rewarding human interactions with clients with no discussion of economic exchange. Mirha-Soleil Ross, a transgendered sex worker writes,

There are times I feel like revolting against this system that is ready to condemn and even jail us for caressing, kissing and holding each other... when I feel like there was, indeed, a higher calling for me to sacrifice my personal reputation, comfort, safety, social status, and even my freedom for a greater good.³⁸

While narratives like Ross' may counter stereotypes of sex workers as passive victims, they do not help us to move the project of establishing sex work as work forward. Nor, for that matter, are they helpful to feminists who wish to work against the association of femininity with self-sacrifice. In Ross' framing, sex workers emerge as servants of a higher cause, not workers in an economy. As with other evocations of martyrdom, this does not function as a rallying cry for change, and it comes across as disinterested in the possibility of working for sex workers' rights. Ross mentions "revolt," but then treats the more obvious targets of revolt (the protection of workers' safety, freedom, etcetera) as static aspects of her work.

Ross' narrative is only one example of the trend in sex-positive sex workers' writing that describes sex work in non-economic terms. Some writers, like Ross, describe sex work without even passing reference to the economic exchange taking place, while others describe payment as one of many benefits of sex work, and still others address monetary exchange only to insist that it is unimportant in comparison to the myriad other benefits of their work. In this last instance, sex workers' personal regard for clients becomes a theme. Veronica Monét describes a "generosity of spirit" in her clients that "would touch my life in ways far more meaningful than money [*sic*]."³⁹ Charlotte Shane believes that prostitution has allowed her to meet "many good men," and describes her clients as "gentle souls" and "friends." Her description of her work focuses heavily on

³⁸ Ross, Mirha-Soleil. "Dear John." In *Working Sex: Sex Workers Write about a Changing Industry*. Ed. Oakley, Annie. (Berkeley: Seal Press, 2007), 217-8.

³⁹ Monét, Veronica. "College Graduate Makes Good as a Courtesan," 128.

interpersonal, emotional interactions with her clients, which she claims were, for many of the men who sought out her services, the primary focus of a paid session.⁴⁰ The heavily classed nature of the assertion that spiritual generosity could be far more important than money is clear, as is the extent to which having saleable interpersonal skills is highly contingent on sharing the socio-economic background of one's clients (or extensive training in acting as if you do). Whether the likes of Monét, Ross, and Shane intend for their points to be applied only to sex work conducted indoors, at higher pay rates and with better records of worker safety, will remain unclear until they and other sex-positive feminists make a real commitment to engaging with race, class, and place in their scholarly and narrative work.

Intimate labor

When Shane's clients are primarily in search of "affection, understanding, and connection,"⁴¹ and Ross' seek "tenderness" with the "intentions of the best lovers,"⁴² we may be left wondering why they do so through the purchase of sexual services. For Shane, the answer is that turning to a prostitute for emotional support allows her customers to express emotional vulnerability while reinforcing their sense of masculinity.⁴³ Here, we see another theme in sex workers' descriptions of the human service sex work involves – that of reinforcing clients' gender identity and thereby sense

⁴⁰ Shane, Charlotte. "The Professional." *The Good Men Project*, November 22, 2010. <http://goodmenproject.com/2010/11/22/the-professional/> (24 November, 2010).

⁴¹ Ibid..

⁴² Ross, Mirha-Soleil. "Dear John." In *Working Sex: Sex Workers Write about a Changing Industry*. Ed. Oakley, Annie. (Berkeley: Seal Press, 2007), 213, 214.

⁴³ Shane, "The Professional."

of self. As in Jane Ward’s discussion of the emotional labor femme women provide to their transmen partners — “offering sexual validation, coconstructing realness... maternal nurturing”⁴⁴ — some sex workers describe the maintenance of clients’ self-concept as a primary task.

Following Bernstein’s theory of “bounded authenticity,” Kimberly Huang describes sex workers in Ho Chi Minh City who “commodify their emotions to induce feelings of desire and a sense of power” in their clients.⁴⁵ Huang’s rendering comes across as less romantic than those of the sex workers cited above, focusing not on tenderness and vulnerability, but on power. Nonetheless, at varying levels of “authenticity,” the emotional labor entailed in reinforcing clients’ sense of self seems to be much the same. The major fault line, then, between the narratives of Huang’s interviewees and those of the sex workers I’ve described above is that a focus on feelings of power as the targeted output of an emotionally laborious interaction between a sex worker and client allows us to maintain a sense of sex work within the context of a recognized power exchange (economic, emotional, or otherwise). I argue that that context is necessary to calls for recognition of sex work as work. It is important to note that the contrasted narratives of emotionality as well as monetary power exchange on the one hand and friendship on the other also represent the self-identified experiences of women of color sex workers and white sex workers, respectively. As with other points in this discussion, the race and class dynamics of sex worker willingness to describe their work

⁴⁴ Ward, Jane. “Gender Labor: Transmen, Femmes, and Collective Work of Transgression.” In *Intimate Labors: Cultures, Technologies, and the Politics of Care*. (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2010), 91.

⁴⁵ Hoang, Kimberly Kay. “Economies of Emotion, Familiarity, Fantasy, and Desire: Emotional Labor in Ho Chi Minh City’s Sex Industry.” *Intimate Labors: Cultures, Technologies, and the Politics of Care*. Eds. Boris, Eileen and Parreñas, Rhacel Salazar. (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2010), 178.

in terms of calculated exchange are important to a holistic understanding of the politics of sex work.

The push to turn focus away from economic exchange in sex work obscures the power dynamics inherent to a relationship within capitalism in which one party extracts labor from another. Irrespective of the feelings of tenderness or friendship sex workers may have for their clients, or visa versa, the fact remains that the employer/ employee relationship is built upon complex and layered power dynamics.⁴⁶ Both sex and other domestic workers describe pleasure in power play as a non-economic benefit of their work. Of migrant workers working as maids, Nicole Constable points out, “although subject to wider political and economic patterns over which they have little control, foreign domestic workers do not view themselves as passive pawns.”⁴⁷ Sex workers’ narratives suggest a similar attitude toward power dynamics, as they describe finding sites of power in their work that remain intact even when socio-economic forces are considered. Annie Oakley, echoing the sentiments of other domestic workers, notes, “the help always knows more about the boss than the boss knows about them.”⁴⁸ We see this type of power in sex workers’ descriptions of clients’ divulging personal, and sometimes highly stigmatized, information,⁴⁹ as well as in the power workers exercise in providing pleasure and intimacy at a cost.⁵⁰ These manifestations of power, however, rely on

⁴⁶ Katsulis, “Youth Sex Workers on the U.S.-Mexico Border,” 117.

⁴⁷ Constable, Nicole. *Maid to Order in Hong Kong: Stories of Filipina Workers*. (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1997), 202.

⁴⁸ Oakley, Annie. “Introduction.” In *Working Sex: Sex Workers Write about a Changing Industry*. Ed. Oakley, Annie. (Berkeley: Seal Press, 2007), 12.

⁴⁹ Ross, “Dear John,” 213-5.

broader dynamics in which the employer or client continues to exercise social control. If, “the act of making men pay is, in fact, quite subversive. It reverses the terms under which men feel entitled to unlimited access to women’s bodies,”⁵¹ it is only so to the extent that men’s entitlement to sexual and emotional services is assigned a fixed price. It is the *terms* of the power exchange that change, not its social meaning.

For Oakley, the “help” know more about the boss than vice versa because they are invisible.⁵² Even in her romantic flurry, Ross guesses that her clients’ comfort in sharing their secrets, non-normative sexual desires, and insecurities with her may be rooted in their assumption that she, as a transwoman sex worker, has less social power than they do.⁵³ It is perhaps easier to make oneself vulnerable to someone who economically, legally, and socially, will likely remain *more* vulnerable regardless of how stigmatized your sexual preferences are or how fragile your self-concept is. Could this help to explain why, while sex-positive sex workers frequently take pains to exonerate their clients from claims of ghoulish sadism, there is not yet a clients’ movement to correct dominant stereotypes about sex workers or organize for their rights?

As with domestic workers’ employers who view or purport to view them as “one of the family,”⁵⁴ sex workers’ clients who describe their exchanges as friendships or romantic relationships do so within the context of a power differential. Consumers of

⁵⁰ Katsulis, Yasmina. “Youth Sex Workers on the U.S.-Mexico Border.” (*Wagadu*, Vol. 8, Fall 2010), 119.

⁵¹ Pendleton, Eva. “Love for Sale.” In *Whores and Other Feminists*, ed. Jill Nagle. (New York, NY, 1997), 79.

⁵² Oakley, Annie. “Introduction.” In *Working Sex: Sex Workers Write about a Changing Industry*. Ed. Oakley, Annie. (Berkeley: Seal Press, 2007), 12.

⁵³ Ross, “Dear John,” 213-5.

⁵⁴ Halder, Baby. *A Life Less Ordinary*. (New York: Harper Perennial, 2008), 158.

domestic labor (including sex work) are able to act under the cover of benevolence when relationships are recast to obscure economic and power dynamics, a shift that, if the popularity of workers' integration of framings of friend and family is any indication, can make the exchange more pleasant (and less psychically damaging) for both worker and employer.⁵⁵ It does not follow, however, that this "personalism" holds equal benefit for both parties, or that it contributes to an improved environment for workers in general. It is true that

The classic argument about personalism and its effects on domestic workers allows us to analyze a deep alliance as a clear example of how personalism leads to the increased extraction of labor from workers. But this analysis is incomplete without addressing the intentions and desires that the work fulfills [for workers].⁵⁶

But it is also the case that even a discussion of personalism that includes workers' perspectives may fail to integrate a structural analysis; indeed, in a majority of writing by sex-positive sex workers, it has.

How do narratives of personalism affect workers' movements for labor rights? To my knowledge, no successful labor movement has rested on claims that are rooted in anything other than the economics of work – it is unlikely that sex workers will gain legal rights based on accounts of how personally "fulfilling and fun"⁵⁷ their work is. That focus, while individually relevant, does not situate sex workers as economic subjects

⁵⁵ Hoang, Kimberly Kay. "Creating Intimate Boundaries: Culture and Social Relations." In *Intimate Labors: Cultures, Technologies, and the Politics of Care*. Eds. Boris, Eileen and Salazar Parreñas, Rhacel. (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2010), 175.

⁵⁶ Ibarra, Maria de la Luz. "My Reward is Not Money: Deep Alliances and End-of Life Care among Mexicana Workers and Their Wards." In *Intimate Labors: Cultures, Technologies, and the Politics of Care*. (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2010), 129.

⁵⁷ Monét, "Sedition," 130.

where discussions of their labor are concerned, and it is not conducive to an organized movement.

Why work matters, and for whom

“In the United States, sex work is sometimes viewed... as a decidedly fashionable way to earn money. It is an alternative to the nine-to-five grind, a declaration of rebellion against confining American middle-class cultural values and sexual norms. For the largely poor, nonwhite, uneducated women laboring in the Galactica, sex work is none of these things.”

-Patty Kelly⁵⁸

What if the movement to establish a work model for prostitution isn't a priority for many of the sex workers who focus on the non-economic benefits of their work? If, instead, these workers prioritize the abolition of stereotypes that assume that sex work is inherently dangerous and unrewarding? These workers tend to be overwhelmingly white, hail from middle-class backgrounds, and work in sectors of the sex industry that expose them to less danger and better earnings than those populated by sex workers of color who come from low-income backgrounds.⁵⁹ In an atmosphere dominated by images of sex work as “dirty”⁶⁰ and “demeaning,”⁶¹ white, middle class sex workers may perceive that they have more to gain from redirecting the discourse of sex work to its more pleasurable and liberating consequences. The question then becomes whether these workers'

⁵⁸ Kelly, Patty. *Lydia's Open Door: Inside Mexico's Most Modern Brothel*. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007), 121.

⁵⁹ Siobhan. “An Interview With Gloria Lockett.” In *Working Sex: Sex Workers Write about a Changing Industry*. Ed. Oakley, Annie. (Berkeley: Seal Press, 2007), 154.

⁶⁰ Dworkin, Andrea. “On Prostitution.” (Speech, “Prostitution: From Academia to Activism,” Law at the University of Michigan Law School, Ann Arbor, MI, October 31, 1992).
<http://www.nostatusquo.com/ACLU/dworkin/MichLawJourI.html>

⁶¹ Queen, “Sex Radical Politics, Sex-Positive Feminist Thought, and Whore Stigma,” 133.

priorities should be given equal authority to those of sex workers with less race and class privilege.

There is a clear rift in sex workers' writing between those who describe their work in non-economic terms and those who do not, and it is drawn on race, place, and class lines. Sex workers are as diverse as any group of workers, so much so that "reduction to a coherent narrative is counterproductive."⁶² A problem arises, though, when a dominant narrative only represents a portion of the workers whose lives stand to be radically affected by any cultural or political shifts that are informed by it. For Carol Queen (a white, middle class sex worker), "the politics of being a whore do not differ markedly from the politics of any other sexually despised group."⁶³ Here, sex work is about sex and identity, themes shared with sexual minorities. For Gloria Lockhart (a black sex worker from a working class background), however, the politics of being a "whore" are in fact very different from those of other sexually marginalized groups, "because prostitution is about money."⁶⁴

The division between narratives of sex work for money and sex work for power, human connection, freedom, etcetera also tells a story of the cultural meanings behind economic need, work, and identity. Carol Queen writes,

No one should ever, by economic constraint or any kind of interpersonal force, have to do sex work who does not like sex, who is not cut out for a life of sexual generosity (however attractive the fee charged for it).⁶⁵

⁶² Spivak, Gayatri. "Can the Subaltern Speak?" revised edition. In *Can the Subaltern Speak: Reflections on the History of an Idea*. Ed. Morris, Rosalind. (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010), 238.

⁶³ Queen, "Sex Radical Politics, Sex-Positive Feminist Thought, and Whore Stigma,"134.

⁶⁴ Brooks, Siobhan. "An Interview With Gloria Lockett." In *Working Sex: Sex Workers Write about a Changing Industry*. Ed. Oakley, Annie. (Berkeley: Seal Press, 2007), 153.

⁶⁵ Queen, "Sex Radical Politics, Sex-Positive Feminist Thought, and Whore Stigma,"134.

While there is clear value in insisting upon consent in sex (and other) work, this judgementalism about women's motivations for entering the sex industry is unproductive and dangerous, and betrays the blinding effect of race and class privilege. First, the fee charged for sex work isn't necessarily "attractive" for some women so much as it is imperative for survival. Second, the idea that women who choose not to enter sex work (or who would have preferred other work but enter the industry because of force or economic need) lack sexual generosity is highly problematic and akin to the suggestion that migrant farm workers who work for pay lack affinity for the land. Finally, Queen unselfconsciously reifies a raced and classed division between "nurturing" and economic motivations for care work. Of this historical division in domestic labor, Evelyn Glenn writes,

For middle-class women, the changes carried contradictory implications, between the elevation of their caring labor in spiritual, moral, and altruistic terms on the one hand and the devaluation of that same labor in economic and political terms on the other... these contradictions could be bridged if the two aspects of caring could be assigned to different groups of women.⁶⁶

Many of the sentiments expressed by Queen and the other white, middle class sex workers profiled here directly capitalize of that rift, and fail to address the socio-historical context that situates them as members of the group with access to "altruistic" care work.

Feminists have encountered similar issues in their effort to establish a representative movement for reproductive choice. Angela Davis writes,

When black and Latina women resort to abortions in such large numbers, the stories they tell are not so much about their desire to be free of their pregnancy,

⁶⁶ Glenn, Evelyn Nakano. *Forced to Care: Coercion and Caregiving in America*. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2010), 36; similarly situated in Davis, 12.

but rather about the miserable social conditions which dissuade them from bringing new lives into the world.⁶⁷

The corollary within a discussion of sex work is the possibility that when women of color enter sex work because of financial need, the stories they tell are not so much about their desire to be sexually free as they are about the “miserable social conditions” which radically constrain their avenues for economic survival. A body of sex-positive writing on sex work that fails to take that possibility into account makes a crucial mistake. Like migrant domestic workers, not all sex workers enter the industry for economic gain,⁶⁸ but those who do *must* be part of the discussion.

The ideal conclusion to the story of the struggle for recognition of sex work as work is unclear. A model of sex work as work begins to address some injustices, but may create new ones. As we have seen in the history of the marriage contract⁶⁹ and state-sponsored sites of sex work⁷⁰, the entrance of relations into the purview of the state does not necessarily improve women’s conditions. Any call for recognition of sex work as work must bear in mind the possibility that, as Foucault warns, “visibility is a trap.”⁷¹ Here, the interests of the neo-liberal state threaten to overpower those of workers, a danger I will discuss in more depth in the following chapter.

⁶⁷ Davis, Angela. *Women, Race, and Class*. (New York: Vintage Books, 1983), 204-5.

⁶⁸ Bergeron, Suzanne. “Gender, Development, and Global Householding.” *Social Policy and Society*, Vol. 9, Iss. 3, 2010, 286.

⁶⁹ Delphy, Christine and Leonard, Diana. *Familiar Exploitation: A New Analysis of Marriage in Contemporary Western Societies*. (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1992), 119.

⁷⁰ Kelly, Patty. *Lydia’s Open Door: Inside Mexico’s Most Modern Brothel*. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007), 3, 210, and elsewhere.

⁷¹ Foucault, Michel. *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*. (New York: Vintage Books), 200.

Chapter Two

Sex Work in the Neo-liberal Economy

Limited Choices

“[Sex workers are] active agents who, despite their limited circumstances, engage in potentially risky commercial sex exchange... as a way to exert some small amount of control over their personal circumstances, as well as to meet their basic needs.”⁷²

The push to establish a work model for sexual exchange corrects the conflation of selling sex with selling oneself in part by shifting focus to the ways in which sex work is similar to other forms of labor. Here, the choice to enter sex work is situated alongside choices to enter other forms of work. As such, economics are clearly a motivating factor for entry into the sex industry, but no more so than for those who pursue other forms of work.⁷³ For some sex workers, sex work is not only a legitimate way to make a living; it is the most rational of a number of (often constrained) choices. Janelle Galazia writes, “it’s about money... it was practical, it was survival, it was intelligent. Sex work is not only a means to an end, it’s a means to a *different* end.”⁷⁴ For women with limited options, that different end can represent the ability to support themselves and their families in a manner that is otherwise only made available to those with access to race, class, and place privilege.⁷⁵

⁷² Katsulis, Yasmina. “Youth Sex Workers on the U.S.- Mexico Border.” (Wagadu, Vol. 8, Fall 2010), 115-143, 117.

⁷³ Monét, “Sedition,” 219.

⁷⁴ Galazia, Janelle. “Staged.” In *Working Sex: Sex Workers Write about a Changing Industry*. Ed. Oakley, Annie. (Berkeley: Seal Press, 2007), 87.

⁷⁵ Brooks, Siobhan. “An Interview With Gloria Lockett,” 154. Dewey, Susan. *Neon Wasteland: On Love, Motherhood, and Sex Work in a Rust Belt Town*, 57.

As with Davis' challenge to recognize how reproductive choice is experienced differently by women of different race and class groups, narratives of sex workers who experience the choice to enter sex work as one of a limited number of often unappealing options should push us to question a global economic system that so drastically limits modes of survival. This is not a question of establishing a hierarchy of agency in which only workers with extensive resources and options are imagined to make careful, self-aware choices. Rather, it is a call to examine a global economic system that perpetuates itself precisely by making it increasingly difficult for its subjects to survive and thrive. This project is not unique to discussions of sex work; however, a careful analysis of how neo-liberal capitalism interacts with gender, sex, and labor is essential to a coherent, rights-based approach to sex work.

Characterized by “the elimination of the public sphere, total liberation for corporations and skeletal social spending,”⁷⁶ neo-liberalism's far-reaching effects on human life include dramatic revision of what it means to be a worker. Now more than ever, as those necessities required for basic survival (water and seeds are two examples) become increasingly privatized and monetized, one must *earn* a living, and doing so requires making hard choices among a limited set of options. Within this context, women will continue to turn to sex work in order to survive.⁷⁷ Those who do so, like other workers in the neo-liberal economy, will continue to experience, and in some cases organize against, economic trends which force workers to “do more for less in order to

⁷⁶ Klein, Naomi. *The Shock Doctrine: the Rise of Disaster Capitalism.* (New York: Picador, 2007).

⁷⁷ Dewey, *Neon Wasteland: On Love, Motherhood, and Sex Work in a Rust Belt Town*, 32.

remain employed.”⁷⁸ A rights-based approach to sex work must engage with what it means to live and work within the context of neo-liberal capitalism. This project should be a priority for both abolitionists (including anti-sex work radical feminists) who wish to reduce the numbers of women who enter sex work because they feel they have no other options and sex-positive feminists who wish to honor sex work as work and increase labor protections for workers. However, both camps approach sex work largely outside the context of structure and political economy, choosing instead to focus on sexual ethics. While I view those discussions as valid and important, I also argue that an approach to sex work that is grounded in structural analysis and a willingness to question the human ethics of capitalist social ordering is best suited to actually improve the lives of women and men inside and out of the sex industry.

The radical feminist avoidance of political economy

Sex-positive feminist theory is often criticized for its lack of structural analysis,⁷⁹ a point I will address shortly. Meanwhile, while radical feminist theory is much maligned for its “sex negativity,”⁸⁰ the extent to which it too lacks coherent structural analysis is all but ignored. Here, radical and sex-positive feminist theories of sex work share more in common than proponents of either would like to acknowledge: both discuss the sale of

⁷⁸ Ibid., 36.

⁷⁹ See: Power, *One Dimensional Woman*, 35. Piepzna-Samarasinha, Leah Laskshmi. “browngirlworld.” In *Colonize This!: Young Women of Color on Today’s Feminism*. Hernandez, Daisy and Rehman, Bushra, eds. (Emeryville, CA: Seal Press, 2002), 5.

⁸⁰ See: Soble, Alan. *Pornography, Sex, and Feminism*. (New York: Prometheus Books, 2002), 98. Friedman, Jaelyn. “In Defense of Going Wild or: How I Stopped Worrying and Learned to Love Pleasure (and How You Can Too).” In Friedman and Valenti, Eds. *Yes Means Yes: Visions of Female Sexual Power & a World Without Rape*. (Berkeley: Seal Press, 2008), 313. Hartley, Nina. “In the Flesh: A Porn Star’s Journey.” In Jill Nagle, ed. *Whores and Other Feminists*. (New York, NY, 1997), 60.

sexual services largely outside of its socioeconomic context. It is particularly interesting that a school of theorists who tout themselves as most willing to contradict the status quo, the “the lone, crazy resisters,”⁸¹ would fail to take such a clear opportunity to critique an economic system that has disastrous effects on women’s lives. That is, in focusing on sexual exploitation in sex work exclusively, radical feminist theorists have left unquestioned the justness of labor in capitalism more generally; in suggesting that elements of exploitation are unique to sex work, they have elevated other forms of labor, hardly a radical position. Illustrating this point, I will rely primarily on a close reading of Andrea Dworkin’s 1992 speech, “Prostitution and Male Supremacy.”

Of prostitution, Andrea Dworkin says, “it is always extraordinary, when looking at this money exchange, to understand that in most people's minds the money is worth more than the woman is.”⁸² I won’t speak to this claim, particularly since legitimately doing so would require extensive research with purchasers of sexual services, something neither Dworkin nor I can lay claim to. I do wonder, though, what about her observation is so “extraordinary” to Dworkin, given that “profit over people” is a well-documented feature of Capitalism.⁸³ Here, as elsewhere in radical feminist writing on prostitution, we find the beginnings of what could be a powerful critique of capitalist social ordering.

⁸¹ Dworkin, Andrea. *Intimacy*. (New York: Basic Books, 1987), 181.

⁸² Dworkin, Andrea. “On Prostitution.” (Speech, “Prostitution: From Academia to Activism,” Law at the University of Michigan Law School, Ann Arbor, MI, October 31, 1992). <http://www.nostatusquo.com/ACLU/dworkin/MichLawJourI.html>

⁸³ See: Chomsky, Noam. *Profit Over People: Neoliberalism & Global Order*. (New York: Seven Stories Press, 1999).

Unfortunately, Dworkin's focus on individual exploitation in sexual exchange⁸⁴ obscures the structural elements at play.⁸⁵

In fact, Dworkin makes a point of being disinterested in structural analysis. Of different types and sites of sex work, she says, "the circumstances don't mitigate or modify what prostitution is."⁸⁶ This is clearly not the opinion of the millions of sex workers who, for centuries, have worked toward improving their circumstances, it is also not particularly useful to policy makers or social scientists, but it does help to illuminate a central flaw in radical feminist thinking on sex work. If circumstances don't matter for sex workers, matters of labor, civil, and human rights become irrelevant, and we are left with no reason to address the circumstances that actively constrain women's choices and enforce social inequality. In addition, it seems deeply disrespectful of workers who have experienced coercion or violence (structural or interpersonal) in sex work to collapse their experience with those of women who have not. Does Dworkin mean to suggest that the circumstances of a sex worker who describes her experiences thusly: "people who have everything cannot imagine what I have to do to earn money. Sometimes I don't understand it either,"⁸⁷ are not meaningfully different from those who experience their work positively? As sex-positive sex workers are quick to point out, it is also

⁸⁴ In the above quote, Dworkin refers to men who purchase sexual services (Johns) and facilitate the purchase of sexual services (pimps).

⁸⁵ Note the ways in which this brings us back to Waller et al.'s description of the intrapersonal focus of the deficiency perspective.

⁸⁶ Dworkin, "On Prostitution," 1992.

⁸⁷ Kelly, *Lydia's Open Door: Inside Mexico's Most Modern Brothel*, 204.

disrespectful of sex workers who view their work as a site of agency and liberation to silence them with claims of false consciousness.⁸⁸

Dworkin is hardly alone in her focus on sex rather than work where discussions of commercial sexual exchange are concerned. Indeed, much radical feminist objection to sex work revolves around assumptions that have much more to do with sex than work, an obvious imbalance in radical feminist efforts to outlaw pornography. For the purposes of anti-pornography legislation, Eva Kittay defines some sexual acts as “illegitimate by virtue of the moral impermissibility of... treating persons as means only.”⁸⁹ Meanwhile, Dworkin and MacKinnon object to the presentation of female sexuality in pornography, claiming, “adult women are presented as children, fusing the vulnerability of a child with the slutish eagerness to be fucked said to be natural to the female of every age.”⁹⁰ In the Kittay, Dworkin, and MacKinnon approaches to pornography (among others of the same ilk), we see an inordinate focus on defining legitimate sexual behavior (and the use of the word “slut” to negatively define these bounds!), and almost no attention to the experience of women workers in the porn industry. Kittay’s failure to address why is it impermissible to treat people as “means only” for sexual pleasure but not economic gain is an important example of the radical feminist avoidance of structural analysis, even when it’s staring them in the face (leading this reader to believe that, like the one-track

⁸⁸ Nagle, “Introduction,” 4.

⁸⁹ Soble, Alan. *Pornography, Sex, and Feminism*. (New York: Prometheus Books, 2002), 55.

⁹⁰ Dworkin, Andrea and MacKinnon, Katharine. *Pornography and Civil Rights: A New Day for Women’s Equality*. (Minneapolis: Organizing Against Pornography, 1988), 46.

minded men they criticize,⁹¹ radical feminists may be too distracted by the bodies on display to see the people behind them).

The sex-positive feminist avoidance of political economy

The previous chapter's overview of sex-positive feminist rhetoric's move away from a work model for commercial sexual exchange addressed many of the problems with the one-dimensional and idealized portrayals of sex work often found in sex-positive writing.⁹² Here, I will take up that discussion again, showing the ways in which sex positivism shares with radical feminism a tendency to avoid discussions of political economy, often at the cost of workers. Ironically, sex-positive critiques of radical feminist theories of sex work shed light on the similarities between the two. In a familiar argument against radical feminist attitudes toward sex and sex work, Nina Hartley writes, "individuals who universalize their self-appointed victim status do so at least in part as a way of avoiding taking responsibility for their own dissatisfaction with the state of their intimate lives."⁹³ That Hartley and other sex-positive thinkers employ knowledge of some radical feminists' experiences with sexual violence (with Dworkin a popular target) or assumed lack of romantic success (often based on unvarnished lookism) as a means of discrediting their work is deeply problematic, but not worthy of discussion here. Hartley's words also betray a strange affiliation with the neo-liberal language of

⁹¹ MacKinnon, Catharine. "Desire and Power" in *Theorizing Feminisms* eds. Hackett and Haslanger. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), 264.

⁹² For a discussion of the limitations of sex positive feminism more broadly, see Power, Nina. *One Dimensional Woman*. (Ropley Hants, UK: O Books, 2009), 30.

⁹³ Nina Hartley. "In the Flesh: A Porn Star's Journey." In Jill Nagle, ed. *Whores and Other Feminists*. (New York, NY, 1997), 63.

individualism and personal responsibility. Elsewhere, Hartley claims that “we all have a say in how political we allow the personal to become,”⁹⁴ but even the most casual observation of the workings of neo-liberal political economy tells us that this simply is not the case. An individual’s ability to determine the extent to which the personal is political is informed by gender, race, class, sexuality, appearance, ability, and place. Even for those with privilege in these areas, the neoliberal state perpetuates itself by manipulating citizens’ personal and political boundaries. The sex-positive failure to engage with the structural in favor of narrative and theorizing that centers on individuals works against the interests of sex workers as workers, negating the many possibilities for coalition building and intersectional analysis that would otherwise be open.

In sex-positive feminists’ poetic accounts of liberation through sex work and indictments of the “erotophobic logic”⁹⁵ that prevents us from enjoying our sexual selves, what is often lost is an acknowledgement that the discussions we are having are about more than just sexual freedom: cold, hard, unevenly distributed cash (in addition to labor rights, health and wellbeing) is at stake too. For example, the pornography and erotic dance industries, both legal in (parts of) the United States, do not exist as a utopian alternative to advanced capitalism where workers rule.⁹⁶ Instead, like most other industries in (advanced) capitalism, they are characterized by the extraction of surplus labor from workers, increasing reliance on an underpaid and itinerant workforce,⁹⁷ and

⁹⁴ Hartley, Nina. *Nina Hartley’s Guide to Total Sex*. (New York: Penguin Press, 2006), 6.

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, 60.

⁹⁶ Kraus, Chris. “Trick.” *Working Sex: Sex Workers Write About a Changing Industry*. (Berkeley: Seal Press, 2007), 47.

strict division of labor based on race, class, gender, and representativeness of normative beauty standards (this is perhaps most the case in sex and other service work).⁹⁸

Sex-positive framings of sex work share with radical ones the tendency to flatten workers' experience by placing undue focus on sex over work. Of pornography debates, Nina Power points out,

Both [radical and sex-positive feminist] positions frame the issue in moral terms—pornography is either degrading and therefore bad *or* it is enjoyable and thus morally good. But pornography is, we must first all acknowledge, a massive industry with major economic and social import.⁹⁹

The economic and social import of pornography and other forms of sex work rests in large part on their status as employers of millions of workers, most of whom are women,¹⁰⁰ and all of whom (as contingent workers) are by necessity impacted by global economic trends and shifting attitudes toward work and workers.

A textured analysis of discourses of sex work requires that we position attitudes toward commercial sexual exchange within that social and economic context. As Drucilla Cornell points out, when pornographers argue for the legitimacy of their industry, “what is at stake for them... is their profitability and not the value of freedom.”¹⁰¹ This does not mean that pornographers' arguments for their rights to produce and sell sexual materials are illegitimate, but it does suggest that feminists should be wary of collapsing arguments for or against an industry's rights with those for workers' rights. That is, the interests of

⁹⁷ Dewey, *Neon Wasteland: On Love, Motherhood, and Sex Work in a Rust Belt Town*, xi.

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, 54.

⁹⁹ Power, Nina. *One Dimensional Woman*, 45.

¹⁰⁰ Ditmore, Melissa. “Trafficking in Lives: How Ideology Shapes Policy.” In Kempadoo. 120.

¹⁰¹ Cornell, Drucilla. *The Imaginary Domain: Abortion, Pornography, and Sexual Harassment*. (New York: Routledge, 1995), 100.

pornography producers, strip club and brothel owners may occasionally coincide with but are not the same as those of actors in pornography, erotic dancers, or prostitutes. Both radical and sex-positive feminists have failed to make this distinction, with radical feminist indictments against sex industries too often coming across and being applied as indictments of their workers, and sex-positive defense of sex industries presenting as oblivious to exploitative labor practices within them. Only a work model of sex work that takes into account the realities of labor in capitalism -- “a system that depends on the exploitation of underclass groups for its survival”¹⁰² -- can move us past this point. As bell hooks makes clear, some feminists “do not have radical political perspectives and are unwilling to face these realities, especially when they, as individuals, gain economic self-sufficiency within the existing structure.”¹⁰³ A rights-based work model of sex work will continue to prove elusive to both radical and sex-positive feminists as long as they refuse to acknowledge the realities of work and life under capitalism.

A rights-based approach to sex work, one that maintains a commitment to analyzing sex work as labor, cannot afford to erase the conditions (macro and micro) in which the work takes place. Sex work outside of the context of what work under capitalism means emerges as one of many expressions of alternative sexuality; it is clear that such an understanding fails to speak to the substance of the issue. This is not to say that issues of sexual ethics have no place in progressive discourses of sex work. However, as several decades of heated and largely fruitless debate have shown us, protracted discussion about the moral meaning of commercial sexual exchange has done

¹⁰² hooks, bell. *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center*. (Boston: South End Pres, 1984),102.

¹⁰³ Ibid.

little to demonstrably improve the labor conditions and broader wellbeing of sex workers. This is due in part, of course, to the fact that people who sell sexual services and products are also citizens, community members, partners, parents, students, workers in other industries, and (often) members of the poor and working classes. As such, sex workers are impacted by policies that may seem to have little to do with sexual exchange, and policies intended to affect sex workers have significant effects of their families and communities.

An approach that fails to address workers in the sex industry as whole people (one that a dismal few thinkers, Susan Dewey, Patty Kelly, and Michelle Tea included, have avoided) cannot inform useful scholarship and policy. Here, intersectional feminist theory, defined by Patricia Hill Collins as having the ability to “shed light on the mutually constructing nature of systems of oppression,”¹⁰⁴ can help us to devise theories of gender, poverty, sexual labor, and political economy that work to simultaneously expand livable opportunities outside of sex work for supporting oneself and one’s family *and* improve conditions for those in sex work. Again, these mutually-reinforcing goals can only be achieved through a level of structural analysis as yet unseen in the majority of scholarship on sex work, including that put forth by radical and sex-positive feminists. A useful starting point for that analysis, as we have seen in the unusually nuanced work of Susan Dewey, Laura Maria Agustin, and Patty Kelly, is a feminist critique of the effects of neo-liberal social and economic policies on life and work.

¹⁰⁴ Collins, Patricia Hill. *Fighting Words: Black Women and the Search for Justice*. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 1998), 153.

Collective action in sex work

Susan Dewey writes, “new labor practices remind workers that they are expendable and not in a position to negotiate the terms and conditions under which they labor.”¹⁰⁵ This is as much true for sex workers as for those who labor in other industries, and it is a direct result of neo-liberal labor policies that prioritize corporate over human rights and manufacture a flexible, vulnerable, and itinerant workforce.¹⁰⁶ Dewey’s discussion of the manifestations of such policies in the lives of erotic dancers in post-industrial rural New York paints a stark picture of the parallels between sex and other work in a neo-liberal economy.¹⁰⁷ Likewise, Patty Kelly’s analysis of the effects of neo-liberal social and economic policies on Mexican workers illuminates the ways in which these policies at once attack the viability of other options for survival to such an extent that sex work emerges as the most viable choice *and* constrain choices within sex work.¹⁰⁸ So, when Kelly terms her ethnographic portrait of workers in a state-run Mexican brothel “a story of structural violence,”¹⁰⁹ she is referring to every part of the process of entering and laboring in the sex industry.

In both Dewey and Kelly’s portraits of sex work we see that the success of the global transition into a neo-liberal economy has rested in large part on the steady and

¹⁰⁵ Dewey, Susan. *Neon Wasteland: On Love, Motherhood, and Sex Work in a Rust Belt Town*, 32.

¹⁰⁶ See Nina Power, Naomi Klein, Patty Kelly, and Susan Dewey.

¹⁰⁷ Dewey, Susan. *Neon Wasteland: On Love, Motherhood, and Sex Work in a Rust Belt Town*, 32, 195.

¹⁰⁸ Kelly, *Lydia’s Open Door: Inside Mexico’s Most Modern Brothel*.

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, 5.

deliberate degradation of workers' rights-- in particular, the closing off of possibilities for collective organizing by legal and economic means.¹¹⁰ Dewey writes,

These economic changes are pervasive and often feature an unprecedented prevalence of untethering the workplace from it workers... a lack of unionization and the rise of part-time positions.¹¹¹

In many ways, these trends appear as exaggerated versions of labor policies that have long characterized traditionally feminized labor, sex and other domestic work in particular.¹¹²

The impacts of these developments on the lives of sex workers are particularly significant because, even prior to the onset of neo-liberal social and economic trends, sex industries have been characterized by particular struggles in worker organizing and collective action. High worker turnover,¹¹³ worker perception of sex work as temporary,¹¹⁴ sex work's placement at the legal and social margins, and economic competition among workers¹¹⁵ contribute to make collective action among sex workers difficult, but not impossible. While formal collective action among sex workers has been limited to a relatively small number of organizations,¹¹⁶ it would be a mistake to assume

¹¹⁰ Kelly, *Lydia's Open Door: Inside Mexico's Most Modern Brothel*, 26. Dewey, *Neon Wasteland: On Love, Motherhood, and Sex Work in a Rust Belt Town*, 200.

¹¹¹ Dewey, *Neon Wasteland: On Love, Motherhood, and Sex Work in a Rust Belt Town*, 32.

¹¹² Power, *One Dimensional Woman*, 18.

¹¹³ Dewey, *Neon Wasteland: On Love, Motherhood, and Sex Work in a Rust Belt Town*, 38.

¹¹⁴ *Ibid.*; Kelly, *Lydia's Open Door: Inside Mexico's Most Modern Brothel*, 57.

¹¹⁵ Kelly, *Lydia's Open Door: Inside Mexico's Most Modern Brothel*, 73.

¹¹⁶ Such as San Francisco's COYOTE (<http://www.bayswan.org/COYOTE.html>); the UK's International Union of Sex Workers (<http://www.iusw.org/iusw-who-we-are/>); and India's Karnataka Sex Workers Union (<http://kswu.blogspot.com/>).

that the impediments to formal organizing in sex work make it impossible for workers to affect the circumstances of their labor. Making that mistake, Andrea Dworkin claimed,

If you have been in prostitution, you do not have tomorrow in your mind, because tomorrow is a very long time away. You cannot assume that you will live from minute to minute. You cannot and you do not. If you do, then you are stupid, and to be stupid in the world of prostitution is to be hurt, is to be dead. No woman who is prostituted can afford to be that stupid, such that she would actually believe that tomorrow will come.¹¹⁷

Taking the idea of precariousness to its extreme, Dworkin makes a convincing (and certainly not radical) argument against labor organizing: not only are the circumstances of sex work constant and unchangeable, any worker who believes otherwise is “stupid” (and soon to be dead).

But it seems that sex workers *are* stupid enough to conceive of tomorrow. In ways that may not be readily legible to outsiders, sex workers use creative strategies to assert control over the terms of their labor, both individually and in concert with their peers.¹¹⁸ There is most certainly a need for more and stronger collective action in the sex industries, and, to be sure, sex workers and their allies face significant challenges in this respect. However, any useful discussion of the possibilities of collective action in sex industries must begin with an acknowledgement of the ways in which workers have always acted to assert control (at varying levels of success) over the terms of their labor.

Most often bearing full or primary responsibility for self-protection (from pregnancy and disease as well as violence perpetrated by the state and clients), maintenance of legal and personal boundaries, and, to the extent possible, the terms of

¹¹⁷ Dworkin, Andrea. “On Prostitution.” (Speech, “Prostitution: From Academia to Activism,” Law at the University of Michigan Law School, Ann Arbor, MI, October 31, 1992). <http://www.nostatusquo.com/ACLU/dworkin/MichLawJourI.html>

¹¹⁸ See Kelly, Dewey, Nagle, Bernstein, and Queen.

payment and services rendered, sex workers are active agents in their conditions of labor. In all these areas, workers develop strategies to manage the circumstances of their labor: learning to protect themselves from unwanted or violent contact from clients,¹¹⁹ carefully managing intimacy so as to maximize profit and minimize both psychic and physical danger,¹²⁰ enhancing the perceived value of their services by managing self-presentation¹²¹ and negotiating the content and nature of the services they provide (insisting on condom use or refusing anal sex, for example).¹²² These strategies are not substitutes for formal unionizing or collective political action, but to ignore them is to ignore workers' resilience and resourcefulness, both of which will be necessary to continued progress in the fight to ensure human and labor rights for sex workers.

Bounded authenticity

As sex workers and theorists take on the idea of sex as work, it sometimes emerges as separate from other forms of domestic labor in that it takes place within pre-determined time periods and involves specific, negotiated acts.¹²³ These circumstances make sex work more closely related to 'productive' labor than other forms of domestic work, particularly because "the commodity aspect of the prostitute's labor power is more

¹¹⁹ Dewey, *Neon Wasteland: On Love, Motherhood, and Sex Work in a Rust Belt Town*, 147.

¹²⁰ *Ibid.*, 121

¹²¹ Hoang, "Creating Intimate Boundaries: Culture and Social Relations," 176.

¹²² Tea, Michelle. *Rent Girl*. (San Francisco: Last Gasp, 2005), 48.

¹²³ Bernstein, Elizabeth. "Bounded Authenticity and the Commerce of Sex." In *Intimate Labors: Cultures, Technologies, and the Politics of Care*. Eds. Boris, Eileen and Salazar Parreñas, Rhacel. (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2010), 153; Fortunati, *The Arcane of Reproduction: Housework, Prostitution, Labor, and Capital*, 45.

evident because it is expressed in direct monetary terms.”¹²⁴ Of course, the extent to which sex work resembles formally recognized productive labor is lessened by social and legal approaches to sex work that cast it as either a criminal, underground economy (as in prostitution in the most of the United States), or as so socially undesirable as to exist outside the bounds of generally accepted labor standards (as in the state of Nevada, where prostitution is legal but relegated to a separate sphere).¹²⁵

With the emergence of neoliberal capitalism, the common characteristic of time-limited, pre-negotiated tasks shared by both prostitution and “productive” labor seems to be eroding for both. In an increasingly itinerant work market, all forms of labor begin to take on many of the characteristics formerly assigned to domestic work.¹²⁶ In this respect, classically liberal models of separate public and private spheres, and radical feminist understandings of objectification – two constructs that heavily contribute to normative understandings of sex work – have become less and less relevant. For Nina Power, this phenomenon is characterized by a political economy in which “the personal is no longer just political, it is economic through and through.”¹²⁷ In significant ways, then, while sex workers have advocated for the recognition of their labor as *work*, labor outside of sexual exchange has become more like sex work than the other way around. When “everything is on show,” flexibility has become a central characteristic of the ideal worker, and the “division between ‘free time’ and ‘labor time’ has become extremely blurred,” elements

¹²⁴ Fortunati, *The Arcane of Reproduction: Housework, Prostitution, Labor, and Capital*, 108.

¹²⁵ *Ibid.*, Fortunati, 56.

¹²⁶ Power, Nina. *One Dimensional Woman*, 20.

¹²⁷ *Ibid.*, 26.

of sex work that have long made feminists most squeamish (objectification and commodification of the intimate, for example) have become the norm in the formal economy.¹²⁸

While sex workers' narratives of calculated choices to enter the sex industry begin to correct assumptions of sex workers as lacking agency, they can also help us to see the ways in which the concerns put forth by critics of sex work can more accurately be applied to critiques of agency within capitalist social ordering more broadly.¹²⁹ This project becomes increasingly urgent as the reach of advanced, neo-liberal capitalism widens, and we discover new meanings for Foucault's model of the economic man, "an entrepreneur of himself [*sic*]."¹³⁰

In an economy in which, for productive and reproductive workers alike, there is "virtually no subjective dimension left to be colonized,"¹³¹ the nature of sex work has expanded to include more emotionally intimate labor than ever before.¹³² Thus, Bernstein theorizes the phenomena of "bounded authenticity" in which,

Emotional authenticity is incorporated explicitly into the economic context... For many sex workers, the provision of bounded authenticity resides in fulfilling clients' fantasies of sensuous reciprocity through the self-conscious simulation of desire, pleasure, and erotic interest. For others, it may involve the emotional and physical labor of manufacturing *genuine* (if fleeting) libidinal and emotional ties, endowing their clients with a feeling of desirability, esteem, or even love [author's emphasis].¹³³

¹²⁸ Ibid, 18, 20, 24.

¹²⁹ Galazia, "Staged," 89.

¹³⁰ Foucault, Michel. *The Birth of Biopolitics: Lectures at the College de France 1978-1979*. Ed. Michel Senellart. (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 226.

¹³¹ Power, *One Dimensional Woman*, 25.

¹³² Bernstein, "Bounded Authenticity and the Commerce of Sex," 155.

For those who have incorporated it into their practice, the provision of “bounded authenticity” has added a new dimension to sex work. Where carefully constructed boundaries, or “unseen borders”¹³⁴ once allowed sex workers to compartmentalize sex work from intimacy, they must now be re-drawn to meet market demand for an increasingly ‘personal’ touch. Sex workers describe the emerging demand for “bounded authenticity” in a number of ways, noting increased client interest in workers’ private lives and corresponding expectation that workers engage with them emotionally as well as sexually¹³⁵ (here we see the explosion of the popularity of the girlfriend experience¹³⁶ and voyeuristic pornography, for example).

“Bounded authenticity” (by various names) characterized the nature of feminized labor before it became the norm in sex work.¹³⁷ Framings of domestic workers being “like one of the family” are not altogether different from those of sex workers being like lovers and friends, themes explored in the previous chapter. We see varied iterations of “bounded authenticity” in domestic workers’ descriptions of their relationships with employers: domestic worker and autobiographer Baby Halder’s employer describes the “pleasure your writing gives to my friends who have been reading your work [*sic*],”¹³⁸

¹³³ Ibid.

¹³⁴ Ibid., 154.

¹³⁵ Ibid., 155. The “girlfriend experience” describes a sexual exchange in which the sex worker performs the role of girlfriend for the client, creating the illusion of a romantic (not monetary) relationship. This may include a variety of non-sexual as well as sexual services.

¹³⁶ Ibid., 157.

¹³⁷ Hochschild, Arlie Russell. *The Managed Heart: Commercialization of Human Feeling*. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983), 11.

¹³⁸ Halder, Baby. *A Life Less Ordinary*. (New York: Harper Perennial, 2008), 161-2.

while Mexican elder-care workers describe caring for their wards “as if she were my mother [*sic*],”¹³⁹ and Filipina maids in Hong Kong share narratives of “pleasure from the performance” of servility.¹⁴⁰

Sex and other domestic workers describe diverse experiences with meeting the demand for “bounded authenticity.” As in Bernstein’s description of the nature of “bounded authenticity” (quoted above), workers experience their emotional labor on something of a continuum. Some identify emotional exchanges with employers and clients as genuine and fulfilling human interactions, while others experience the emotional demands of clients as a burdensome addition to their repertoire of tasks, and still others describe complex and sometimes conflicting relations of power and care in emotional labor.¹⁴¹ This diversity of experience makes clear that a strict division between economic and ‘personal’ motivations for and rewards from work fails to account for the complexities of intimate labor. With that in mind, while sex workers’ accounts of their work often seem to fall into those categories (often framed with that pre-existing rhetorical division in mind), I view them as complimentary rather than mutually exclusive. Further, to say that aspects of our emotional life have been “packed ever more tightly into market commodities,”¹⁴² is not to suggest that they are any less real. Accordingly, to

¹³⁹ Ibarra, Maria de la Luz. “My Reward is Not Money: Deep Alliances and End-of Life Care among Mexicana Workers and Their Wards.” In *Intimate Labors: Cultures, Technologies, and the Politics of Care*. (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2010), 129.

¹⁴⁰ Constable, Nicole. *Maid to Order in Hong Kong: Stories of Filipina Workers*. (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1997), 204.

¹⁴¹ Bernstein, “Bounded Authenticity and the Commerce of Sex.”

¹⁴² Bernstein, “Bounded Authenticity and the Commerce of Sex,” 163.

acknowledge that some sex workers and their clients view sex work as valuable human service¹⁴³ is not to erase its economic and performative dimensions.

The question becomes, then: how can we develop a critique of the neo-liberal imperative to destroy the boundary between work and life, worker and human, without attaching the silencing label of “false consciousness” to sex worker’s narratives that suggest a personal disinterest in maintaining that boundary (such as those workers quoted in the previous chapter who positively interpret their work as identity)? A wrong turn here runs the risk of approaching a politics of judgment akin to what sex-positive and post-colonial feminists have found in liberal and radical feminist thought. Of such politics, sex-positive thinker Debbie Stoller writes, “the last thing any of us needed was to have one set of rules... replaced by another.”¹⁴⁴ Of course, the danger of such an approach is dramatically increased when sex workers, who are arguably more likely than any other group to be denied the integrity of their own position, are a discourse’s primary subject. At the same time, a libertarian politics of total choice that refuses to account for the innumerable ways in which the power apparatuses of the neo-liberal state color and colonize our thinking is equally unhelpful. Working through these tensions requires an interrogation of the theories and politics of agency, choice and self-awareness.

¹⁴³ Ibid., 155.

¹⁴⁴ Stoller, Debbie, “Karp and Stoller, Eds. “Sex and the Thinking Girl.” *The Bust Guide to the New Girl Order*. (New York: Penguin, 1999),76.

Chapter Three

Constrained Agency: Getting to the Heart of the

Discourse of Sex Trafficking

“The power to define problems, terms and solutions rests with social agents, who debate how to get Others to behave differently, even save them from themselves—the disadvantaged, unruly, victimized, unhappy, offensive, addicted.”¹⁴⁵

As Laura María Agustín shows, the discourse of sex trafficking often functions as a veritable playground in which scholars, helping professionals, and activists work through their uncertainties about the nature of agency. While it has certainly experienced a strong resurgence in recent years, this focus is not new. In a recent report on human trafficking, the United Nations notes, “the public and the media are becoming aware that humans prey upon humans for money.”¹⁴⁶ In the same report, the UN states that sexual exploitation represents a significant majority of cases of global trafficking (79%).¹⁴⁷ That this awareness has come to the fore now, after centuries of fairly obvious exploitation of some people by others for material gain is peculiar, particularly given that it happens to center around the sexual labor of primarily low-income women from the global south. Why the concept of human exploitation has become the object of political and popular attention during this historical moment begs further exploration. To begin, a brief analysis of the historical evolution of the concept of trafficking allows us to better understand the current socio-economic positioning of the issue.

¹⁴⁵ Agustín, María. *Sex at the Margins: Migration, Labour Markets, and the Rescue Industry*. (London: Zed Books, 2007),194.

¹⁴⁶ United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime. “Global Report on Trafficking in Persons.” Last modified February, 2009. http://www.unodc.org/documents/human-trafficking/Global_Report_on_TIP.pdf.

¹⁴⁷ Ibid., United Nations.

Migration for work, undertaken alone or with the prompting or assistance of others has existed for centuries. As with the labor of those who remain in their birthplace, this work has sometimes involved sexual services.¹⁴⁸ Of course, exploitation of workers is also not a new phenomenon, though it has become increasingly common as the scope of neo-liberal capitalist economic and social ordering has widened.¹⁴⁹ As the above quote from the United Nations suggests, attention to trafficking, however, seems to have evolved without respect to this history, and has often been brought to public attention by advocates of issues which may or may not directly relate to trafficking specifically (those interested in restricting immigration, deviant sexual expression, or the spread of disease, for example).¹⁵⁰

The current discourse of sex trafficking can be traced back to feminist anti-prostitution movements of the early 20th century. Britain's trafficking discourse during the time, originally put forth by feminists concerned with the increasing numbers of young, low-income women from rural provinces migrating to London and becoming prostitutes, was quickly appropriated by the British government in the service of legislating low-income women's sexuality.¹⁵¹ In the United States, Jane Addams, among other feminist anti-prostitution advocates, incorporated anti-trafficking language into her calls for "social housekeeping." Like their British counterparts, Addams and her peers

¹⁴⁸ Agustin, *Sex at the Margins: Migration, Labour Markets, and the Rescue Industry*, 10.

¹⁴⁹ Fortunati, Leopoldina. *The Arcane of Reproduction: Housework, Prostitution, Labor, and Capital*. (Brooklyn: Autonomedia, 1995).

¹⁵⁰ Agustin, *Sex at the Margins: Migration, Labour Markets, and the Rescue Industry*, 128.

¹⁵¹ Walkiwitz, Judith. "Male Vice and Female Virtue: Feminism and the Politics of Prostitution in Nineteenth-Century Britain." In *Powers of Desire: The Politics of Sexuality*. Eds. Snitow, Ann; Stansell, Christine; and Thompson, Sharon. (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1983), 419.

focused on the “white slave trade,” and conceived of prostitution and trafficking as one in the same.¹⁵² Likewise, the United Nations’ 1950 statement of goals includes abolishing prostitution in its anti-trafficking initiative.¹⁵³

Following decades brought intense debates surrounding the issue of consent in prostitution and corresponding fierce division among feminists. Radical feminists conceived of both prostitution and other forms of sex work (particularly work in pornography) as stark evidence of a culture that condones violence against women.¹⁵⁴ Radical feminist theories on prostitution have rested on a number of key assumptions: that sex workers are coerced -- by circumstance or force -- into the industry; that their identities as sex workers subsume other aspects of their personhood; and that the appeal of purchasing sex rests on men’s desire to use women’s bodies, often violently, in the service of men’s selfish pleasure. Andrea Dworkin’s description of prostitution as a “[negation] of self-determination and choice” represents a central point of conflict between Radical and sex-positive feminists.¹⁵⁵ Robin Morgan offered a definition of consensual sex that was exclusive to that initiated by women and motivated by pure respect and desire.¹⁵⁶ These criteria for consensual sex exclude a variety of sexual activities, most obviously, those which involve transactions of economic or social capital

¹⁵² Addams, Jane. *A New Conscience and an Ancient Evil*. (New York: Macmillian, 1912).

¹⁵³ UNESCO. *International Social Science Bulletin*. 1(1950): 87.
<http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0004/000412/041251eo.pdf>

¹⁵⁴ Nagle, Jill. “Introduction” in *Whores and Other Feminists*, ed. Jill Nagle. (New York, NY, 1997), 4.

¹⁵⁵ Dworkin, Andrea. *Intimacy*. (New York: Basic Books, 1987), 181.

¹⁵⁶ Morgan, Robin. "Theory and Practice: Pornography and Rape", in *Going Too Far: The Personal Chronicle of a Feminist Theory and Practice*. (New York : Vintage Books, 1978), 165.

or are motivated by the a desire for casual access to pleasure.

As sex-positive feminists have been quick to point out, aspects of these definitions (especially those most germane to the sound bite) do not differ widely from religious conservatives' definitions of proper, non-degrading sexual expression. For the most part, however, sex-positive, anti-feminist, and post-feminist critiques of radical feminist definitions of sexual consent tend to fail to evaluate radical positions in context, resorting to one-dimensional accusals of "erotophobic," "paranoid," and "fluttering" thinking.¹⁵⁷ Thus, while the scope of this chapter does not allow for a more holistic evaluation of radical feminist theories of sexuality, I encourage the interested reader to refer to radical feminists' original work as well as critiques of it.¹⁵⁸

In the mid-nineteen seventies, the radical feminist project to address violence against women came to focus on "the failure of the state to recognize and protect women."¹⁵⁹ The successes of these efforts are evident in laws, created during the past thirty years, which address domestic and sexual violence against women with a level of seriousness previously unimaginable. Alliances with the state and, in some cases, religious conservatives, enabled these formal advancements, but at the cost of "the incorporation of the feminist anti-violence movement into the apparatus of the regulatory state."¹⁶⁰ Subsequently, these alliances have been the root of much division among the

¹⁵⁷ Nina Hartley. "In the Flesh: A Porn Star's Journey." In Nagle, 60; Ibid., Soble, 17; Kipnis, Laura. *The Female Thing: Dirt, Envy, Sex, and Vulnerability*. (New York: Vintage Books, 2007) 128.

¹⁵⁸ See *Radical Feminism*. Eds. Koedt, Levine, and Rapone; Morgan, Robin. *Going Too Far: The Personal Chronicle of a Feminist Theory and Practice*; and Dworkin, Andrea. "On Prostitution." (Speech, "Prostitution: From Academia to Activism," for examples.

¹⁵⁹ Bumiller, Kristin. *In an Abusive State: How Neoliberalism Appropriated the Feminist Movement Against Sexual Violence*. (Durham: Duke University Press 2008), 2.

feminist community; sex workers, post-colonial feminists, and critics of neo-liberalism and the prison-industrial complex voicing particular concern.

For obvious reasons, many feminists who have or do work in sexual exchange have taken exception to the idea that all sex work is the result of coercion, violence, or pathology.¹⁶¹ Like other sex-positive feminists, they point out the ethical and conceptual dangers of an understanding of sex work that fails to differentiate between sex work that is chosen and that which is forced. From this perspective, because

The idea underpinning both legal constructs [anti-pornography and anti-prostitution] is that pornography causes rape, prostitution is rape, and that women are inherently incapable of consent,¹⁶²

sex workers' calls for legal rights are silenced by the overwhelming assumption that their work is inherently exploitative and dangerous. As I discussed in the previous chapter's treatment of collective action among sex work, if we are to accept that all prostitution is violence, there is little reason to create and enforce legal structures or cultural norms that prevent violence within prostitution. Social discussions are radically constricted when one approaches an issue under the assumption that an involved party has already been stripped of agency and voice.

In the wake of these debates, scholarship and policy making use of the language of human trafficking resurfaced in the late 1990's with the emergence of the "crisis" of sex trafficking. This time, concern regarding sex trafficking was woven into broader cultural

¹⁶⁰ Ibid., 5.

¹⁶¹ See *Whores and Other Feminists*, ed. Jill Nagle (New York, NY, 1977); Hartley, Nina. *Nina Hartley's Guide to Total Sex*. (New York: Penguin Press, 2006); *Working Sex: Sex Workers Write About a Changing Industry*, ed. Oakley, Annie. (Berkeley: Seal Press, 2007), and *Yes Means Yes: Visions of Female Sexual Power & a World Without Rape*. Eds. Friedman and Valenti. (Berkeley: Seal Press, 2008).

¹⁶² Alexander, Patricia. "Feminism, Sex Workers, and Human Rights." In *Whores and Other Feminists*, ed. Jill Nagle. (New York, NY, 1997), 83.

narratives of “sexual terror,” the increased interest of the neo-liberal state in regulating and policing its citizens, and intensified state concerns about immigration and mobility.¹⁶³ Sex-positive feminists have pointed out the utility of anti-trafficking arguments for those whose primary interest is ending prostitution. Patricia Alexander claims, “[radical feminists] focus on ‘trafficking’ in order to frame prostitution as a cross between forced labor and rape, and then present prostitutes as passive bodies, victims who must be rescued.”¹⁶⁴ More accurately, radical feminists do not so much attempt to *frame* prostitution as a cross between forced labor and rape as genuinely view it as such. As I have attempted to show throughout this project, these debates are not so much about sex (and unilaterally positive or negative attitudes towards it) as they are about agency, a more layered concept that both sex-positive and radical feminists have failed to grasp in its full complexity.

Agency for All?

Part of the problem here is that discussions of sex work too often take place without the author’s disclosure of the theories of agency on which they operate. That is, it is not terribly helpful for Alexander to critique the radical feminist tendency to present sex workers as “passive bodies” without offering some vision of what it might look like for workers to be *active* bodies. In order for that vision to qualify as both useful and feminist, Alexander would then have to engage with what it means to be an active subject in varied economic, cultural, and regional contexts. Without that, we are left with a vague agency

¹⁶³ Bumiller, *In an Abusive State: How Neoliberalism Appropriated the Feminist Movement Against Sexual Violence*, 7.

¹⁶⁴ Alexander, “Feminism, Sex Workers, and Human Rights,” 90.

that appears to apply only to those workers least encumbered by circumstance (with familiar self-congratulations from white, formally education, western, conventionally attractive women). Thusly, feminist sex worker Carol Queen writes,

The stereotype about sex workers that says we are driven to this demeaning lifestyle by a damaged history must be exposed as sex-negative and sexist... (how eerily this parallels what used to be said about lesbians!) This image is neither universally truthful nor even helpful for analyzing the situations of those whores whom it describes, unless the question is also asked: What separates those sex workers who experience their lives negatively from those who do not?¹⁶⁵

Queen makes important points. Condescending and infantilizing approaches to sex workers are dangerous, and, at their core, not in line with a feminist project. This is especially so in the case of the discourse of the global trafficking crisis in which the presentation of poor women from the global south as hapless victims is particularly pervasive (a point which Queen and other sex-positive feminists conspicuously fail to make).¹⁶⁶ Indeed, “what separates those sex workers who experience their lives negatively from those who do not” is a critically important question. However, if we are to read an answer to that question from sex-positive writing from former or current sex workers who “experience their lives” positively (almost all of whom reference lack of economic need as a condition for being able to freely choose sex work), we would be lead to believe that racial, geographic, and economic privilege is “what separates... sex workers who experience their lives negatively [presumably possessing a poverty of “sexual generosity,”¹⁶⁷] from those who do not.” We would then be left with a hierarchy of privilege-contingent agency not altogether different from that criticized in radical and

¹⁶⁵ Queen, Carol. “Sex Radical Politics, Sex-Positive Feminist Thought, and Whore Stigma.” In *Whores and Other Feminists*. Ed. Jill Nagle. (New York, NY, 1997),133.

¹⁶⁶ Agustin, *Sex at the Margins: Migration, Labour Markets, and the Rescue Industry*, 191.

¹⁶⁷ Queen, “Sex Radical Politics, Sex-Positive Feminist Thought, and Whore Stigma,” 134.

liberal feminist thought.

This does not mean that privilege and agency are unrelated. Certainly, the ways in which we are actors in a given context are informed by social location. This is why formal labor organizing appears as the best option for some workers, while careful management of interpersonal space does for others. What it does mean is that agency always operates within constraint, and it is more productive (and less ethically problematic) to examine agency as a fluid, complex, and layered process than as fixed, straightforward, and easily assignable to those whose choices we can most easily understand. Within the context of the discourse of trafficking, this focus on constrained agency has allowed a select few scholars (Kelly, Kempadoo, Agustín and Dewey for example) to focus on those factors that support and constrain sex workers' agency (labor and immigration policies, global economic trends, and access to social services for example) rather than to fixate on the impossible task of grouping human beings into the fixed categories of agent or hapless victim (with low-income women from the global south almost always falling into the last category). That governments and non-profit agencies offering assistance have chosen the second option, making access to legal, medical, and social support contingent on fitting neatly into the victim category should give us particular pause.¹⁶⁸

Examining the discourse of sex trafficking within the context of constrained agency exposes significant faults in mainstream approaches to the issue: most glaringly a serious naming issue. Illustrating this, Nena, labeled a victim of trafficking, describes the experience thusly,

¹⁶⁸ Frederick, John. "The Myth of Nepal-to-India Sex Trafficking." In Kempadoo. 133.

We migrant women have left our countries and our families for various reasons... we are here today to bring to the attention of this conference [Second International Prostitutes' Congress] that many migrant women are being coerced, under conditions of servitude and violence, to work in different branches of the sex industry. Migrant women working voluntarily in prostitution are often under great control and suffer violence and are not free to determine how and where and when to work. Most of the money we earn is taken away from us.¹⁶⁹

It doesn't downplay the horror of Nena's experience to point out that no part of her account describes trafficking. Rather, she describes severe violation of workers' rights and rape. What, then, is the utility of filing this experience under "trafficking"? Are labor rights less effective at mobilizing public interest, lawmaking momentum, and non-profit funding? Are women who willfully travel to work less deserving of state protection against violence than those who are duped into it? How does the state stand to gain from mobility-focused anti-trafficking laws in a way it wouldn't from labor laws that protect sex workers' rights? How can a model of constrained agency help us to articulate a more accurate, helpful, and ethical model of sex workers' rights?

¹⁶⁹ Quoted in Chew, Lin. "Reflections by an Anti-Trafficking Activist." In Kempadoo. 79.

Conclusion: A Strengths Based Approach

Given the demographics¹⁷⁰ of those assigned the label “victim of trafficking”, we must ask what it means for policy makers, helping professionals, and feminists to be so comfortable with positioning low-income women from the global south as always already victims. Applying Sharon Marcus’ critique of the feminist language of rape awareness that assumes that “women are always either already raped or already rapable,” J.K. Gibson-Graham ask that we avoid narratives of globalization that assume that poor people in the global south have already been invaded, damaged (raped, as it were) by the forces of neo-liberal globalization.¹⁷¹ Gibson-Graham ask, “how had globalization become normalized so as to preclude strategies of real opposition?”¹⁷² The discourse of sex trafficking represents a powerful blend of these globalization and rape narratives. Thus, both Marcus’ and Gibson-Graham’s critiques are useful reminders of the dangers of an approach that reads subjects’ choices and experiences within the one-dimensional script of inevitable victimhood.

In this project, I have explored the question: how has exploitation in sex work, particularly within the context of neo-liberalism, come to be normalized so as to preclude strategies for real opposition to abuse of workers’ labor and human rights? Through exploration of narratives of choice, need, pleasure, and labor in chapter one; sex work in the neo-liberal economy in chapter two; and a brief history of discourses of sex trafficking in chapter three, I have shown that the answer to this question rests in large

¹⁷⁰ Agustin, *Sex at the Margins: Migration, Labour Markets, and the Rescue Industry*, 191.

¹⁷¹ Gibson-Graham. *The End of Capitalism (As We Knew It): A Feminist Critique of Political Economy*. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006), 121-22.

¹⁷² *Ibid.*, 122.

part on what have been (with notable exceptions) dismal failures to articulate an ethical framework of agency within constraint. That is, strategies for real opposition to exploitation in sex work are precluded (but not hopelessly so) by conceptions of sex worker agency as either non-existent (put forth by radical feminists, mainstream policy-makers, and a majority of those in the helping professions) or so privilege-contingent as to be unhelpful to analysis of the resilience and resistance of sex workers who are low-income, persons of color, queer, and/ or citizens of the global south (put forth by sex-positive feminists). In these explorations, I have tried to do justice to both the very real constraints imposed by gender-oppression, neo-liberal economic and labor policies, and a broken policy system *and* the remarkable ways in which sex workers can and do exercise agency and resistance within this context.

Margaret Waller et al. remind us that “focusing unilaterally on problems perpetuates inequality and disadvantage by constricting vision and limiting hope in both service recipients and helping professionals.”¹⁷³ In the context of the discourses of sex work and sex trafficking, we can add that a deficiency focus has constricted vision and limited hope in academics, policy makers, and activists. Whether this is also the case for sex workers is difficult to tell given the lack of a diversity of sex worker voices in the dialogue. Nevertheless, as Waller et al. point out, failures of vision in the wider community limit the extent to which members of the group marked as disadvantaged can imagine and work for better conditions for themselves. So, the tendency of academics, policy makers, helping professionals, and the community in general to assume that

¹⁷³ Waller et al. “Harnessing the Positive Power of Language: American Indian Women, a Case Example,” 64.

violence and exploitation are inherent to sex work can be expected to color what sex workers expect for themselves. This tendency also fashions a language, legal system, and cultural script that makes it difficult for sex workers to advocate for themselves when they do envision a better future. Of course, it is difficult to hear someone you have already assumed has no voice. That is, within a framework that views sex workers as totally defined by vulnerability and risk factors, strengths like workers' ability to define and advocate for their rights become illegible. It is vitally important that those concerned with the wellbeing of sex workers refuse to contribute to the drone that repeats, in different ways and at different times: in sex work "you cannot assume that you will live from minute to minute."¹⁷⁴

This does not mean that policy makers, helping professionals, and the community in general should ignore the violence and exploitation that do take place within sex industries or the structural forces that shape them. Rather, the resilience perspective I call for "views individuals, families, and communities in terms of their resources as well as their liabilities."¹⁷⁵ For sex workers, this means allowing for a critique of personalism¹⁷⁶ that acknowledges its potentially harmful effects on a work narrative for sex work without forgetting that, for some workers, the ability to describe their work in terms of pleasure, power, or service means the difference between being able to articulate and maintain a livable self-concept or not. It means understanding that, while worker

¹⁷⁴ Dworkin, Andrea. "On Prostitution." (Speech, "Prostitution: From Academia to Activism," Law at the University of Michigan Law School, Ann Arbor, MI, October 31, 1992). <http://www.nostatusquo.com/ACLU/dworkin/MichLawJourI.html>

¹⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 66.

¹⁷⁶ Relationships between worker and employer that are perceived (by one or both parties) to be more than economic, such as "like one of the family," or like lovers or friends in the context of sex work.

perception of sex work as time-limited is a risk factor where labor organizing is concerned, it is also an important protective factor in that it enables workers to endure sometimes spirit-squelching conditions.¹⁷⁷ And, it means that we should address the risks women, men, and children face when they cross borders and enter illegal and/ or highly stigmatized industries while at the same time honoring the agency and resourcefulness that pushes people to leave home in search of better lives. The project of addressing migrants' rights can and should take place as we simultaneously work for policies that make it possible for people to live and work without leaving home.

For public policy, the call for a resilience perspective requires that we structure policy with both risk and protective factors in mind, working against structural factors that limit choice, wellbeing, and justice while at the same time working to support individual and community resilience. For instance, a resilience perspective can encourage policies that foster labor organizing among sex workers by linking the rights of sex workers to those of other laborers such that even sex workers who view their time in the sex industry as a temporary condition recognize a long-term stake in improving conditions. Policy makers would first need to act against the growing erosion of workers' rights to unionize. A state that fails to recognize schoolteachers' rights to organize is unlikely to recognize marginalized workers' rights to do so. This is one area of many in which the fortunes of sex workers and workers in other industries are linked. For policy concerning sex workers who migrate from the global south, this resilience-based approach would entail working for immigration laws that allow migrants to live and work

¹⁷⁷ Dewey, Susan. *Neon Wasteland: On Love, Motherhood, and Sex Work in a Rust Belt Town*, 210.

out of the shadows. It would also involve an end to global development policy that, prioritizing profit over people, renders leaving home to work in low-wage and sometimes dangerous jobs one of few options for survival.

Within the context of structural inequalities that limit agency and threaten our ability to survive, we continue to make choices and, sometimes, to thrive. The story of what breaks us matters, but the story of how we, as part of a community, put ourselves back together, is just as significant.¹⁷⁸ Starting here, we can begin to work towards rights-based policy and scholarly approaches to sex work. Starting here, we can articulate a feminist alternative to a radical feminism mired in victimology and an ahistorical sex positivism. To the extent that the discourses of sex work and sex trafficking function as a theater in which many feminists play out debates over sexual freedom versus victimhood, once reconfigured, they can instead push us towards explorations of labor, migration, resilience, and human rights. These explorations might radically reconstruct our scholarly and activist approaches not only to sex work, but also to identity, agency, and economy more broadly. They might also encourage us to reevaluate the extent to which collusion with the capitalist state is a legitimate feature of feminist activism. These projects are connected, timely, and necessary to feminism's future.

¹⁷⁸ Framing borrowed from Waller's adaptation of Hemingway's "strong at the broken places." In Waller, Margaret. "Resilience in Ecosystemic Context: Evolution of the Concept." *American Journal of Orthopsychiatry* 71 (2001): 290.

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Appendix: Content Analysis of Sex Worker's Narratives¹

T e x t	“How I came to sex work disclaimer”	Economic Need	Power/pleasure/curiosity/freedom	Inter-Personal Coercion	Other	Demographic Markers ²	Sector of the sex industry	Mention of Labor ³
Sheiner, Mary. “Odyssey of a Feminist Pornographer.”	X		X			ND ⁴	Pornography writing	
Fabian, Cosi. “The Holy Whore.”	X	X	X (privileged) ⁵			ND	Prostitution	
Hartley, Nina. “In the Flesh: A Porn Star's Journey.”	X		X			ND		
Dyda sh, Twynya. “Peep Show Feminism”	X		X			College-educated	Pornography	X
Highlyman, Liz. “Professional Dominance: Power, Money, and Identity.”	X		X			ND	Dominatrix	X

¹ “Narratives” is defined as sex workers’ stories of long-term involvement in one or more sector of the sex industry

² Authors’ self-described identification with demographic or identity markers (eg, race, ethnicity, sexuality, gender, class, place)

³ Abuses, rights, organizing, etc.

⁴ None disclosed

⁵ Author weighs this feature more heavily

Mone t, Veron ica. “No Girls Allow ed at the Musta ng Ranc h.”						College- educated, hetero- sexual	Prostitutio n	X
Reed, Stacy. “All Stripp ed Off.”	X		X			College- educated, white	Erotic dance	X
Camp bell, Drew. “Conf ession s of a Fat Sex Work er.						“fat”	Phone sex and Various	
Almo dovar , Norm a Jean. “Wor king It.”	X		X			ND	Prostitutio n- indoor	
Mone t, Veron ica. “Sedit ion.”	X	X	X (privilege d)			College- educated	Prostitutio n	
Leigh , Carol. “Inve nting Sex Work .”	X	X	X (privilege d)			College- educated, middle- class	Prostitutio n, indoor	X
Macc owan, Lynd all. “Orga nizing in the Mass age Parlor .”	X	X	X			Lesbian, working class	Prostitutio n, indoor	X
Brook s, Siobh an. “Dan cing Towa rd Freed om.”	X	X				College- educated, black	Erotic dance	X
Kraus , Chris.							Erotic dance	X

“Trick.”								
Galazia, Janelle. “Staged.”	X	X					Erotic dance	X
Vasquez, Tre. “Pimp.”	X	X				High school dropout, homeless youth	Prostitution	X
Mont, Veronica. “College Graduate Makes Good as a Courtesan.”	X		X			Working class, college-educated		
Brooks, Siobhan. “An Interview With Gloria Lockett.”	X	X				Black, single mother	Prostitution	X
Myles, Eileen. “Meeting Rita.”	X				X			
Blowdryer, Jennifer. “My First Porn Film.”	X	X					Pornography and prostitution	
Totals								
20	17	9	11	0	1			11