

Prorate Confidant: Beyond Despoiled Innocence and Empowerment

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There are some moments when I feel that I have achieved sublimation, that I have become holy. Moments of divine strength when I grit my teeth through the last spasms or painful thrust of an over-eager trick, allow unsteady hands to pull and paw at my small breasts in an attempt to overcome alienation, loneliness, and shame, move someone from emotional or physical impotence to joy, share in a deviant desire without judgment or hold someone as they orgasm or cry. I provide an opportunity for usually powerful men to be honest for a brief spell—to feel weak and despairing.

A lover thanked me for being so open to hopelessness the other day. It struck me as an apt description of my professional life. When I am able to transmute others' grief, a part of me is made sweeter. I have a practiced patience that allows people to tell me horrible things. A certain familiarity with discomfort enables me to be present in that moment, accept it for what it is, then proceed with seamless grace to emotionally cathartic sex. It is a physical sacrifice that does not actually touch me. My body, on most days, is just a vessel, a blank slate, a container for other people's cheap lust, steadied desire, or aching need.

I look in the mirror as I dress for work. The years of traveling, resistance, living on the cusp are starting to show—but only if you know me, only when I smile and the lines around my eyes give me away. All my tricks still think I am in my early 20s. I curl my hair, paint on lipstick, and apply mascara. I have mastered this gendered chameleon-like transformation in 15 minutes—changing from the playful boyish charm of my everyday attire to something feminine, sweet, and seemingly vulnerable. It goes without saying that men want you to appear vulnerable. Much of that vulnerability is, of course, a front—the lingerie and lace are actually my armor and not much gets past them.

Lately, though, more is getting past than usual. I am working every day and grieving in tandem. An old friend I was sweet on killed himself a few weeks

ago. He is the first of what time necessitates will be many dead lovers. In this grief I feel other people's despair with startling intensity. I do not think that sex is mourning. It should sometimes be about joy, pleasure, release, and renewal, although there are many different ways to define pleasure and excise pain. I am just a conduit for emotions and energy stored too long. Have you ever touched someone you just met and truly understood what they are feeling in that moment?



I have held many bodies in intimate embrace—hundreds through the years. So many I have lost track. Aging feeble bodies, exposed and vulnerable; surely many of them must be dead by now. We live in such a shallow, image-obsessed culture; people always ask me how I can manage to hold those bodies without revulsion, with such tenderness. As though self-worth were proportioned by skin elasticity, as though time and its passing imprint were a curse. It's not the wrinkled casings that make my tricks hard to caress. The hardest part is dealing with what's on the inside. It's difficult to see people for what they really are and not pass judgment.

In the last decade, I have elicited more self-examination than most psychologists and been party to more confessions in over-priced lingerie than the local parish priest manages in a lifetime. I have traced the trajectory of senescence with tactile familiarity, fingertip to tongue, and been rewarded for this talent with too much information. I am the prorate confidant.

I have learned a lot of unflattering truths about humanity, or at least a certain subsection of it. I have learned that many successful men, those with the most power, are not happy. Some are simply treading water in their own bored dissatisfaction, but many are in a great deal of pain. Our culture is awash in self-hatred and self-doubt, deep sadness, emptiness, despair—and most people can't talk about it.

The challenge of this epoch is to not die *inside* before your time comes physically. So many people are already dead. Sex work is a daily practice in accepting mortality. I pick up polished hard pieces of other people's regret, anger, and sorrow and I swallow them whole. I have become very good at swallowing stones.

We redress our deep discomfort with the ways we live and change it into other things: indulgence; lascivious consumption; greed; lust; neurotic, obsessive tendencies. Most of my client base is seeking validation for the destructive and depressing ways we all use the earth, the ways we use each other, and the spiritually empty aspirations that pass for modern life. In this chapel of shallow consumerism, lo and behold, the sex worker has become priestess, counselor, and keeper of a world of fear, sin, and pain that only the female figure deemed beyond redemption, social salvation, or honor could mediate.

How many of my clients acknowledge they are paying for absolution or redemption? Not many. Occasionally, on a good day, I inspire my johns to examine their sexual and spiritual life in a critical manner, but that labor is intensely personal. The structural role of sex workers is not something frequently considered by clients.

Why is there a constant demand for sex work? The pressing need for sexual fulfillment and intimacy is a direct result of patriarchy. The gender binary keeps us from relating to each other in healthy and mutually satisfying ways. This system affects people of all genders, though it uses the female body as its preferred method of enforcement.

When you are perceived to be female you are ceded to the public sphere. Your body is always open for comment and judgment. You must negotiate possession at all times. Proving that someone of the “opposite” gender already owns you is one of the only ways to avoid constant sexual solicitation. Any divergence from this model leaves you suspect and open to being preyed on or pursued. Marriage, with its social, economic, and sexual binds, controls the female subject within a system of self-participatory control.

Whores touch something deep within the core of social mores because we provide services that are traditionally confined within the chains of matrimony, heterosexuality, and male supremacy. If sex work is radical in any way, it is because it allows “men” to meet their sexual needs through brief,

* I know that cisgender women and trans folks solicit sex workers as well, but in the interest of discussing the broader implications of sex work in modern society, I would like to acknowledge that statistically most clients are cisgender males—that is, male-socialized and male-identified.

instead of sustained, intimate relations. Intimacy by the hour creates uncomfortable fissures in the most basic structures of social domination—the straight monogamous couple and, by extension, the nuclear family.

Sex work has been around since time immemorial, and it certainly hasn't shattered these institutions yet. However changing social mores around sex, female participation in the labor force and the increasing acceptability of divorce has made it somewhat harder for marriage and infidelity (when discovered) to exist concurrently. **It begs the question, if people cannot be constrained and held in check through heterosexuality, marriage, monogamy, and familial obligation, then how will they be managed?**

Is sex work a small window into the joyful chaos of free association, or is it simply the commercialization of that potential? Discussions of sex work infrequently explore these themes, because the debate is so monopolized by essentialists arguing over the dichotomy of empowered whore vs. victim.

Many second-wave feminists think that all whores are complicit in patriarchy—guilty by virtue of association—or that sex workers are victims who deserve help getting out of the business. That view of the world does not ring true to me. The language of victimhood is degrading. Paid erotic exchange does not negate the ability to make informed choices about one's life—regardless of one's social or economic status. Agency is not the hallowed property of politicized sex workers. Sex work happens within a *context* of social control, but that is a result of capitalism, and is not unique to whoring. All economic exchange is coercive, and at the end of the day whores are neither more responsible for nor more exploited by patriarchy or capitalism than anybody else.

I think it is worth asking why mutually consented acts between adults are so vilified to begin with. It must be the consent and the open communication as much as the financial compensation that creates such discomfort. Social stigma around sex work highlights the horrific ambivalence many people have toward any kind of negotiated consent in sexual exchange.

In order to work in the sex industry in a sustainable manner, you must become adept at stating, negotiating, and affirming your personal boundaries. You must create and teach a language of respectful, safe sexual practice to a cross-section of the population that was never taught how to engage in healthy intimacy. Sex always involves power exchange—the question is how to negotiate that in an ethical manner. The affirmation of “yes” that prearranged sexual exchange embodies lays bare how often normative sexual practices in our society, both within and

outside of marriage, involve coercion and domination and leave no room for “no.”

My body is my own—to use, proffer up, commercialize, mark, and display (to consenting adults) in any way that I want. I choose to be a whore and I feel no shame in it. Yet I am expected to. I should feel shame. The culture wars over which socialized gender is more to blame for this sorry state of affairs are not something I feel invested in. If the gender binary is a prison, it is one that few have managed to escape. We are all both prisoners and guards, aren't we? Queers, gender deviants, and hoes cheer ourselves up by insisting that sex work is empowering, but I don't know if we are “free” as much as we are fastened onto a longer chain.

I am not a soapbox courtesan or red Madame. It's a nice idea, but I do not claim to be bringing down the pillars of Western society one marriage at a time. Frankly, I don't think straight people need my help destroying the institution of marriage or the nuclear family. I think sex work displays certain social vulgarities and hypocrisies in an interesting light, but I don't trick as a tactic to start some kind of sexual/social revolt or to change my johns in any intentional way. I don't trick out of pity, desperation, or joy. At the end of the day, I trick for the alms. I do it for money and autonomy.

In exchange for compassion, human contact, and affection, I get to fund dreams most of my clients don't know exist: dreams of social upheaval, resistance, and solidarity. Dreams which seek to unravel that which has made us so dissatisfied with our lives and made some able to live unhappily in their luxury. There is pleasure in performance. I derive a certain amount of camp satisfaction from parlaying society's imposition of femininity into an economic surplus. High-end sex work pays well. It allows me to circumvent many social and economic structures I would rather not be invested in. Making a lot of money for essentially part-time work is wonderful. It gives you time to pursue creative projects and spend time with your kids. But calling it freedom speaks more to the grueling realities of capital and the small amount of breathing room we have than the fact that sex workers are economically unchained. The privilege of being a high-end call girl has kept me from such desperate fates as working for a nonprofit as a professional activist. Yet tricking offers only repose, not escape, from the market.

Lately, in certain circles, sex work has become quite en vogue. Hustling itself is considered to be a political act. The income I make allows me a certain autonomy in struggle, but sex work itself is not my political work. Sex work has taught me to be kind,

gentle, and forgiving at times, but narratives of empowerment coming out of feminism's third wave ultimately ring false to me, especially the idolatry of high-class whoring. I have seen too many friends become addicted to the money and the lifestyle that escorting offers to be able to ethically reinforce the idea that it is inherently freeing.

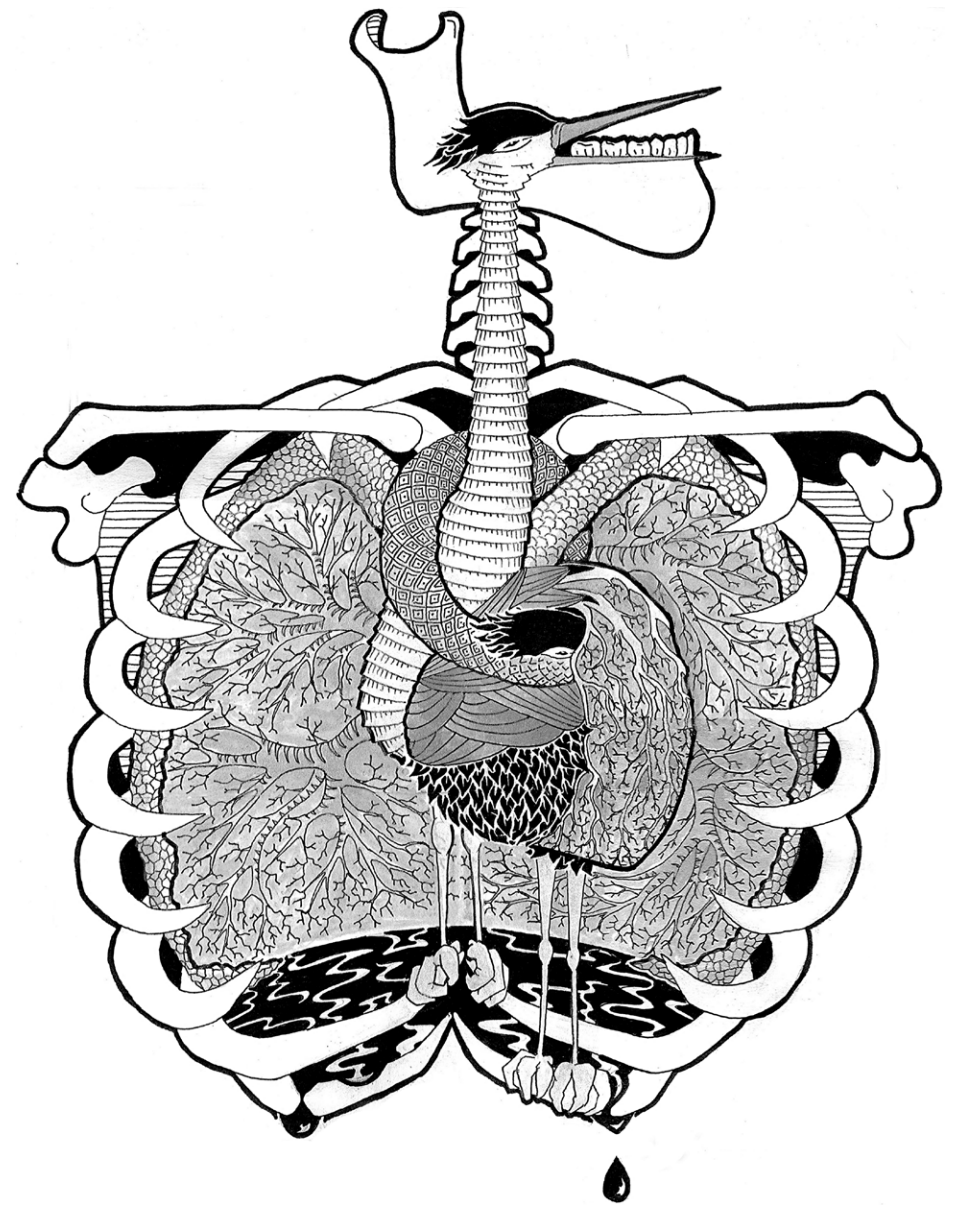
Fast money is corrupting. It is very difficult to make large amounts of money in cash and retain a grounded sense of what one “needs.” That financial slippery slope is part of why, after a decade of working, on and off, I am done with the industry. I started out feeling unconstrained due to my ability to hustle whenever necessary and ended up simply running a business. Behind the avant-garde identity of the politicized high-end worker, a much more insidious class-consciousness is rising. I think it is worth asking ourselves: are we performing for the bourgeois or are we becoming them?

Discourses that paint sex work as a form of total emancipation are a reaction to the judgments of a moralizing public. These narratives have pragmatic utility, depending on the audience. They can be a strategic way to deal with police repression, but it is worth asking where empowerment will take us—all the way to legalization?* What great joys will we find in a more closely managed, taxed, and flooded market? I've worked abroad in legal brothels. The safety of a madam and security guard were nice, but I did not feel empowered giving half of my earnings to the house. Rates in the legal brothels were very low and I ended up making 10% of what I usually made in an independent black market exchange.

Pushing for decriminalization, given the psychological and social cost of imprisonment, makes sense, but legalization is an absurd goal for those invested in autonomy. Sex workers are criminals and empowerment is a useful political narrative when trying to combat narratives of knee-jerk victimization that help legitimize policing, but is empowerment emotionally honest? What if we do, at times, feel used, exhausted, and disheartened? What if sex work is exploitative—not because selling sex is wrong or dirty, but because it is a form of economic exchange?

The absurd moral judgments of second-wave feminists and conservatives aside, it makes sense that one would feel reflexive discomfort when commodifying sex. As an anarchist, I always feel some discomfort when commercializing parts of myself. Given the

* Legalization refers to government management of sex work with all the codes, taxes, and monitoring that comes along with regulation. Decriminalization refers to making sex work no longer illegal under the current criminal code but still unregulated.



compartmentalizing required to package and sell something as feral as sexuality, burnout should be expected. Especially when so many politicized workers imply that what is essentially intimate labor should feel like a riot.

Sex work feels radical because there is a low bar when it comes to sex positivity in this society and sex workers frequently help people accept themselves. From an emotional perspective, we do hold power. It is not a power that is very widely recognized, and I think empowerment narratives should be appreciated for trying to bring that emotional labor to light. The potent healing encompassed by the idea of the “whore as goddess” is real, and should be respected, but in what bereft world are our highest aspirations to offer careful tending only to the broken souls of the upper-middle-class and the rich?

I work in the high end of the industry. Independent call girls generally enjoy more autonomy in working conditions and take home a net percentage of gross income that is incomparable to the realities suffered by non-independent workers. Narratives of empowerment don't really address problems of social control and industry managers. Neither do they address the repression that street-based workers face daily at the hands of the police or the increasing criminalization indoor and outdoor workers experience via anti-trafficking raids. Very few people offer genuine solutions to these aspects of the industry because there really aren't that many, short of a larger-scale collapse of the economic and social order. Second-wave feminists use categories of victimization which ironically lead to more policing, and third-wave feminists either don't address

issues of class or else act like everyone can simply trade-up. Except we can't all be high-class hookers.

The sex industry, like most industries, is shaped like a pyramid. Only a certain percentage of workers can make their way to the top tier. The wages of those on top are dependent on their privilege and on the subjugation of the workers below them. My clients pay me to emulate their class mores and airs, and to give the impression that I don't feel exploited by my job. I make a fantastic wage in part because other workers suffer horrendous working conditions and my wealthy clients want nothing to do with that kind of physical or emotional coercion (unless it's a part of some kinky, consensual script). High-end sex workers are like green capitalists: we exist to make people feel better about a consumer exchange that hasn't really escaped the terms of the market but is supposed to feel like it has.

While I would like to knock down the pedestal of "radical" cock sucking, I must say that being a whore has made me a better person. It has tempered my extremist predilections to judge, categorize, and dismiss, because it has opened a world of moral relativity for me to consider and play with. Capitalism makes people seek out absolution. Everyone wants to be forgiven; no one wants to admit how much they negatively affect others by living unexamined lives. Sometimes this industry hurts people, sometimes it heals them. Nothing is simple.

Personally, I would like to do away with the idea of the "untouched elite." There is no unity in domination; there is no homogeneous power. Where power does accrue—be it societal, corporate, or economic—it takes an exacting toll on its hosts. Today I tended to the mental anguish and suffering of some of the most privileged men in the world, and let me tell you, their strength is an illusion and in some ways so is their power. I think sometimes anarchists act as though the "enemy" is an easily delineated category, but it isn't. Because control regimes are participatory, every thoughtful person will draw their line in the sand in a slightly different place.

So is sex work radical? If sex work can be said to be a part of resistance, it is because it is a part of our survival and, though it may be depressing to admit, resistance these days looks a lot like survival. Beyond survival, I don't think we've yet answered the question of the place that sex work will have in struggle. I know for myself, as time passes, hustling feels more and more like class warfare. Whether that is an astute political observation or just a sign that I am definitely on my way out is hard to say. Yet it is still worth asking where points of productive conflict (against the State) as opposed to unproductive

conflict (against one another) *could* exist in our networks. For the answer, one only has to look up the case of Marcia Powell.

Marcia Powell was an inmate who died of complications from heat exposure in 2009 while serving time for a prostitution charge in Maricopa County, Arizona. She was held in an outdoor cell in Perryville, and her death was a result of the intense summer temperatures and the cruel negligence of her guards. No prison employees were ever charged with her death; outdoor holding cells are still in use, albeit with some modifications.* The abuse and impunity to kill apparent in Marcia Powell's case are not anomalies. Marcia Powell died because the State considered her a "criminal" and prisons are places of torture. The categories of criminal and victim are tools of control used to justify repression.

Social control has always been mediated via women's bodies and sexuality. Police raids in many communities, including undocumented ones, are being financed through anti-trafficking initiatives. Anti-trafficking narratives rely on degrading and misinformed sexual hysteria. Posters with pictures of abused children use implied trauma in the sex industry to fund, conceal, and legitimize police raids that send consenting adult workers to prison and immigration detention.† This should not come as a shock—the State is not benevolent!

* Marcia Powell has been extended much more compassion in death than she was ever offered in life. Coverage of her case is almost always sympathetic, but usually does not address the criminalization of sex work.

“Powell, 48, died May 20, 2009, after being kept in a human cage in Goodyear's Perryville Prison for at least four hours in the blazing Arizona sun. This, despite a prison policy limiting such outside confinement to a maximum of two hours. The county medical examiner found the cause of death to be due to complications from heat exposure. Her core body temperature upon examination was 108 degrees Fahrenheit. She suffered burns and blisters all over her body... Powell, who was serving a 27-month sentence for prostitution, actually expired *after* being transported to West Valley Hospital, where acting ADC Director Charles Ryan made the decision to have her life support suspended.”

–Stephen Lemons, “Marcia Powell's Death Unavenged: County Attorney Passes on Prosecuting Prison Staff,” Phoenix New Times Blog (September 1, 2010)

† Police raids financed through anti-trafficking initiatives claim to “save” workers from the industry by offering them social services and diversion—only that's not what really happens. If you break down the numbers after raids, you discover that many workers (due to past convictions, drug possession, or legal status) don't qualify for the offensive, mostly Christian-based diversion programs and end up with criminal charges anyway.

For more information see coverage of Project Rose (Phoenix) <http://titsandsass.com/reporting-on-rose-a-journalists-work-in-phoenix> and Project Raise (Tucson) <http://www.tucsonweekly.com/tucson/sex-sting/Content?oid=3668055>.

Sex workers' rights organizers like Monica Jones are fighting profiling and criminalization: http://www.huffingtonpost.com/darby-hickey/monica-jones_b_4937899.html.

“Sex work” encompasses so many experiences that it is almost too general to be a useful political category. Each facet, and within that each worker, will surely have a different take, but hopefully we can agree that we don't need “community” police officers or social workers to speak for us. When we let state agents speak for us, we allow ourselves to be recuperated and used for evil.

Social control is something we all engage in, at different times in different ways, therefore no one static identity is inherently radical or freeing. Second-wave feminists infantilize sex workers as victims, third-wave feminists don't address the problem of the market, and many anarchists would rather focus on the sins of white-collar professionals than see society as a system of social management. We must be careful not to reinforce simplistic narratives that keep us from reaching our potential for social rupture. I don't think we really need to worry about whether sex work is *inherently* radical or not. These terms of debate are too essentialist. Sex work, as a criminalized profession, is relevant to social struggle when we make it relevant. We make hustling relevant when we connect sex work to movements against incarceration not from a place of privileged charity, but because criminalization is deeply personal.

Fighting mass incarceration should matter to all sex workers because all sex workers risk going to prison. High-end workers may not feel they are vulnerable by virtue of their impressive earnings since money can buy you a certain amount of “justice,” but not always. The increase in repression aimed at indoor workers over the last few years should be setting off alarm bells. Once the vice squad has gotten its kicks, what is to stop them from actually doing their job? Security and protection for sex is for trophy wives, not whores. No worker is too high-end to prosecute—the case of the DC Madame taught us that.‡ In this economy, prisoners are also a profitable commodity. The hierarchy of sex work can stop being advantageous whenever it is convenient for local politicians and police. It is difficult to examine our vulnerabilities, but dangerous and foolhardy not to.

We must abandon the false sense of security implied by the industry's internal hierarchies and look more critically at the State infrastructures that seek to control us, because it is there that we will find our common thread. Before we can defend ourselves, we must see ourselves clearly and understand our own motives. What draws us so strongly to these risks and to these rewards? What are we willing to give up to

‡ For a brief overview of the DC Madam case, see http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Deborah_Jeane_Palfrey.

continue to exercise our limited autonomy? Narratives of empowerment, or even those of class war, cannot fully sum up what draws people into this kind of labor.

Sex work was a calling I found of my own accord through a mixture of intrigue in my power to move people, a bit of emotional voyeurism, and a healthy disgust with late-stage capitalism. I tell anyone I am bringing into the fold—appreciate the hustle for what it is, be present in the moment, honor what it can teach you, and always pay tribute to the whores who paved the way. Bring a little more joy into the world (to those who deserve it), hold power over your johns with compassion, and always get your money upfront. Most importantly, live without shame and make no apologies for working a rotten system to your advantage. **Just don't forget that climbing farther up the refuse pile of capital is not the point. Dream big!**

As for the question of the “social value” of my labor, I pessimistically await my anointment knowing most people will never acknowledge the worth of what I do. Yet I am grounded, because I no longer need that affirmation. We are not just what we do for money, we are so much more than that. Sex work doesn't need to empower me; I am empowered by my family and friends in struggle. I believe in us, because until there are no more prisons to hold whores and mothers, rent bois and queens, we will fight.§ Struggle is a process, not an event. There is no failure or success in social war, only persistence. This perseverance is the essential spiritual labor of our historical moment. In the end hustling is just an imperfect coping mechanism. To engender resistance, we must keep our rage sacred and focus that anger against society. We probably won't “win,” at least not in this generation, but that's all right. If we rise each morning and do our best to fight against this prison society, we will discover, in many ways, we are *already* free.

§ For an interesting, if academic, look at trans folks and incarceration, see Stanley, E. A., & Smith, N. (2011). *Captive Genders: Trans Embodiment and the Prison-Industrial Complex*. Oakland, CA: AK Press.

Grin and Bare It All: Against Liberal Conceptions of Sex Work

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Sex work is a constant yet discreet presence in anarchist circles—commonly taken on by the young precarious part-time laborers that make up the bulk of our scenes, privately considered by many more of our cash-strapped comrades. Our theoretical analyses of sex work tend to mirror our personal and collective feelings about gendered oppression, class society, the violence that capitalist patriarchy inflicts on our bodies and hearts—and the efficacy of various forms of resistance. This essay conceptualizes sex work as a point where feminized labor (“women’s work,” caring labor) reproduces itself—that is, where a primarily-female workforce of social workers, scholars, writers, lecturers, professional sex work abolitionists, non-profits, “rescue” organizations, and bloggers exists to “serve” and “care for,” but ultimately control, another primarily female workforce: sex workers. The former workforce does this in ways that often undermine sex workers’ autonomy and livelihoods, at the behest of ruling-class men, in ways that benefit men sexually and perpetuate patriarchal and statist violence.

Sex workers serve these same ruling class men, directly or indirectly, through the performance of paid reproductive labor* that helps stabilize the superstructure of heterosexual monogamy, as a concurrent dynamic that depends on the oppression of sex laborers as a class. As a result, sex laborers are pulled into the cycle of stigma and criminalization that helps to maintain a perpetually marginalized, easily exploitable underclass.

We Are Not Your Social Service

Strip clubs are normalized as a rite of passage for 18-year-old men, as an acceptable diversion for financially accomplished men who have earned it

* The undervalued, unpaid or underpaid invisible labor that is typically performed by women as a means to “reproduce” the workforce, i.e., cooking, cleaning, comfort, socialization, education, sex, childbearing and rearing. Further reading on reproductive labor: *Caliban and The Witch* or *The Arcane of Reproduction*.

and want to relax (or working-class men who work hard and wish to treat themselves), as a judgment-free space without the pressure to conform to the “civilizing” social norms imposed by the women in their workplaces and romantic lives. A slightly more negative view of sex work consumption holds that seeing a sex worker is a pitiable last resort for men who are less physically desirable or socially savvy, but still entitled to sexualized services. This centering of the consumer experience to weave a narrative that is palatable to men conceals the power differential that is triangulated between bosses, exotic dancers, and customers, such that dancers are inherently the least powerful in the equation. Abolitionist feminists (feminists who oppose and seek to abolish sex work) point to this empathy for customers as a hallmark of sex workers’ rights discourse. While the centering of customers’ needs and desires is a deplorable trend among some liberal, anti-worker, sex-positive feminists, its frequency is highly overstated and functions as a straw man argument to discredit sex workers’ rights activists as being more concerned with male orgasms than workers’ liberation.

In addition to paying the strip club a base mandatory payment every night plus a cut of our sales, strippers cover additional costs of operation such as wardrobe, staff wages (bouncers, DJ), and the maintenance of our own physical and mental health. We work not only to generate personal profit, but also to front these industry-standard expenses imposed on us by the bosses. We perform a constant precarious balancing act: we cater to the customer’s desires as attentively as possible within the limits of the law and club rules, and the responsibility for keeping the customer from becoming unruly often falls on us—yet when customers break the rules or violate our boundaries, we are victim-blamed. Given this dynamic of precarious anxiety, objectification, economic exploitation, and disempowerment, it’s unfair to expect sex workers to be sympathetic to customers’ sexualities and entitlement when they play out in ways that can be uniquely invasive and uncomfortable to us. The recognition of sex work



as “real work” shouldn’t depend on the perceived social value of the job, despite well-meaning (but ultimately ableist and ageist) arguments from some outspoken sex work activists that sex workers play a positive role in society as sexual outlets for the elderly, disabled, or kinky. Just as we shouldn’t water down our feminism to make it sexy and comfortable to men, we should resist the urge to humanize ourselves through our social and sexual usefulness to male consumers.

Meanwhile, we are excluded from the fulfillment of our own desires by the usual forces: slut-shaming, compulsory heterosexuality, the social construction of certain bodies as less desirable, and histories of violence and trauma, which create barriers to sexual enjoyment. These roots of sexual exclusion are so systemic and internalized as to be socially invisible, exacerbated by customers’ own perceived feelings of exclusion from unhindered access to “desirable” bodies—that is, to the young, thin, light-skinned bodies considered desirable by the standards of white supremacist patriarchy. Essentially, customers like to think that we have unfettered access to gratifying sex and are thus its gatekeepers. This is a dangerous and misogynistic mythology.

Benevolent Coercion and Unenthusiastic Consent

A parallel top-down dynamic coexists with our servicing of the male workforce: the enforcement of caring upon sex workers (particularly those who perform illicit, undocumented, full-service, or street-based work). The logic of “saving” women† from performing this kind of labor is a direct legacy of middle-class social-working women of Victorian England and their contemporaries in the US. Rarely discussed is the classist, coercive, and hypocritical history of women’s entry into the caring professions—particularly with regards to the construction of the prostitute as a subject in need of saving by benevolent ladies during the “rise of the social” of the late 19th century. During this era, “those doing charitable works entered into a governmental relationship with the objects of their charity, and created themselves as important social actors in the process... ‘Helping’ became a profession that relied on identifying subjects and then placing them in closed spaces where they could be worked upon and controlled.”‡

† Savior rhetoric tends to ignore people who aren’t women.
‡ “Helping Women Who Sell Sex: The Construction of Benevolent Identities,” Laura Augustin

Modern non-sex-working feminists who support abolitionist/savior tactics or engage in these projects themselves presume a more dignified identity than that of the sex worker. They often end up replicating a system of enforced docility based on misogynistic, bourgeois notions of respectability and the proper place of women in the public sphere. Middle-class academics and writers who make their living promoting a framework that casts sex workers as an inherently victimized identity “for their own good” do so at the direct expense of the agency and economic livelihood of women of lower socioeconomic status. Statist feminists’ rhetoric of “fighting the sex industry” typically relies on State power in the form of legislative reform that criminalizes at least some aspects of sex work, increases the power of law enforcement, and regulates the sex industries. This regulation can have the unintended effect of further marginalizing the least privileged workers by making their safe participation in these economies prohibitively expensive or difficult.

Thus, sex workers are bound in a system of caring labor: on one hand, that which is enacted upon us, sometimes forcibly, by carceral feminists, paternalistic liberals, the prison-industrial complex, the surveillance State,* and the superstructure of capitalist patriarchy; on the other, that which we perform for middle- to upper-class men, not to mention the unpaid reproductive labor we are often mandated to perform in our homes and communities. In some ways, this system self-replicates:

“From homemaking to professional housekeeping—not to mention nursing, hospitality, and phone sex—women and people of color are disproportionately responsible for the care that keeps this society functioning, yet have disproportionately little say in what that care fosters. Likewise, a tremendous amount of care goes into oiling the machinery that maintains hierarchy: families help police relax after work, sex workers help businessmen let off steam, secretaries take on the invisible labor that preserves executives’ marriages.” (*Self As Other: Reflections on Self-Care*, CrimethInc. 2013).

* The FBI was founded in 1908 specifically to investigate and combat supposed “white slavery” in American brothels, leading to the White-Slave Traffic Act (Mann Act) of 1910. International policing, in fact, developed in the late 19th and early 20th centuries in response to both the “anarchist terrorism” of the 1890s and the threat of international “white slavery.” (Deflem, 2005. “International Police Cooperation—History of” pp. 795–798 in *The Encyclopedia of Criminology*, edited by Richard A. Wright and J. Mitchell Miller. New York: Routledge.)

At the same time, institutions that collude with the State (such as academia and the nonprofit-complex) are often positioned against the selling of sexualized services, supporting direct or indirect criminalization.† These institutions passively align with the State by controlling the discourse around sex work, feminism, and labor via a professional class of experts, most of whom have never engaged in sex work themselves but assume that they are entitled to speak on these intersections based on their position as members of “the sex class.”‡

While sex workers who critique non-sex-workers’ skewed analysis of the industry are criticized for being privileged, scholars, authors, non-profit representatives, policymakers, abolitionist activists, professional feminists, and other “experts” on sex work are not held to the same standard of scrutiny. Regardless of our experiences, sex workers who don’t fit into our culture’s perception of what the “worst off” looks like are assumed to be “not representative of the average sex worker.” The idea that workers currently in the sex industry are too close to it and too invested in it to have good analysis also reinforces the notion that non-sex-working feminists are qualified to speak on behalf of the “most marginalized” in the sex industry. This is similar to how the ruling class works to divide the “fringe” elements of resistance from the real “People,” not acknowledging the possibility that those of us embedded most deeply in capitalist misery are the ones pushing back against the ideological policies that most severely affect us. Portraying radical sex workers as white middle-class women, as a highly-paid minority, erases the work of people of color, poor people, undocumented immigrants, and queer and trans people who not only agitate for better working conditions in the industry, but are also on the cutting-edge of gendered labor theory. It also erases the decriminalization and harm-reduction campaigns spearheaded by sex-worker-led activist groups in the US and across the globe.§

† The “Swedish Model” criminalizes buying sex but not selling it, as well as criminalizing whatever “third party” the law determines to be “profiting” off someone else’s work. In some instances, charges of “brothel-keeping” and “pimping” have been pressed against the friends and lovers of sex workers. Many sex workers consider this a form of “backdoor” criminalization, a way of making sex work more burdensome and dangerous due to increased difficulty screening clients or being open about their work.

‡ “The sex class” is a second-wave feminist term that doesn’t refer specifically to sex workers, but to [usually cisgender] women as a whole.

§ Asia Pacific Network of Sex Workers, SWEAT [Sex Work Education and Advocacy Taskforce] in South Africa, Scarlet Alliance in Australia, SWOP-USA, and AINSW [All-India Network of Sex Workers] are some examples; see swaay.org’s list of groups.



That’s not to say that these experts are always blinded by their economic and social privilege, or that none have adopted their views as a result of their experiences working in the sex industry themselves. Identity itself isn’t always the deciding standard for sound analysis. The problem is that (usually relatively privileged) non-sex-working feminists or former sex workers overwhelmingly take up space at the table where sex workers, especially marginalized and institutionally disenfranchised sex workers (such as street workers, drug users, trans women, single parents, and people of color) could be debating effective strategies for liberation, resistance, and survival. We should be finding ways to help each other avoid exploitation without contributing to a culture of stigma or perpetuating rhetoric that makes the criminalization of sex work a winning strategy for politicians and good PR for celebrities and CEOs.

Professional feminist academics like Gail Dines make their living appropriating our experiences, anger, and struggles as ideological talking points, with the implication that Dines is a mouthpiece for all women as a monolithic class with shared interests—a “voice for the voiceless.” According to Dines’ logic, the process of our objectification bleeds out into the rest of this feminized class and

taints mainstream culture with a kind of sick, unnatural “pornification.” If Dines believes inner-city street-based workers, or Eastern European cam girls, or Asian brothel workers, or strippers with drug addictions are truly voiceless, it’s only because she hasn’t been listening.

It’s tempting to focus our ire primarily on the experts (radical feminist or otherwise) who actively advocate against the interests of sex workers. But it’s important to recognize that the chief reason these experts are dangerous is because they act as a mediated apparatus of State power upon socially stigmatized and criminalized classes of workers. Poor street-based workers are shuffled into the prison system by way of “prostitution diversion programs” funded and spearheaded by non-profits and universities.¶ Sex workers’ bases of operations have been raided under Britain’s Policing and Crime Act** on the pretense that the women working together were

¶ Project ROSE (Reaching Out to the Sexually Exploited) is a collaboration between the Phoenix Police Department, Arizona State University’s School of Social Work, and a number of local service organizations, which rounds up “prostitutes” en masse in 2–3 day stings and forces them to enter into the 6-month diversion program or face criminal charges. See titsandsass.com/for-their-own-good-swap-phoenixs-campaign-against-diversion-initiatives/.

** The UK feminist organization Object lobbied in favor of the Policing and Crime Act as part of their “Demand Change!” campaign, in conjunction with scores of other women’s groups.

“trafficked” and that these spaces were “brothels”; the Act effectively criminalizes those who are attempting to stay safe by selling their services indoors with other sex workers, forcing them to operate in isolation and out on the streets. Undocumented and immigrant sex workers in particular are framed as “trafficking victims,” a convenient justification for increased State surveillance and control: racial profiling, raids, invasive searches, forced placement into factories and “rehabilitation centers,” deportation, and State acquisition of sex workers’ children. This, in turn, drives workers further underground in response to increasing difficulty crossing borders, obtaining licenses, and finding and screening clients. Similarly, moral panics about the sexual exploitation of minors are induced by means of misleading and sometimes fabricated statistics, using the existence of child sex trafficking to justify the consequences of criminalizing full-service sex work.

Incarceration is a toxic cycle that reinforces itself in the lives of sex workers—a prostitution arrest in the US can result in an appearance on the local police department’s vice crime website or the cover of the weekly mugshot tabloid, and often prevents the arrestee from obtaining other employment. It can also disqualify you from other sexualized jobs—cities that require strippers to be licensed demand a criminal background check as a precondition of employment, a condition which specifically targets those charged with prostitution as undesirables, “liabilities” to the strip club. Up until as recently as 2011, escorts in New Orleans were arrested and prosecuted under the local Crimes Against Nature statute, which occasioned higher penalties and fines than a conventional prostitution charge—and required workers to register as sex offenders for a period of fifteen years to life.* A prostitution arrest is effectively a scarlet letter, inextricably binding the offender to a life of indefinite systemic violence and exclusion.

The specter of incarceration looms over other kinds of sex workers—professional doms/dommes/switches and other fetish workers, strippers, and legal brothel workers—as a self-policing mechanism. This becomes internalized, maintaining a “who-rearchy” of workers. For instance, strippers who perform illegal sex acts inside the club (or who are known for doing so outside its walls) are referred to as being “dirty,” branded “whores,” and are subject to alienation, harassment, and even violence from their “clean” coworkers. And strippers who are assaulted or otherwise violated on the job by customers

* “Almost 40 percent of registered sex offenders in New Orleans are on the registry because of a [Crimes Against Nature] conviction.” (www-no.org)

(especially dancers who are taken advantage of while drunk) can be apprehensive about reporting this abuse due to internalized whorephobia and fear of being victim-blamed.

This hierarchy of sexual laborers cuts full-service, undocumented, and criminalized workers off from solidarity with more “respectable” sex workers. Drug use, HIV status, and rates charged are some other factors that contribute to such divisions. Statist oppression of sex workers, combined with sex workers’ social marginalization and isolation from other workers (and one another), renders us particularly vulnerable to the most extreme forms of economic exploitation by bosses, customers, and the Market—all invariably male-dominated, all working to maintain capitalist patriarchy from different angles.

A further point of tension in feminist, liberal, and radical discourse around sex work is the issue of consent. The presence or lack of meaningful consent in our context has served as a rhetorical device to justify a variety of ideological positions on sex work, including supporting oppressive policies against sex workers and reaffirming stigmas against us. I recently read an article examining what “consent” means in the context of sex work. It critiqued “enthusiastic consent” as a model that doesn’t accommodate the reality that many people have sex for other reasons beyond compelling erotic desire—for procreation, to please a partner, for an ego boost, for a sense of closeness, for practice, for money—and that none of these invalidate the fact that consent was given: “freely consenting to unwanted sex.” It left me wondering what sexual consent means in the context of an institution that is inherently exploitative and coercive, like all labor under capitalism and patriarchy?

Our praxis should reflect and be applicable to our individual conditions and desires (or lack thereof) as sex workers.[†] Perhaps consent can have very different parameters in different contexts—it feels futile to apply in my workplace the same standards I use in my romantic life to determine whether good consent was practiced. Anarchists’ expectations of “good consent” are rarely achieved in the strip club. When the theorizing of consent is restricted to the interpersonal and sexual, however, we fall short of

[†] Discussing a “community” or “class” of people while erasing the individuals who form it is the same kind of logic that has traditionally viewed women as one nebulous mass under the pretense of common interests or shared experiences of “womanhood.” This universalization of experience was what prompted women of color, trans women, poor women, and queer women to argue for an intersectional feminist analysis that contradicted the universalizing of one set of women’s experiences (usually white, cisgender, middle-class, and Western) in the first place.

critiquing the social landscape in which ideas of consent are formed and practiced. Critiquing the larger context of consent is a positive contribution that both anarcha-feminists and radical feminists have made to the discourse: it’s not enough that customers ask us what makes us “feel good,” because the answer will always be motivated by the economic coercion inherent in the transaction. We have to challenge the institution and the power relations it imposes.

It’s the paradox of the self-employed radical sex worker to simultaneously resent and anticipate male sexual entitlement, to privately condemn the objectification of women and yet to perform at work in ways that are meant to encourage that same objectification. My desire isn’t for a world full of hip alternative strip clubs, run by “sex-positive” or “radical” bosses, populated by Chomsky-quoting customers whose desire for “authenticity” necessitates an increasingly emotionally invasive performance of enthusiastic consent. I want to end all the patriarchal capitalist institutions that mediate

our alienation from our own bodies and our loved ones; I don’t imagine that they can be reformed to foster mutually healing interactions. We should avoid the pitfall of reformist thinking that falls short of challenging these institutions themselves, and the pitfall of ignoring those most affected by these institutions in favor of an ideology that presumes a false class cohesion. We need an analysis of sex work and of labor in general that synthesizes various anti-authoritarian and anti-capitalist feminisms. We must acknowledge that “caring” can often play out in oppressive, destructive ways within inherently flawed institutions and systems, particularly as it affects marginalized precarious laborers. “Helping” as a means to exert social power over us “for our own good” or for the good of women as a class serves and strengthens the carceral surveillance state and justifies its continued existence. We must look beyond sex-positive leftist rhetoric around consent, consumption, and sex workers’ “rights,” for a more totalizing critique of capitalism and the sex industry.

