

Men, Masculinity, and Male Domination: Reframing Feminist Analyses of Sex Work

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Prostitution has been considered by feminists as, alternatively, a *gendered* relation, an issue of *sexuality*, and a kind of *labor*. In this article, I argue for an integrated feminist analysis of sex work that focuses on the first and third of these, leaving the second in the background. I argue that this reconstructed feminist analysis must reject the moralism and determinism of the gendered critique, and radicalize the economic critique. It must also, I suggest, orient itself toward consideration of prostitution as a symptom or function of various *masculinities*. In all cases, feminism has considered sex work as a question or problem of *women's* agency and sexuality. Reversing this standard feminist approach offers important new directions for empirical research, and denaturalizes prostitution as an inevitable feature of human life. This denaturalization radicalizes the otherwise traditional policy debate over prostitution by allowing for a more revolutionary critique of the relations of domination that both govern and constitute sex work as a stigmatized, hierarchical, and exploitative practice.

Prostitution has ever been, as Priscilla Alexander (1998) notes, “A Difficult Issue for Feminists,” one that has engendered bitter academic debate and sometimes nasty political infighting.¹ The difficulty of this issue may be attributed, in part, to the extraordinary challenge of producing an adequate feminist theory of sex work that is sensitive to the many different kinds of prostitution that exist and the varied political,

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1. See Bell 1987; Chapkis 1997; Duggan and Hunter 1995; Pheterson 1989.

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social, and economic contexts within which they occur, and yet can nevertheless offer a compelling critical framework within which to analyze sex work itself. Laurie Shrage has cautioned that feminism too often traffics in the “fiction” that prostitution is “an isolable phenomenon possessing a single transcultural meaning” (1994b, 569). Similarly, Martha Nussbaum warns that “[p]rostitution is not a single thing. It can only be well understood in its social and historical context” (1999, 280). Nevertheless, it is my contention that feminist theory is not mired in the quicksand of ambiguity when it comes to offering a theoretical analysis and critique of practices of sex work. The emphases on particularity and historical context do not thereby render generalization impossible (and if they did, more than just the theoretical debate on sex work would be in jeopardy).² Shrage’s and Nussbaum’s cautions are a call for careful, nuanced analysis, one that can acknowledge the complexities and cultural differences of various practices of prostitution. They are not, I suspect, a demand that feminists cease to offer critical assessments of those practices.

It is in this spirit that I propose to reread the existing feminist literature on sex work and offer my own suggestion as to how these positions can be incorporated and redeployed in order to produce a more comprehensive feminist analysis and critique of prostitution. In this article, I examine what I see as the three most prominent feminist positions on prostitution.³ The first, which I will call the Abolitionist view,⁴ argues that prostitution is a hierarchically *gendered* relation, and must be understood through the lens of male domination and women’s oppression. The second position, which I will call the Sex Radical view, argues that prostitution is a variety of *sexual activity*, and must be understood through the lens of sexual stigma and marginalization. Finally, the third position, which I will call the Sex as Work view, argues that prostitution is primarily an *economic* relation, and must be understood as a form of labor under capitalism. I argue that we, for the most part, overlook the second

2. It is possible to make some general claims about sex work, because some things are generally *true* about sex work worldwide, without either lapsing into a problematic essentializing of the practice of prostitution or foreclosing the possibility that these general features of sex work might change. This theoretical balancing act is not new to feminism, which has confronted the difficulty, for example, of maintaining the existence of feminism in the face of the de-essentialization of the category “woman.”

3. This homogenization of the debate into three major “positions” is of course artificial, and an oversimplification besides. As a schematic framework, however, I think these abbreviations are a fair (if also necessarily violent) representation of the Western feminist discourse regarding sex work. I offer them not as an ivory tower “intervention” into the sex work debate by a self-proclaimed “expert,” but rather as a contribution to that discussion by one of its committed participants.

4. In using this term I follow Jo Doezema 1998.

position and focus, rather, on integrating feminism's gendered and economic critiques of prostitution. I am skeptical that prostitution is best understood as a sexual practice, in part because I think this view neglects what is definitive of current practices of sex work for the sake of a naive celebration of minority sexuality. By contrast, I find the Abolitionist and the Sex as Work views to be the most powerful theoretical tools at our disposal, and the perspectives that can most comprehensively account for what we empirically know about prostitution and two of its definitive features as it generally exists worldwide—its hierarchically gendered and economically exploitive status.⁵

Moreover, I argue that this integrated feminist analysis must be reoriented toward a consideration of prostitution as a function or symptom of various *masculinities*. Mimicking the standard legal approaches to prostitution that criminalize sex workers but not their clients, the feminist literature on prostitution has by and large considered sex work as a problem of *women's* agency, freedom, or sexual expression. Indeed, there is notoriously little data on the men who visit prostitutes; most feminist empirical research on prostitution focuses on sex workers themselves (Høigård and Finstad 1992; Vanwesenbeeck 1994; partial exceptions include Bishop and Robinson 2002, 1998; Davidson 1998; Davidson and Layder 1994). But in order for there to *be* a market for women's sexual services, there must be a demand that fuels and sustains that market. And in order to understand that demand, we must investigate those doing the demanding—men themselves. While this approach analyzes prostitution from a gendered perspective, it diverges from the Abolitionist framework insofar as it focuses on masculinity, not women or male domination. This corrects for the Abolitionist failure to consider a crucial consequence of its own understanding of power, namely, that men too are the constructed subjects of gender oppression. Rather than implicitly

5. The constants to which I refer in claiming that sex work is, in general, hierarchically gendered and economically exploitive are 1) it is primarily *women* who work as prostitutes (although child prostitution, an issue I do not consider here, tends to be less female dominated); 2) prostitution is frequently the best-paying employment opportunity for the women who engage in it; 3) prostitution is nevertheless illegal in most countries, as well as being one of the most socially and morally stigmatized forms of income generation for women; and 4) by and large, it is *men* who buy the sexual services prostitutes offer, an activity to which virtually no stigma attaches (I leave the issues of trafficking and procurement aside). These facts are acknowledged by nongovernmental organizations worldwide, no matter what their position on sex work as such (Brody 1997; Human Rights Watch 1995; Lim 1998). Throughout this article, then, "prostitution," "prostitute," or "sex work/er" will always only refer to adult females; and, since I do not address transgender or transsexual prostitution (a scandalously underdocumented phenomenon [Namaste 2000]), I will use the words "female" and "woman" relatively interchangeably. (For male prostitution, see Aggleton 1999; Marlowe 1997; West 1993.)

holding men “responsible” for the existence of sex work (much less “male domination”), I suggest we view sex work as a *symptom* of particular masculine identificatory norms. Indeed, sex work may exist not simply in order to prop up certain roles or expectations of *women*, but rather (or also) to meet the defensive demands of anxious masculinities, which disguise their need for validation by producing sexual satisfaction—specifically via the use of prostitutes—as male privilege or entitlement.

The feminist focus on *women* in sex work may inadvertently reproduce the gender hierarchy it seeks to critique, insofar as this traditionally feminine assumption of responsibility for the burden of “explaining” prostitution leaves the essential aspect of *men’s* participation in sex work uninterrogated. By focusing on prostitution as a problem of women, we only reinforce the notion that *women* or prostitutes are the problem. This focus also has the unfortunate (if unwitting) effect of naturalizing female prostitution as an inevitable and unremarkable feature of human life. The Abolitionist account of gender hierarchy does this insofar as it mysteriously exempts men from the radical process of gender construction to which women, in its view, are subjected. Sex Radical and Sex as Work feminists, however, also fail to theorize the masculine half of the prostitution relation, focusing instead on how women’s choices and agency have been constrained by the Abolitionist theory of complete and total coercion. These feminists thus argue for the existence of social meanings of prostitution other than exploitation, such as political rebellion or economic activity. This view of women’s agency has the effect of naturalizing prostitution as an ever-present “option” for women that does not itself demand explanation. For Sex Radical and Sex as Work feminists, the problem is not prostitution but, rather, that women are not free to be prostitutes divorced from social stigma or economic exploitation. In either case—whether prostitution is the problem, or social stigma and exploitation are the problem—the focus remains on the ability of *women* to choose sex work and the relative desirability of their doing so.

Rather than wondering what to “do” about women sex workers, I suggest we investigate the reasons why there *are* women sex workers in the first place. If prostitution is to be altered in any way—if its existence is to become less exploitive, hierarchical, racialized, and stigmatized, or even if it is to dissipate or be overcome—the root causes of prostitution must be addressed. Those causes are not (simply) women’s vulnerability, nor are they reducible to women’s enterprising nature or their active self-assertion in the economic sphere. All of these reasons explain why women engage in *any* form of work. Women could not engage in prostitution if

it were not already a sexual and economic category, a “pink skirt” ghetto to which women workers are always already relegated. Prostitution exists as a job for women because of men’s demand for it, a demand that needs to be understood in terms of the requirements of successful masculine identification. This means that neither prostitution *nor* men are the “problem” to be addressed in a feminist analysis of sex work; rather, it is cultural formations of masculine identity that require scrutiny and interrogation. This investigation and analysis is the essential precursor to a successful transformation of women’s exploited, stigmatized, and subordinated sexual labor into the possibility of a practice of freedom.

PROSTITUTION AS EXPLOITATION

Kathleen Barry is feminism’s preeminent spokeswoman against prostitution. The foundational premise of her work is that prostitution epitomizes women’s subordination and constitutes the foundation of patriarchal male domination: “[W]hile pornographic media are the means of sexually saturating society, while rape is paradigmatic of sexual exploitation, prostitution, with or without a woman’s consent, is the institutional, economic, and sexual model for women’s oppression” (1995, 24; 1979; cf. also Jeffreys 1997 and the writings of Janice Raymond).⁶

While Barry is the best-known feminist critic of prostitution, she is not, to my mind, the best elaborator of the theoretical assumptions that undergird her position. For example, she uselessly defines prostitution as “sexual exploitation sustained over time” (1995, 29) and refuses the possibility of meaningful consent under conditions of male domination (1979, 1995), yet cannot explain what *constitutes* exploitation, aside from coercion (which must be ubiquitous under patriarchy anyway, given the impossibility of consent). Although Barry’s later work drops the problematic trope of slavery, she is unable to provide an adequate account of the conditions of power, freedom, and agency under which she believes desire and consent are produced, and that therefore govern women’s and men’s lives to the extent that prostitution cannot be defined as anything other than sexual exploitation.

If Barry’s work does not supply its own theoretical basis, then we must look elsewhere to explicate her position. In my view, the most powerful

6. Raymond’s writings on prostitution may be found online at the Website for the Coalition Against Trafficking in Women (CATW; www.catw.org), a fiercely anti-prostitution NGO that Barry founded, and Jeffreys and Raymond codirect.

elaboration of the theoretical underpinnings of Barry's critique is to be found in the work of Catharine MacKinnon. Although MacKinnon is not primarily an anti-prostitution activist,⁷ her theory of gender and sexuality animates Barry's critique of prostitution, and therefore a consideration of MacKinnon's theory in this regard will help to clarify Barry's position at crucial moments of ambiguity.⁸

The starting point of MacKinnon's theory is that there is no such thing as "just sex"; that is, there is no original or natural "way sex is" that is somehow presocial or precultural. "Sex" here means *sexuality*, which includes, but is not limited to, sexual activity of whatever variety. Indeed, sex here also refers to *gender*, for MacKinnon claims it is impossible to distinguish between the various phenomena of sex/gender/sexuality, since all are products of power relations. Power constitutes gender (understood as either social identity or biology "simply"), which creates and determines sexuality, which classifies bodies and behavior as "masculine" or "feminine." There is no "just sex" for MacKinnon because there is no "before."

This means, then, that all existing sexual relations, including prostitution, are in no way a reflection or organization of "natural" sexual desire. Barry concurs on this point, noting: "There are no biological givens about sex that are not social and political constructions. In that sense society precedes biology" (1995, 22). There is no "reason" rooted in the constitution of bodies, generalized patterns of behavior, or biological necessity for the sexual relations that we observe and in which we participate. Rather, MacKinnon argues, these relations are due to various imperatives and organizations of power, which, in our particular historical context, are forms of *male* power. Thus sex, sexuality, and gender are by necessity *male* constructions, and it makes no sense to talk about a separate "women's sexuality," for it is not as though women could ever locate a sphere that is outside, beyond, or before the realm of male power in which they could construct it. Because men make the rules, men also limit the available options. To choose among them is indeed to make a choice of some sort, but it is in no way *women's own*.

7. See, however, MacKinnon 1993.

8. Certainly MacKinnon's major writings (1987, 1989) postdate Barry's initial foray into theorizing prostitution (1979). However, without MacKinnon to provide the basis for her critique of prostitution, Barry's theory of gender oppression would never get off the ground. Moreover, MacKinnon similarly compresses all forms of oppressive behavior into manifestations of a single dynamic, such that her analysis of pornography (for which she is most famous) can, in my view, be applied to sex work as another crystallized form of male domination.

It is unclear whether or not Barry subscribes to as totalizing an understanding of male power as MacKinnon's.⁹ As already noted, Barry does not present any theorization of the larger dynamics of male domination as she understands them. However, we have some indication that Barry *must* subscribe to a MacKinnon-like framework, when she writes (in a typical passage):

Can women choose to do prostitution? As much as they can choose any other context of sexual objectification and dehumanization of the self. . . . [W]omen actually do not consent to prostitution or any other condition of sexual exploitation—in rape, in marriage, in the office, in the factory, and so on. (Barry 1995, 33; original emphases)

Although neither Barry nor MacKinnon explains how or why women's choices have become so limited, both nevertheless agree that choice is a meaningless concept under male domination.

Barry also lacks an independent analysis of how and why the sexual exploitation of women is so pervasive. This is the crux of MacKinnon's theory and, to my mind, the major contribution of her work to feminist theory. For MacKinnon, male power is distinctly *sexual*, but not because men have it "as a sex" over women "as a sex." Men's power is sexual because it creates the categories of sex itself—male power creates the genders *man* and *woman*. Moreover, it does not create them equal. The establishment of the genders man/woman is also the establishment of the genders active/passive, strong/weak, subject/object, dominant/submissive. MacKinnon concludes that men have not simply produced inequality—they have made it *sexy*: "Dominance eroticized defines the imperatives of its [sexuality's] masculinity, submission eroticized defines its femininity" (1989, 130). In order for sex to happen at all, in *any* form, MacKinnon argues, relations of hierarchy—of dominance and submission—must be present. Her conclusion: no power, no inequality, no sex. By extension, then, prostitution constitutes a purified form of male power: an industry of women paid to be subservient to male sexual

9. Denise Schaeffer (2001) insists that MacKinnon's system is not, in fact, total, emphasizing two key passages that she claims amount to a "careful qualification" of it: first, a sentence in which MacKinnon claims that patriarchy is only "nearly perfect," and another where she mentions a "shadow world" that women inhabit wherein they might glimpse the truth of their condition. These rather ambivalent "qualifications" are nevertheless belied by a preponderance of determinist passages throughout the *entirety* of MacKinnon's writings; to take only one (wholly representative) example: "[T]here is no such thing as a woman as such; there are only walking embodiments of men's projected needs. Under male supremacy, asking whether there is, socially, a female sexuality is the same thing as asking whether women exist" (1989, 119).

demands. What MacKinnon writes of pornography also explains the dynamic of prostitution: “Possession and use of women through the sexualization of intimate intrusion and access to them is a central feature of women’s social definition as inferior and feminine” (1989, 195).

There are a number of critiques of MacKinnon’s work that may be consulted for an elaboration of its various difficulties (Brown 1995; Cornell 1991; Haraway 1991; Harris 1990). However, if this account of MacKinnon seems in accord with Barry’s critique of prostitution, the two nonetheless diverge when we ask them each the question, “What, specifically and fundamentally, is *wrong* with prostitution?”¹⁰ This difference is one that is often overlooked in examinations of MacKinnon’s writings: unlike Barry, MacKinnon is offering a *structuralist* Marxist analysis of gender relations, while other Abolitionists rely on a *humanist* analysis (whether Marxist or not). Thus MacKinnon, by definition, has no answer to the question of what is wrong with prostitution. She is explicit that she is not offering a moral critique (2001, 710; 1989, 138, 196; 1987); nor is it possible, within the parameters of her system, to rely on a normative ideal of who or what women “really” are on the basis of which to criticize the damage that male domination perpetuates against them, since there is no “before” power to which we can appeal. Prostitution (like pornography) can be problematic for MacKinnon only insofar as it perpetuates the mystification of gendered, hierarchical imperatives of power. In other words, prostitution is a clear example of men’s constructing women as sexually available and subservient, and yet this construction is itself rendered invisible as an act of power through various modes of naturalization.¹¹ Insofar as prostitution seems natural and inevitable, male domination has succeeded in essentializing its imperatives, thereby rendering women’s oppression invisible and masking its own productive power. Like sex, there is nothing essential about it that might render it intrinsically objectionable.

Barry’s texts, by contrast, refuse this amoral reading. What emerges from Barry’s work is precisely what Denise Schaeffer (2001) argues *must* be present in MacKinnon’s work if it is to be coherent—namely, a notion of selfhood that is possessed of integrity and capable of agency. Barry writes:

10. For some feminists, this is *the* question to be asked; indeed, most of the “philosophical” feminist writing on prostitution has focused on the question of its ethical status (see Ericsson 1980; Nussbaum 1999; Overall 1992; Pateman 1988, 1983; Shrage 1994a, 1994b, 1989).

11. This is Marx’s critique of ideology and mystification, which MacKinnon has deftly applied to the existence of gender inequality and oppression.

When the human being is reduced to a body, objectified to sexually service another, whether or not there is consent, violation of the human being has taken place. The human being is the bodied self that human rights is meant to protect and human development is intended to support. . . . In the fullness of human experience, when women are reduced to their bodies, and in the case of sexual exploitation to sexed bodies, they are treated as lesser, as other, and thereby subordinated. This is sexual exploitation and it violates women's human rights to dignity and equality. (1995, 23–24; original emphasis)

In explicitly adopting a human rights perspective in her later work, Barry argues that prostitution is wrong because, as sexual exploitation, “it harms the human self and destroys through sex, dehumanizing women” (1995, 71).

For Barry, objectification and violation are synonymous—to treat another person “as a body” and not “as a human being” is to violate her. This reliance on a self that is degraded through the practice of prostitution is a familiar argument, and the bedrock claim of much anti-prostitution feminism. Carole Pateman's famous answer to the question of what is wrong with prostitution is that precisely because of the close connection between the self and gender, prostitution can never be a healthy or nondegrading occupation for women:

When a man enters into the prostitution contract he is not interested in sexually indifferent, disembodied services; he contracts to buy sexual use of a *woman* for a given period. . . . Womanhood . . . is confirmed in sexual activity, and when a prostitute contracts out use of her body she is thus selling *herself* in a very real sense. (1988, 207; original emphasis)

For Ryan Bishop and Lillian S. Robinson, sex work is the quintessence of alienated labor, labor that is “alienated in the emotive sense: that is, separated and *causing* separation from authentic feelings, giving rise to isolation and revulsion” (1998, 247; original emphasis; cf. their identical locution in 2002, 19). The implication is that there is some locus of “authentic feelings” from which the sex worker becomes alienated, causing “isolation and revulsion.” And in arguing for a valorization of masturbation as one means of reducing the pervasiveness of prostitution, Julia O'Connell Davidson claims that if masturbation were “valued in the same way that heterosexual coupling now is,” then “we would all be in a position to recognize and realize ourselves as sexual subjects, without turning anyone else into an object” (2002, 95).

Unfortunately, the self on which these feminist critics of prostitution rely is an ideal that remains unexplicated. This leads to significant problems—most obviously, it is unclear what else human beings are *besides* bodies, which would thereby make it illegitimate to treat them as *only* bodies (or “objects”). Barry implies there must be *something* else, since she defines objectification as treatment in which a person is “*reduced to a body*” (my emphasis). But if we have no account of the self, we can have no idea why objectification is a problematic way of treating someone. If feminist critics do not present an independent account of a self that somehow exceeds or is distinct from the body, the force of their argument remains tautological, not normative—objectification is bad because it has already been defined as violation.

The root of this tautology is the Abolitionist understanding of social meaning, which so saturates the self that there is *no need* for an independent account of it, since to be a woman under male domination is to be an object *by definition*. Clearly, then, this holds for women in prostitution. Male domination, as *the* hegemonic discourse, simply forecloses the possibility that prostitution could ever mean anything to anyone *besides* the exploitation of women. Thus, objectification *is* always violation: Male power so totally creates sexuality that it determines the entirety of its social meaning, whether individual choosers acknowledge that meaning or not. Because “women” and “men,” like prostitution and other sexual practices, are social entities, and because the realm of the social is governed by the hegemony of male domination, there is simply no space for any other meanings (or selves) to proliferate.¹²

The ability of male domination to reproduce itself in the Abolitionist account is staggering, but it is in fact MacKinnon’s and Barry’s *theories* that foreclose the possibility of innovation in social meaning. Their absolutist positions mysteriously focus exclusively on the meaning and nature of *women’s* choices and identities under patriarchy. This conspicuously fails to acknowledge the ways in which men are produced *as men* under hegemonic gender discourses. Because power is described and understood as “*male* domination,” men are somehow “responsible” for the production of women as passive, violable, and so on. But if sex/gender/sexuality are as radically constructed as MacKinnon and Barry insist, *men too* must be the constructed subjects of masculine power. Who, then, instituted male domination? After all, men first needed to become “men”

12. Thus, Barry’s objection to objectification cannot stand; it relies on a self which, on her own terms, does not and cannot exist.

in order to figure out what “men as a gender want sexually.” What does it mean to say that power is masculine if there is no base or “substance” that exists *before* that denotes who these men are, to which power is, in MacKinnon’s scheme, inextricably linked?

This gap between power’s effects and power’s instigators suggests that domination, whether defined as “male” or not, cannot belong to some preexisting substrata of malevolent men who are busily plotting the domination of those they produce as “women.” Although it is true that men generally possess greater physical, political, and economic power than women, they are not therefore exempt from the coercive structures of gender identification that “male domination” produces for them, too. Masculinity is no more “natural” than femininity, and it is no more primary, first, or “before” to be dominant than to be submissive. This means that although male domination may produce prostitution as primarily and specifically a job for women, and on the other hand *also* demand female sexual purity (hence, the derogatory usage of “whore”), nevertheless *men as clients of sex workers* are also produced by “male domination.” The idea that men’s sexual desires are more urgent, more powerful, and more numerous than women’s certainly contributes to tacit acceptance of prostitution; the notions that men are actors in the world, better suited to displays of courage and bodily strength, and the romantic or sexual aggressors, are also reliable expectations of masculinity that shore up the image of men as buyers of sexual services. Yet it is important to remember that definitions of masculinity, even when those identifications look oppressive or domineering, are no more “intrinsic” or “natural” to men than any other kind of identification. Men are no more suited to these identificatory categories than women are to the roles of “virgin” and “whore.”

I return to the importance of denaturalizing masculinity in the final section, because I think it offers the key to a successfully nonmoralizing redeployment of the gendered critique of sex work. I turn first to examine two different groups of feminists who deny the fatalism of MacKinnon’s and Barry’s approaches, and argue that prostitution must be understood as more than simply a gendered phenomenon.

PROSTITUTION AS SEX/WORK

Dissatisfied with Barry’s and MacKinnon’s monocausal account of prostitution, two major responses have developed from within the feminist

and sex worker activist community. The first is animated by Gayle Rubin, who rejects the idea that sexuality is a mere by-product of gender (oppression), arguing that sex, too, “is a vector of oppression” (1984, 293). Rubin calls for a radical theory of sexuality, one that is “not reducible to, or understandable in terms of, class, race, ethnicity, or gender” (p. 293). Her “sex-positive” position has been profoundly influential in shaping the feminist debate over prostitution, and can be seen as foundational to “pro-sex” and/or Sex Radical perspectives on prostitution (e.g., Califia 2002, 2000; Nagle 1997; Queen 1997a, 1997b), just as MacKinnon’s analysis grounds the anti-prostitution feminist position.

By contrast, the editors of and contributors to the collection *Global Sex Workers* (Doezema and Kempadoo 1998) argue for an understanding of prostitution as a form of *labor*, thereby taking the expression “sex work” literally. According to Kempadoo, “we view prostitution not as an identity—as a social or a psychological characteristic of women, often indicated by ‘whore’—but as an income-generating activity or form of labor for women and men” (1998a, 3). These writers thus acknowledge both the gendered nature of sex work—“Today the majority of the world’s sex workers are women, working within male-dominated businesses and industries” (p. 6)—and the problems of exploitation that occur in the sex industry—“the exploitation of sexual labor is intensified under systemic capitalism, leaving it open to similar kinds of pressures and manipulation that any other waged labor faces” (p. 8)—without either categorizing all prostitution as violence against women or forgoing a critique of the often brutal conditions under which women (and men) work in the sex industry.

Both of these positions refuse the Abolitionist contention that women’s engaging in prostitution is simply or only exploitation. When MacKinnon or Barry argue that women can never be understood to consent to prostitution, they are claiming a single, universal, determinist cause of both the existence and *meaning* of prostitution for women: male domination. Sex Radicals and Sex as Work exponents deny this monolithical meaning, arguing instead that prostitution both *means* something different than what the Abolitionists argue, and that this is possible because women themselves *contribute* to the production of that meaning (Zatz 1997). Rubin’s assertion that sex, too, is a vector of oppression dislodges the patriarchal stranglehold on power that MacKinnon and Barry claim to document. If sexuality has its own modes of value and stigmatization, then prostitution can also be understood as a punished or problematic form of sexual activity. While this stigmatization may coexist with gen-

dered forms of power and domination, it is importantly also a by-product of the cultural discourses of law, medicine, religion, and psychology, all of which argue for the sanctity of sexual relationships, the importance of monogamy for physical and psychic health, and the refusal of exchanging money for sex as a degradation of the human being. Notes Rubin: "Like homosexuals, prostitutes are a criminal sexual population stigmatized on the basis of sexual activity" (1984, 286).

The Sex as Work position, by contrast, simply tables the debate about social meaning altogether. Prostitution may in some cases be exploitive, and may in some cases challenge the gender or sexual status quo, but neither of these is due to anything about sex work itself as *sex work*. As *labor*, prostitution may be exploited or it may be unionized, and workers may have more or less bargaining power, freedom of movement, and desirable working conditions. But sex workers do not, *as sex workers*, carry the burden of determining the meaning of sex and gender relations on their shoulders. This successfully nonmoralizing position makes room for the possibility of all sorts of social meanings of prostitution, dependent upon the particular historical and geopolitical context in which it occurs, without forgoing the task of critique. Within this framework, sex work could be both transgressive of gender expectations *and* exploited as labor, or thoroughly reificatory of feminine sexual norms and yet utterly uncoerced.

Rubin acknowledges the distinction between sexuality and economic activity, noting that "[s]ex work is an occupation, while sexual deviation is an erotic preference" (1984, 286). Despite this, some Sex Radical feminists argue explicitly for an elision of the differences between erotic orientation and occupation. Joan Nestle (1998) has claimed that prostitutes and lesbians are powerfully linked by the challenges they pose not only to male definitions of appropriate female sexuality but also to feminism itself, which, she argues, similarly polices the bounds of appropriate womanhood: "Both dykes and whores have a historical heritage of redefining the concept of woman" (p. 250). Jill Nagle also analogizes sex work with lesbianism, implicitly claiming that both are "options" whose only drawbacks are in social condemnation:

[T]ry juxtaposing the statement "No woman with other options could possibly choose sex work" with "No woman with other options could possibly choose lesbianism." Elements of these arguments sound nearly identical: Why risk the stigma, give up privileges, take on pariah status, to do something many believe is aesthetically if not morally offensive? (1997, 6; cf. Queen 1997a, 1997b)

Indeed, Nagle presents homosexuality and sex work as analogous practices of sexual deviance, which are deliberate political acts:

Like the bisexual woman, the proud harlot, the lesbian feminist stripper, and the part-time whore working her way through grad school all suggest that women can *choose* the less socially sanctioned of the good girl/bad girl boxes, and can do so out of liberation rather than compulsion, or can refuse the dichotomy entirely. (1997, 6; original emphasis)

Carol Queen presents a slightly more nuanced account of how choiceness of deviant sexuality can come to be seen as an erotic orientation, noting that “queer whores seem most likely to define sex work as part of their sexuality, acknowledging the sex they have for money as desirable and one component of their sexual makeup” (1997a, 186). She thus goes to some length to emphasize that sex work can be an enjoyable and sexually stimulating form of income:

What do the whores who are content with sex work like about it? Besides the most obvious answer (the money), the sex-positive, feminist sex worker may cite flexibility and independence, working for herself, the recognition of her sexual power, getting to have sex outside the confines of a relationship, having a lot of sex and/or sexual variety, pride in stepping outside the restrictions imposed on “good girls,” pride in sexual prowess or exhibitionism, an increased ability to set limits, and opportunities to explore her sexuality through roles and fantasy. (1997a, 187)

Queen’s key claim, which informs her fundamental objection to the Abolitionist position, is that it is sex negativity that makes prostitution a generally wretched existence. Sex workers have it rough most often, on her account, because of their internalized fear and hatred of sex itself:

As an activist in the sex-work community, I have met well over a hundred prostitutes, as many exotic dancers, a few dozen dominatrices, and a number of models and porn actresses—far more than have most anti-sex work activists and even most sex researchers. Just one factor stands out to distinguish those who live well, with no loss of self-esteem, from those who may find sex work a difficult or even damaging career choice. Most of the former have sufficient sex information and are sex-positive. (1997b, 128–29)

Indeed, if (women’s) sex negativity were vanquished, she argues, an egalitarian, gender-blind sexual market would emerge, wherein persons of every gender are free to become both patron and solicitor of sexual services (Queen 1997a, 204).

Other Sex Radical feminists acknowledge the distinction between sexuality and economic activity, arguing that prostitutes offer a therapeutic service, akin to service work of all sorts (child care, domestic labor, flight attendant, etc.). This position presents the prostitute as a skilled laborer ministering to the needs of a vulnerable population seeking company and human contact, a population perhaps too undesirable or otherwise unlucky to find sexual fulfillment through more traditional, noncommercial avenues (Califia 2000, 264–65; Chapkis 1997, 75). A few even celebrate prostitution as a kind of sacred ritual of goddess worship, a practice of spiritual healing that confers sexual energy and positivity on both its practitioners and its clients (see the discussion of Annie Sprinkle in Chapkis 1997, “Afterword”; Queen 1997a). Whether as therapy or spirituality, however, prostitution in this analysis is solely about sex: Prostitution is stigmatized and criminalized because of sex negativity; it promises sexual fulfillment to all seekers, which is their right; it is empowering for the sex-positive prostitute who celebrates her professional duties; and, if it were to become available to all, promises a kind of sexual egalitarianism wherein perhaps even payment for sexual services would wither away, and all would engage in their own consensual sexual pursuits without shame.

Sex Radicals’ overflowing valorizations of sex work as an exciting, fulfilling, and socially beneficial career option stem, I think, from these feminists’ desire to produce a new meaning for prostitution—to redeploy “whore” in an empowering way, just as the epithets “queer” and “dyke” have been taken over by gay and gender activism. This makes sense in the context of the elaborate legacy of anti-prostitution feminism, whose determinist accounts of “male domination” seem to foreclose the possibility that the meaning of prostitution could ever change, much less *be* changed by sex workers themselves. To acknowledge this attempted re-deployment of sex work, however, is to acknowledge the very privileged site at which the Sex Radical position is being articulated in the United States. Queen’s list of the positive aspects of prostitution is, in fact, a list of benefits for a particular *subset* of sex workers, who already benefit from their social positionings as white, well educated, not homeless or otherwise economically vulnerable, and situated in both the richest country in the world and the most sexually liberal city in that country, San Francisco. These are sex workers who have a fair amount of power in determining what they do and who they are, such that they *can*, more or less, redeploy the meanings of these choices. Nagle acknowledges her perspective on this count (Nagle 1997, 2), yet by itself, this acknowledg-

ment is insufficient for formulating an adequate Sex Radical feminist analysis of prostitution.¹³

Moreover, as Kempadoo points out, the conditions of global capitalism and the international relations between developed and developing countries are at least as constitutive of prostitution as the hegemonic discourses of gender or sexuality. The politics of race, geography, and migration are crucial for understanding the existence of sex work throughout the globe:

The emerging global economic order has already wreaked havoc on women's lives. . . . Skilled and unskilled female workers constitute the main labor force in the new export-oriented industries . . . where they are faced with poor working conditions, are continually threatened with unemployment due to automation, and experience mass dismissals due to relocations of whole sectors of the industry. In many instances, minimum wage, health[,] and safety laws are overridden by the transnational corporations in these new production zones, leaving women workers in particularly hazardous situations. Furthermore, with disruptions to traditional household and family structures, women are increasingly becoming heads of households. . . . With dwindling family resources and the western emphasis on the independent nuclear family, women must also increasingly rely on the state for provisions such as maternity leave and child-care, yet fewer funds are allocated by governments for social welfare and programs. Informal sector work and "moonlighting" is growing and engagement in the booming sex industries fills a gap created by globalization. (Kempadoo 1998a, 16–17)

Understanding prostitution as merely or purely a gendered or sexual relation abstracts from these economic constraints, the international geographic and political relations that have produced them, and the issues of race and migrancy that determine which workers can work in which sectors, often leaving migrant women and women of color at the bottom of the labor pool.

Queen, Nagle, Califia, Nestle, and Chapkis all write about sex work from the perspective of their own experiences with it. This is an animating principle of Sex Radical feminist scholarship on prostitution—the groundbreaking collections of Sex Radical essays on sex work consist pri-

13. Indeed, what is at stake in defining prostitution as a deviant sexual practice? And who gets to be included as a sexual transgressor, and who (because of class, race, nationality, or immigrant status) is necessarily left out? Does the Sex Radical analysis unwittingly reward its own practitioners with the distinction of having the most radical politics, or as engaging in the most cutting edge practice of queerness?

marily of sex workers' first-person narratives (Delacoste and Alexander 1998; Nagle 1997). Such testimonies are valuable accounts of women's experiences of sex work, and are crucially important for the documentation of a dehumanized and largely invisible population. By themselves, however, these narratives offer no systematic theorization of the factors that produce sex work as both the most profitable form of labor for these women, and one that is always available to them and primarily *only* to them, no matter what their own legal status or the legal status of sex work itself. The activist figureheads for Sex Radical feminism, as sex workers themselves, direct remarkably little of their investigative energies toward the conditions under which many *other* women become sex workers, conditions that include poverty, racism, drug addiction, youth, runaway status, migrancy, responsibility for supporting a family, gendered wage gaps, unemployment, market shifts, and globalization. The Sex Radical view erases these vulnerabilities, literally whitewashing them under the rubric of sex-negativity.

Similar errors pervade the Sex as Work position. Although these feminists are much better at analyzing the dominant structures of race and capital that adversely affect the women who *are* prostitutes, nevertheless there is an odd conflation of otherwise incompatible Marxist and liberal arguments, wherein labor can be both exploited and yet freely chosen. For example, Marjan Wijers explains the inherently paradoxical nature of attempting to exert control over one's life as a poor person under capitalism, noting that a "great many of the women who become a [*sic*] victim of trafficking end up in this position because they do not want to accept the limitations of their situation, because they are enterprising, courageous and willing to take initiatives to improve their living conditions and those of their families" (Wijers 1998, 77). This observation is significant for Wijers, not because it highlights workers' powerlessness under capitalism, but rather because it shows that "women who have become victims of trafficking cannot be classified as passive or stupid victims" (p. 70).

Other contributors argue that women may turn to prostitution not out of poverty, but simply because no other job pays the kind of money that sex work offers. This is meant to highlight women's agency, insofar as it shows that women need not be desperately poor in order to pursue sex work actively. Amalia Lucía Cabezas rightly points out that this sort of agency is gendered: While Cuban men who migrate to the United States in search of money and opportunity are seen as self-sufficient and worthy of respect, "[t]his large space of tolerance is not offered women who par-

ticipate in sexual commerce. Their motivations may vary from travel, entertainment, and clothes to meals, consumer goods, and the vital daily necessities that make survival in this period of crisis possible” (Cabezas 1998, 84; cf. Kempadoo 1998b). Importantly, Cabezas notes that these motivations explain why *anyone* enters the ranks of wage labor, even if the jobs are dangerous or unpleasant:

These are some of the same reasons why most people work in boring, hazardous, and exploitative jobs, and why people choose to improve their economic circumstances through strategies that include marriage and migration. In the early 1990s, many even risked their lives crossing the shark-infested ocean in makeshift rafts. (Cabezas 1998, 84)

She nicely illustrates the ways in which economic necessity is gendered, disadvantaging women twice over as both economically vulnerable and stigmatized insofar as they attempt to overcome that vulnerability by engaging in sex work. Her conclusion, however, is to protest the fact that women cannot safely or respectably “choose” sex work as a viable means of self-support, arguing that “policies and studies must aim to create the most advantageous conditions for women workers to sell their labor with the recognition that women’s sexual labor is their own. It does not belong to the capitalist patriarchy or the state” (p. 86).

What these Sex as Work feminists choose to highlight about women’s economic situations is the fact that in the face of oppressive economic and cultural conditions, women nevertheless *choose* prostitution as a form of work. Sex Radical feminists similarly celebrate the moment of choice as a kind of political resistance to sexual marginalization and stigma; indeed, choice is at the root of both groups’ political activism. Such faith in the efficacy of choice, however, must implicitly rely on the idea of an at least semiautonomous agent who not only exercises choice, but also has some say over the *meaning* of that choice. Sex Radicals achieve this elision between choice and the social meaning of choice by focusing too narrowly on a subset of sex workers privileged by race, class, and education. These women *do* come closest to achieving the status of the autonomous agent our liberal politics sets up as the norm, just as childless, well-educated, well-off white women come the closest to approximating the male norm in employment (and thus come the closest to earning his salary). We cannot mistakenly extrapolate these conditions, however, to the majority of sex workers, who are neither all white nor well-off, and often neither childless nor in possession of the benefits of a college degree. Moreover, these Sex Radical prostitutes are hardly positioned to

extrapolate their self-made definitions of prostitution to a venue outside their own local clubs and social circles. This community of meaning—as significant as it is—may not extend beyond the boundaries of (certain areas of) San Francisco.¹⁴

Similarly, although Sex as Work feminists acknowledge prostitution as a form of labor, and even the coercive nature of labor itself under capitalism, nevertheless these observations are marshaled in order to serve a political project wherein women must be increasingly able to exercise their choice of sex work, *regardless* of the existence of coercive structures. This position conspicuously lacks any critique of labor per se, a necessary and obvious task given its Marxist inheritance (Marx argues, of course, that all wage labor is compulsory insofar as it is necessary to survive [1977, 272–73]). While it is indisputable that women can and do choose to be sex workers, just as workers around the world can and do choose to work in sweatshops, factories, hotels, nightclubs, bars, and hair salons, what is missing from the Sex as Work position is a critique of the compulsion and exploitation of wage labor itself under capitalism. If, in fact, prostitution is one more kind of dangerous, illegal, and exploitative labor to which the poor, migrants, women of color, gender/sexual deviants, and other marginalized persons are inevitably relegated under strained (and even “normal”) economic conditions in the capitalist market, then what is needed is not a defense of women’s ability to *choose* sex work, or an interpretation of sex work (or *any* labor) as “free choice,” but rather a critique of the economic, racial, and gendered power relations that coincide to produce sex work itself as the most lucrative option (and often *because* of its illegal status) for so many at-risk workers.

Sex Radicals and Sex as Work feminists are surely right that as a public policy, Abolitionism harms sex workers much more than it helps them. “Rehabilitation” of prostitutes only deprives women (who in many places are not traditionally expected or sometimes even allowed to work) of the most lucrative employment available, sending them in search of scarce positions in various other industries with just as poor (if not poorer) working conditions, and for significantly and predictably lower wages. Moreover, Sex Radical and Sex as Work feminists’ worthy goals of easing punitive criminal and immigration laws will alleviate some of the most damaging harms of trafficking and international sex work for women.

14. The major obstacle to the idea of sex work as political radicalism is the issue of translation: How is the spectator—in particular, the john—who is *not* submerged within the worlds of feminism and/or sex radicalism supposed to recognize a subversive sex worker? How much is his recognition impeded by the receipt of the very sexual services he demands?

These policy positions, however, neglect the more radical critique that the practice of prostitution demands. The emphasis on choice seems to suggest that our only goal can be the mitigation—not transformation—of coercive structures, and therefore only the facilitation—not overcoming—of women’s participation in prostitution. Systems of domination—like capitalism, for instance, but also gender and racial hierarchy, not to mention immigration law and police regulation—thus become naturalized, insofar as these difficulties are seen as extrinsic to the practice of sex work (and *all* labor under capitalism), rather than constitutive of it. They are thus impervious to change. Although the possibility of transforming such pervasive and pernicious systems of domination like sexism, racism, and economic exploitation may seem an impossibility, we cannot allow our theories to compromise in the face of this formidable task. Absent the transformation of the more fundamental relations of gender hierarchy, racism, and (global) capitalism, it is highly doubtful that the practice of prostitution could ever be anything *but* harmful for women. These problems are not incidental to prostitution, any more than they are incidental to domestic labor, secretarial work, cleaning services, child care, or social work. It is *because* of these relations of power that such professions are produced as “options” for women, as the jobs that most men do not (want to) do. That women—but especially poor women, migrant women, and women of color—are relegated to such economic strata without question or comment belies the reality that, unlike the free agent our liberal politics valorizes, women are indeed *not* free to “choose” just anything.¹⁵

The question thus becomes how to theorize the *constrained* choice to become a sex worker, without moralizingly declaring all sex work to be exploitation or violence against women. This cannot be accomplished through the Abolitionist reliance on a humanist ontology (for this is the root of their moralism), but neither can it be accomplished by relying (however implicitly) on a liberal notion of the autonomous agent, a fiction that obscures the very structures of power and domination that render its realization impossible. MacKinnon’s theory comes the closest to offering a nonmoralizing analysis of power and coercion, but, as I have

15. To argue thus is *not* to suggest that sex work is inherently loathsome, nor is it to declare all prostitution to be disreputable or anti-feminist work that no one in her right mind ought to pursue. The former claim is obviously untrue, as we have seen in various Sex Radical accounts of sex work. The latter claim is one that I believe irrelevant to feminist research. Feminism is not inquiry into the *morality* of women’s choices and behavior; rather, it considers women’s ability to choose and act in freedom, as social, economic, and political equals.

argued, it also fatalistically forecloses any possibility of political change. This fatalism is the result of her failure to consider two very important consequences of her own theory of gender oppression; namely, that men too are the constructed subjects of male domination, and second, that if there is no “before” power, then men cannot be held “responsible” for the existence of male domination.¹⁶

I therefore suggest that if we are to understand the multiple ways in which women’s choices in and around sex work are constrained, we must return to an examination of prostitution as a function of gender hierarchy, albeit not in the way in which *any* of the Abolitionists recommend. Instead, I propose we consider sex work as both a product of masculinity and a practice that (re) produces masculinity as an identificatory norm for men. The three most prominent feminist perspectives on the problem of prostitution approach *women themselves* as the conundrum to be deciphered—the paradox of “women as sex workers” is what theorists and researchers have sought to explain. I suggest that we reverse perspectives and seek to explain the problem of “men as consumers of women’s sexual services.” Understanding sex work as a function of masculinities offers a crucial unifying framework by which to understand the almost historically universal development of a sexual market in which women cater virtually exclusively to the needs and desires of men. This offers new possibilities for understanding the social meaning of prostitution, and it opens up potential for radical transformation of its exploitive and oppressive conditions.

MASCULINITY AND RADICAL TRANSFORMATION

The Sex as Work position offers a crucial reminder that prostitution cannot simply be understood as a by-product of relations of gender and sexuality. By focusing on prostitution as a form of work, Sex as Work feminists are able to resist the Abolitionist reduction of all prostitution to women’s subordination, and yet remain flexible enough to accommodate important observations regarding the gendered nature of this work. Although it is reasonable to believe that women, like all workers, engage in sex work

16. That MacKinnon so consistently overlooks the production of men under “male domination” implicitly grants a founding assumption of the power hierarchy she claims to critique; namely, the given-ness of the male perspective as *the* perspective, the norm from which “woman” deviates. The one-sidedness of her analysis thus shores up the dynamic of male domination that, she argues, must be effectively overcome if feminism is to succeed (1989), suggesting that it is indeed MacKinnon herself who produces the fated and eternal dominion of male power.

because they need to support themselves and others, nevertheless we must also interrogate the very *existence* of prostitution as a form of work for women to begin with. Occupational segregation is nothing new; documenting its existence (and its concomitant gendered wage gap) has been an important task of feminist economists for some time. Surely we can ask the same sorts of questions about prostitution. This particular form of work seems to cry out for such feminist scrutiny: Why is *this* form of work so readily available—and so lucrative—for *women* workers?

Although many of the contributors to *Global Sex Workers* neglect a sustained focus on gender, Kempadoo offers a striking insight in this direction when she describes prostitution as a practice in which “women and men . . . service vast sections of the worlds’ *male* populations and render what many consider vital to the well-being of *manhood*” (Kempadoo 1998a, 3; my emphases). This important observation that sex work is “vital” to the maintenance of masculinity suggests that we must consider not only the economic or materialist underpinnings of the existence of prostitution, but also the gendered nature of power relations, such that sex work (even, as Kempadoo notes, when it is performed by men) is a market that is dictated and perpetuated by men’s (sexual) needs. As Julia O’Connell Davidson and Derek Layder have noted: “Though ostensibly a commercial exchange, because sex is so powerfully attached to ideologies about gender, biology, and the proper relations between the sexes, the transaction between prostitute and client is not a simple market exchange” (1994, 216–17).

An integrated feminist analysis of sex work would acknowledge prostitution as a form of economic activity, but it would not abstract from the fact that this economic activity is engaged in primarily by women in order to service men. Indeed, this integrated feminist analysis would ask such questions as: What drives the market for sexual services? Who are consumers of sexual services? What influences consumers’ choices with regard to sexual service providers, sexual services sought, preferred location(s) for pursuing sexual services (e.g., rural/urban, domestic/foreign), and amount spent on sexual services?

That there is shockingly little empirical data to answer these questions reveals just how naturalized the existence of prostitution is for so many researchers. That these questions have only begun to be asked by feminists suggests the degree to which the hierarchical racial, gender, economic, and sexual relations that govern prostitution’s existence are (perhaps unconsciously) viewed as so overwhelmingly powerful as to be considered impervious to change. Rather than interrogate these power

dynamics themselves, therefore, researchers have focused on the symptoms of power and the best means by which to alleviate these symptoms. The “problem” of prostitution is thus most often considered to be a quandary about what to “do” about women sex workers, a question framed as a choice from among the three traditional policy options of abolitionism, decriminalization, or legalization/regulation. But this policy approach assumes that prostitution is a perennial feature of human life, a cultural formation that transcends culture, a relationship rooted in the natural categories of masculine and feminine, male and female.

By shifting our economic analysis of prostitution away from questions of women’s agency and sexuality and toward questions of men’s buying power and habits of sexual consumption, not only will we learn dramatically more about the character of sex work throughout the world, but we may also begin to see it as a cultural and economic formation that is subject to change, reform, and transformation. As Holly Wardlow has recently argued, it is difficult to fit every practice that involves women exchanging sex for money into the widespread (and primarily Western) sex work paradigm (2004). This is because the “globalization of terminology like *sex work* . . . assumes particular kinds of subject positions, motivations, and gendered identifications that may not be accurate for all women who exchange sex for money” (p. 1037).

Yet thinking of sex work in terms of *men’s* “subject positions, motivations, and gendered identifications” solves this difficulty. Wardlow describes the practices of “passenger women” among the Huli in Papua New Guinea, women who leave home in an attempt to abandon patriarchal family relations, and in the process have sex with numerous men, sometimes receiving a few dollars or small items in exchange. Wardlow notes that two of the major presuppositions of the feminist conceptions of sex work simply do not apply here—first, that women are sexually desirable objects, and second, that sex might be a form of work. Indeed, Huli culture believes *men* to be the objects of beauty and sexual desire, and dismisses the idea of paying for sex with women as ridiculous and contemptible. As Wardlow observes, this raises the more crucial question of *why* such sex for money exchanges happen at all. Significantly, she suggests that Huli men pay women for sex in order to construct a specific form of masculine identity:

At a broader level, Huli men are paying passenger women for a certain kind of masculinity that they associate with being modern. Young Huli men are often told that they must choose between one of two “roads,” or

ways of living in the world—*nupela rot* (the new or modern road) and *rot bilong tumbuna* (the ancestors' road). To adhere to the ancestors' road requires a man to build a house for himself and one for his wife; he must cook for himself, certainly when a wife is menstruating but ideally all the time; and he must learn the lineage myths and genealogies that serve as cultural capital during land disputes. Modern masculinity, in contrast, is associated with insouciance about gender-related taboos, obtaining knowledge through school and urban experience, cultivating a conquest orientation toward women, and displaying a certain degree of autonomy and transcendence of clan identity. Paying women for sex is a means for men to assert this modern masculinity: it shows that they worry little about women's bodily substances and that they can gain access to women without enmeshing themselves in the heavy web of kinship obligations entailed in marriage. (2004, 1028–29)

Although Huli passenger women's practices of sex work defy conceptualization by any of the three feminist positions set out in this article, nevertheless we can see these women as acting within a framework wherein *all* of their actions (both as sex workers and otherwise) can be understood as (dis)confirming various forms of masculine identification for the men they encounter. To become a passenger woman, as Wardlow argues, may be a form of resistance to certain expectations of female behavior (e.g., that she will marry the man chosen for her) that reinforce the authority and legitimacy of male patriarchs. This means that a passenger woman's father or clan leader may experience a depreciation of his power or a destabilization of his masculine identification upon her exchange of sex for money. As we see, however, the man who pays this same woman for sex may experience a *confirmation* of his own modern, contemporary masculinity. Understanding sex work from the perspective of masculinity in this context successfully diverts attention from the passenger woman to the gendered cultural configurations of power as the "problem" to be deciphered by feminist analysis. We see how the very category of "passenger woman" itself may have been produced through the unwitting intersection of various masculine desires, and the ways in which women's falling into this category can both serve and undermine different forms of masculine identification.

Noah Zatz has suggested that a primary difficulty with conceiving of prostitution as work is answering the question of what exactly is *produced* by it (1997, 283). This difficulty is solved, however, if, following both Wardlow and Kempadoo, we see that the major product of relations of prostitution is particular formations of manhood or masculinity. Amongst

the Huli, as we have seen, the men who solicit passenger women do so in order to confirm or produce a self-image of modern manliness. By contrast, as Davidson and Taylor have demonstrated, white Western sex tourists pursue business and holiday excursions to Southeast Asia in order to live out a “racially fantasized male power,” a masculine identity that can be seen as “the flip side of dissatisfaction with white Western women, including white Western prostitute women” whom these men find too self-determined and resistant to their desires (1999, 38). As Bishop and Robinson have shown, the Internet diaries of sex tourists to Thailand reveal the ways in which their solicitation of Thai prostitutes serves the function of simultaneously confirming and erasing the authors’ “dominant subject position, which like all dominant subject positions gets cast as progressive, liberating, commonsense, unquestioned, natural, logical, and unmarked” (2002, 21).¹⁷ Finally, limited survey data from a small group of convicted johns in West Coast America indicate that these men’s primary reasons for pursuing prostitutes were their desire to be with a woman who “likes to get nasty” and who is in some way “illicit or risky” (Monto 1999, 80; cf. Davidson 1998). Although all of these data are limited in scope, nevertheless we can see how they offer nascent insights into the ways in which masculine gender and sexual identities lead to prostitute solicitation for geographically specific groups of men.

Significantly, the American study found that no matter what the motivation of the prostitute solicitor, his reason for seeking out prostitutes was intensified and ranked as more important if he was a repeat customer (Monto 1999:81). In other words, the more often these men visited prostitutes, the more their motivations and incentives for doing so were strengthened and reinforced, confirming the suspicion that prostitution is not only a product of masculine desire and identification, but also a practice that confirms and reproduces it. While first-timers were nervous at the prospect of approaching a prostitute—indeed, some of the study participants had been nabbed by police decoys their first time out—repeat customers were not only more comfortable approaching prostitutes, but also more than twice as likely to feel “shy and awkward” about or “have difficulty” forming relationships with nonprostitute women. This

17. This experience of “unmarked” power cannot, in this case, be divorced from the nature of the medium through which it is conveyed—the Internet. However, Davidson has suggested it is possible that men’s use of prostitutes gives them access to a kind of male community they otherwise lack, whether through the tourist groups they spontaneously (but reliably) form together while abroad, by bragging to other men at home about their exploits, or, as Bishop and Robinson document, by reading about one another’s travels on the Internet (1998, 173–74).

suggests that men's use of sexual services may have a polarizing effect—it not only separates them out from other men, but also alienates them from nonprostitute women, insofar as it reproduces an already-existing anxiety regarding noncommercialized sexual relationships.

Since not all men seek out prostitutes, and not all men who seek out prostitutes do it (simply) because they are seeking sex (alternative reasons include companionship and care, or power and control), it is crucial that additional empirical research be directed toward critical scrutiny of prostitutes' clients. Davidson's 1998 research, wherein she analyzes the results of client interviews with men from eight different countries, suggests both the difficulty of understanding what exactly men "want" from prostitution, as well as determining what they "get" from it. Indeed, a sizable proportion of the men interviewed actively—although not necessarily consciously—understand or construct their interaction with sex workers as being about something "more" than just money. Davidson writes:

One of the striking features of interview work with clients is just how many of them wish to construct some kind of fiction of mutuality around their encounters with prostitutes. Clients often want to believe that, although the prostitute is a paid actor, in *their* particular case she enjoys her work and derives sexual and/or emotional satisfaction from her encounter with them. . . . [S]exual excitement often hinges on a paradox wherein the fantasist must simultaneously remain conscious of the fact that he or she controls and authors events and yet conceal this knowledge from him- or herself. (1998, 158–59)

Queen's observations about her own clients are similarly striking, insofar as her experience suggests that men do not always get exactly what they "want" from prostitutes:

Not every client comes to me joyful or even leaves joyful—in fact, with many men I see the curtain descends right after orgasm, and their open emotions close, their countenances go blank. Some are bitter about women, about sex. Their schizophrenic upbringing as men, after all, taught them that sex is wrong *and* that they should be able to have all of it they want. They are engaged in a hurtful dance with women that is powered by resentment and prolonged by their (and women's) inability to communicate successfully about the forbidden and the intimate. (1997a, 198)

Her observations, of course, are particular to her clients, presumably American men living on the West Coast. But both Davidson's and Queen's observations, coupled with the data offered by Monto, suggest

the complexity of formations of masculinity, masculine heterosexual desire, and the ways in which these produce motivations to seek out prostitutes.

There is, of course, no single, universal masculinity (just as there is no single, universal practice of prostitution), and no one description will resonate with every cultural formation of masculinity throughout the world. Moreover, it is important to remember that the masculine identification(s) reinforced by prostitution may differ from a culture's more general masculine identifications, because obviously not all men (or even most men, in many cultures) visit prostitutes. It is possible that the identification (re)produced by prostitution consolidates certain *aspects* of masculine identity, or produces a pathological form of mainstream masculinities by emphasizing some aspects of it to the exclusion of others. Specifying the relationship between these two formations, then, requires expanded empirical research not just into the solicitors of prostitutes, but also into the formations of masculinity that the larger culture demands and produces. Whether differences along these lines will emerge or not remains to be seen; nevertheless, it is crucial that they become part of our inquiry into the consumers of sexual services and their desires that drive the sexual market.

I think it is only by considering prostitution as a function of masculinity that sex work can be seen as a category that itself requires explanation, and therefore a political, cultural, and economic formation that is susceptible to transformation and change. This is not to say that prostitution is not or should not be considered a legitimate form of work, one that must be a viable and exploitation-free option for women who choose it. It is to say, however, that in order for prostitution to be a viable and exploitation-free option for women, it must no longer be an illegal, criminalized, stigmatized practice constituted by hierarchically gendered, racialized, and economic relations. Which is simply to say that if prostitution were a viable and exploitation-free option for women, it would not be prostitution anymore. It would, as Sex Radical feminists argue, be something else entirely—a practice of sexuality, perhaps, or therapy or spirituality. The abstracted, “philosophical” definition of prostitution as an exchange of sex for money denies the situatedness of prostitution as *labor*, as the labor of *women*, and in particular the labor of migrant women, women of color, and economically vulnerable women. To yearn for the day when any and every woman might be able to embrace an exploitation- and violence-free practice of prostitution as her profession is to desire that which is as yet unthinkable—for what would prostitution

be without these things? Would it still be work? Would it still be work *for women*? Because the definition of prostitution does not reside somewhere outside of its concrete historical occurrences, but is rather embedded precisely and *only* within its practices, there can be no answer to these questions without further empirical research and analysis of prostitution as a function of masculine identity and desire, for it is these that drive the market for women's sexual services. Only then will we begin to grasp the possibility for *radical* political transformation, for a women's labor and sexuality that can become practices of freedom.

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