

From Abject to Subject: Some Thoughts on Sex Work as a Missing Link in Feminist Understandings of Sexuality

Kathryn Payne is a writer, steward, labour educator and slut. Recently, her work has been published in *Brazen Femme*, *Bent and Geeks*, *Misfits and Outlaws*. Her book of poems, *Longing at Least is Constant*, was published by Broken Jaw Press in 1998.

Abstract

This essay presents some thoughts on the framing of sex work at various stages in the development of Western women's movements. The tenets of victim feminism are critiqued. Observations and impressions from the author's sex work experience support the need for sex worker participation in feminist theorizing about sexuality.

Résumé

Cet article présente certaines pensées sur le cadre de l'industrie du sexe à différentes étapes dans le développement des mouvements de femmes occidentaux. Les principes du féminisme de la victime sont critiqués. Les observations et les impressions tirées de l'expérience de l'auteure dans l'industrie du sexe supportent le besoin d'avoir la participation de la travailleuse de l'industrie du sexe dans l'élaboration de la théorie féministe sur la sexualité.

Since my temporary, and thus quite typical, stint working in the sex trade (Payne 2002), I have been very aware of the disjuncture between common cultural and feminist narratives of sex work (and sex workers) and the general banality and quotidian oddity of the sex work that I did. While I do not expect my women's studies alma mater to invite me back on career day, I do consider being paid for my sexual labour consistent with my feminist convictions. As feminists seem to be ambivalent about sex workers, sex workers are profoundly and justifiably divided on whether or not feminism represents or represses us (Stella 2006). The women that I have met through sex worker networks and activism are among the most diverse, tough-assed, independent and unapologetic bunch I have ever had the pleasure to call community. Here I offer some thoughts on the history and political potential of the complicated relationship between the movements we have called feminist and those women workers who have been called so many unflattering names.

Narratives of sex worker agency and the stories of practising sex workers themselves have, for the most part, been excluded from the history of Western feminism. The theme of "saving sex workers," on the other hand, recurs at pivotal moments in the history of feminist organizing - often constituting feminisms that disavow and disallow sex workers' expertise in and knowledge of human sexuality. In taking up the vexing questions of what sex is and should be, much feminist rhetoric continues today to pathologize and discount sex worker agency, expertise and labour rights in the name of a feminism that seeks to "protect women." Despite the increasing production of scholarship and activism that focuses on the agency and labour rights of sex workers, sex work remains an important missing link in feminist theories of sexuality. As "third wave" or "postmodern" feminisms grapple still with questions of sexuality, it is clear that in order to best explore and understand women's sexual agency and in order to

think through sexual practices that centre on women's pleasure and well being, we need to encourage conversations that foreground sex workers' experience and skill in this arena.

Feminist Respectability on Sex Workers' Backs

Sex work is hugely emblematic. As new and more complex understandings of the activism and ideas that constitute the history - as well as the present state - of women's movements in North America are produced (Cobble 2004), those exclusions that are constitutive of "feminism" increasingly emerge. Historically, the stories of sex workers are an important missing piece in those accounts of actions and analyses that came to be counted as feminist in North America. That the stories of sex workers are missing from the accounts begs the question of which subjects' interests were served by the specific kinds of political, economic and cultural challenges that were mounted in the name of a nascent feminist movement. In the historical period that has been referred to as "the first wave," the display and discussion of sexuality in the West were deeply marked by a classed normative morality and the cultural shifts accompanying the industrial revolution. These included changing meanings attached to sexual practices, as evidenced by the numerous taxonomies and pathologies constructed by the late-nineteenth century sexologists.

As historical scholarship (Doezema 2001; Hobson 1987; Strange 1995) has demonstrated, during the 1800s, the figure of the prostitute as fallen woman and abject illustration of male depravity, was central to middle-class white women's claims to respectability and increased political power, as well as to their moralizing project of social welfare, anti-prostitution, and anti-vice legal reforms. Indeed, scholars argue that the figure of the prostitute was central to early articulations of white middle class, English-speaking feminism. The racialized prostitute in particular, as Doezeema argues - drawing on Antoinette Burton's (1994) work - served to forward British suffragettes' claims to full participation in the privileges of empire, among other things.

The ways in which Indian prostitutes were portrayed by Victorian feminists had many similarities with the portrayal of working-class prostitutes "at home." As "suffering bodies" of prostitutes at home

(in England, America and elsewhere) served to provide Victorian feminists a way of arguing the necessity of their political participation in domestic government, so the "enslaved" Indian prostitute served to demonstrate the need for women's involvement in the politics of empire in order to purify it and stop the suffering caused by men (Doezema 2000, para 24).

The spectre of the wretched prostitute - associated with the weak moral character of working/servant-class and racialized women, the sullied victim of male deviousness and caprice, and with her lazy, irresponsible preference for "selling her body" over honest work - continues to haunt Western culture and feminism. Researchers continue to conclude that even today "female prostitutes are legally and socially constructed as a separate class of persons, and as such are subjected (to varying degrees) to a range of civil and human rights abuses" (O'Connell Davidson 2002, 84).

Victim Feminism

The absence of articulations of sex workers' agency (and the particular class investments that that absence belies), and the sensationalist narratives of sex work and victimized sex workers¹ in the formative historical moments of North American feminism are important components for understanding how various groups and activists were able to articulate a distinctly un-sexy, although nonetheless titillating, victim and harm-focused, heterosexist and somewhat determinist analysis of human sexuality as the "official" (and often women's studies-endorsed) Anglo-feminist line in the late 1970s and the 80s. This set of moralizing reactions, often to representations of sex workers or sex work itself - which I call victim feminism² - can be understood in the context of its genesis in the ashes of a much-lauded "sexual revolution" that avoided genuine engagement with women's economic and social subordination generally, and women's sexual pleasure specifically. I cannot disagree with Catharine MacKinnon's claim that "sexual freedom is not and will not be equally delivered," but I balk at the revival-tent tone of her conclusion: "no matter how many women are sacrificed on its altar" (MacKinnon 1987, 15).

Dworkin and MacKinnon's presentation and articulation of pornography - the products of the

work of sex workers in a very particular industry - as the vehicle of women's exploitation, as inciting violence against women and as violence against women in itself, exhibits a rather oversimplified understanding of the effects and implications of representation. In addition, these narratives function to silence and sideline the diversity of stories about working in the sex trade in favour of a monolithic narrative of abuse. This narrative provides no novel insights into anyone's sexuality, but rather constitutes another historical moment requiring the abjectification of sex workers to prop up a "respectable" (read righteous and gunning for state-mandated power) feminism and its claims to a modicum of political and cultural power.

As I see it, "prostitutes" in MacKinnon's work function as a metaphor for all women's sexual exploitation. She asks readers to "consider how similar the condition of prostitutes is not only to that of women who make a more permanent sex-for-survival exchange, but to those of us who must make it daily" (1987, 25). For MacKinnon and other victim-feminists, sexual exploitation is fundamental, supported by all the economic and cultural exploitation of the day, indeed, is the end result of, the apex, the ultimate manifestation of the violent patriarchal system.³ MacKinnon's argument draws upon and supports what Wendy Chapkis calls "...one of the most profound misunderstandings about sex work": the idea "that it involves the purchase of a prostitute's body for indiscriminate sexual use" (Chapkis 2000, 181). The misunderstanding is that the client's fee buys unmediated, unmitigated access to the woman's sexuality, to her body. On such misunderstanding rests MacKinnon's claim that the client purchases the sex worker's submission to sexual violence and violation. Within such logic, the woman/prostitute cannot possibly have boundaries because she has no power in the interaction.

This one-dimensional reading of power dynamics in sexual or sexualized interactions has been queried by many current theorists. In the collection *Jane Sexes It Up*, Paula Austin responds to the similar simplification of femme gender performance, as expressed by another feminist theorist:

[Susan] Brownmiller is right about femininity reassuring men of their rightful

dominance. But she misses the power in it, for me and for my mother. She misses the art, the craft, the resistance at its core. She misses how looking like a proper woman can provide cover for far deeper survivals.

(Austin 2002, 104)

Rather than engaging with the agency of sex workers and their working conditions, victim feminism uses the figure of the prostitute as a metaphor for the vulnerability of women who have few resources and little power to withstand the abuse by men who have both. MacKinnon's writing conflates prostitution with rape, battery, sexual harassment, incest, pay inequity and forced maternity, thereby setting the stage for later abolitionist conflation of sex work and slavery, which advocate an end to sex work of all kinds.

Victim feminism, as an attempt to theorize what sex is and what sex for women should be, gets derailed when it cedes the territory of active sexuality, and of pleasure in sexual representation, to men, and reduces sex to the principle tool in women's exploitation. (Thereby framing sex once again as degrading.) The famous works produced around anti-pornography campaigns by MacKinnon and Dworkin do not exaggerate the social and economic vulnerability of American women. They do, however, uncritically rely on dominant and hackneyed cultural narratives about aggressive masculine and passive feminine sexualities, and marshal in ill-defined, emotionally loaded terminology (such as "objectification," or equating sadomasochism with "torture," etc.). They reduce a wide diversity of sexual practices to the "use and abuse" of women by men (and by the odd "lesbian sadomasochist"). Finally, victim feminism has failed to present a model of women's (or men's) sexuality that is, or at least has the potential to be, affirming, empowering, or attractive; advocating instead for prohibitionist cultural changes such as censorship and increased state controls over sexual expression and practice.

The question of sex cannot be detached from a concept of feminism as constituted within the terms of Victorian discourses. If we understand the exclusion of sex workers from the ranks of the early women's movement as one of the central forms of disavowal, which underpin the discourses of Western

feminism, we can begin shedding a slightly different light on the "sex wars" of the 1980s. Rather than thinking of the "sex radicals" as a new challenge to old feminist constructions of female sexuality and women's agency, we can think of these ideological struggles as a return of the historically repressed: the pathologized and criminalized sexual perspectives and subject positions of queer women and sex workers. Therefore, if so-called "third wave" feminism seeks to address the exclusions that have framed and underpinned mainstream women's movements and the production of feminist theory in the academy, an insistence on the decriminalization of prostitution and on full labour and human rights for sex workers globally must precede, frame and inform our discussions of women's sexuality. First, I believe, we must assert ownership and control of our own sexualities and sexual labour; then we can assert and proliferate models of women's sexual pleasure.

Residual Ideology

Victim feminist discourses and understandings, despite their historical specificity and despite more than two decades of attempts at refuting their premises, are neither passé nor without contemporary proponents. The negative effects of victim feminists' legal and cultural interventions around sexual expression and practices impact sex workers in particular. In the name of feminism, some "anti-violence" activists continue to join the criminal justice system and fundamentalists of many stripes in maligning sex work, rather than working with sex workers to improve conditions and options in the trade. We continue to debate "The Rights and Wrongs of Prostitution" (O'Connell Davidson 2002) in ways that we do not debate the moral "rights and wrongs" of the garment industry, but rather push for improved working conditions and full human rights for those workers.

Articles such as O'Connell Davidson's leave me with a sense that sex work is still operating as a foil or figure in a rhetoric that claims neutrality. Discussions of sex work provide a potent forum for asserting impressions of what sex is and what agendas for sex should be. (My text here is no exception to that). O'Connell Davidson's article, for example, deploys Marxist theoretical tools "to explore the specificity of prostitution as a form of exploitation"

(2002, 94). She rejects the "liberal concept of property in the person"⁴ and posits that the route to genuine sexual freedom (outside of capitalism, patriarchy, etc.) requires "revising the sovereign sexual subject" (95) through revaluing masturbation so that "no one would 'need' to sublimate and displace masturbation by paying a prostitute to temporarily surrender aspects of her will" (96).

While I do not wish to discount the entire body of O'Connell Davidson's research on the sex trade, I find myself suspicious of the sexual utopia constructed in her work. Her advocating for masturbation as an alternative to the sex trade echoes advocating abstinence as an alternative to safer sex. I am less interested in pursuing abstract sexual utopias outside of the structures that inform and have formed my sexuality and am more interested in addressing feminine sexual pleasure and agency - however imperfectly - here and now. I believe that the debate about sex work within feminism continues to serve as a lightning rod for conflicts that arise from differing understandings of sex - and perhaps feminism - itself.

However dense the research and rhetoric, the determinant of one's position on sex work seems to me to be rooted in complicated, and mostly unacknowledged, identifications, individual sexual histories and preferences - basically, in how one understands sex and imagines sex work. I would argue that it is often how one imagines sex work and the relationship of those fantasies to one's particular physical or sexual boundaries and desires that shapes responses to, and positions on, sex work and sex workers. If one can imagine that my experience of performing, with strangers, a wide variety of actions commonly associated with penile penetration and male orgasm in our culture has not been particularly uncomfortable or was frequently pleasant, one may be able to conceive of workers getting satisfaction from their experience in the sex trade, and almost certainly from being paid to do so. Whereas, if one conceives of those same forms of sexual contact with strangers as always already a violation - and it seems to me that many women do - one should not engage in sex work. One also may want to help others who would experience this as a violation, avoid such occupations. If, however, one can imagine sex work otherwise, one might be more willing to query the legal prohibitions

and stigma that endanger sex workers and support measures that would make sex workers able to operate without being harassed by the police and state, losing access to their children, or risking violence. In fact, one may wish to support wider social change that would enable more sex workers to experience a range of choices and supports.

To adequately and rigorously think about women's sexuality, and especially sexual agency, we need to credit and recognize the validity of the sexual experience and expertise of sex workers (including sex workers whose stories are less rosy than mine). The rhetorical figure of the prostitute (however handy in whipping up moral panic) must be recognized as the foil that it has functioned as, and be discarded in favour of multidimensional understandings, which are able to conceive of "sex worker" as one subject position (like teacher, activist or lesbian) among many that a woman may occupy over a lifetime. The work to re-imagine sex work has certainly begun in some schools of feminist thought. This change is signalled, for example, by the increasing use of the term "sex worker," and by scholarship that begins to address the legal and labour issues faced by particular groups of sex trade workers (Brock 1998; Chapkis 2000; Chateauvert 2005; Nagle 1997; Namaste 2005; Queen 1997; Ross 2005). However, until sex work is decriminalized and until it becomes safer for sex workers to come out, the material and sexual experience of living, breathing, and working sex workers will remain largely buried under a pile of generally inaccurate (but certainly productive) representations in popular culture and victim feminist dogma alike.

Sexual Labour

Ignoring sex worker agency has allowed victim feminists to put the cart before the horse by framing sex work as a source, prototype or distillation of sexist exploitation instead of examining the impact of various social inequities on labour conditions in specific areas of the trade.⁵ Conditions in the sex trade and sex workers' experiences of their work remain deeply imbedded in cultural understandings of femininity, sexuality, class and transgression. But sex worker experiences are anything but homogeneous, instead they vary geographically, by area of the trade and over time. Unarguably, at this moment in history,

the sex trade globally is steeped in and constituted by the effects of a racist and sexist distribution of economic power and resources. In my own limited experience working in the sex trade in Toronto, men are generally the clientele and often it is men who have the capital to start mid-size to larger (and even trans-national) sex trade businesses, while it is women who form the workforce, who can become managers and are often small business owners. In addition, I remember being taken aback by the blatant racism that informs everything from hiring practices and the division of labour in third-party establishments, to the exoticized marketing (what one of my managers in the trade used to call "ethnic niche marketing") and differential remuneration of independent (self-employed) workers.⁶

The sex trade generally involves the same enormously problematic and racialized aesthetics of feminine beauty marketed by the fashion industry, the cosmetics industry, the diet/exercise industry, much popular culture and most mass media products. I get a kick out of imagining abolitionists attempting to save supermodels from themselves and their "traffickers/pimps." In her research into worker autonomy and control in the sex trade, Chapkis discovered that "[w]hile appearance rules are generally clearly defined and rigorously enforced by management, even self-employed workers and independent contractors are under pressure to discipline their bodies to conform to what they perceive to be customer preferences" (2000, 187). Despite my acceptable slenderness and dyed-blond whiteness, I would definitely have been considered a bigger asset to most of my bosses if my bra size had been more substantial. However, I did not find, when they got right down to it (so to speak), that my clients required airbrushed aesthetic perfection as much as they needed friendly permission to get what they wanted sexually. I also observed a much wider variety of shapes, ages and types of women working in the sex trade (suggesting a wider variety of client tastes) than popular culture and adult entertainment advertising would lead us to believe.

As a result of my own sex work, I also found myself differently interpellated by cultural prescriptions around women's attractiveness and value. The nagging insecurity about physical appearance that is a fairly common experience for media-saturated

North American women receded substantially in the light of my clients' willingness to pay money to look at and touch me, as well as through my relationships with my coworkers. I have talked to many sex workers who share this experience of increased confidence. Often, these women express regret that they didn't see their own attractiveness until they began to work in the sex trade. In addition, performing sex work can denaturalize - or at least reconfigure one's relationship to - the concept of "feminine beauty," including exoticizing stereotypes, by making evident the effort, time and money put into tanning, lightening, plucking, augmenting, shrinking, firming, softening, perfuming and outfitting our bodies.

While sex for money remains much maligned, this exchange is merely an extension of common cultural assumptions about the exchange that structures mainstream heterosexuality and gender roles (think talk show episodes such as "She married him for his money"). Like much other domestic and reproductive labour, the work necessary to incite desire ("being pretty") and elicit orgasm has been culturally framed as natural to women and occasionally as effort, but rarely as work. Entitlement to the products of that work (active desire and sexual satisfaction) is framed as a natural quality of masculinity. Thus, the all too common double standard of promiscuous men as studs (complimentary, following their nature) and promiscuous women as sluts (degraded, derogatory) persists.

An example of how this gendered division of sexual labour is embedded in the practice of heterosexuality can be found in common Western dating rituals. I think I can safely argue that it is commonly understood that if the masculine party pays for "the date," "he" has invested in the evening out (and may or may not expect sex as a return on this investment), whereas the hours of work and significant cost involved in grooming and outfitting the feminine party are largely taken for granted (and, sadly, seldom result in the woman expecting sexual compensation - or satisfaction). This example points to the differential capital that each party is understood to bring to the exchange. The shape of this exchange is unlikely to be altered substantively until men are no longer culturally framed (and materially positioned) as primary economic producers and sexual actors.

The fact remains that when I went into sex work, I made more cash for taking my clothes off, tending to clients' sexual pleasure and exaggerating my own than I made as a contingent college teacher using the skills and training accumulated in the pursuit of my two university degrees. MacKinnon and others have claimed this as a stellar example of the ways that women are valued for their sexuality and not for their skills or labour (MacKinnon 1987). This holds true only if one accepts the neo-Victorian framing of prostitution as not-work (work, you'll remember, being that which whores are too lazy to do), as a passively "selling my body." Than-Dam Truong (1990) reframes sex work as sexual labour⁷ - and thus payment as remuneration for my particular sexual efforts, abilities and skills. Truong argues that sexual labour has been socially organized in a variety of forms in different times and by different cultures: from wet nursing and temple prostitution, to commercial sex and biological reproduction. At the present moment in history, capitalism has commoditized labour, and as Doezema relates: "...commercial sex work - commodified sexual labour - is specific to a capitalist arrangement, open to the similar kinds of pressures and manipulations that any other waged labour faces. It thus forms a primary source within a capitalist economy for exploitation and wealth" (Kempadoo 2003, para 8, emphasis added).

I certainly experienced my jobs in the sex trade as work. They involved a renting of my time, as does most paid work; a uniform of sorts; an exertion of effort requiring me to draw on my (largely informal and very gendered) training in massage, communication, acting, nurture, and negotiation; and the judicious application of the abilities and skills I'd gained in my unpaid explorations of various sex acts, to produce the client's sexual pleasure and orgasm(s).⁸ My bosses made money off of my labour. I noticed differences in working conditions - different hours, wages, health and safety standards - from job to job. Finally, it was clear to me as a lefty that, like most of the low status, seldom-unionized jobs I'd known, the only substantive means of resisting draconian managerial policies (insisting workers volunteer one day a week answering the phones, for example) was quitting.

While trans-national comparative research is needed on sex worker wage rates, in my experience, sexual labour can be fairly lucrative relative to women's wages in other occupations. As one of my coworkers once put it - there's gold in these folds. Somehow, at the same time that caring for kids pays little or nothing; that cleaning up is low status, low pay or no pay kind of gig; that most "women's work" has been relegated to the cheap labour heap of creeping capitalism; sexual labour can often (but not always) still command a relative premium. There are reasons for this that have as little to do with a measurable degree of effort as hefty CEO salaries do.

The dominant organization of sexuality into culturally prescribed monogamy in North America, in tandem with a proliferation of sexual and sexualized cultural products (and sex as a key marketing tool), certainly generates demand for sex workers' services - as well as for couple therapy, divorce lawyers, dating services, singles bars and hotel rooms. At the same time, the illegality of the trade and whore-stigma limit the labour supply. This, alongside the availability of more socially acceptable and/or less demanding work for women, the higher wages paid to men/clients, and other factors (such as the high value placed on sexual activity in constructions of heterosexual masculinity), largely explains the relatively good wages paid for sex work in most North American cities.

Nonetheless, these wage rates vary wildly, depending on the type of work and number of clients. Lower sex work wages in certain places and during certain periods may reflect a scarcity of other good jobs open to women, flooded sexual labour markets, reduced social stigma and variations in legal and other risks. Certainly, research into the migration of sex workers suggests their attempts to move to areas with less flooded markets and higher remuneration, often despite the increased legal risks related to migration.⁹ Since, as Chapkis points out, "Legal status has a profound effect on a worker's power vis-à-vis clients and employers" (2000, 183), migrant sex workers are rendered doubly vulnerable at work by a lack of avenues for legal immigration and anti-prostitution laws that criminalize them, forcing them further underground.

At the same time that feminists argue to have women's reproductive labour understood as

producing forms of capital in the United Nation's System of National Accounts (Waring 1988), and thus remunerated as such (hopefully with the end result of increasing women's economic agency), abolitionists heap scorn upon - and deny women's agency in - sex workers' conversion of their sexual labour into capital in the global market. Abolitionist organizations such as the Coalition Against Trafficking in Women (CATW) actively object to and attempt to obstruct the creation of immigration policies that could enable sex workers to legally cross borders in search of more lucrative markets for their sexual labour (and away from the lower wages created by flooding of the sexual labour market) (Doezema 2000). Indeed abolitionist organizations launch scathing "feminist" critiques of states that come anywhere close to recognizing the labour rights of sex workers - or "state-sponsored prostitution" (Raymond 2003). Perhaps a more strategic argument could be made to nation states whose coffers benefit substantially from the income generated by sex workers (whether through sex tourism, taxes on the revenues of the adult entertainment industry, or income taxes paid by sex workers), that a portion of these funds be re-invested in relevant social programs (child care, legal aid, accessible and voluntary health care) and other supports for these women workers.

Thanks in part to their neat fit with other common cultural narratives (from Christian fundamentalism to music videos), the discourses of abolitionism and victim feminism are alive and well. The effects of these ideologies can be seen particularly in the reception (or absence of it) of more than three decades of Canadian sex worker activism in more established "feminist" activist communities. While North American women's studies itself may host a hotbed of nuanced "third wave" discussion, many women's organizations "on the ground" seem to be engaged in the work of upholding a victim feminist status quo. In Canada, this can be seen in growing struggles over the continued articulation of sex work as a form of violence against women within the women's antiviolence movement. A good example of this can be found in the heated debate over resolutions concerning sex work at the Canadian Association of Sexual Assault Centres' 2005 Convention.

Additionally, the work of building alliances between sex workers' labour organizations and the

larger labour movement in Canada has been repeatedly stymied or stalled - apparently often when these proposals reach internal union Women's Committees. Pressured by transsexual and queer women activists' work in their own unions, the Canadian Labour Congress did produce a draft discussion paper on the sex trade in the aftermath of the media coverage of sex worker murders in Vancouver. However, sex worker organizations' attempts to participate in the drafting of and discussions around this document have proved fruitless. Like the now-defunct federal Subcommittee on Solicitation Laws of the Standing Committee on Justice and Human Rights, which emerged in the same media moment, little seems to have come out of this for sex workers. Canadian sex workers have seen nothing like the support evidenced for sex worker organizing in the United Kingdom, where in 2003 the International Union of Sex Workers affiliated with Britain's General Union (the GMB, well known for organizing disrespected workers), formed the GMB's Sex Work & Fantasy Branch (BBC 2003) and doubled their initial membership within two years (J. Clamen, personal communication, Oct. 27, 2005). Requests for statements of union support for sex worker labour organizations, such as the Canadian Guild of Erotic Labour, and sex workers' attempts to address mainstream labour bodies regarding sexual labour rights continue to be met here largely with a lack of response (with a few notable exceptions such as the Newfoundland CUPE president's support of the International Union of Sex Workers (CBC 2004)).

Feminist Sexualities

Many sex workers point to their work as a source of sexual agency and pleasure, as well as income. I tend to miss the work when I'm not employed as a sex worker.¹⁰ Sometimes I miss it for the incredibly clear-cut boundaries of the interactions. Other times I miss it for the perks of the job, or for the relief of not having to leave my not-particularly-normative sexuality at home when I go to work. I miss the affirmation of myself as a sexual being that is embedded in working as a whore. I believe my scepticism at the claim that there is some kind of contradiction between a feminist politic and good hot (even raunchy) sex is largely due to my experiences in the sex trade. As part of a

project that is certainly not the sole province of sex workers, many present-day feminists are working to expand women's sexual possibilities, increase knowledge of the breadth and variety of sexual practices and create spaces that encourage women's sexual choices.

A feminist, sex-worker-generated theory of sexuality would envision women's autonomous sexualities and women's sexual agency as central, asserting that many of the realities of work in the sex trade challenge the dominant cultural (and misogynist) construction of sexuality. Sex work debunks the myths that sex acts are inherently private and attached to "romantic love" (which is, of course, generally understood to be monogamous). My experiences as an escort and professional dominatrix also led me to query the framings of the female body as penetrated (never penetrating), submissive and vulnerable, and of male sexualities as dangerous (both premises dear to victim feminism). As Mirha-Soliel Ross (2004) points out in a moving monologue near the end of her brilliant one-woman-show "Yapping Out Loud: Tales of an Unrepentant Whore," most sex work clients are respectful and straightforward, and some are downright tender and kind. These men render the stereotypes of aggressive, unscrupulous, mashing Johns laughable; they also suffer under their own stigma and fears of legal sanction.

Until quite recently, the history of Western feminism has been that of social movements constituted on the disavowal of sex worker agency and sexual expertise, as well as the denial of the possibility of feminist sex workers. Imbedded in their socio-cultural contexts, feminist theories of sexuality have tended towards narratives that abjectify and pathologize sex workers, resulting in impoverished understandings of women's sexual agency, pleasure and sexual labour. Sex work remains an important missing link in feminist theories of sexuality, despite an increasing number of substantive scholarly projects focusing on the agency and labour rights of sex workers. I have argued here that in order to sufficiently theorize what sex is and what sex could be for women, sex workers' expertise, experience and concerns must be privileged.

It is time for North American women's movements to recognize and embrace the sexual expertise and experience of sex workers. It is time to

prioritize the labour rights of sex workers globally, and demand an end to the criminalization of remuneration for sexual labour. It is time to deflate the figure of the degenerate and damaged whore, as well as her companion, the liberated and righteous good-girl feminist. It is time to challenge the ways that women and girls remain complicit in the social policing and de-clawing of feminine sexual agency - another common function of the spectre of the whore. If we are truly attempting to develop understandings of women's sexuality that are heterogeneous, inclusive and attentive to the effects of women's intersecting subjectivities, we all - sex workers and non-sex workers - have our work cut out for us.

Acknowledgement

The author would like to thank Chanelle Gallant, Trish Yeo, Gwen Bartleman and Kirsti Wynne for their insightful comments and support.

Endnotes

1. The stories of "white slavery" analyzed in Hobson (1987) and Doezema (2000) as well as the frequent reiterations of Linda Marchiano's accounts of abuse while working in the sex trade are good examples of these narratives.
2. Obviously, there are many pitfalls in generating taxonomies of feminisms. I have no desire to reify Naomi Wolf's myopic or Camille Paglia's reactionary dichotomies. This term, however, allows consideration of the ways that feminist theory and political claims have tended to frame sexuality and vulnerability to violence as inherently synonymous for women.
3. I want to be clear that I am not minimizing or denying the pervasiveness of violence against women, abuse or the harm in sexual assault. Systemic sexism and male violence continue to be pressing problems today. I do not see these as phenomena rooted in sexuality, however.
4. O'Connell Davidson's argument echoes MacKinnon both in the ways she frames pro-sex work arguments as "liberal" and her premise that clients purchase away the agency of sex workers.
5. There is an urgent need for more research into the multinational corporate structures, small business practices and differing labour conditions across the sex trade as an occupational sector, rather than individual (if scintillating) portrayals of particular sex

workers or workplaces. More cogent analyses - centering sex worker's agency and experience - of the macro-economics and labour relations of sex work are required to address the hyperbolic assertions of fundamentalists and abolitionists in their attempts to incite moral panic and legal repression.

6. The growing body of research into specific working conditions reveals many particular configurations of racist discrimination in sex work. For example, Chapkis' research in the United States and Netherlands found that "because of...racism on the part of managers and clients, women of color are disproportionately clustered in the least well-paid and most stigmatized sectors of the sex industry such as street prostitution" (Chapkis 2000,187).

7. This is a framing that I initially resisted because of my own investment in understanding sex as intimate and leisurely while understanding work as impersonal and less-than-voluntary; because of my distaste at the commodification of everything; and because of a reluctance to think of the sex that I have with my lovers for free as work. I came to value this approach after much thought about the pleasures in other forms of feminized, often unpaid and exploited reproductive labour (cooking, child rearing, domestic work, etc.) and a conversation with a friend who reminded me of the environmentalists' strategy of attaching monetary value to natural resources - exploited for free under capitalism - in order to render the work done by rivers, trees, etc., visible and measurable.

8. There is a disjuncture between the common North American heterosexual male assumption that women orgasm from vaginal stimulation, and the fact that few women even have vaginal orgasms. This fact, combined with concern for male egos and a culture of poor sexual communication, means that, unfortunately, believably exaggerating sexual pleasure is a skill that the vast majority of sexually active North American heterosexual women learn early in their sexual careers.

9. The movements of sex workers for work in North America also needs further study. In the past few years, I have met a number of street workers who have left Vancouver citing the fear and low morale caused by the disappearances and murders of as many as seventy sex workers there as reasons for heading east.

10. As I have in previous publications (Payne 2002), I need to be clear that my experience of sex work is, of course, inflected by the particular employment I obtained and my various privileges (whiteness, graduate education, slender body type, queerness). I also chose to leave the uncertainties and stigma of sex work for a unionized job with a pension. Chapkis reminds us that, "while not every sex worker can choose to work part time or to transition out of sex work into equally lucrative employment, for those who can, the experience of sexual labour is significantly improved" (2000, 200).

References

Austin, Paula. "I Learned from the Best: My Mother Was a High-femme Whore," *Jane Sexes it Up: True Confessions of Feminist Desire*, Merri Lisa Johnson, ed. New York: Four Walls Eight Windows, 2002, pp. 91-105.

British Broadcasting Corporation [BBC]. "Union Launches Sex Worker Drive," (2003, Dec. 17). Retrieved October 22, 2005, from <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/uk_news/3326429.stm>.

Brock, Deborah. *Making Work, Making Trouble: Prostitution as a Social Problem*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1998.

Burton, Antoinette. *Burdens of History: British Feminists, Indian Women and Imperial Culture, 1865-1915*. Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1994.

Canadian Broadcasting Corporation [CBC] News Online. (2004, Sept. 21). "Union Discusses Call to Organize Prostitutes." Retrieved September 21, 2005, from <<http://www.cbc.ca/story/canada/national/2004/09/21/prostitutes040921.htm>>

Chapkis, Wendy. "Power and Control in the Commercial Sex Trade," *Sex for Sale: Prostitution, Pornography and the Sex Industry*, Weitzer, ed. New York: Routledge, 2000, pp. 181-201.

Chateauvert, Melinda. "What's a Working Girl to Do? Sex Workers' Views on Management in the Commercial Sex Industry." Presented at Labouring Feminism and

Feminist Working Class History in North America and Beyond. University of Toronto, Sept. 29-Oct. 2nd 2005.

Cobble, Dorothy S. *The Other Women's Movement: Workplace Justice and Social Rights in Modern America*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2004.

Doezema, Jo. "Ouch! Western Feminists' 'Wounded Attachment' to the 'Third World Prostitute'," (2000). Retrieved January 02, 2006 from <<http://www.walnet.org/csis/papers/doezema-ouch.html>> (A later version of this paper appears in *Feminist Review* 67 (Spring 2001): 16-38).

Hobson, Barbara M. *Uneasy Virtue: the Politics of Prostitution and the American Reform Tradition*. New York: Basic Books, 1987.

Kempadoo, Kamala. "Reconceptualizing Prostitution," *Lolapress*, 9-1998 (2003). Retrieved October 15, 2006 from <http://www.lolapress.org/artenglish/kempe9.htm>

MacKinnon, Catharine A. *Feminism Unmodified: Discourses on Life and Law*. Cambridge Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1987.

Nagle, Jill, ed. *Whores and Other Feminists*. New York: Routledge, 1997.

Namaste, Viviane. *Sex Change, Social Change: Reflections on Identity, Institutions and Imperialism*. Toronto: Women's Press, 2005.

O'Connell Davidson, Julia. "The Rights and Wrongs of Prostitution," *Hypatia* 17.2 (2002): 84-98.

Payne, Kathryn. "Whores and Bitches Who Sleep with Women," *Brazen Femme: Queering Femininity*, Chloe Brushwood Rose and Anna Camilleri, eds. Vancouver: Arsenal Pulp Press, 2002, pp. 47-56.

Queen, Carol. *Real Live Nude Girl: Chronicles of Sex-positive Culture*. San Francisco: Cleis Press, 1997.

Raymond, Janice. "Ten Reasons for Not Legalizing Prostitution and a Legal Response to the Demand for

Prostitution," *Prostitution, Trafficking and Traumatic Stress*, Melissa Farley, ed. Binghamton: Haworth Press, 2003, pp. 315-32.

Ross, Becky. "'Troublemakers' in Tassels and G-strings: Striptease Dancers and the Union Question in Vancouver, 1960-1980." Presented at *Labouring Feminism and Feminist Working Class History in North America and Beyond*. University of Toronto, Sept. 29-Oct. 2nd 2005.

Strange, Carolyn. *Girl Problem: the Perils and Pleasures of the City, 1880-1930*. Toronto, ON: University of Toronto Press, 1995.

Stella, l'amie de Maimie. *eXXXpressions: Forum XXX Proceedings*. Montreal: Stella, 2006.

Truong, Than-Dam. *Sex, Money and Morality: Prostitution and Tourism in South- East Asia*. London, UK: Zed Books, 1990.

Waring, Marilyn. *If Women Counted: a New Feminist Economics*. New York: Harper and Row, 1988.