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THIRTEEN

WRITING SEX WORK ONLINE:
THE CASE OF BELLE DE JOUR**Debra Ferreday¹**

Abstract: This article examines responses in the British media to the autobiographical writings of Brooke Magnanti, known as Belle de Jour. In her blog and in the related book and television series, *Intimate Adventures of a London Call-Girl*, published anonymously, Belle de Jour details her largely positive experiences as a highly paid sex worker. A key aim of this article is to examine how Belle's self-authorship becomes problematic for media accounts of sexual labor, and how her multiple and intersecting identity performances challenge widely accepted myths about what constitutes reality and fantasy.

Writing Sex Work Online: Belle de Jour and the problem of authenticity

Unless you have been a sex worker, or know one intimately, you have No. Fucking. Clue. (Belle de Jour, cited in Saner, 2008).

One of the best-known contemporary autobiographical writers on sex work is the blogger Belle de Jour. Belle de Jour is the *nom de plume* of Dr. Brooke Magnanti, a research scientist at Bristol University, who subsidized her graduate studies by working as a high-class prostitute in London for eighteen months between 2003 and 2004. Her blog was later adapted into three bestselling books, *The intimate diaries of a London call-girl* series, as well as a novel and a self-help book, *Belle de Jour's guide to men*. These books were further adapted into a long-running television series in which Belle was played by the popular British television actress Billie Piper. Notably, Belle's trademark intimate and direct address to the reader was conveyed by the actress speaking directly to the camera, thereby mimicking the way Belle's writing seemed to

open up a window, through the computer screen, onto the hidden spaces that made up a virtual map of the hidden sexual economy of the city.

Belle's memoirs are as notable for their positive account of her experiences as a sex worker, as well as for the cool eroticism and ironic detachment of her writing style. It was this literary accomplishment, as much as the content of her blog, that led many commentators to raise doubts as to her identity and to suggest that she was really either a male novelist, a collective of writers, or a single writer, perhaps Rowan Pelling who edits the *Erotic review*, a journal of erotica with a mainly educated middle-class readership (Saner, 2008; Knight, 2009). Although the blog contains much more than simply explicit sex, media critiques tended to overdetermine this aspect of her work, dismissing the blogs as pornographic fantasy intended to give voyeuristic pleasure to the reader. This assumption that Belle was a writer, not an authentic sex worker, led to her being taken to task in the media for glamorizing prostitution and denounced as part of a wider post-feminist sexualization and commercialization of popular culture which destroys young women's capacity for "real" intimacy (Walter, 2010a, 2010b, 38, 43). The anxieties surrounding Belle thus center on questions of authenticity. The popular feminist critique of Belle mobilizes fears about the disembodied nature of cyberspace to position her as doubly inauthentic: as a writer posing as a prostitute, and as one who misrepresents the reality of sex work.

This need to fix whether Belle was "real" led to a media campaign to expose her true identity in what scholar Feona Attwood has termed the "hunt for Belle" (2009, 6). As Attwood notes, this form of exposé journalism is typical of the ways in which the British tabloid press perpetuates narratives of shame and stigma around women's sex writing, not only writing on prostitution. A cause célèbre in blogging culture is that of Zoe Margolis, author of the sex blog *Girl with a one-track mind*, who has spoken eloquently of

the violence of such exposure following an exposé by the *Sunday Times* which involved the stalking of Margolis and her family by journalists and paparazzi (Attwood 2009: 6-8, Margolis 2006). In 2009, when a former partner threatened to sell his story, Magnanti was similarly forced to “come out” in an interview with the *London Times* (Knight 2009). Whilst this interview established that Magnanti had in fact worked as prostitute, however, this did not lay to rest the debate about authenticity, nor did the subsequent commentary acknowledge that her “coming out” was not a free choice but the result an initial abusive act of betrayal by a man she had trusted. Instead, commentary shifted from the question of whether Belle herself was “really” a sex worker, to an interrogation of Magnanti’s “right” to speak about sex work which centered on the question of whether her actual experience was atypical (and hence still inauthentic). As the journalist Tanya Gold put it:

You may not realize that Dr Magnanti is an exception, even as she performs her role as glamorized outreach worker for prostitution... Hers was an extraordinary experience of prostitution; she was lucky, because prostitution ordinarily is, simply put, a condition that kills women (Gold, 2009).

Whilst this blog post provoked fierce debate, many respondents echoed one anonymous poster’s comment that “I highly doubt that it's the reality for most of the women who do this... anyone who tells you prostitution is anything other than sordid is a liar” (posted at 9.06 am: 17 November 2009).

As Professor Jane Arthurs has noted, debates on the media representation of prostitution indicate “deep divisions within feminism over sexuality and pornography which followed from the ‘sex wars’ of the 1990s” (2006, p. 117). Positive portrayals of prostitution are likely to be dismissed as “worthless voyeurism” and as a symptom of the dumbing-down of popular culture” (Arthurs, 2006, p. 117). Tanya Gold’s article hence reproduces an

opposition which has been identified by many feminist researchers (Bernstein 1999, Bernstein & Schaffner 2004, Brennan 2004, McClintock 1993, Satz 2006, Weitzer 2000), between “sex-positive” and conservative accounts of sexual commerce. In this sense, it can be read in the context of what sociologist Ronald Weitzer describes as a “moral crusade” against prostitution by radical feminism and the Christian right, and which is characterized by “a host of outlandish claims”, especially about trafficking (2006, p. 33). As Elizabeth Bernstein has noted, conservative accounts of sex work have tended to divert public attention to trafficking and violence as a means of justifying the criminalization of prostitution (2007, p. 3). While she does not deny that violence exists, Bernstein suggests that the media focus on “victimized” women and their exploitation by “bad men” prevents engagement with the more complex experiential realities of sex work (2007, p. 3-4).

In the media critique of Belle de Jour, the narrative of “bad men” becomes rewritten as one of “bad women”. Belle is seen as a procuress who lies to young women in order to tempt them into prostitution. But what this account misses is precisely that Belle claims to speak only for herself. In this paper, I want to argue that Belle, as blogger and later as media commentator in her own right, opens up a space which both calls into question polarized debates about sex work, and questions black-and-white notions of authenticity and intimacy. The media’s obsession with establishing Belle as somehow inauthentic hence precisely conceals a need to shut this down. The reaction to her blog encapsulates the question of whether the increasing cultural visibility of sex work represents a capitulation to capitalist values and/or an extension of the media’s exploitation of women, or whether such representations allow sex workers to speak out and hence to “overcome a long history of stigmatization of sex workers” (Arthurs 2006, p. 117).

However, this “speaking for oneself” does not imply that the self can ever be fixed as a single, unitary or “authentic” entity. Belle’s

construction of her multiple selves involves layers of mystification and demystification; in developing a voice that both speaks of her real, embodied experience and simultaneously speaks to the reader's fantasy, Belle de Jour refuses the notion that sex workers represent a unitary category that can be spoken for. It is precisely by refusing the terms of the debate, as the author of her own shifting and multiple personae, that Belle suggests that it is possible for sex workers to be the authors of their own narratives, to speak for themselves. By singling out Belle as a special case, both her detractors and some of her fans miss the ways in which digital media enable marginalized subjects to construct and occupy liminal spaces from which it is possible to disrupt and problematize the binaries between sex work and other forms of labor as well as to resist stigmatization by speaking about what is deemed to be shameful and secret.

Sex Work Online

Recent academic writing has focused on the increasing role played by digital media in the sex trade. This work has focused on the use of the internet by sex workers themselves (Constable, 2003; Schaeffer-Gabriel, 2005; Bernstein, 2007) as well as websites by and for mainly Western men who use prostitutes either at home or abroad (Soothill & Hughes, 2003; Sanders, 2005; Holt & Blevins, 2007). Elizabeth Bernstein suggests that the increasing importance of the internet to sex workers and clients is part of a wider shift in the cultural meaning of sexual commerce. Bernstein notes that, contrary to expectations, sex work has persisted and even flourished in post-industrial societies, and that the Internet is central to the ways in which it has "diversified along technical, spatial and social lines" (Bernstein, 2007, p. 3). What is more, in this changing late capitalist economy, the nature of the services that sex workers are selling has also undergone a shift. She argues that increasingly, what is being sold is not simply an anonymous sexual encounter, but intimacy; a change which is typified by the provision of a "girlfriend experience" (Bernstein, 2007, p. 107-

129). This consists of an encounter which involves not only sexual acts such as intercourse, but may also include talking, massage, kissing and cuddling, and is hence “more like a non-paid encounter between two lovers” (Bernstein 2007, p. 126).

Bernstein argues that the girlfriend experience, which was first provided by white, middle-class and non-immigrant U.S. workers with “sufficient cultural and bodily capital to fulfill their clients’ fantasies of sex with an equal” became popularized through bulletin boards and chat rooms, creating enough demand to produce a new generation of “intimacy workers” (Bernstein, 2007, pp. 126-127). Certainly this resonates with Belle’s experience. As she noted in an interview with Billie Piper broadcast on UK television, the services she provided ‘depended on the person’:

Often it would start off like a normal appointment where you have a drink, a bit of chit-chat, then sex, then let's sit down and have more chat, maybe watch a movie or order room service, then sex again, then sleep, then sex in the morning. *They're paying for intimacy* (Magnanti, 2010).

What is interesting about this notion of intimacy is that it resonates as much with Belle’s encounters with her blog readers as well as with the sexual services she provides. Both are encounters between embodied subjects whose identities are nevertheless ambiguous and constructed; both involve the construction of quasi-private spaces within the public domain. The internet has been widely imagined as a space of transgressive encounters with forbidden others, as a site of danger as well as a space in which it is possible to “play” with identity and live out one’s fantasies (Ferreday, 2009a, 2009b). Belle herself describes how her first steps in the sex trade were made possible by the ways in which the internet brings the public and the private into proximity. Belle carries out a web search for escort agencies from her work desk, noting that “the miracle of information technology means that any site is only three clicks away from an escort service, really” (Belle

de Jour, 2005, p. 20). While much of Belle's writing deals with the difficulties she experienced in keeping her sex work, "official" work, and personal lives separate, then, she is constantly reminding us that in digital space, as in "real life", not only is the membrane between the public and the private paper-thin, but the categories of public and private are themselves fluid. Hence she is constantly deconstructing and challenging the question that fixated the media: namely, who is the "real" Belle? Thus the scene is set for the emergence of Belle the blogger: a figure of the borders who occupies the space between public and private, online and offline, the 'real' and the fantastic, and whose ironic voice continually disrupts these binaries.

Performance and Narrative: The Creation of Belle

This self-authorship is demonstrated by Belle's reflections on her offline as well as online construction of her working persona through the selection of an escort service. While all the agencies advertize using a common style, often typified by quasi-pornographic photographs of women, accompanied by a few fictionalized biographical details, she chooses one whose workers appear "attractive" and "normal" (Belle de Jour, 2005, p. 20). From this follows an email exchange with the woman who later became her "manager", involving negotiations about setting up an online portfolio and the kinds of services that will be listed (Belle de Jour, 2005, p. 21-29). This involves a photo shoot with a woman photographer hired by the escort agency and the writing of a profile (Belle de Jour, 2005, pp. 46 - 49). It is a matter of some pride to the articulate and well-spoken Belle that she, unlike most of the other women, is allowed to write her own. Here, she satirically notes the manager's pride at having 'bagged another graduate' (2005: 47). This section arguably works to destigmatize sex work, undermining the popular assumption that it is a choice grounded in destitution or lack of education. However, the reminder that most women are not 'allowed' to participate in their own image construction reminds us that Belle is a special case

whose relative privilege enables her to make choices not available to other workers.

A section in which Belle records the photographic “tricks” and manipulations that are used to produce the right image and the way in which they manipulate reality, further works to portray Belle as an actively engaged subject (2005, p. 49). Here, an explicit connection is hence made between the work of prostitution and that of digital identity formation. Her anxiety about being recognized from her profile mirrors that of being spotted in meetings with her manager and, later, of running into friends and acquaintances in the course of her work. The online and the offline worlds of sex work are portrayed as mirroring and echoing one another: each involves creating persona that appeals to the other’s fantasies; both take place in liminal and anonymous spaces that are nevertheless embedded in “real life”. This is true of the website on which she is pictured for anyone to see (but is nevertheless confident that in embodying the figure of male erotic fantasy she is effectively invisible) as well as in the hotel rooms, taxis and anonymous central London coffee shops where she meets with her manager.

Such offline spaces connect, as I have argued, to form a virtual geography of the city which exists alongside but is discontinuous with the spaces, home, offices, places to meet friends and lovers, of her official life as Brooke. Instead, these spaces are part of what might be seen as a virtual or fantasy world into which she enters through the medium of digital technologies. This is not a world in which fantasy and reality are separated or in opposition; rather Belle is engaged in a constant self-construction and self-presentation in which reality and fantasy are combined and performed for her various audiences. Contrary to the narratives of cyber-identity that privilege textual, disembodied self-construction, however, her self-authorship is an embodied process that is embedded in geographic, temporal and corporeal realities.

In her writing, she portrays herself as an active agent in the creation of her fantasy persona, but the notion of agency is itself revealed to be a fantasy through her satirical, frequently detached approach to the production of her image, as the following exchange with the photographer suggests:

We worked through a dozen standard glamour shots. “Are you getting bored yet?” she asked.

“Yes”.

She looked hard at me. “You’re bored? That’s terrible.”

“I was being ironic. Actually, I’m not bored at all,” I said, cupping my own breast for the thirtieth time (Belle de Jour, 2005, p. 46).

Here, in the tension between the stilted performance of a male fantasy and her own ironic commentary on that performance, one can see the familiar voice of Belle begin to emerge. Importantly, this performance is produced in relation to a policing gaze which is not that of the male client, but of a woman. This both touches on the idea that the sex worker’s identity is not a matter of individual choice, but is produced within structuring discursive norms of heterosexual femininity. Here, though, this feminine self is produced not in relation to a desiring male gaze, but through dialogue with a female spectator who, framing Belle through her camera lens, might be read as standing in for the female reader/fan. Belle’s relationship with the photographer is ambiguous. Together, they are engaged in producing an image designed to be positioned on a commercial website orientated to the economically powerful male gaze.

This process precisely involves the erasure of cultural capital to produce the correct image of relative economic inferiority as well as sexual submissiveness; for example, by changing her designer underwear for something less classy (Belle de Jour, 2005, 45). However the ironic response to the question “are you bored?” suggests the blogging voice which allows (female as well as male)

readers to see through this manufactured image of femininity. Yet the response “that’s terrible” represents a moment of rupture, calling into question the opposition between fantasy/image and authentic self. Belle’s “authentic” and privileged voice (“I was being ironic”) emerges at precisely this moment of rupture.

In this exchange, then, Belle is engaged in a dual performance: the production of the offline escort service persona which is designed by a collective of women to appeal to male desires, and the proximate development of the blogging ‘voice’. Whilst both ‘acting’ and using humor are common strategies for sex workers, as Teela Sanders has argued (2004, 2005), here this notion of a multi-layered performance are given particular resonance by the anonymity of cyberspace. In digital culture, one becomes used to the vagaries of online identities: assumed personae, unexpected changes of identity or virtual location, sudden disappearances. In the case of Belle de Jour, however, the only surprise is that she turned out to be exactly what she claimed: an educated, middle-class² woman in her thirties who had worked as a prostitute in London. But she is simultaneously shown engaging in constructing layers of fantasy, not only in her working life but as a blogger. Most importantly, she offers, and continually withdraws, a fantasy of seeing what is “authentic” about sex work.

Pleasure and Authenticity

This notion of authenticity is given a further twist by some of Belle’s fans, notably the writer Jeannette Winterson. While Belle plays with the idea that she is letting us in on the reality of sex work, Winterson’s response appears to suggest that real pleasure lies in being the sophisticated reader who is in on the joke. For Winterson, in order to enjoy Belle’s writing, it is necessary both to claim that the blog is autobiographical, while simultaneously leaving open the possibility that it is fiction and hence that no actual woman has had to undergo the dirty reality of sex work in order to make the reader’s pleasure possible. Winterson’s article on

Belle in the London *Times* exemplifies this. For Winterson, Belle is a fiction, perhaps, but a necessary one in that she embodies female sexual agency in a way that is an “antidote” to the “moronic low-level porn” that saturates contemporary popular culture, as well as to reality television, with its insistence on “tales of ordinary folk” which, she rather snobbishly opines, are “as flat and dead a hell as we can make for ourselves” (Winterson, n/d). This being the case, it hardly matters whether Belle is “real” in the sense of being an actual sex worker who offers anthropological insights into some Other world of sexual labor: indeed, she claims, this is the least interesting aspect of Belle’s writing:

What exactly have we learned that we did not know before?
Answer - nothing. We all know that expensive tarts work the rounds of expensive men. We know too, that for the majority of prostitutes, life is a freezing doorway, a short skirt, and a drug habit. Belle de Jour is quintessentially a theater act, whether or not she is real. To read her as a documentary makes us naïve or just stupid (Winterson, n/d).

For Winterson the novelist, Belle is interesting and entertaining precisely in that she is a storyteller whose anonymity merely reminds us that Other is always unknowable, always strange. This represents, she argues, a profound truth about the nature of desire which becomes more explicitly visible in the transaction of sex work, as well as in the shape shifting anonymity of cyberspace: that it is always dependent on performance and in some sense always involves objectification and distance (Winterson, n/d).

In academic writing, one can also trace this attachment to Belle as a figure of female sexual agency who represents the liberating potential of digital media. For Feona Attwood, the anxiety that Belle might be a male fantasy who represents a continuation of what Linda Williams has termed the pornographic “male fiction about loose-lipped women” (cited in Attwood 2009, p. 7) is

counteracted by the ways in which her writing speaks to the need for representations of the autonomous, desiring female subject who “step[s] outside feminine norms” (Attwood, 2009, p. 14). In this sense, Attwood argues, she is part of a tradition of disputed texts for and about women, and especially about female desire, which are “criticized and ridiculed” but are simultaneously “a focus for debates about the representation of contemporary female sexuality” (Attwood, 2009, p. 10-11). Attwood demonstrates how such texts have been read as both being engaged with feminist debates about sexual identity, and at the same time as having failed on feminist terms, and how this failure gets articulated through an ideological reading which suggests that the apparent feminism of the text belies or distracts from an underlying and hidden reproduction of more reactionary values (Attwood, 2009, p. 11).

Although some readers were seduced by Belle’s writing, , others expressed concern that her breezy online persona must be hiding something: either that her memoirs were in fact fictionalized or, more disturbingly, that some bad experience, some trauma, must have been edited out of the published narrative in order to make it palatable. In the article that revealed her offline identity, the journalist and author India Knight wittily summarizes this sense of disquiet in a description in their first encounter, in which she attempts to read Magnanti’s face. She caricatures her own reaction as one of anxious searching which parodies earlier attempts to read the “reality” “behind” the published text. “I scrutinize her face,’ she writes, ‘without quite knowing what I’m looking for — dead eyes, maybe, like in a movie, or something a bit grim and hard around the mouth” (Knight, 2009). She notes her relief on finding no such stereotypical traces of ‘hardness’ on a face that, reassuringly (or threateningly, depending on one’s point of view), appears “perfectly normal”, unmarked by her experiences (Knight, 2009).

Other commentators, both before and after the exposure of Belle de Jour’s identity, are less convinced. In an article in the *Times*, the

criminologist Roger Matthews argues that defiantly positive accounts of sex work like Belle's mask a deeper ambivalence. Writing of his research with high end sex workers, he argues:

Nearly all of the women whom I have interviewed...carry considerable emotional baggage, consume significant amounts of illicit drugs and alcohol, feel lonely and isolated, find it difficult to maintain any type of meaningful relationship - particularly with men - and have little or no contact with their family because they feel ashamed. And very few manage to save any significant amounts of money (Saner, 2008).

In addition, he concludes, all prostitutes live in fear whether they admit it or not: he concludes that "to be in a flat or a hotel room with an unknown man for an hour or so is a daunting prospect for any woman", but particularly so when he is "paying for the use of the woman's body" (Saner, 2007). Sex workers who claim agency are hence suffering false consciousness: the power structures that produce the choice of entering into sex work are so rigid, and so all-encompassing, as to make it no choice at all.

Given the problematic nature of the critique cited above, it is little wonder that some commentators have been defiant in their embrace of Belle as a postfeminist heroine. Leaving aside questions about whether the "emotional baggage" described is unique to women who fall into this category, particularly problematic is the way in which 'shame' is naturalized as an inevitable and detrimental consequence of being outed as a sex worker. Further, while the threat of sexual violence clearly remains a reality for women both inside and outside the sex industry; nevertheless this does not justify the claim that all women are necessarily terrified by the prospect of sleeping with an "unknown man".

To accuse Belle of being in denial or, in more political terms, of suffering from false consciousness, is I would argue to miss the point of her appeal. Again, in her “outing” interview in *The Times*, Brooke Magnanti is candid on the subject of loneliness. However, she is speaking not of her experience of sex work, but of her inability to be recognized as a successful writer. Asked if she has ever felt lonely, she replies: “Sometimes... because of the writing, not because of the sex. And being anonymous is no fun. No jolly lunches to celebrate the book’s success; I couldn’t even go to my own launch party. On the plus side, I didn’t have to do book tours” (Magnanti, cited in Knight, 2009).

The notion of isolation is similarly problematic. Whilst it would be possible to argue that the very existence of Belle’s blog proves that she is alone in her offline life, it is at least as plausible to argue that the author of a blog read by millions is in fact constantly engaged in making and maintaining social connections. It should be remembered that Belle is not simply an anonymous author: she was, and remains, an active blogger who continually solicits and replies to responses from her multitude of readers. Matthews’ account seems to suggest that such connections, made anonymously, are of no more value and are no more ‘real’ than the performance of intimacy that characterizes the prostitute/client relationship, that in her interactions with her readers Belle is merely flattering and fooling us using the same skills she perfected in hotel bedrooms. It is striking how strongly this resonates with Winterson’s positive reading of Belle, the difference being that Winterson asks us to accept and celebrate this writerly act of seduction.

Conclusion: the Fantasy of ‘Knowing’ the Other

Although they appear very different in their attachments to Belle, all the accounts I have cited above share an important characteristic. We can see in both Winterson’s account and the attempts to track down and expose the “real” person ‘behind’ the

story, we can also perceive a hope on the part of both fans and detractors that she is not real. Indeed, most of the early ‘false alarm’ outings of Belle involved the investigation of specific writers or groups of writers. It is almost as though those who pursued her *wanted* her to be a writer and not a prostitute. In order to ‘enjoy’ her writing, she must remain fixed in what is seen as the essentially unknowable fantasy realm of cyberspace. Enjoyment, for readers like Winterson, lies in the fantasy that the online world is pleasurable in that it allows for identity play, encouraging subjects to try on entirely fabricated identities. If Belle de Jour is really just a fantasy, this would suggest that the reality of sex work is always elsewhere, in news stories about drug addiction and trafficking which are important but which need not disrupt ‘our’ pleasure. What Belle de Jour reminds us is that, as I have argued elsewhere, the real value of cyberspace may be in its ability to allow real lives to be spoken of, real voices, in all their complexity, ambiguity and difficult-ness, to be heard (Ferreday, 2009).

The desire to out her hence, I think, conceals a hope that Belle would turn out, reassuringly, to be a writer, hence ‘one of us’ and not really a prostitute at all. That she should turn out to be both is troubling for a society still heavily invested in the age-old binary of good woman and bad girl, Madonna and whore, and that sees sex work in teleological terms, as a downward spiral. Simply put, Belle disrupts two deeply held myths that persist in Western culture. The first is that one “ends up” as a sex worker, that in coming to embody the figure of the prostitute one is at best excluded from mainstream society and at worst, doomed. Indeed, Belle’s importance may lie in speaking, not for sex workers, but for *former* sex worker, and thus disrupting the eschatological timeline that is implicit in the moral panic narratives that circulate around both sex work and cyber identities. What she tells us is that sex work may simply be part of an individual’s history and experience, a product of economic and embodied social realities rather than the transformative and irreversible transgression or inauthentic and flaky walk on the wild side that is often portrayed

in art and popular media. As she herself insists, she is not attempting to sell sex work as a career, nor as a route to empowerment:

Have I ever said that being a sex worker is a great job for everyone? No. In fact, I spend about half of my email time every day discouraging people clearly unsuited to the job from doing it. I'd be interested to know how many of my critics have actually successfully talked anyone out of sex work, because I do it *all the damn time*. (Belle de Jour, 2010, posted March 11).

Although Belle remains a problematic figure, her defiant, angry, seductive voice remains an intervention into the idea of sex workers are neither fallen women nor inhumanly eroticized Others. Whilst her fame has led her to be accused of glamorizing prostitution, she is only one of a growing number of sex workers whose online writings are worthy of further study. We do not need to accept some notion of sex work as a completely free and unconstrained choice, in order for this intervention to be valuable. Instead, the real importance of Belle's writing lies not in its universal representativeness, but in its uniqueness. Above all, she shows that it is possible, through digital technologies, for sex workers to tell their own stories, to tell of their own embodied experiences. However, such a speaking out need not, indeed cannot, tell the 'whole truth' about sexual labor. What Belle tells 'us' is that by speaking for themselves, workers might be able to show the diversity and difference that exist within the unitary category of 'sex work'.

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² I am using the term ‘middle-class’ here to denote an individual’s positioning within complex networks of relational cultural capital that are not limited to levels of education and/or economic wealth. Belle is remarkable in that she is able to embody middle-class identity whilst simultaneously writing about sexuality, in contravention of the traditional association of middle-class femininity with desexualized “respectability” which is traditionally opposed to the prostitute as excessive working-class Other (Skeggs, 1997, p. 47).