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**Anonymity and the stigmatised subject: exploring
the face and voice of the sex worker in documentary
film practice.**

Clare Havell

Submitted for the qualification of Doctor of Philosophy, Birkbeck
University of London Department of Film, Media and Cultural Studies
2023

I declare that the work presented in this thesis is entirely my own.

Clare Havell

Abstract

Anonymity and the stigmatised subject: exploring the face and voice of the sex worker in documentary film

Mapping the representational and material dangers of participating as a sex worker in documentary film practice is the central purpose of this thesis. Argued here is that the totalising and dispossessive treatment of the sex worker plays out through topographies of their face and voice. Conversely, this thesis locates practices of voice and face that counter stigma, rhetorical silencing and disciplinary operations of power enacted through the documentary lens.

This thesis is undertaken through practice-integrated research, whereby creative documentary practice connects and is used in tandem with other methods. Also combining textual analysis, documentary case studies, and research interviews with sex workers who have taken part in documentary anonymously, the intervention is to argue that the marginal subject of this thesis requires a schizoanalytic methodology. Adopting feminist methods of situated knowledges, the thesis addresses voice and spectatorship from the perspective of sex worker documentary subjects themselves.

This analysis finds that while coming into voice as a marginalised subject signifies power, how one comes to that voice, and how it is heard, remains complex. Further, strategies of blurring, voice distortion and even disembodiment which facilitate sex worker voice are prone to amplifying social abjection of sex work and facilitating pseudo-proxies covering over sex worker subjectivity. Arguing that anonymity itself is prone to failure, and that this is widely understood by sex workers, as is the representational volatility of that anonymity, the thesis counters that anonymity should be understood as a practice rather than as something one attains. Nonetheless, this translucency of identity can enable vulnerable subjects to speak.

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Introduction: The documentary and the sex worker

The Embodied Thesis

This thesis maps practices of sex work focused documentary film, looking for impediments to sex worker voice, possibilities of anonymity and safety, and sex worker agency both in representational and material terms. This thesis is premised on the understanding that the sex worker, as a closeted and stigmatised subject, is produced and reproduced via the cinematic apparatus in ways which further stigma, silencing, and violence against sex workers. The questions driving this thesis seek the un-doings of this poesis; the sex worker as agent of their own representational resistance, acting through participation in documentary film and video. Yet this participation is complicated by stigma, risk and in many cases criminalisation of sex work. To this end, my thesis asks what it means to ‘give voice’ from a position of secrecy and fragile agency. This is necessarily bound to practices of anonymity, whether the ideals of anonymity can be actually achieved, and at what cost. Indeed, visual anonymity and obfuscation via the blur in video were the seeds from which this thesis grew. Beneath the question of sex worker voice, this thesis redraws understandings of the interplay and reproduction of power and knowledge on and through the body of the sex worker in documentary practice. It does so through the lens of embodied, situated knowledge, which is also applied to practices of academic research with closeted and stigmatised subjects.

I use the term obfuscation to include a broad range of strategies to visually or aurally obscure the speaking subject on screen. This includes blurring, cropping, extreme shadows, separation of voice from the visual body (disembodiment) and vocal distortion. This thesis is concerned with how these obfuscations are experienced and interpreted by sex workers themselves, and how they may be used beyond the stated intent of anonymity. I will demonstrate for example, that when the face or voice are effaced, something else emerges in their place; a proxy face or voice. The use and volatility of these stand-ins for the face and voice of the sex worker will be considered alongside questions of discursive silences in sex worker representation.

Further, because relations between and the voice and body on screen are complicated by the specific power relations and stigmas of sex work, it is also necessary to consider whether anonymity in sex worker documentary can increase

stigmatisation, or intensify a voyeuristic gaze; or conversely, where, if at all, anonymity can build identity and connective knowledge. In this vein, it is necessary to ask how embodied knowledge of the sex worker can be communicated when the body is mediated by distortion and disembodiment. As I will show this is particularly complex when the sex worker body is rendered excessive and un-hearable even before it meets these distortions. Crucially, this thesis understands the spectator to include sex workers themselves.

This thesis is not, however, an attempt to resolve the dilemma of anonymising effacement; rather, but an attempt to map it. This mapping also requires an understanding of the sex worker face and voice prior to or outside of anonymity. It is therefore necessary to study the sex worker face which is ‘seen’ and ‘unseeable’; the sex worker voice which is ‘heard’ and which is ‘unhearable’. These separations are not as stable as one might suppose, in part because we use the face to enhance understandings of the voice, and vice versa. Furthermore, neither in/visibility nor in/audibility are total, and nor is total concealment even necessarily desired sex worker participants.

Grey areas around concealment and articulation bring particular challenges for research concerning sex work and documentary, where there is a clash between forces of concealment (in sex work) and exposure (in documentary practice, research practice, and in disciplinary social responses to sex work). This includes unease and conflict within the subject themselves; the necessity and desire to be known, countered with the necessity and desire to hide. These conflicts cannot be separated from the social and political terrain which produce them.

Indeed, this thesis is enmeshed with the world beyond it. The study of sex worker documentary is so critical because it impacts the lives of sex workers in both collective and individual terms. I mean this in a liberatory sense, but also in terms of direct harm to participants as well as furthering violent rhetoric more generally. As a sex worker, I have witnessed the effects of stigma and violence against other sex workers. I have observed filming by non-sex worker documentary teams ‘on our side’ cross boundaries and lingering in unethical strategies to extract testimony. I came to see the urgency and necessity of addressing anonymity in sex worker documentary because I, as a sex worker, and as a video artist, saw who was speaking in my documentary practice and who was not. Distorted faces and voices on screen felt like a dissonance, pushing up against what I thought held true - *is voice not power?* The

boundaries between the material conditions of sex worker lives and personhood, and the re/production of the sex worker on screen, reveal themselves as all too permeable.

This permeability extends from documentary practice to research practice. For this reason, I have adopted a practice integrated approach to this thesis, using video practice as one connective strand of research to reveal complexities and contradictions in the face and voice of the sex worker in documentary. My recruitment of practice is where my proximity to my research subject is most useful, but it is also demanding, and subject to scrutiny within the thesis itself.

Genesis: watching and being watched

Gaps in understanding are the beginning of any research project and inevitably frame its undertaking, but I contend that when it comes to sex work-related research it is necessary to pay attention to the structures, ideologies and situated knowledges that lay beneath. As a closeted sex worker, my experiences of silence and anonymity formed the genesis of my thesis, but this anonymity has co-existed with other anonymities, including within the German autonomous left movement. These repeated experiences of the hidden face and hidden identities were different in terms of stigma, and identification posed different kinds of risk,¹ but the space between them has always felt permeable. The close relationship between different anonymities has been heightened by the camera, including my own. My approach to filming and understanding sex work documentary emerged from to my experiences of the unphotographable face in the context of the radical left.

This intensity of the anti-camera sentiment within the German left, and quotidian nature of covering of ones face, even when it may be dangerous to do so, is exemplified in my experience of an anti-fascist action in Dresden, 2007. As evening fell, a large white nationalist march assembled, holding burning torches aloft and flanked by riot police. As I joined the counter demonstrators gathered in the side streets attempting to block their path, I pulled the scarf across my face. As was typical the anti-fascists attempted to look identical to each other: black hoodies, baseball caps pulled down low. Some wore balaclavas but this was also a target for pre-emptive arrest; the anonymity too demonstrably intentional. The police were armed with water

¹ For example, neo-fascist groups were publishing faces and names of left wing activists on websites such as Red Watch, resulting in harassment and physical attacks in some cases.

cannons, tear gas, and cameras. It was a violent scene. I did not have my camera with me. It was a clear understanding amongst the German left – the face should not be broadcast. The anti-camera stance acknowledges a problem; where anonymity is concerned, and even where the camera is needed, it is also always dangerous.

Reflecting my experiences of hidden identities, there was a notable resistance to revealing documentary ‘evidence’ in my video work leading up to this thesis. In Germany, suspicion of the camera paired with the recognition that anonymity can easily slip, by accident or through the efforts of others, prompted me to produce work in a video art context rather than documentary. This was a comfortable home for my video practice, as my undergraduate study was in fine art. Several years later, in London, I began working with Sex Worker Advocacy and Resistance Movement (SWARM),² where issues of anonymity were avoided by largely filming with people who were already open about their marginalised identities and experiences. However, this period of practice also highlighted a more ‘discrete’ form of anonymity, which produced coded ways of speaking in order to navigate potentially exposing knowledge or unsafe spectatorship. Strategies included speaking about personal experiences as if they belonged to somebody else, or as if they were hypothetical, or avoiding particular topics altogether. I recognised that stigma persisted despite casting off a closeted identity, which played out through absence and displacement in my documentary practice.

This complexity is exacerbated by problems of spectatorship. My concern with anonymity and strategies of concealment originate not only in experiences of the closet, and filming from within it, but also in spectatorship of other concealed subjects. I relate a particular experience below in order to highlight an unstable spectatorship of stigma and trauma, even when the subject of the documentary was outside my own personal experience. In this instance, I was flicking through television channels when my attention was caught by a news channel. A man was speaking about sexual abuse experienced as a youth at a football club. He was backlit so intensely his body became a dark hole of indeterminate depth. He sat in an ordinary space, like me, but he was not there - not fully. His voice was strange, low and less than whole, as if his body had been removed completely. It sounded to me like part of him had been cut out. He had become a void. This did not entirely prevent me from being called to hear him, as

² Then known as Sex Worker Open University (SWOU).

I felt a closeness through shared disturbance - his disturbance via abuse, mine via the image/voice void, and perhaps, a shared fear. But in this proximity I also recoiled - is this my fate? Is this what I will become?

This disturbance, originating in the streets of Dresden and the everyday management of a secretive identities, took root via my own spectatorship. It manifested itself in my own video practice by turning further away from images of anonymity. Instead, I filmed faces of sex workers, smiling, laughing, or even angry – but always visible, present, and open. My avoidance of stigmatising images is most evident in *Common Life* (2011), filmed in Istanbul, Turkey, which drew links between State control of sex workers and other criminalised ‘disobedient’ communities. A year later, I travelled to Kolkata to film *The Honey Bringer* (2012) at the United Nations AIDs satellite sex worker conference³ with sex workers from around the world. Many faced multiple experiences of marginalisation, including gender non-conformity and living with HIV. Other than sex work - a deceptively broad subject - what links these documentary works was a decision to only film sex workers who were already out as sex workers, in order to circumvent the need for anonymising facial obfuscation or vocal distortion.

My treatment of the face and voice in these works is typical of a kind of documentary testimony where, as Irina Leimbacher (2014: 3) suggests, the absences of *mise en scène* and camera movement can be used to emphasise and magnify the face in motion and the different qualities of the voice. I used the visible face as communicator of the unsaid, to enhance emotion expressed in the voice, and as connective presence, believing, as Leimbacher articulates, that the face and voice provide a particularly powerful entry into a work of film;

We, the off-screen audience, are rhetorically interpellated in a fundamentally different way by a visible face and an audible voice. We are called to attention and implicated in our very physical being by another physical being addressing us in words and voice, in time and across space, sometimes even seeming to look directly at us.
(2014: 4)

³ The main UN AIDS conference was in the USA in recognition of the then recent lifting of a travel ban of people living with HIV, but as there remains a travel ban on sex workers entering the USA, a satellite conference was held in Kolkata.

Leimbacher recognises the body as a crucial link in documentary testimony: the face and voice of the speaker hails the spectator, breaking open the diegetic wall between audience and speaker. Along with amplification of stigma, it is this hailing that I feared would be so profoundly altered by blurring the face and distorting the voice in my own documentary practice.

This fear was exemplified in my practice in an unfinished documentary with asylum seekers in Leeds. While initially wanting to speak openly on camera, after filming was completed anxieties surfaced around potential repercussions. They wanted anonymity, and I wanted to provide this protection. As I began to blur their faces shot by shot, the moving image became one long blur. Without the face, even silences became difficult to fully ascertain. The blur was *too much*, as if it leaked uncontrollably from one sequence to the next, overtaking the work as a whole. Finally, I abandoned the video project. I realised that something I want so intensely - for myself, for others - is unwieldy and brutal. I could not reconcile the image that the blur produced with the faces beneath it. While the blur did what it was supposed to do - the speakers were unhooked from visual identification - it felt uncontrollable, too much, but also unable to be any less.

Prostitute or sex worker?

Before I talk about sex worker representation, I need to address the term itself, which is implicated in that representation. The terms 'sex work' and 'prostitution' have been used as opposing markers in the political landscape, with sex work implying a rights based approach, and conversely prostitution implying an abolitionist approach. I primarily use the term 'sex worker' throughout this thesis. As an exception, I use the term 'prostitute' when used by others as self-identification. In limited instances I also use the term to signal a discourse which does not recognise sex work as a form of labour. However, as the term sex work is broad, and its use contested, some deeper analysis of how I use it and why is important.

While some use the terms interchangeably, 'sex work' and 'prostitution' are not the same thing. Sex work is inclusive of many forms of sexual labour, including stripping, erotic massage, and pornography and is therefore useful in reflecting the multiplicity of experience and forms of sexual labour. For this reason, I consider that 'sex worker' lacks the precision of 'prostitute', namely: a person of any gender

identity who exchanges ‘sex’, in person, for financial or other material compensation. I use the term sex worker despite this imprecision, but with a caveat. While I use ‘sex worker’ throughout my research, I am specifically limiting my analysis to documentaries concerning ‘full service sex workers’, as those who provide in-person, full sexual contact. Because this form of sex work is the most stigmatised with the greatest risk, and because these sex workers are the most likely to be concerned with anonymity, this is where I am directing my inquiry.⁴ Additionally, while sex work research often separates or excludes sex workers by gender (and depending on the research aims, this is appropriate), or frames sex work as a woman’s issue,⁵ I include sex workers of all genders in my thesis, including non-binary and transgender sex workers. I actively consider gender and sexuality in my analysis, taking into account, for example, intersections of homophobia and the voice.

Critically, as Melissa Gira Grant argues, ‘sex worker’ (2014: 20) is a contemporary political term, a political identity and not one used in all contexts. Using the term ‘sex work’ is an act of recognition that the exchange of sexual services for money is a form of labour, which, in turn, works toward legal protection and inclusion in the labour rights movement. For this reason, there is disavowal of the term within abolitionist movements which hold that prostitution can only be a form of abuse.⁶

Additionally, because the word ‘prostitute’ is burdened with stigma and used as an insult, this term is contested within some sex worker communities. For this very reason, and along with the word ‘whore’, it is deliberately used in others. Both ‘whore’ and ‘prostitute’ are used interchangeably in Pheterson’s seminal text *The Whore Stigma* (1993), for example. It is crucial to note however that ‘sex worker’ is a preferred term by sex workers in academic contexts, and in my personal conversations with sex worker activists and researchers there was considerable resistance to non-sex workers or those with ambiguous positions using the term prostitute. Gira Grant notes

⁴ This does not deny the stigmatisation of other forms of sex work. Performers in pornography experience a considerable amount of stigma for instance. However, as their faces already exist on screen, with few exceptions, issues around anonymity and the screen itself are not the same.

⁵ The reasons for this vary from the assertion that most sex workers are women, or that stigma and the policing of sex work disproportionately affects women.

⁶ While I consider discourses of agency problematic when singled out in the context of sexual labour, as opposed to all labour under a neoliberal capitalist system, I differentiate sex work from forced sexual labour. While grey areas exist, a key differentiation lies in the question of who is getting paid; if the person performing sexual labour does not get paid, they are not a sex worker. Furthermore, the idea that sex work cannot be work if abusive suggests that other forms of labour are free from abuse.

that when used in literature, the use of the term sex worker is a direct result of sex worker advocacy, particularly in height of the AIDS crisis, when stigma against sex workers was especially high (2014: 21). Its use has been hard won. For this and the reasons outlined above, I will primarily use the term ‘sex worker’.

Identifying the corpus

Sex work documentary spans across sub-genres and I examine works with diverse approaches to representation, power and truth. My corpus is not linked by ideology or a singular documentary genre or time, but spans the experimental, the testimonial, the committed and those based on spectacle. This inclusive approach to my corpus allows me to show the shifting mechanisms of power in sex worker representation, including limitations on and conditions enabling sex worker voices to be given and heard.

While this thesis will demonstrate that when a figure is shrouded in closeted knowledge, divisions between the fictional and the real can become critically degraded, I am focused on documentary rather than the sex worker on screen more broadly.⁷ While fictional works remain relevant to my body of research, particularly where issues of spectatorship, stigma and the gaze intersect, it is in documentary, precisely because of ‘truth’ claims associated with the genre, where the subjectivity of the sex worker is most at stake. It is where most is put at risk and where the very bodies of actual sex workers are implicated and co-opted. Documentary film is a knowledge producing genre, even in works which displace perceptions of authenticity and singular truth, because that is also a form of knowledge. As an intervention in making something audible and visible, it is in documentary where bodily ‘evidence’ of disgrace is most revealed, as revelation is at the core of the documentary lens. As my thesis will address, it is also where resistance to this lens can be found.

Documentary is where disciplinary confession, closeted knowledge and the drive to give voice meet. In a context where sex workers are often excluded from

⁷ This erosion is even promoted in dramatic works such as *Lilya 4-ever* (2002) which is heavily invested in realist filming techniques and a ‘true story’ narrative. But shifting boundaries between the real and the fictional are also at stake in counter and hybrid cinema such as Jean Luc Godard’s *Deux ou Trois choses que je sais d’elle / Two or three things I know about her* (1967), or Amos Kollek’s *Fiona* (1998) which amongst the fictional elements contain within them ‘true’ vignettes of the sex worker’s lived reality. In both, I argue that the documentary aspects strengthen rather than undermine the authenticity of the fictional elements. The fiction fills in gaps of knowledge. The genre of fiction also offers a plentiful array of works where a study specifically of the face and voice of the sex worker could be carried out - Clint Eastwood’s *Unforgiven* (1992), or *Klute* (1971) for example. Both would reveal much about the workings of sex worker stigma beyond documentary practice.

narratives and political discussions of which they are the very subject, documentary, as unstable as the genre can be, remains critical. As sex worker and author Juno Mac (2016) argues, the discourse around sex work is a site of projection, and the words of sex workers are routinely disregarded. She highlights the impossible position of the sex worker who wishes to speak publicly *as a sex worker*; either labelled as too much of a victim to be taken seriously, or not victim enough to be representative. My focus on the sex worker as speaking subject within documentary film thus stems from the political and personal transformative possibilities around giving voice, and face - as well as the risk.

Many of the questions posed by my thesis have led me to examine committed documentaries and experimental hybrid forms. By 'committed', I take Thomas Waugh's definition of film that strives toward 'a specific ideological undertaking, a declaration of solidarity with the goal of radical socio-political transformation' (2011: 6), film with transformative intent. This requires the filmmaker to engage in reflective practice and willing to be changed themselves in the course of their creative practice (Waugh, 2011: 6).

While the context of viewing, and making, will be included in my discussions of each work, the level of creative treatment is not a criteria for either inclusion or exclusion from my field of research. Experimental documental forms are included amongst my case studies, some of which can also be considered video art, but only where they have documentary elements. Relevant here is Adam Kossof's notion of the video art documentary as provocation:

In the context of the documentary in the gallery it would be beneficial to dwell further upon the idea of the documentary as a medium for *resistance*, which to my mind is where the various discourses of art and the documentary, to some extent, overlap. (2013: 83, emphasis in original).

This resistance is not always overt or consistent in my case studies. The nature of my thesis means I cannot confine my gaze to the politically transgressive documentary. While many of the films I examine fall into a reflexive and experimental category, some as a response to trauma, others as a means to navigate questions of anonymity, a significant number do not. As I will elaborate in Chapter 1, this does not make them less worthy of consideration, as these films reveal much about not only the cloaked

sex worker subject, but the wider social conditions which deem this secrecy necessary. In fact, several of the works I examine can be more accurately described as a disciplinary apparatus. Furthermore, disciplinary elements may also arise in work that aims to give voice to marginalised subjects. In this vein, Alexandra Juhasz describes a form of documentary practice wherein, despite willing participation, punishment is enacted by and through the camera. This genre, which she terms ‘victim documentary’ (2004: 252), is predicated on a re-victimisation through the camera, and particularly located in the giving of testimony. Yet it should also be recognised that the opportunity to speak to one’s victimhood is also sought after, and that disciplinary elements of any given film may be partial or interwoven with transformative approaches. Therefore, the complexity of disciplinary forces within documentary forms, even those undertaken in politically committed contexts, requires a corpus that is open to nuanced and contradictory movement of power.

Documentary fantasies and pornography

In addition to the above, sex work documentary crosses at times into territory of the ‘pornographic’, a term I intentionally use in a broad sense. Even in documentary genres of sobriety, and works which focus on the face and voice, including ‘headless’ but speaking bodies, it should not be assumed that sex has been removed from sex worker documentary. Sex is always there. I contend that this is not only to do with the subject matter, but where it meets spectatorship, knowledge and audio-visual pleasures more generally. An analysis of sex work documentary within a pornographic lens is important because this element influences the limits of participation, how the sex worker on screen is read, how their voice is received, and the extent to which power relations at play are able to be perceived. Indeed, the term ‘pornography’ itself emerged in relation to knowledge of sex work and the communication of this knowledge. As late as 1909, *The Oxford Dictionary* defined pornography as the description or depiction of the lives of sex workers in either medical, literary and art fields (Falk, 1993: 3). According to this definition, any film about sex work would in itself be a form of pornography. While this definition is outdated, it reveals the historical conceptual space from which sex work documentary springs and has been understood. This link has at times been explicit, for example Russell Campbell

highlights the proliferation of films about the ‘white slave trade’ (2006: 20) in the early twentieth century which eventually led to the subject being banned in film in the United States in 1916.⁸

In a contemporary context, one need not search for long on platforms such as YouTube.com to find covert, sexualised recordings of sex workers under the guise of amateur documentary or travelogues. In cases such as *johnstv*, ostensibly a vigilante online video project aimed at prompting arrests of sex workers and clients, and which includes sexually explicit footage and voyeuristic scenes of confrontation, the boundary in this instance between documentary and pornography is non-existent. Here, too, the sexualised gaze is inseparable from the camera as apparatus of discipline and punishment. While this is an extreme example, as I will show throughout this thesis, the correlation between power and the pornographic gaze in sex work documentary is not always easy to unhitch and is not always obvious.

This pleasurable discipline enacted through the camera can be situated in terms of Foucault’s analysis of the closet, discipline through visibility and the pleasure of making secrets known. There is one strand of Foucault’s work that is especially relevant to understanding the pleasure and knowledge principles at play in sex work documentary, and this hinges on bringing the illicit to light where it can be seen.

At issue is not a movement bent on pushing rude sex back into some obscure and inaccessible region, but on the contrary, a process that spreads it over the surface of things and bodies, arouses it, draws it out and bids it speak, implants it in reality and enjoins it to tell the truth: an entire glittering sexual array, reflected in a myriad of discourses, the obstination of powers; and the interplay of knowledge and pleasure. (Foucault, 1998: 72)

Reading sex work voyeur documentary alongside Foucault’s argument, there are two key points of conformity. Firstly, I contend that even overtly ‘anti’ sex work video and platforms such as *johnstv* do not wish to make sex work invisible – if they did they would not put so much effort into making it visible. Rather, it is a disciplinary act,

⁸ From the ruling: ‘No picture hereafter will be passed by the National Board of Review which is concerned wholly with the commercialized theme of ‘White Slavery,’ or which is so advertised as to give the impression that it is a lurid ‘White Slave’ picture’ (cited Campbell, 2006: 20)

reflecting Foucault's articulation that discipline operates through awareness that we are seen and may be made visible at any time (1991: 187).

Secondly, many forms of sex work documentary spread 'rude sex' throughout the work, some being more immediately evident than others. *Whore's Glory* (2011), for example, not incidentally a film where sex workers speak very little, imbues almost every scene with sex.⁹ Not only does the film include suggestive sequences of sex with clients, the cinematography throughout is decadent and opulent. Light and the camera linger on gleaming bodies, even in segments which unfold slowly into tragedy. As sex workers line up in brothel viewing rooms for clients to choose for example, sexual potential is also on display for the documentary spectator. Foucault notes that there is an added pleasure in making visible anything to do with the secrets of sex; 'the pleasure of knowing that truth, of discovering, of captivating and capturing others by it, of confiding it in secret, of luring it out in the open...' (1998: 71). Here, this pleasure of receiving secret knowledge cannot be extricated from the pleasures of the visual.

While situating sex worker documentary in a broader intersection of knowledge, power and pleasure, intensified by its closeted nature, I do include documentary containing explicit elements of pornography in my case studies. In the field of documentary where the fantasy of the real persists, and where links have been drawn between pornographic and ethnographic film projects (Hansen et al., 1989), there is a muddying of the waters which deserves further attention. Both *The Good Woman of Bangkok* (1991) and *My Night with Julia* (2003), examined in Chapter 2, are produced by clients and include footage from the periphery or centre of the sexual act respectively. *Happy Endings* (2009), discussed in Chapters 3 and 5, is another notable exception to the visual absence of sex, as it features security camera footage of a sex worker and client having sex.

The examples above notwithstanding, few sex work documentaries depict sex itself. Nonetheless, because a sex worker is defined by sex, sex is there. Even in instances where sex is not explicitly discussed, it remains in the room, filling the

⁹ *Whore's Glory* follows sex workers in Thailand, Bangladesh and Mexico, and includes extended scenes of drug use, explicit encounters with clients, extreme poverty and conflict.

spaces of the unsaid. Whether sex is visible or the open secret, this thesis demonstrates that the face and voice are used as vehicles for the conjuring of the sexual body.

There are also significant parallels between documentary and pornography when it comes to notions of the real. As Jean Baudrillard suggests, pornography has everything to do with fantasies and voyeurism of the 'real', which muddies the water in terms of documentary film - and indeed, around sex work on-screen in general:

The only phantasy in pornography, if there is one, is thus not a phantasy of sex, but of the real, and its absorption into something other than the real, the hyperreal. Pornographic Voyeurism is not a sexual voyeurism, but a voyeurism of representation and its perdition, a dizziness born of the loss of the scene and the irruption of the obscene. (1990: 29)

The desire for the real in pornography is likewise a foundational fantasy of documentary, even if documentary is now more free to undermine this 'real', and even if suspension of disbelief is arguably as much at play in pornography as it is in fictional film. However Baudrillard's conception of irruption, of a forced or bursting entry, is especially pertinent here. While Baudrillard is describing an effect on the body of the viewer, and an obscene which is as much loaded with victimhood and suffering as it is with pleasure, my concern is equally with a breach of subjectivity experienced by the speaking subject on screen. This includes entry to trauma and the 'real' self and events. My considerations of the pornographic gaze thus also includes the voice, and wider concerns around intimacy, and director/subject boundaries. In relation to the hypersexualised body of the sex worker on-screen, and as research subject, this 'pornographic' lens is all the more critical.

Marks of disgrace and concealable knowledge

This thesis is founded on the principle that the sex worker is a stigmatised subject. As I demonstrate, this stigma is a part of representational failures, anonymity, and impediments to speaking as a sex worker. While stigma will be examined further in the chapters which follow, it is a fundamental concept to this thesis and thus useful to define how I use the term from the outset, as well as its conceptual limits.

In Erving Goffman's seminal work, stigma is conceptualised as an attribute, or 'mark', which reduces a person from being seen as whole to one as tainted and discredited (1990b: 12). Goffman contends that the stigmatised person – the one whose identity has been 'spoiled' – is perceived as less than human. Stigma is not inherent but relational. A stigmatised attribute exists in relation to stereotype, and these qualities in one person are used to confirm the 'normalness' of another (1990b:13). For example, attributing moral deviance to a person who exchanges sex for money can be used to confirm normalness of sex as unpaid emotional labour. While Goffman was not focused exclusively on the stigma of sex work, he included it in his analysis.

In terms of conceptual limitations, Goffman's work has been critiqued for promoting the individual over structural forces at work (Link and Phelan, 2001), however his relational model of stigma forms the basis of theorisations of stigma in terms of structural relations of power. As Bruce Link and Jo Phelan note:

stigmatization is entirely contingent on access to social, economic, and political power that allows the identification of differentness, the construction of stereotypes, the separation of labeled persons into distinct categories, and the full execution of disapproval, rejection, exclusion, and discrimination. Thus, we apply the term stigma when elements of labeling, stereotyping, separation, status loss, and discrimination co-occur in a power situation that allows the components of stigma to unfold. (2001: 367)

This conception of stigma as a relational tool of power is important, as it allows me to move beyond a descriptive analysis of sex worker marginality in film to ask how and why stigma is produced and recast in the documentary project, even in works which seek to undo this stigma. Relational stigma also allows for a more complex investigation in terms of sex worker's own management of stigma within documentary. This includes the management of concealed and unconcealable knowledge, for as Goffman argued, the relationality of stigma also hinges on a relation between these two forms of knowledge. In concrete terms, there is a difference between an identity where the stigma is easily perceived and one with the potential to remain in the closet (Goffman, 1990b: 14). Both identities exist in sex work, and sex workers may shift in and out of concealability, but this difference can be unstable.

While the unconcealed sex worker, for example the street based or arrested sex worker, must manage direct discrimination, the concealable or closeted sex worker must manage other tensions and information; ‘to display or not to display; to tell or not to tell; to let on or not to let on; to lie or not to lie; and in each case, to whom, how, when, and where’ (Goffman, 1990b: 57).

Critically, the stigma against sex workers is entangled with a heightened demand that they speak. As Goffman notes, the demand for the concealable subject to speak puts them at even greater risk:

The more there is about the individual that deviates in an undesirable direction from what might have been expected to be true of him, the more he is obliged to volunteer information about himself, even though the cost to him of candour may have increased proportionally. (1990b: 83)

This management and un/concealment of ‘truth’ and spoiled identity is at the heart of the sex worker documentary, where the costs of candour can range from the emotional to the material and physical. Yet concealment also carries a cost. As argued earlier, this very concealability is part of the stigma against the sex worker.

Engaging in a medium of audio-visual revelation such as documentary film, the problem of information management for the sex worker in documentary film is twofold. There is telling which reveals through the voice, and there is display, which reveals through the visual. The sex worker must not only consider what they say, and how they say it, but whether to show their face, if so how much, and what methods and degree of concealment are acceptable. These pressures are not equal, nor are the relations between voice and image fully separable. For example, the provision of visual concealment not only marks the subject as possessing a spoiled identity, but may lead to a more intense external pressure or desire from the subject themselves to reveal without limit through speech. The pressure to allow oneself to be mapped in this way should also be understood in relation to the concept of the closet more broadly, and the disciplinary power of tracing the boundaries of sex worker silences.

The closet and its discursive uses

As outlined above, the stigma of sex work renders it a concealable identity. There is a closet of sex work. But it is important to note here that the closet is also revelatory.

Sedgwick notes the change at the turn of the century where people began to be ‘mapped’ as subjects, sexuality and gender, a mapping that leaves ‘no space in the culture exempt from the potent incoherencies of homo/heterosexual definition’ (1990: 2). This crisis of definition accordingly expands to other epistemological pairings, such as majority/minority, masculine/feminine, same/different. I propose this is present in the mapping of the ‘prostitute’/ ‘non-prostitute’, or ‘good’/‘bad’ woman. Thierry Schaffauser (2010) makes the link explicit in his discussions of the term ‘whorephobia’. Whorephobia is conceptualised as a system of classification aimed at controlling not only actual sex workers but any woman. I contend it is especially evident in documentaries concerned with mapping the moment someone crosses a boundary from non sex worker to sex worker. This is evident in sequences where a sex worker is preparing for or travelling in to work, for example, or in scenes where they recount their entry into sex work, common narrative tropes in sex worker documentary.

As Sedgwick outlines, the closet has been expanded in recent times beyond the homosexual to include any form of representation of the oppressed, yet the closet, and the concomitant ‘coming out’ can never be divorced from the homosexual context from whence it springs (1990: 72), nor from constructions of the homosexual as threatening to heterosexist culture and economic systems, incoherent, and resistance to being known (1990: 70-71). A sex worker may or may not be homosexual, but their experience of being in the closet, or coming out as a sex worker, is nonetheless linked to this dangerous incoherence; they are subjects to be mapped.

As Sedgwick proposes, the closet is a performance which must be continually enacted, and this performance is initiated by the *act* of silence (1990: 3). This silence is one of ‘fits and starts’ and operates in relation to its surrounding discourse. Considering silence as a speech act, as Sedgwick proposes, also challenges the notion that silence is passive. This is an underexplored aspect in her text but a critical one to hold in mind, and will be examined in depth in Chapter 4.

Masks of contagion

As this thesis will demonstrate, even when unimpeded by the blur, the face is not neutral. But the face and voice of the sex worker, and their distortions, requires some historical context in order to fully understand their significance and use in documentary practice. Historian Helen Davies argued the sex worker is a subject

historically represented as a vector of disease and deformity (2015: 164-165), who traded on their appearance and whose authenticity was consistently questioned.¹⁰ This thesis will demonstrate these questions persist in contemporary film and media, where the sex worker exists in contested bodily territory, especially in terms of facial and vocal territory. Even before their countenance is captured and eroded through blurring, one could say the face of the sex worker is already constructed as implicitly deceitful, evasive or even the very sign of a threatening promiscuity. While such constructions primarily originated in nineteenth-century discourse on physiognomy and syphilis (Davies, 2015), they linger still.

Leo Bersani provides a useful example of contemporary manifestations of ‘contagion’ signs, drawing parallels between the representations of the female sex worker from that time and modern-day representations of gay men in the context of the AIDS crisis:

The realities of syphilis in the nineteenth century and of AIDS today legitimate a fantasy of female sexuality as intrinsically diseased; and promiscuity in this fantasy, far from merely increasing the risk of infection, is the *sign of infection*. Women and gay men spread their legs with an unquenchable appetite for destruction. (2010: 18, emphasis in original)

I would add a caveat here, in that while promiscuity as a *sign* of infection is applied to sex workers as it is to gay and transgender subjects, it is not applied equally,¹¹ especially where multiple identities co-exist.

If promiscuity is a sign of infection, then it is important to draw out how that sign manifests and is received. This thesis will show that promiscuity can be signified through the face (for example scenes close up of sex workers applying makeup, or even an extreme close up alone), and that particular treatment of the visible face of

¹⁰ While I will expand upon this throughout this thesis, examples of the inauthentic sex worker in film, art and literature include Emile Zola’s *Nana* (1972), and Alan Pakula’s *Klute* (1971)

¹¹ While there are significant crossovers between sex workers and gay men in both historical and contemporary contexts, it has been argued that male sex work in the nineteenth-century was not considered as problematic as female sex work (Scott, 2003: 181). Specifically, John Scott contends that male sex work was considered a threat to the social order through the association with homosexuality rather than in the exchange of sexual services for money (*ibid.*). Likewise, as was made evident to me during filming of the UN Aids conference in Kolkata, while contemporary cis-gendered women sex workers are subject to the stigma of HIV, it is particularly racialised, homosexual and gender variant sex workers who have borne the brunt of HIV related stigma and discrimination (Havell, *Honey Bringer*, 2012).

the sex worker can be used to signify contagion, regardless of the presence or absence of ‘disease’ signs. The face itself is the sign. However, the face need not even be visible in order to signify this boundary effacing promiscuity. The blurred, masked face can read as sign of infection-deviance too. While promiscuity is a sign of this threat, it is one that is attributed not only to the visible body, but in especially in implied or evident concealment of the body.

The mask as signifier of contagious bodies has been amplified by the Covid 19 pandemic. Despite mask orders being in place for whole populations, rather than a smaller stigmatised minority, the (temporary) quotidian quality of the mask has not rid the mask of its power. It remains associated with a state of exception, and with plague in the broadest understandings of the word. The strength of this association is illustrated by the very need for mask mandates (in New Zealand and the United Kingdom for example), as opposed to voluntary use (Binka et al, 2023).

Jennifer Beth Spiegel asserts that the pandemic has caused a situation where: ‘The face becomes a material and ethical battleground’ (2022: 4), and while the face is ostensibly the territory, it is a battleground played out through the mask. Noting that mask wearing is a form of mutual care, rooted in the idea of a collective social body, Spiegel highlights certain elements of mask resistance as a performance of hyper masculinity (2022: 11), which rejects the mask as not only an impediment to freedom but a symbol of weakness. But in the disavowal of individual vulnerability, she locates a performance of mask resistance done under the guise of freedom, in order to further totalising regimes of power:

The mask may masquerade as armor, and thus be taken by the opponents of mask-wearing as a harbinger of fascist aesthetics, neutralizing singular expression. On the other hand, the impermeable manly man needs no mask and thus a performative matching of a manly aesthetic as a fascist ideal must present a face, mask-less to reflect a movement of manly individuals. Mask-wearing implicitly performs an acknowledgement of permeability and trans-corporeality, a sense of ontological interconnection performatively expressed as ethical solidarity within a global network where the actions of each potentially affect the life or death of others. (Spiegel, 2022:12)

This history of the anti-mask debate is important to the sex work documentary context because it highlights the voracity of anti-mask sentiment. This sentiment labels covering ones face not only as a marker of contagion – even now – but as a marker of intolerable weakness and compliance¹² which is both abject and liable to spread the more that masks are seen, as a form of mimesis.

While masks are visual evidence of interconnectedness, Nicolette Makovicky describes masks as boundary objects in broader but critical terms;

Masks are boundary objects, mediating between ideas of contamination and containment, purity and pollutions, and life and death. Since the outbreak of COVID-19, however, they perform a new kind of boundary work: they demarcate and negotiate the relationship not only between the body and the body politic, the individual citizen and the national whole. In the hands of politicians, the political logic of masking reinforces other governmental practices – from the imposition of travel bans, the neglect of migrant populations and stigmatisation of certain minorities – in defining the permeable boundaries between nation and self, self and other from the invading virus. (2020:1)

Spiegel and Makovicky’s work begs the question as to the extent the visibly obscured sex worker face in documentary film continues to signify the dangerous permeability between abject and non-abject bodies and continues to undertake the work of a boundary object. Indeed, it is pertinent to consider whether the use of the ‘masked’ sex worker as boundary object is intensified in a ‘post’ pandemic context. As I will demonstrate in the thesis, boundary work was already taking place in documentary film via the stigmatised sex worker body, and part of this is done on the understanding that sex workers are intrinsically masked subjects, even before they are masked. This highlights the importance of understanding the treatment of the sex worker body and

¹² This is evident for example in the ‘Voices for Freedom’ occupation of New Zealand’s parliament grounds in 2021. This ‘pro-freedom’ performance of mask opponents, which included white nationalists openly allied with other groups, extended to physical attacks on those choosing to wear masks (O’Brian & Huntington, 2022). The mask was not only a symbol of government control in this context but of sign of submission and contagious fear.

voice in documentary film, not only in terms of documentary ethics, but also in understanding how marginalised subjects more broadly may be used to further totalising regimes of power.

Mapping the thesis

I began my thesis with a plan to undertake practice based research and produce video with sex workers both throughout the thesis and as final artifacts. Once underway however, my multiple locations within the field of research - as sex worker and video artist/documentary maker - led to an intervention in how research itself was undertaken. This intervention included my later decision to draw back from practice. This ‘abandonment’ was a pivotal and rich point in thesis. Instead of being the driving force, practice shifted to form a research assemblage with close documentary readings and qualitative interviews with sex workers who had participated in documentary film. This shift is the focus of *Chapter 1: Practice Integrated Research as Entry to Furtive Sites of Knowledge*, where I illustrate how and why my research adapted in response to critical interventions of my practice. This new way of thinking about practice research is one of my key interventions.

As noted by Sophie Hope, the place of practice-research in an academic context remains tenuous (2016: 75). In order to foster more fruitful understandings of the emergent paradigm of practice-research, Hope argues that practice should be understood as existing on a colour wheel spectrum. Building on Christopher Frayling’s three categorisations of research (1994: 5) *for* or *as* art/practice (which she designates as ‘blue’), *through* art/practice (‘red’), and *into* art/practice (‘yellow’), Hope contends that different practice approaches can be mixed with each other in nuanced ways, creating a multitude of colours or research practices (2016: 80). One of the interventions of my thesis is in taking up the colour wheel model of practice as spectrum, and demonstrating how multiple approaches to practice-research can mix and speak to each other to create new knowledge. I locate my practice-research here as an earthy orange; made up of research *through* video practice (red), and research *into* sex work documentary, undertaken through close film readings, and research interviews with documentary participants (yellow). This mixing of practice and non-practice methods is an intervention I have named ‘practice integrated research’, and is a form of schizoanalysis.

As I will illustrate, this research paradigm shift is especially important in the context of a research subject fraught with difficult relationships to traditional disciplinary forms of knowledge-making. Practice integrated research is an adaptive response to this dynamic, allowing navigation through closeted and difficult knowledge, through the opaque, gaps and abandonment, and embracing ‘failure’ as productive act.

Chapter 2: Giving and Taking Face: The Sex Worker Made Known in Documentary Practice charts the terrain of stigma of the sex worker on screen, in terms of both how stigma is produced and reproduced through the screen, and what the implications are for sex workers in documentary film. To do so, I examine the idea of the ‘prostitute imaginary’ and videopoiesis, asking how the drive to render sex workers visible intersects with the cinematic apparatus and wider operations of power. I undertake case studies of two documentary films, *The Good Woman of Bangkok* (Dennis O’Rourke, 1991), and *My Night with Julia* (Matthew Bown, 2003). In both films the directors are clients of the sex workers they film. This lens is important, because the intimate, subjective proximity of the directors to the sex workers allows for close analysis of the crossovers between the pornographic and the ethnographic, and documentary mechanisms of power through vision. Both directors closely film, or attempt to film, the sex worker’s faces. I ask how this treatment produces a face that is entry to, or deflector of knowledge, in order to examine the sex worker face as boundary, and concomitantly, a site where racialised relations of power are fought. While the filmmakers attempt to gain extreme proximity to an individual sex worker through the camera, and images of their body, I ask to what extent boundaries between the individual/collective sex worker body are even possible in ethno-pornographic forms of documentary practice. I ask if this is precisely where the prostitute imaginary runs free, and where sex worker power is particularly tenuous.

While Chapter 2 addresses the face made visible, *Chapter 3: Black Holes: On the Limits, Dangers and Possibilities of Facelessness*, is concerned with the concealed face. I examine the blurred, pixelated, obliterated and otherwise visually transformed face of the sex worker. I do so not to illustrate facial obfuscation as a necessarily totalising or destructive practice, nor to suggest a less effacing practice, but in order to trace the emergence of the sex worker as abject subject and to question the limits and possibilities of this abjection.

This is a chapter where my own practice becomes important, as I address barriers to producing visual strategies of identity protection, and my own spectatorship. Engaging with my videos *Three Gifts* (2016), and *Face Works* (2017), I address the im/possibilities of recruiting an oppositional abject in blurring and effacement in my own practice, in order to understand resistance to blurring the faces of documentary subjects, and the volatility and precarity in facial obfuscation.

Using a case study of abolitionist television series *8 Minutes* (Kevin Brown, 2014), I make the intervention that facelessness of the sex worker in documentary comes with a concomitant risk, which I have termed the ‘face proxy’. That is, where the sex worker’s face is blurred, other - non-blurred and visible - speakers can be used as more controllable stand-ins, effectively muting the face and voice of the blurred sex worker. Proxies emerge particularly in contexts of trauma or stigma. Critically, these proxies are not, or seldom are, other sex workers, and should more accurately be considered pseudo-proxies. As stand-ins they do not channel the original speaker, but act as site of projection, deflection or co-option. As I will illustrate, face proxy is recruited most effectively where the sex worker is rendered faceless through anonymising strategies, but this obfuscation does not need to be total in order for proxy to be constructed.

My second case study is of *Happy Endings?* (Tara Hurley, 2009), a politically committed documentary focusing on police raids on massage parlours where migrant sex workers are employed. This is a video which recruits a variety of extreme visual effacement strategies in order to anonymise its subjects, allowing a thorough analysis of representational dangers in practices of visual anonymity.

While Chapter 3 reveals the volatility of visual obfuscation in sex worker documentary, Chapter 4: *Discordant lips: the voice of the sex worker as ‘revolutionary demand’ and as disappearance* demonstrates a volatility imposed on the sex worker voice itself. This chapter is an analysis of what it means to give voice from a position of vocal dispossession. I examine the sex worker voice as a form of connective ‘magic’ in its emergence and persistence in adverse territories. I undertake this analysis in order to understand how power, stigma and marginalisation move through the sex worker voice in documentary practice. An examination of the voice in sex worker documentary requires an analysis in liberatory and revelatory terms, but as I will demonstrate, this voice must also be scrutinised in relation to the unspeakable, submission, and resistance through withholding voice. This chapter therefore builds

on understandings of the contradictory forces at play in giving testimony and voicing secrets in the documentary context, including perceptions of the inauthentic or ‘indecipherable’ racialised voice.

I undertake a case study of *Portrait of Jason* (Shirley Clarke, 1967), which allows for a nuanced examination of the coercive voice of the director and the extraction of marginalised voice, as well as counter strategies from the documentary subject. This is important in order to understand how practices of voice intersect with likewise shifting relations of power. Given that the film was consciously grappling with issues of race and homophobia, it is particularly pertinent to examine how power played out within the film, and through voice itself.

Portrait of Jason is not only significant in what was said, and how, but in silences and unspeakability. I argue that in order to understand rhetorical silencing of sex workers, which is so linked to notions of victimhood, it is necessary to understand other forms of silence. I examine theories around trauma and testimony, and silence in my own practice. I then undertake a case study of feminist counter cinema documentary *Taking a Part* (Jan Worth, 1979), which in contrast employed a collaborative, scripted approach to sex worker voice. I examine this in relation to trauma and the unspeakable, which was also present in *Portrait of Jason*, asking how difficult narratives are able to be voiced, and heard. Finally I make a comparative, reflexive analysis between the unspeakable in my practice (*The Proxy*, unfinished, because of this unspeakability), and my video *Three Gifts* (2016), where trauma narrative was able to be spoken. This practice integrated approach allows me to map the contours of power, voice, and silence in the sex worker voice in documentary, and their many crossings.

Recognising that the above does not address the silences stemming from the need for anonymity, or voices cloaked in anonymity, in *Chapter 5. Anonymity, power and the vocalic body: practices of vocal distortion and dis/embodyment*, I examine attempts to render the voice unrecognisable, primarily through the dual strategies of pitch distortion and disembodiment. I question the limits of anonymity in the sex worker voice specifically, and its wider representational implications, arguing that both disembodiment of voice and vocal distortion should be understood as failures of anonymity.

I also question the very possibility of the disembodied sex worker voice, mapping the intersection of the prostitute imaginary with the idea that the disembodied

voice holds more power. My case study *The Prostitutes of Lyon Speak* (Carole Roussopoulos, 1975) allows for a detailed examination of practices of disembodiment, in terms of representation, power, and as adaptive strategy to facilitate vulnerable subjects to speak. I follow this with *All That Sheltering Emptiness* (Matilda Bernstein Sycamore and Joey Carducci, 2010), which is able to counter the prostitute imaginary despite an explicitly violent account of rape, because of a specific relation between voice and image.

I then pick up the subject of vocal distortion, asking why this voice is so difficult to hear, and how it should be understood in relation to disembodiment. I return to *Happy Endings?*, as similar to the visual treatment of participants, vocal distortion is likewise extreme. I end however with an example of sex worker led distortion, in *To Survive, To Live* (Juno Mac and SWARM, 2018), which deploys a significantly lighter distortion. This is likewise critical, as it reveals the negotiations which must take place between representational and safety concerns.

In *Chapter 6: Practices of anonymity* I enter into conversation with sex workers who have participated anonymously in documentary film, with and without their consent to appear in film in this way. As a result of these research interviews, I make the intervention that not only does anonymity fail, but that documentary participants are not naïve to this, and very often insist upon it regardless. Mapping fear of being outed, alongside representational negotiations, desire to speak, and active constructions of individual and collective subjectivities, I ask how anonymity should then be understood. I argue that rather than a secure state, anonymity is a practice, deeply implicated in risk, but which nonetheless allows the sex worker to speak.

In addition, I engage with questions of self-spectatorship in sex work documentary, asking how identification and dis-identification with their own representations on screen facilitates or impedes practices of speaking. Bound with all the above is a concern with power, and it is in this chapter I examine sex worker accounts of filming itself, considering how these experiences resituates participation, harm, and safety in documentary film practice.

Can the sex worker speak? A summary of research concerns

At its core, this thesis questions the uses, limits, desires for, and dangers, of speaking and of being seen in sex worker documentary. As much as it imagines an outside viewpoint in spectatorship, it is grounded in embodied sex worker experiences in watching ourselves, in speaking and not speaking, and in listening back to ourselves even through distortion.

While anonymity lies at the heart of this thesis, this concern is not limited to the achievement or failure of that anonymity, but rather includes anonymity as a contingent and imperfect practice, as zone of safety and of communication, and implicated in wider struggles of power. This includes the production of face proxies via particular practices of anonymity.

In contrast, I ask how the visible, speaking sex worker can also be rendered rhetorically silent and unknowable in documentary practice, and used as boundary object to further relations of power that harm sex workers. This requires an analysis of how the cinematic apparatus has been used to produce a collective imaginary of the sex worker, steeped in abject trauma, before further analysis of giving voice in relation to trauma, and voice as power. In the context of sex work documentary, this requires a consideration how of the sex worker body is used in conflict with or in opposition to the sex worker voice, and as entry to privileged, intimate knowledge.

In this vein, I also ask whether the ‘unseen’ or ‘un-hearable’ sex worker should truly be perceived as unseen and unheard, and whether anonymising strategies of disembodiment can work to undo the sex worker body as abject boundary object. This is particularly pertinent in the context of already gendered, racialised and ‘spoiled’ identities.

Above all, this thesis is concerned with the complexities of the body and voice of the sex worker on the documentary screen, especially in regards to the reconfiguring or entrenchment of power, and how sex workers themselves, as closeted and stigmatised subjects, negotiate concomitant relations of silence, voice, anonymity and revelation. How, in other words, does the sex worker speak?

This thesis is a connective text, intent on grounding itself to the world outside it, and my questions are therefore not separable from how this research is carried out. In thinking through the production of knowledge around closeted subjects with fragile agency, I am necessarily concerned not only with documentary practice but academic

research methodology itself. In addition to the questions above then, I also ask how, in the research process - a process of knowledge making which I will demonstrate echoes the documentary - can new knowledge be produced without replicating the disciplinary forces at play. In a research subject laden with silences and disciplinary power, I have used practice as a means to navigate gaps and difficult subjects with embodied knowledge, whilst interrogating the parameters and limits of doing so. This approach is key both to how I have tackled questions relating to sex worker documentary practices specifically, as well as to interrogating the production of knowledge itself. It is to this subject I now turn.

Chapter 1: Practice integrated research as entry to furtive sites of knowledge

1.1 Introduction: towards the research assemblage

My thesis is centred on how knowledge is extracted from and produced by the sex worker body and voice through the documentary apparatus. I question how those with fragile agency can speak outside of disciplinary apparatus, how trauma can be voiced without replicating structures of violence, and how closeted and stigmatised subjects negotiate silence, anonymity and voice themselves. Yet these questions do not belong to the documentary field alone, but equally concerns academic knowledge production. There is an interplay between these two fields which demands a reflexive and connective way of thinking and ‘doing’ research. In this chapter I will detail how I have navigated the fields of documentary practice and academic research, and adapted my methodology accordingly. I will engage with complex ethical questions that emerge in sex work research. I lay out how and why I have used practice within this thesis, including the critical importance of ‘failure’ and abandonment of practice.

While I outlined my personal connection to sex work and documentary practice in my thesis introduction, it is important to illustrate how I have used these positions as interventions in my research methodology. Donna Haraway’s concept of situated knowledges provides a foundation for understanding the complexities of ‘insider’ research practices, particularly where this inside position is associated with the abject or oppositional knowledge. Haraway argues that true objectivity can only come from feminist practices of knowledge-making, stemming from limited location, partial perspectives and situated knowledges (1988: 581). This is a recognition that embodied knowledge, vision from the inside, allows for knowledge to be produced which is only possible from that viewpoint, but that it has its own obstructions. In the context of my thesis, this requires not only making my embodiment and proximity known, but engaging with the boundaries and instabilities of this experience, and continual reflexive mapping of my location.

There is risk in this proximity. For one, there is a risk of using self identity of the subjugated in knowledge production. As Haraway states, ‘Self identity is a bad visual system’ (1988: 585). By visual system, she is referring to technologies of perception and knowledge production and arguing that identity politics alone cannot

offer the subjugated the power of vision, since being a woman/migrant/sex worker for example is always contingent. One can never fully occupy subjugated positions. This means I cannot argue absolute knowledge, but I can identify gaps, links, and problems not visible from outside identities, articulate contradictions and probe my own response against my own experiences. I account for multiplicity, contradiction, and the non-isomorphic, that is, I take on different locations within my research, recognising that even within my own view my gaze is not singular. This is a form of subjugated vision that Haraway calls for; the production of webs of connection, which she calls solidarity, and which counters the ‘unmarked narrowing and obscuring’ power of single vision (1988: 11). In this sense, webs of connection exist not only within my own location, but the methods which make up my schizoanalysis, and practice integrated methodology as a whole.

Secondly, there is a risk to the researcher of sex work in openly situating themselves within the field of their research. As this chapter will demonstrate, the sex worker voice is associated with, and subjected to, silences, rather than academic discourse/enunciation. Full disclosure of the researcher’s position comes with risk, even though feminist challenges to ‘outsider’ research practices have been underway for some time.¹³ As I will show here, and critically, this stigma also extends to how the voices of sex worker research participants are treated. This chapter illuminates and critiques the multiple silences which I have had to consider in undertaking this thesis, as well as resistance to situated knowledges in the field of sex work research more broadly.

In order to fully understand impediments to vision-from-below (inside) in sex work research, I will show how the sex wars of the late 1970s and 1980’s have contributed to the rhetorical silencing of sex workers. While this conflict within feminism was triggered by debates around pornography and sexuality more broadly, rather than sex work in isolation, in this chapter I will show how this discourse has intensified the closet of sex work within both academic discourse and documentary practice. I ground this critique with an examination of documentary *Not a Love Story: A Film About Pornography* (Bonnie Klein, 1981).

¹³ Post-colonial feminist thinkers such bell hooks (1992), Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (1993) and Trinh T Minh Ha (1991, 2011) join with Haraway (1988) in critiques of ‘objective’, outsider knowledge production; it is not a new field.

As a response to the problems above, and in regards to shifting discourses of power, Giles Deleuze and Felix Guattari's concepts of schizoanalysis and the assemblage underpin my methodological approach. Within a field of closeted knowledge, marginalised subjects and multiple silences, I use schizoanalysis and assemblage theory to produce a complex analysis of voice, agency, power, violence and rupture. As I will show later in this chapter, these concepts are also key to my approach to practice, as well as the relationship between practice and other forms of interrogations of my thesis, including textual analysis.

Finally, as practice has anchored my own embodied knowledge, revealed gaps in knowledge, and is a significant intervention of this thesis, this chapter provides a detailed analysis of its challenges and methodological importance.

1.2 Integrated practice and a colour wheel

I began this thesis with the intent to produce experimental documentary video parallel with the written thesis, culminating in works that would reflect resolution of my research questions. I imagined these final videos forming an audio-visual resource for marginalised communities wanting to engage with documentary practice. With this early model, my thesis was practice-based, until a series of roadblocks radically shifted my approach.

For example, it became apparent that this video as experiment approach risked instrumentalisation of my practice in the thesis. Reflecting on the limits this form of practice placed on my thesis' aims, I began to pull apart what I thought my practice was doing, and in contrast what it could be used to do. I realised that I had been influenced by my years in art school, where the creative artifact assumes a different place in a hierarchy of knowledge production. We were artists first, who had to learn to write about our work, whilst negotiating conflict between the concept that 'the work speaks for itself', the idea that the creative work can reveal more than textual analysis could hope to, and conversely that theory was plastic. That is, theory changed shape in deference to practice, and a good artist could bend both to their will.

This reflection, combined with a 'failure' of practice, led to a kind of abandonment (I detail specific abandonments in chapters 3-5). I use the term failure with oppositional intent, that is, I consider it in the context of practice as a productive,

revelatory force. Much has been written on the queer use of failure (i.e. failure to conform as radical intervention, even failure to write and research in a linear fashion), and conversely critiques of valorisation of failure in regards to vulnerable subjects.¹⁴ While these critiques are important to academic discourse more generally, this is not where my use of failure is situated. I acknowledge that things not going to plan is an integral part of practice, and in the sense that this produces knowledge, it cannot be failure but rather part of the process. Even stepping back from practice is not failure. Nonetheless, I embrace the term failure as it signals a break, or rupture. Failure is not gentle, nor impersonal, and signals an almost violent point of entry to knowledge. In writing that an aspect of my video practice failed, I am highlighting the embodied, situated knowledge that is the foundation of this thesis.

The individual failures that have enriched and built this thesis will be addressed throughout, however I want to highlight here the shifts in practice that failure facilitated; allowing practice to become a means to reframe my research questions; a provocation to the limits of my own feelings; and understanding in a field of embodied knowledge. Rather than being mechanised to address theoretical problems, I began to use practice as a form of entry into a wider research assemblage. My videos provided another means to identify philosophical problems playing out in my thesis as a whole, particularly when practice was most difficult. In this sense, and on a visceral level, I consider practice within this thesis most significant in terms of rupture. There were video projects which were too emotionally difficult to complete as intended. There were levels of face distortion that produced a kind of recoil, but also doubt, as I edited. This element of abjection will be interrogated in later chapters of my thesis. While this circular process of editing and deletion was rich in terms of revelation, it is one which cannot be fully 'seen' in the final creative artifacts. The intervention is instead made evident in my textual accounts.

I produced two videos and one script as part of my practice. The first video is titled *Three Gifts* (2016) and is an auto-ethnographic account of 'gifts' from a client, and explores disidentification and performances of managed identity. It uses the gifted objects to obscure the face, but this defacement is also intrinsic to the uses of the gift. While there is a form of masking of the face in *Three Gifts*, it is opaque, varies in

¹⁴ Specifically Jack Halberstam's *The Queer Art of Failure* (2011), and Merri Lisa Johnson's response in 'Bad Romance: A Crip Feminist Critique of Queer Failure' (2015).

intensity and is at times incomplete. I use a disembodied and multiple approach to voice. *Face Works* (2017), is a series of video ‘drawings’, recruiting a variety of obfuscation strategies, including video projection on the face whilst filming, and different filters in post-production. This includes a more extreme treatment of face distortion and an examination of both excess and lack of face. There is a mixed approach to voice, including both disembodied voice and speaking to camera, although some of this voice is audibly cut out.

When I say that my video practice became a form of rupture, I refer in particular to my second video where I was attempting to render my own face non-recognisable even to myself. Its importance lies less in the final work than in the process of obfuscation itself, which reveals the complexity of navigating extreme facelessness and the intangibility of anonymity, but also my own refusal to ‘deface’ somebody else. Defacement and my failure to enact it will be examined in later chapters. However staying with these responses was far more productive than trying to find ways around it.

My script, *The Proxy* (2018), continued this rupture. An auto-ethnographic reflection on self-identity and being ‘unknown’ in sex work, the writing could not even be progressed from script to recording. It could not be spoken. While it is this script that initially led me to realise the importance of addressing trauma in voice, it also demonstrates the role of practice as entry to embodied knowledge, as it was in the process of writing this script that the concept of proxy first emerged as something I needed to address. Proxy would later become a key tenet to understanding uses of the obscured sex worker face, as well as critical analysis of the voice in the context of the ‘unspeakable’. This demonstrates the productive possibilities in using embodied knowledge and practice to produce new understanding within fields of trauma and difficult, closeted knowledge.

However, the ‘failures’ of practice, which I detail throughout the thesis, also reveal the limits of a purely practice-based approach in my research. This rupture produced by my videos demonstrated the volatility of practice, as something which acted on the body and voice of those entering in to it, and which needed care. This in turn emphasises the importance of this thesis in researching documentary practice with marginalised subjects. Yet at the same time it also requires a reconsideration of how this research should be carried out; and indeed, how research with sex workers in general should be conducted.

Critically, this rupture through practice showed the potential ethical problems of working with other sex workers in a documentary filming context that was also a piece of academic research. Ethics will be addressed more fully further in this chapter, but I want to signal this concern from the outset. This is about disparities of power in the very heart of documentary practice. Considering power in this way, it was evident to me that I also needed to consider parallel power inequalities in research practice. These new understandings necessitated a radically different approach to practice and my research process, opening it to more nuanced recruitment of practice and alternative methods. I realised that my methodology needs to be located on a spectrum of practice, and this approach to practice is one of the interventions of this thesis.

In the initial abandonment of practice, I felt my thesis could no longer be considered purely practice-led or practice-based. The status of practice within my work felt more elusive, but also still present and entangled. Understanding this shift requires a return to how practice is understood within a research context. Educationalist Christopher Frayling theorised that there are three primary categories for arts research: research *for* art (wherein research is used in the service of the creative artifact), research *into* art (art history, influences on art/artist) and research *through* art (for example action research, materials and technical development) (1994: 5). Research for art was my primary approach as I was studying fine art for example, with a parallel strand of research *through* art. But critically, those strands did not cross. Both were also present at the very beginning of my thesis, but again, with minimal complexity in their relationship with each other.

This either/or understanding of practice as described by Frayling links into Linda Candy's (2006) later definition for practice research approaches. She suggested that research should be considered *practice-based* when the creative artefact forms the basis of new knowledge gained, and *practice-led* when the aim of the research is new understandings of practice itself (Candy, 2006: 1). Artist and researcher Brad Haseman (2006) provides a counter stance. He critiques practice-based research as failing to 'contribute to the intellectual or conceptual architecture of a discipline' but instead only 'concerned with the improvement of practice, and new epistemologies of practice distilled from the insider's understandings of action in context' (2006: 3). The implication here is that practice based research can be too focused on the personal creative gains of the researcher, at the expense of academic rigor. He considers *practice-led* research as a more experimental approach, which he elevates, producing

‘symbolic data in the material forms of practice; forms of still and moving images; forms of music and sound; forms of live action and digital code’ (2006: 5). My critique is that this form of research, where results, or data, are expressed and understood primarily within the medium in which they were created, can be inaccessible and self-referent.

Pertinent to my own approach, the distinction between practice led/based research is also about the place of text in relation to the practice, and linguistic ‘failures’ of translation, as Haseman understands practice-led research as fundamentally performative, and the creative artifacts data in themselves, which ‘not only expresses the research, but in that expression becomes the research itself’ (2006: 6). In contrast, I assert that while creative artifacts, such as video in my case, can recuperate research findings back into that creative medium, text is a critical aspect of my research, and engaging with translation between practice and writing has been the source of much learning. It is in relation to the treatment of research data that my approach strongly diverts from Haseman’s model.

It is these conflicting propositions and understanding around practice-research that artist and researcher Sophie Hope (2016) addresses and complicates in her work on practice research as spectrum. She argues that much important research occurs in a mixing of approaches, but that there is a simultaneous disavowal of this complexity to present practice-research as compliant with a more traditional understanding of academic rigour (2016: 75-76). She proposes that this complexity can be more productively understood as a colour wheel model. In this conceptualisation, research *for* and *as* art/film is blue, research *into* as yellow, and research *through* as red. These approaches can be mixed to form secondary colours of green, purple and orange. In this model different approaches to practice can be mixed, without losing integrity, and instead form a new and more robust research practice.

Hope defines the ‘green’ of the practice-research wheel as research *for/as*, and *into* practice. This is where ‘new forms of practice emerge that also encapsulate research into that practice’ (2016: 83). Hope uses Trinh T Minh-ha as an example of this approach (*ibid.*). Indeed, Trinh T Minh-ha is exemplary in this respect, as her

films embody her written research, and vice versa, both actively countering a colonial ethnographic gaze in form and content.¹⁵

It is also necessary to address Hope's addition of the '*as practice*' to Frayling's category of *for practice*. By research *as practice*, Hope is referring to very specific form of research methodology which recruits the research process into the creative artifact, for example, an academic interview being recorded and then incorporated into a film. 'Purple' includes research *for/as practice*, mixing it with research *through practice*. In doing so, Hope suggests 'the artist is having to stand outside the artifact (to communicate it) and within it (to make it)' (2016: 82). Purple is where research focus is most strongly imprinted and mirrored in research methods. Her own research provides illustration of this:

For example, with my Performative Interviews project I was experimenting with the form of the interview to reflect on epistemological and ontological questions, playing with the idea of the interview as a performative research device. The space of the interview became a series of mini-stages for confessions and reflections performed to camera. The interviewing, performing, filming, and editing were not a means to an end, rather they were the research. (2016: 83)

As noted above, whilst inclusion in the creative artifact can be a productive use of practice research, and can facilitate deeper understandings of the research at hand, including by wider audiences, I do propose that this should come under additional ethical scrutiny, as the camera alters relations of power, what is disclosed, and what is withheld.¹⁶ As I will detail, I did not consider this an ethical approach to take in the context of my thesis.

¹⁵ As Minh-ha herself states: 'I am not interested, for example, in making films to teach someone a lesson. Nor am I interested in making films that induce people to cry, that solicit identification with the image seen, and facilitate consumption through a well-formulated story-spectacle or well-packaged information. I am, however, interested in making films that further engage filmmaking, and contribute to the body of existing works that inspire and generate other works.' (1991: 108-109)

¹⁶ For example, documentary filmmaker and researcher Agnieszka Piotrowska argues that transference is a powerful drive in documentary practice, resulting in a loss of boundaries once the camera is present (2013: 45). This aspect of documentary ethics will be addressed throughout this thesis, but in chapter 4 particularly.

My research was more strongly *through* and *for/as practice* at the beginning of this thesis. I imagined it as a muddy mauve, because there was also an element of research *into* practice, and mixing all colours together does, appropriately, give a muddy result. However, based on the experience outlined above it can no longer be accurately located there. In contrast, an ‘orange’ approach recruits research *into* and *through* practice, and this is where my thesis sits. By this I mean that my research has moved away from resolving my own practice (noting too that it was never about only my practice), and that I realised my research outcomes needed to unfold and be expressed through writing.

To this end, I want to make it explicit that because this thesis is not practice-based, creative artifacts are not included in my documentation. That being said, all of my own video to which I refer, is included in my filmography, including links. I also include video stills in relevant chapters.

However, and partly because I use practice in relation to other methods as well, locating my own approach on this colour wheel was not straightforward, precisely because practice is expansive, connected to what has come before it and outside it, and more than one thing, almost always. As Hope notes, in orange: ‘[r]esearch into art, might combine with research through art by using practice to *reveal more about a problem*’ (2016: 81; emphasis mine). It is this focus on practice to find gaps, not necessarily to fix them, that is significant for me here. However, even after my own distancing from the practice, it was not immediately evident to me that orange is where my practice-research belonged, primarily because in this constellation Hope positions the artist as an outsider in the research process:

Orange emerges where research into art, or a particular problem, gets at that problem through the practice of filmmaking, editing, photography, singing or painting, for example. In this section the research frame is still designed by social science researchers. They are in control of documenting, observing and analysing; informing the development of the research. *The artist and the researcher are not the same person.* (2016: 81; emphasis mine)

The complication arises when considering *whose* practice is at question. In orange, the artist has been distanced because her role in the research is less for her own practice specifically. Her role is a facilitator for the greater project; art is a means and

not an end. I began my practice-research with a view that my practice was both the means and the end. But through the at times disturbing proximity engendered through my practice; through a necessary abandonment; and my critical analysis of this disturbance, my goal changed. It is also significant that my approach to practice, combined with situated knowledge, has also helped to identify problems in practice (documentary film) which are not my own.

Locating my research within this spectrum has again required a reconsideration of where I myself stand within it, and a subsequent recognition that nonetheless, I belong there too. Hope's emphasis on the separation between artist and researcher reflects her study of specific case studies. To recognise this divide as a tendency does not make it a rule; and indeed, there is no justification given as to why this separation should be a defining limit of an 'orange' approach. Like this thesis as a whole, I insist on the importance of being on the inside, and multiply so, as sex worker, as maker.

With multiple locations in mind, I move to make the meeting of my methods explicit. In this thesis I analyse a variety of sex work documentary films, with different uses of practice and approaches to sex worker anonymity, image and voice. And I also interview sex workers who have participated in documentary films anonymously. Both methods are forms of research *into* practice. I make a series of video 'drawings' and script; and I abandon practice. This 'failure' is critical but is also part of practice. This is research *through* practice, and it reveals problems of practice which deepens the interrogations of my other methods.

1.3 Schizoanalysis, assemblage, and practice integrated research

I have outlined the evolution of my approach to practice, but as stated this is only one connective strand of my research. I will now detail my approach to textual analysis, followed by my research interviews. While the mapping of closeted, deviant subjects has disciplinary uses, this thesis should be considered an alternative, counter mapping, namely: schizoanalysis. Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari's theories of schizoanalysis and the assemblage (2013) inform the foundations of my research practice. Both concepts are fruitful means of producing knowledge in circumstances of stigma and closeted relations and inform strategies for putting feminist theories of vision-from-below and embodied knowledge into play. As well as fleshing out these concepts

more broadly, what follows is a clarification of how these ideas relate to film and my thesis specifically.

Deleuze and Guattari's concept of schizoanalysis emerged from critiques of psychoanalysis, which they argue falsely imagines repression and liberation as residing in the individual, rather than the collective, or in social forces (2013: 43).¹⁷ Instead, social oppression produces and is enmeshed in psychological repression. Schizoanalysis can be summarised both as a destructive practice of analysis which considers the relations of capitalism and power, and a creative analysis that seeks out productive linkages and transformations.

Deleuze and Guattari also use the term pragmatics interchangeably with schizoanalysis, describing this form of analysis as rhizomes with linked components; generative (tracing something); transformational (mapping it); diagrammatic (abstract creation); machinic (creative / giving expression / new form) (2013: 169-170). Taking pragmatics/schizoanalysis as a whole, this is 'making the transformational *map* of the regimes, with their possibilities for translation and creation' (2013: 169; emphasis in original), making diagrams, which I would also describe as making visible the workings of apparatus of power at play, in order to then 'bring a circulation of movement with alternatives, jumps, and mutations' (ibid.). Fundamentally, this is a form of analysis which does not simply seek to describe and map the workings of repression, but which aims to find ways out of oppressive regimes entirely.

In this sense, schizoanalysis should more be considered a guerrilla methodology, taking aim, amongst other things, at the separation of subjectivity, emotions and embodied knowledge from ways of understanding. This adaptive mapping and decoding of repressive systems includes consideration of desires and drives which make up or are recruited in those systems. For example, and addressed in the final chapter of this thesis, the conflict between desire and repression where vulnerable subjects seek to participate in documentary projects knowing that may harm them.

It is this holistic approach that renders schizoanalysis so pertinent to my research concerns and methodology, as the concept makes space for the destructive but also creative analysis of hegemonic social forces that produce sex worker

¹⁷ Deleuze and Guattari level strong critique at Sigmund Freud's theory of the Oedipus complex in particular, which in their view, in locating repression as an individual problem, obstructs liberation (2013: 42-44).

documentary, alongside those at play within spectatorship. This includes an analysis of conditions which facilitate sex worker participation in documentary, particularly in projects that put participants at risk. In speaking of harm to sex workers, I include material harm such as arrest, violence, or loss of earning, alongside wider impacts of negative or totalising ‘representation’, and in the subject formation of sex workers themselves resulting from speaking in and viewing themselves in documentary film.

Crucially, as well as guiding how I analyse sex worker documentary and critical texts, schizoanalysis frames my corpus. It is worth emphasising in regard to the corpus that schizoanalytic mapping requires an analysis of cinema as a whole, refusing to see it as outside of material life. In doing so, I am attentive to divisions of ‘high’ and ‘low’ cinema, and included both in my corpus. I direct my gaze toward ‘reality’ television documentary; funded documentary from established directors; low budget independent work that ‘fails’ aesthetically or conceptually; politically committed works in both form and content; to works primarily shown at film festival circuits. Many of these works have precarious cultural status, and have limited or restricted viewing access. This includes works which have been withdrawn from view by the filmmakers themselves, as well as works which are rendered precarious by shifting discourse and institutional unease with the explicit or difficult subjects depicted. Absence and restricted viewing is illustrative in itself. This thesis requires consideration of both objects of mass consumption, and those works which effectively exist in another closet.

Schizoanalysis likewise extends to my critical analysis of written texts, imbuing textual analysis with radical potential. I study academic texts, as I do work written by sex workers themselves, recognising crossovers. Reading a text ‘is a productive use of the literary machine, a montage of desiring machines, a schizoid exercise that extracts from the text its revolutionary force’ (Deleuze and Guattari, 2004: 116). This is simply about how a text is read and used. Echoing my earlier assertion, this reading is not limited to written texts but includes readings of documentary and other moving image art forms, including in relation to wider regimes of power. Film theorist Amy Herzog notes that in using schizoanalysis in the context of film, the film/text is not simply a representational object to be decoded but an event or force to be explored ‘within, through, and against larger systems of social power’ (Herzog, 2008: 65). This is an important distinction, as it acknowledges that film is not a self-contained system of representation, and acts upon and through those who

participate in it, view it, and produce it. A film cannot be read outside of the systems in which it was made. This critically connective approach to film analysis also needs to be understood in relation to another concept of Deleuze and Guattari, namely the assemblage.

Documentary as assemblage

While the philosophical partnership of Deleuze and Guattari did not exclude film, it was not a primary object of interrogation. Rather, wider concepts developed by Deleuze and Guattari have been picked up and applied to film by other theorists, most notably here that of the assemblage. This is a term which morphs and slides in Deleuze and Guattari's work, and which is not intrinsically liberatory, as repressive apparatus can also form an assemblage. What is critical however, is that the assemblage includes the human, including desires, bodies and subjectivities. This is made explicit in the following:

We think the material or machinic aspect of an assemblage relates not to the production of goods but rather to a precise intermingling of bodies in in a society, including all the attractions and repulsions, sympathies and antipathies, alterations, amalgamations, penetrations, and expansions that affect bodies of all kinds in their relations to one another....Even technology makes the mistake of considering tools in isolation (Deleuze and Guattari, 2013: 104-105)

The above is a description of a machinic assemblage of bodies, but always in relation to this exists a collective assemblage of enunciation 'of acts and statements, of incorporeal transformations attributed to bodies' (ibid., 102-103). An incorporeal transformation for example is the transformation of a person to a 'prostitute'.¹⁸ However it is important to note that assemblages of bodies and assemblages of enunciation are of each other (ibid., 95).

Because of this relation between body/enunciation assemblages, and while my film critiques will include assemblages within films, I draw upon feminist film theorist Teresa Rizzo's argument that film should be understood as an assemblage with the

¹⁸ Deleuze and Guattari give the example of a hijacking: airplane passengers are incorporeally transformed into hostages; the 'plane-body' into 'prison-body' (2013: 95).

viewing subject. While film is an assemblage ‘with its own system, such as frames, shots, sequences, montages, soundtracks and so on’ (Rizzo, 2012: 59) because it is not fully exterior to the system from which it is produced it is not simply a representation of the world outside, but an assemblage with the outside (ibid.). Film as assemblage connects to a host of other assemblages, including the political, academic, technological and more, and, as noted, it is an assemblage with the film-viewer:

The film is an assemblage made up of parts, but it also forms an assemblage with the viewing body. Understood as such, the relationship between the film and the viewer offers a genuine escape from the object/subject distinction which assumes that the viewer identifies with a voyeuristic gaze. An understanding of the film as an assemblage with the viewer allows us to consider the impact of different kinds of cinematic affect that flow between the film and the viewer. (Rizzo, 2012: 60)

Like Rizzo, my attention lies in an analysis of film as something which does things and connects to bodies, subjectivities and structures outside of itself. This also allows for a embodied solidarity and connection, rather than simply possessive knowledge taking and the reproduction of ideology. However, I contend film assemblage should be expanded to include the documentary subject as well. Considering the documentary film as an assemblage with the documentary subjects themselves, facilitates a deeper interrogation into ethics and the role of documentary in producing or altering subjectivities. Particularly in the context of vulnerable agency, and the production of ‘unseen’ selves, it is all the more crucial to examine the documentary subject in this assemblage, along with blockages or incomplete assemblages in relation to the viewer. This examination is a function of my practice as well as research interviews.

For example, in asking how a strategy of visual obfuscation can be recruited to entrench power, I also ask what that feels like to watch as both ‘outside’ and ‘inside’ that obfuscation; to consider the body of the viewer, the film maker, and the body of the speaker. I examine what it feels like to produce that effacement, in addition to what may be displaced by distortions, and where to. This is partly a consideration of flows and impediments of power surrounding the documentary project, but also an active linking across trains of critical thought and mediums of communication. In this

context, my research interviews (along with practice and textual readings) are part of my wider research assemblage, but they are also used to understand power, knowledge and desire across the documentary assemblage. That is, they are a form of schizoanalysis, but they are also an assemblage.

1.4 Shadows of the documentary in the research interview: ethics made visible

The function of interviews within my thesis is not as a means to move forward in my own practice, but rather as a means to understand how those with fragile agency come to speak, or not, within documentary practice and how they understand, experience and negotiate their own anonymity. These interviews problematise grey zones and porous boundaries between the desire to speak and to obscure or avoid talking about particular subjects. While I had initially planned to conduct filmed interviews, as my research progressed it became increasingly evident that concerns around power, disclosure, opacity and confession that play out in the documentary interview are echoed in the research interview. This made the interview and the ethics relating to it highly pertinent to my study, but also highlighted the risk which would have come from combining practice with research interviews. I judged that interviews needed to take place outside of the context of the documentary and my own creative practice. Instead of incorporating interviews into my creative practice, qualitative interviews with sex workers who have participated anonymously in documentary film are incorporated into my written thesis only.

There were two factors at play in the decision to move away from filmed research interviews. Firstly, because the interviews were concerned with experiences of being filmed, I felt there could be too much loss of boundaries in carrying out interviews in this way, and that this boundary loss would have been profoundly unethical. At the core of my thesis is a concern with ethical dilemmas in documentary practice involving stigmatised or otherwise vulnerable subjects. This includes relationships between the speaker and the director, ways in which participants are compelled to speak, give consent and are rendered anonymous.

Secondly, my practice itself highlighted the difficulty in achieving anonymity, as well as the level of defacement required. After producing *Face Works* in particular, I did not want to subject the face or voice of another person to what were at times

brutal explorations that I was producing in my video work, nor to risk the failure of their anonymity.

To reiterate, my research interviews, while stemming from questions and tensions in my current and past documentary practice, are not part of my creative practice. Instead, emerging from and taking place adjacent to my own creative practice, these interviews are part of my broader practice integrated research methodology, and form an assemblage with practice and textual analysis.

It is difficult to separate the subject of ethics from other aspects of my methodology, and indeed my thesis as a whole. For example, when undertaking schizoanalysis of other texts and films, I frequently turn to questions of ethics, and the power over, and responsibility to, marginalised subjects. In addition, my own practice and engagement with discourse around ethics has altered my approach to research interviews (in turn leading to more learning around practice and ethics). However, ethical concerns saturate my approach to research interviews in particular, because this is where my own power as researcher is, and should be, most subject to scrutiny. I therefore address research ethics most deeply within this interview section. Before I begin this task however, it is useful to outline the fundamental approach to my interviews in detail.

Interview objectives, parameters and form

Before beginning my interviews I went through ethics committee approval, a process I found to echo many of my research concerns. The key objective of this strand in my research was to build a comprehensive analysis of the disembodied and distorted voice in documentary film, addressing two distinct but linked concerns. The first focus was obfuscation as a facilitation of giving voice and prevention of identification. In the interviews we talked about the experience of being filmed, speaking anonymously, different methods used to prevent identification, and degrees of success or failure of anonymity. Secondly, I sought to understand spectatorship of the self in a stigmatised context. This aspect of the interviews focused on participants experiences of listening to and watching themselves on screen, as well as spectatorship of sex worker film and television more widely. The interviews were audio recorded only.

Addressing the documentary participant-as-spectator is a significant intervention of this thesis. While surveys are an established method for audience

research, this was not appropriate in this instance, due to the small number of participants and the need for in-depth conversations. Interviews facilitated the production of nuanced information, and is a methodology more open to reflexive practice, which as Jane Stokes argues allows ‘subjects to determine the course of the interview and to shape the discourse themselves’ (2013: 199). I argue that this is particularly important in the case of researching marginalised and stigmatised communities, and where, as I will illustrate in this chapter, the interview subjects are not generally considered expert in their own experiences.

Research interview participants were current or former sex workers of any gender, who had participated in documentary films in which attempts were made to obscure their identity. All participants were over 21 years of age and not working with me on any other project. In total I interviewed five people, located in Thailand, the United Kingdom, and New Zealand. Interviews took place over Skype (with participants in their homes, or sex worker social spaces) or in person in decriminalised workplaces. All locations should equally be considered the field, by virtue of what takes place there. Indeed, the field exists beyond the interview context and encompasses all aspects of my research practice.¹⁹

From the onset of the ethics process, anonymity of interview participants was of utmost importance. Yet early in the recruitment process the desire for anonymity was challenged. Mai Chanta and Thanta Laovilawanyakul participated on the condition their legal names were used, and it was clear they were not pseudonyms. Both asserted that when aliases are used in academic research, the interviewees are effectively written out as their contributions cannot be fully recognised. As Thai sex workers who frequently engage with a majority white, Western academia, they argue this form of erasure devalues their research contributions and enforces racist hierarchies of knowledge.

Conversations around anonymity in this context hinge on debates around consent and stigma, and spring from non-consensual anonymity in both research and

¹⁹ Although my interviews could be considered field work in a more conventional understanding, they are part of a wider field to be mapped. Rather than locating the field in terms of geographical place, Nast defines it ‘in terms of specific political objectives that (as such) cut across time and place’ (Nast, 1994: 57). This is also about the researcher’s place within the research, and situated knowledge, for, as Cindi Katz suggests, conceiving of the field as a naturalised place suggests that the researcher can easily step outside of it (Katz, 1994: 67).

documentary encounters. It is, I propose, a form of defacement, and reflects an inability or refusal to perceive research participants as agents. For Donna Haraway (1988: 592) agency and ability to steer the course of study is a fundamental tenet of ethical research practice, which counters what she describes as the Aristotelian impulse to render everything in the field of study as objects. I would add that the objectification of research subjects is heightened when those subjects are sex workers. This was illustrated in my interview with Chanta and Laovilawanyakul. Liz Hilton, a white woman working with the Thai sex worker organisation Empower for many years, facilitated and translated our interview, and as we were finishing Hilton described an encounter with a Western researcher studying whether someone can consent to engaging in sex work. The researcher would only give a research consent form to Hilton, not the sex workers she had been interviewing, as it was not considered that sex workers could consent to be interviewed themselves. While this reveals an infantilisation of sex workers within certain strands of academia, it also echoes the treatment of sex workers in documentary practice. Both Chanta and Laovilawanyakul described documentary interviews where they were made anonymous against their explicit wishes, and when they challenged the film producers they were told it was for their own good. This infantilisation is a product of stigma and is embedded in representational regimes. It is also racialised, as trafficking discourses for example focus more heavily on migrant sex workers and workers of colour (Agustin, 2007; Doezema, 2001).

The above notwithstanding, the provision of anonymity for research participants is a foundation of research ethics for valid reason. Further, consent for identifiable participation does not render a project ethical. Anonymity, and lack thereof in research is not restricted to concerns around violence, privacy and stigma, but extends to repercussions within social circles and communities, which in stigmatised communities can have a heightened sensitivity to outsiders and sharing of privileged knowledge. By way of example, Ulrike Dahl, interviewing femme-identified participants in her own queer community, highlighted a lack of anonymity limiting what participants were willing to say, or would allow in published accounts:

The downside of not building text on anonymized accounts was that it was more difficult to address what some interlocutors have called ‘the thorny aspects’ of femme politics and community making. In

particular, moments of critique of fellow femmes and other queers in some respects had to be downplayed as putting things in print can have powerful effects. It also meant that there were things that were said in interviews that did not end up in the book – as subjects changed their mind or decided other things than those that I considered significant were more important. While some critics are quick to point out the lack of attention to tension and disagreements as a shortcoming of the book – and once again, hinting towards the notion that this would make *Femmes of Power* less ‘scientific’. To me this raises questions about the inevitable limitations of any kind of representational ‘outing’. (Dahl, 2016: 163)

But, I argue this avoidance of thorny issues is also the case in anonymous accounts. Indeed, one of my participants, who had only appeared anonymously in documentary projects, stated that anything related to trauma was heavily self-censored, as they worried it would have negative impact on other sex workers (as opposed to themselves or their own interpersonal relationships).²⁰

1.5 Ethics, ‘absent’ researchers, and circles of silence

Former sex worker and academic Sarah Mann advocated for not studying sex work at all, unless it very directly benefits sex workers, in which case the researchers should be sex workers themselves (2013). While one of the reasons for her admonishment is what she calls a ‘glut’ of sex work research which takes away time and resources from sex worker organisation’s peer support and advocacy work, she also highlighted the danger to sex worker researchers themselves.²¹ This highlights a problem of disclosure for those researchers with sex work or other embodied knowledge; there is rightfully a demand for sex worker lead research, but negative consequences in locating oneself in this way. That is, in the context of research involving the oppositional subject and

²⁰ The concept of collective representational ‘outing’ in anonymity will be addressed in my final chapter.

²¹ In addition to raising concerns that sex work research can harm sex worker researchers undertaking it, through reducing them to sex workers only, Mann wrote that “‘Nothing about us without us’ means that sex workers are *so over* research that uses their knowledge without paying them back, that investigates their lives without asking them what needs to be found out, or that talks about them behind their backs’ (2013)

subjugated vision, situated knowledges become ever more critical, but also come with heightened risk and additional silences to be navigated. Silence is therefore not only an issue in terms of the sex worker and other closeted subjects who are the focus of research, but is also at play within the research process itself.

For Haraway, as producers of situated knowledge we must be ‘marked’, embodied, and visible – we must position ourselves (1988: 587). This becomes especially pertinent, but also troublesome when it comes to sex work, which is a ‘sticky’ stigma,²² and plays a particularly difficult role in terms of silence and visibility. This stigma can result in a stepping back from visibility within the research process. Jacqueline Sanchez Taylor and Julia O’Connell Davidson for example, revisiting an unpublished paper on researching sex tourism, describe a series of racist, sexist incidents witnessed by them and directed toward them in the course of their research. The unpublished work was emotional, angry, and can be roughly summarised as saying the research process was personally excruciating (2010: 44).

They make a point of saying they had personal reasons for undertaking the research but do not elaborate on what that is, and are both grateful the paper was never submitted for publication. The primary reason for stepping back from this kind of embodied reflexivity in the context of sex work research specifically is around perceived boundary loss and negative impacts on academic careers. Locating the stigma of sex work in the clash of symbolic domains of the public world and private, they highlight this boundary loss as a cause of stigma.²³ Entering this space of boundary loss casts the researchers themselves as compromised:

...those who research sex walk a fine line between claiming authority by showing how deeply they immersed themselves in the field and/or demonstrating their ‘insider’ status, and jeopardizing their professional reputation by revealing that have come *too* close to a form of stigmatised form of sexual activity. (Sanchez Taylor and O’Connell Davidson, 2010: 50)

²² That is, it is a form of stigma which attaches itself to those around the sex worker, including partners, and family.

²³ As outlined in my introductory chapter stigma around sex work is more complex than this, but boundary loss is certainly one element, and one pertinent to sex work research in particular.

Further, this kind of openness does not impact researchers equally. All researchers come to the field as sexual, gendered, classed beings, and this affects interactions in the ‘field’. However reflexive accounts, and concomitant closeness to the subject it brings, endangers the careers of women and gay researchers for example disproportionately to white heterosexual men (ibid., 51).

Sanchez Taylor and O’Connell Davidson (ibid., 50-51) rightly problematise the responses to this stigma which establish even greater divides between sex workers and (non sex worker) researchers,²⁴ amplifying the Madonna/whore complex. But their conclusion, by which I cannot help but feel disappointed, is that ‘silence is golden’ when it comes to reflecting on their location in their research, both regarding their research motivations and how they were able to build relationships with difficult actors in the research, i.e. with third parties in the sex industry. This disappointment is not so much directed at Sanchez Taylor and O’Connell Davidson’s advocacy of silence around the research experience. Only they can make those decisions. But it reflects my frustration in the signalling of retreat rather than confrontation with institutional prejudice. On further reflection, my disappointment is based on a distancing by apparently *non-sex worker* researchers – had the piece been written by closeted researchers nonetheless known to me to be current or former sex workers, I suspect my feelings would be entirely different. This is a largely unresolvable conflict; but we do not necessarily need to know the ‘truth’ of the author’s experiences; it is more useful to pay attention to the conflict itself. Indeed, conflicted feelings around not being able to come to a hidden truth of something echoes throughout my thesis as a whole. It is the crux upon which the problems of the veiled sex worker hangs.

While the above is focused on more traditional forms of social science research, self-censorship extends to practice. My own practice has changed with the knowledge it will be seen by academic peers, rather than sex worker peers, and without the anonymity that screenings in film festivals and gallery easily provide. I have made some censorship evident in *Face Work* where I obviously cut sections of the audio track. But alongside these signals exist decisions around how much of my body is visible for example.

²⁴ Sanchez Taylor and O’Connell Davidson differentiate between sex workers and those who research sex work. There is however significant crossover, as many sex work research projects undertake peer-led research, including Empower (Thailand), Scarlet Alliance (Australia) and Swarm (United Kingdom). Academics not aligned to sex worker organisations may also be former or current sex workers.

I acknowledge too that different contexts of spectatorship may call for an alternative withdrawal, for example, I would not have made videos disclosing safety screening processes if clients were attending a screening, or which I thought might disrupt social relationships between my peers. Likewise, withdrawal includes decisions on where, and who, may view a work. I have in the past made collaborative video with others which were conditional on the work remaining offline. That is, different audiences require different adaptations. While a degree of self-censorship exists in any creative practice, even in practices where artists are expected to reveal themselves, provoke and transgress, as illustrated in my thesis introduction there are still consequences for doing so. Furthermore, while self-censorship can stem from negative external forces, and result in the abandonment of important research or practice, it can also be protective and productive. As Jane Parpart highlights, silence is not always about disempowerment but a form of agency;

Silence and secrecy can be evidence of desperation and disempowerment, but they can also be strategic choices offering tools for gradual, subtle renegotiations of gender hierarchies and practices. The question remains: how can we discover and analyse such elusive and secretive strategies? (2010: 23-24)

Any examination of the function of silence and secrecy should be accompanied by equally important questions around what secrets should be left as secrets, or to whom things should be told. As geographer Cindi Katz writes, there are risks in rendering ‘the practices of the oppressed visible to those who dominate’ (1994: 71), and the researcher may be silent on particular issues for numerous reasons. This concerns the ethical foundations and aims of the research itself, for, as Katz reminds us, or perhaps reprimands, responsibilities of researchers include making ‘the operations of capitalism and patriarchy more transparent to the oppressed groups’ (ibid.).

To reveal the practices of the subaltern to those in power would be an ethical lapse. In the context of sex work research, I would include studies revealing safety screening practices of sex workers for example, as research which is most appropriate for sex worker organisations to carry out themselves. This is a pointed example, as it applies to equally if not more to documentary practice as well.²⁵ In my own research,

²⁵ This is not hypothetical. As will be discussed in later chapters, the film crew of *8 Minutes* not only revealed screening practices but also evaded screening practices themselves, posing as clients in order

this includes discussions of what is strategically withheld from documentary filmmakers, which is less to do with the possibility of direct retaliation from State authorities (although this fallout can be witnessed in some sex work documentaries)²⁶, then with their words being recuperated in processes of criminalisation, and in the reproduction or co-option of stigmatising attributes.

That not everything can, or should be, known is a key tenet of my research practice, and is reflected in my writing, video practice, interviews, and textual analysis of film and writing. While this stance may seem at odds with a project hinged on the production of new knowledge, it is however, simply drawing attention to a veil which can easily go unnoticed or unacknowledged in academic work. Moreover, questions of concealment are integral to the research at hand.

To return to arguments of closeted knowledge, concealment is, or appears to be, counter to the impetus of confession, a tool of power so ingrained as a cultural practice it is no longer seen as such (Foucault, 1998: 58-60),

The obligation to confess is now relayed through so many different points, is so deeply ingrained in us, that we no longer perceive it as the effect of a power that constrains us: on the contrary, it seems to us that the truth, lodged in our most secret nature, ‘demands’ only to surface; that if it fails to do so, this is because constraint holds it in place, the violence of a power weighs it down, and it can finally be articulated only at the price of some kind of liberation. (Foucault, 1998: 60)

By confession, I mean to speak of ordinarily hidden things - a kind of speech not restricted to religious or carceral institutions but common in both documentary and research contexts, including in works of documentary auto-ethnography. The constraining power was illustrated in one of my research interviews, where participant Emma spoke of recounting for a podcast her experience of her first client. She noted this was a story that she had not even shared with other sex worker friends, before expressing how much she regretted her participation in the audio documentary and

to film covertly. This puts sex workers at greater risk of violence from both police, clients, and others posing as clients.

²⁶ Evidenced in the imprisonment of sex worker Duran Ruiz after participating in a *60 Minutes* sex work documentary. She details her experience in short film *A Gram o Pussy*, (2007) directed by Scarlot Harlot and Alexandra Juhasz.

wishing she could take it back. It was not liberatory, rather, she was weighed down by its confession.

Concealment only appears to be contrary to confession because, as Sabine Grenz emphasises, ‘concealment is not only a means of disclosure, but also the necessary condition for confession’ (2010: 56). This is particularly the case in a research context, as Grenz also points out, where ‘the scientific frame provides a sense of anonymity, supposed neutrality and contact with experts’ (ibid.). In other words, the research interview creates an environment for enhanced disclosure. There are crossovers here with documentary relations which enable confessional disclosure, as I will explore further in my thesis. The desire for telling secrets and the desire to maintain or protect secrecy are addressed by research participants in my own interviews, albeit laden with anxiety around loss of anonymity, and a burden of representation which is only enhanced, not lifted, by that anonymity.

While stigma produces a pressure to confess, Grenz also highlights confessional speaking as a clarification of identity (Grenz, 2010: 57). I would suggest this is particularly the case for stigmatised identities, and identities of the closet (for, not all stigmatised identities are able to be closeted). If interviews are a production of the self, where the ‘voiceless’ sex worker becomes a speaking subject, it is grounded in disciplinary notions of confession which go largely unseen. This is equally true in the academic research interview as it is in the documentary interview. This is why my thesis demands the reflexivity and agility of a practice integrated approach.

1.6 The spectre of the sex worker, and the long arm of the sex wars

In researching relations of silence, power, and voice in sex work documentary, it is also necessary to locate and respond to how the sex worker has been used and evoked within knowledge producing apparatus. In this final section, I illustrate the risks that sex workers/researchers undertake in speaking about sex work, show how discursive silencing of sex workers takes place, and map the origins of this dispossession of the sex worker voice. I give visualisation to the above, as well as provide an example of schizoanalysis in practice, with a case study of documentary *Not a Love Story*. I undertake this case study in order to demonstrate how the sex worker, a ‘failed’

feminist subject,²⁷ is subject to harsh disciplinary forces within feminist discourse, and further how has harmed both sex worker representation and participation in academic research and documentary forms of knowledge production, ultimately leading to the silences outlined in the section above. There are clashing feminist ideologies in sex work discourse, and as illustrated above, the multiple silences of sex workers and researchers within the field of sex work show that this problem is ongoing.

Indeed, it is the intensity of this conflict which necessitated the disclosure of my own sex work experience in this thesis, but also made it difficult to do so. For much of my thesis I had veiled my own location within it, before determining that my obscured location, even if eventually made explicit in some neat narrative conclusion, was impeding how my arguments and interventions could be understood.

While many feminist movements have long had an uneasy relationship with sex work, it was in the so-called ‘sex wars’ of the 1980s and 1990s in Western Europe and North America where the conflict came to a head. In this conflict, radical feminists considered sex work and pornography, along with sexual practices such as bondage and sado-masochism as forms of violence against women which enabled structures of gender based violence and oppression. Sex workers were considered complicit, even collaborators with patriarchal power structures. In response, ‘sex-positive’ feminists advocated for the revolutionary use of pleasure and situated non-conformist sexual practices, including sex work, as sites of subversive liberation.²⁸ There was little if no space between these two poles.

In the midst of this debate sex workers felt side-lined and used as collateral. As early as 1977, for example, sex workers demanded that sex work be discussed but not *used* as a rhetorical device (Mac and Smith, 2018: 2). Mac and Smith likewise take issue with the use of sex work as a metaphor for the subjugation of women, or as a vault where feelings and anxieties around sex and gender are stored, rather than as

²⁷ While sex workers are constructed as undermining the feminist struggle, Mac and Smith argue that they are the ‘original feminists’. They provide numerous examples of sex workers organising collectively, from medieval sex workers in Bavaria, to street based workers in colonial-era Nairobi, to transgender sex workers at the forefront of the Stonewall riots (Mac and Smith, 2018: 5-7).

²⁸ The production of queer explicit pornography, including written forms, flourished in response to what was considered the repression of sexuality and pleasure. Laura Guy (2016) for example examines queer pornographic magazine ‘On Our Backs’ in this context. However, this form of pornography should be considered separately to sex work and certainly to commercial pornography as it was not a commercial venture.

a workplace (ibid.).²⁹ Furthermore, and particularly relevant in the study of cinema, Mac and Smith argue that *both* sex work exclusionary feminism and sex positive feminism tended to use sex work in symbolic rather than in material terms:

Stuck in the domain of sex and whether it is ‘good’ or ‘bad’ for women (and adamant that it could only be one or the other) it was all too easy for feminists to think of The Prostitute only in terms of what she represented to them. They claimed ownership of sex worker experiences in order to make sense of their own. (2018: 11).

The sex worker is constructed as either a sexual revolutionary or a victim/collaborator, side-lining the material realities of sex worker’s lives. Meanwhile actual sex worker artists such as Cosi Fanny Tutti were tolerated until they made their own sex work explicit in their art - her group 1976 exhibition at the Institute for Contemporary Art in London entitled *Prostitution* was open for days before being shut down (Coles, 2016). To make one’s own sex work symbolic was not acceptable.

Alison Phipps argues that the sex wars paradigm remains a powerful force in limiting who can speak as a sex worker and the risks that come when so doing. In her analysis of the sex war paradigm in contemporary debates, Phipps outlines three rhetorical sleights of hand which dispossess sex workers of a voice which can be heard. The first is by ‘disappearing sex workers’, by producing rhetorical panic around clients and managers being the origin of the sex worker speech (Phipps, 2017: 308).

Secondly, sex worker representability is undermined. Within the abolitionist rhetorical economy, sex workers are either victims or accomplices. Accomplices cannot be representative, nor can sex workers speaking from a relative position of privilege (ibid.: 311). Privilege includes being able to speak at all, therefore ‘A sex worker is unrepresentative if she is making any representations at all’ (ibid.: 314).³⁰ In excluding only certain subjects - oppositional sex workers - it uses representation in a disciplinary and exclusionary manner.

²⁹ Conversely Mac and Smith also take issue with ‘pro-sex’ feminist movements which frame sex work as a form of sexual liberation (Mac and Smith, 2018: 10) and which tended to make arguments from a non-sex worker perspective, or to focus on the consumption rather than the conditions of production of pornography for example.

³⁰ Phipps builds her argument from Frankie Mullin’s article refuting the existence of a ‘Pimp Lobby’ (2015) and Wendy Lyon’s text on the impossibility of the representative sex worker (2011).

Finally, there is a demand that survivors of prostitution be heard, but the definition of survivors is confined to those who have left the industry and is not extended to those who identify as survivors but who still work within it (ibid.: 314). Phipps argues that survivors are thus used as a proxy for current sex workers who are ‘voiceless’, rendering the ‘representative’ sex worker an apparition summoned only by the radical feminist

... she cannot manifest herself: she can only *be manifested* as an absence within constructions of sex workers’ struggle for rights. She must be spoken for, by the feminist critic or the ‘survivor’: as soon as she speaks for herself, her representations are dismissed. This full stop is repeatedly drawn on the body of any sex worker activist who raises their voice. (2017: 314)

This manifestation of absence and proxy will be further analysed in my discussions of documentary television series *8 Minutes*, in Chapter 3. However the majority of analysis within my thesis is directed toward film which complicates notions of agency, the voicing of trauma, and challenges the use of the sex worker as an apparition or symbolic figure able to speak only in the service of someone else.

The co-option of the sex worker experience is exemplified in a seminal documentary produced at the beginning of the sex wars, *Not a Love Story: A Film About Pornography* (Klein, 1981), which argues that pornography harms those performing it, other women, and consumers of pornography. The film illustrates the problem with the intersection of sex work exclusionary feminism and documentary practice, namely, that while superficially it appears the sex worker is given voice and visibility, multiple silences are enacted. The film uses the sex worker both as vault and as proxy, while presenting itself as doing otherwise. I include a brief analysis of the film here in order to demonstrate how rhetorical silencing plays out in practice.

Despite the participation of sex workers in the film, and the anti-pornography intent, *Not a Love Story* should itself be considered an apparatus of objectification. The film mixes extensive anti-pornography ‘consciousness raising’ circles where non-sex workers sit together and speak, with a narrative where erotic dancer Linda comes to a similar anti-sex work consciousness. The sex workers who speak are framed as either non repentant because they are not fully cognisant of their oppression

(victim/accomplice, and thus illegitimate voices), or as those who have come, or are coming, to an understanding of the harm done to them. This process unfolds on screen.

Not a Love Story uses several discursive devices, but a central one is watching (other) people watch. The documentary spectator sees men peek through the opening shutters of the peep show, and photographers directing porn shoots. This is a conventional representation, until the extended scenes where a sex worker is encouraged to view violent pornography. As the camera lingers on her face, and distress, it also requires her narration of the undoing of how she perceives herself. The voyeurism continues in a scene where peep show performers are interviewed through a booth window and telephone. Although the spectator via the camera in the peep show booth is placed in the same viewing position as a client, they are discursively set up as if they are not - as if they are not also watching sex workers perform on screen. The conditions of documentary viewing could have been richly interrogated here, but instead, because the gaze of the camera is not addressed, it serves to further contain the sex workers as objects to be mapped.

The scene is further problematic in that it assumes the sex workers are speaking to the director as if they are not also a kind of client; as if they are not still thinking about what the person on the other side of the glass wants to see and hear. On the surface, it appears as if the film is making visible relations of power, but this is always partial, and this is where the danger sits. The film's refusal to turn the mirror on itself continues to the final sequence, where dancer Linda recounts her experience being photographed for a pornographic magazine. She not only feels 'weird' about her boundaries being pushed by the photographer, but this process of sexual objectification and her feelings of loss of self is recorded by the documentary film crew for all to see. This is a production of shame in which the filmmakers are complicit, but do not reflect upon, even though Linda only took part in the shoot for reasons of documentary narrative. Shame is instead treated as a part and parcel of the pornographic experience, rather than something the documentary has spent the whole time producing.

I should make it explicit here that whilst I am critical of sex work exclusionary feminism, this thesis is not concerned with arguments around sex work as a liberatory force, nor conversely as a site of violence. I am concerned instead with the use of the body and voice of the sex worker in the documentary apparatus, by filmmakers, and by sex workers themselves. This includes an analysis of who is permitted to speak,

what spectres are manifested, and in what circumstances. I consider documentary as a site of resistance, of pleasure, connection, and also of violence, played out on and through the body of the sex worker.

1.7 Conclusion: the silence that is not one

This chapter has charted the epistemological territories that guide the interventions of this thesis. Because the way I have carried out research is itself one of these interventions, it has been all the more important to attend to how my methodology has unfolded and adapted. To reiterate, while this thesis began as practice-based, and became practice-led, my video practice and subsequent abandonment produced a kind of rupture that fundamentally altered my approach. It is a research assemblage, consisting of critical analysis of sex work documentary film (including ‘high’ and ‘low’ forms, sex worker made, and disciplinary film); textual analysis; research interviews; and practice as spectrum.

My practice has provided a complex intervention on how practice-research can be used in an academic context. Expanding on Hope’s proposal that practice-research should be conceptualised as a spectrum, and locating my approach as ‘orange’ on this spectrum (research *into*, and *through* practice), I have made space for the ‘insider’ artist as researcher in this approach. I have also demonstrated, and will continue to demonstrate throughout this thesis, the importance of practice in seeking out the problems and gaps in research, which, when used reflexively - including in abandonment - allows for difficult knowledge to be produced.

I further propose that rather than being considered a methodological tangent or anomaly, practice inclusive research disrupts hierarchies of knowledge and the separation of different forms of knowledge production. It embraces the circularity, blocks, tensions, failures and diving under where learning takes place. In addition, this thesis holds practice is a mode of entry into feminist strategies of embodied, situated knowledges. This approach is not only ethically necessary in the field of sex work research, but is essential for the production of knowledge within a field of closeted, and rhetorically silenced, subjects.

In locating this thesis as a work of unfolding embodied knowledge, I signal my concern with relations of power, and what I seek to do with this analysis, which includes the illumination of the very structures of disclosure and silence within

knowledge making systems. In order to understand how sex workers can 'speak' in the documentary, it has been necessary to consider obfuscations, stigma, subterfuge, silence and sex worker voice that are both inside and outside of documentary.

This counter-hegemonic lens is useful in a field of difficult and traumatic subjects that are often present in speaking about sex work, and where complex relations of the closet reside. In emphasising here the connections between stigma in sex work documentary film and in academic research, I include the complex, multiple silences that can emerge on the part of both researchers and sex workers. Stigma of sex work, and risks to sex workers in engaging with documentary and research practices, mean that much is unsaid, and that the researcher has a responsibility to consider which silences need to be honoured, and which ones approached with gentle and reflexive curiosity. Navigating a commitment to reflexivity within a research field made of secrets is extremely complex. Going forward, these gaps, tensions and silences will continue to play a crucial role in the production of knowledge and will be addressed throughout the thesis.

Chapter 2: Giving and taking face: the sex worker made known in documentary practice

2.1 An introduction to a hallucination

A collective imagery arises when a media infrastructure casts and repeats the same images in a million copies, producing a common space; a consensual hallucination around the same object (that afterwards is spread through other channels word of mouth to the film industry).

- Matteo Pasquinelli (2007: 151)

This chapter charts the construction of the sex worker through the face, and my interventions are twofold. Firstly, in an expansion of Matteo Pasquinelli's theory of videopoiesis, I argue that there is a 'consensual hallucination' of sex workers, powerfully re/produced in moving image broadcast media. Pasquinelli does not take into consideration obscured events or closeted identities, which I will argue intensifies, rather than weakens, collective imagery of the sex worker. As a way to understand the implications of this 'hallucination' in documentary film practice, I will explain that the intersection of videopoiesis with the prostitute imaginary produces totalising imagery which suspends the sex worker in place. I argue that the face of the sex worker is a potent vector of this collective imagery, and how the face and facialised body (where the body becomes like a face) of the sex worker are used to reveal what must otherwise remain veiled. That is, I argue that the sex work documentary is a genre of visual omission, even when the sex worker is visible, but that what escapes the visual record can be projected onto the face. It is the face which acts as entry into the unknowable. One implication of this, which I will address further in this thesis, is that in participating in documentary representation the sex worker must navigate an image of themselves which is not whole.

Secondly, I will demonstrate that the prostitute imaginary, and the use of the face within it, amplifies stigma and intersecting oppressions, such as racialisation and hypersexualisation of the sex worker. It is this intersection of the closet and collective hallucinations which render the sex worker such potent use as a boundary object. Suspended in collective imagery, the sex worker face is loaded with discourses of both

victimhood and threat which further the entrapment of the sex worker in discursive silencing.

While my thesis as a whole is concerned with the agency of the subject within the prostitute imaginary, and the scope for taking apart negative representations, my analysis in this chapter pays particular attention to oppositional uses of the face by sex workers themselves within the cinematic apparatus. I will argue that any alternative videopoiesis of the sex worker must include the taking apart of totalising treatment of the sex worker face. This renders visible hidden operations of power, and the ideologies playing out beneath the surface of the film reliant on an unquestioned collective imagery of social abjection. With this contention comes a recognition that the face of the sex worker is not used equally across documentary practice. I find attempts by filmmakers to use the face as site of entry not to a collective imagery but to individual, and intimate, hallucination. As I will demonstrate through my case studies, this approach is fraught with risk to the sex worker, on both individual and collective levels.

Both my two documentary case studies, Dennis O'Rourke's *The Good Woman of Bangkok* (1991) and Matthew Bown's *My Night with Julia* (2003), share a concern with gaining extreme proximity to the sex worker documentary subject. Both documentaries begin with the same premise: a white filmmaker meets a sex worker at a bar for sex, in Thailand and Russia respectively. What follows are filmed sexual encounters, making the sex worker their primary subject. But the documentaries diverge in treatment of the sex workers, both visually, and in their approach to the ethno-pornographic, allowing me to map uses of the face as an entry point to closeted and stigmatised subjects, invocation of the prostitute imaginary, racialisation, and enactment of sex workers as boundary objects. Along with the situated gaze of the filmmakers, it is the subsequent divergence which makes the two works so useful in the study of the prostitute imaginary and the documentary apparatus.

2.2 The prostitute imaginary

As outlined in the opening chapters of this thesis, discourses of abjection and the closet heighten the sex worker as subject to be mapped. However, the nature of sex work and the sex worker pose a particular problem for visual mediums such as documentary practice, wherein the drive to reveal the subject is met with elements of both the unfilmable and unwatchable. That is, not only may the sex worker resist the full gaze

of camera, but sex work itself is largely unfilmable in a documentary context.³¹ Secondly, because of the explicit sexual imagery and content this recording would entail, such documentary video can also be considered un-broadcastable. There are exceptions to this, and I am referring to prostitution here rather than strip or peep show work, but it is significant to note that visually and aurally explicit sex work documentaries have been pulled from public view, sometimes by censorship boards, sometimes by (sex worker) filmmakers themselves.³² What is not filmable, or transmittable, however, is nonetheless imaginable, and I argue here that understanding how these gaps in knowledge are filled, and what this form of world building does, is crucial to a schizoanalysis of sex worker documentary.

As I will illustrate here, the mapping of the ‘absent’ sex worker bleeds into the mapping of the ‘present’ sex worker, and this mapping both produces, and is formed by, what Melissa Gira Grant (2014) named the ‘prostitute imaginary’. Critically, Grant argues that it is the prostitute imaginary which transforms someone from a ‘woman’ to ‘prostitute (2014: 4)’ – not the work itself. I propose that this is an important distinction, as it recognises that representation imposes a spoiled identity, not the sex work. The use of the term prostitute by Grant is intentional here, emphasising the stigmatising and abject qualities of this imaginary.

Significantly for the work of this thesis, Grant contends that the transformation into ‘prostitute’ is built through a particular kind of moving image, specifically videos of arrests and raids which are then published online (2014: 4). In this argument, it is the acts of un-consensual filming paired with broadcast which produce the prostitute. Spectatorship is critical here. I agree with Grant that a collective imagery is built, at least in part, through the disciplinary camera,³³ and that this imagery makes up how

³¹ Unless covertly filmed, recording of sex work would require consent from both sex worker and client, and depending on circumstance, management. While uncommon, it occurs in ‘Like a Pascha’ (2010), where director Svante Tidholm sought to understand why men paid for sex. Both the brothel owner and clients were filmed, including in masked orgies, where the documentary camera was joined by other cameras. It is notable the documentary was filmed in Germany, where sex work is legalised. Sweden in contrast criminalises clients.

³² As I will detail, after one broadcast *My Night with Julia* was pulled from air due to viewer complaints. But filmmakers withdraw their own work from view too. This is exemplified in the work of Bubu de la Madeleine, who stopped showing her work *Pornography made by me and a client* once she decided to disidentify as a sex worker (Stuttgen and Herbst, 2010: 286).

³³ Grant’s prostitute imaginary is exemplified in the actions of a group non-satirically named ‘Save Our Eyes’ in Leeds, UK, who successfully campaigned to end the managed approach to street-based sex work in the Holbeck area. This was an approach which set out an area where sex workers would not be arrested. Save Our Eyes operate primarily through photographing and videoing sex workers and

sex work is conceptualised. However, arrest and sting videos, including covert and non-covert recording, make up a relatively small field of totalising uses of the camera. In fact, I argue that one implication of the absence of sex work from the visual record is that the sex worker is visually mapped in other ways; as well as raids, it is through the spaces work may be solicited; in the beginning and at end of work; or workspaces empty of men, but rarely ‘working’. Recordings of sexualised geographies where sex work takes place, such as covert recordings along streets and red-light districts also contribute to the prostitute imaginary, even when sex workers are absent or only partially visible, constructing an alternate ‘body’ of the sex worker.³⁴

While there is a particular violence to the videos Grant describes, the prostitute imaginary is not contained to filming by hobbyists, anti-sex work groups or state apparatus such as police, just as the violence elicited in these forms can be found across documentary genres. In order to fully understand how the prostitute imaginary impacts how sex worker documentary is produced and in turn received, I need to address the concept of videopoiesis, because it is this which allows the prostitute imaginary to take root and disseminate.

2.3 Videopoiesis

Before I analyse examples of the replication of a hallucination of the sex worker through film, I want to consider Pasquinelli’s concept of ‘videopoiesis’ in relation to the prostitute imaginary and the figure of the sex worker specifically. My argument is that the closet makes the sex worker particularly vulnerable to a ‘consensual hallucination’, to use Pasquinelli’s term (2007: 151), of the sex worker and their lives. It should be noted from the outset the consent referred to is that of the spectator, not the film subject. The foundation of the term videopoiesis is poiesis—not simply representation, but a form of creation which, even if it appears to be a copy of the world, plays by its own rules in regard to the real. Both fictional and documentary

clients in the area, uploading the footage online (Save Our Eyes, 2018). The prostitute imaginary is also at play in the documentary series filmed in the same area *Sex, Drugs and Murder, Life inside the Red Light Zone* (2017), which focused on sex workers in the throes of drugs, withdrawal, and other bodily signs of deviant behaviour, and in extreme emotional states. Outreach organisation Basis holds the filmmakers responsible for an increase in vigilantism and violence in the area (Basis, 2017). Thus, the prostitute imaginary has real world consequences.

³⁴ As noted in Chapter 1, covert amateur or hobby recordings of sex work geographies appear in large numbers on easily accessible platforms such as youtube.com. While such surveillant videos are a combination of pornography and disciplinary apparatus, they are highly accessible, and make up a body of collective imagery.

film are thus works of poiesis. Fernando Berns' description is particularly useful here, as it highlights the impossibility of a creative work existing separately from the world, with emphasis on the further impact on the world which creates it.

Poiesis is creation, the product of humans; the word 'poiesis' refers to both the poetic object and the process that made it. It implies autonomy from reality, so narrative cinema, even if mimetic in its depiction of the world, works following its own rules and norms of order and intelligibility... Still, poiesis does not refer exclusively to the arts: more broadly, it refers to any action (and the product of that action) that both transforms and continues the world. (Berns, 2017: 121; my emphasis)

Videopoiesis is a little different from poiesis. It simply considers the specificity of the speed and repeatability of imagery and sound which video enables, making poiesis even more potent and uncontainable. The sex worker in documentary, in the evening news, the blockbuster fictional film, and the videos of brothel raids are all works of videopoiesis. These images 'both transforms and continues' (Berns, 2017: 121) how the sex worker is thought about, which not only impacts sex workers on a material level but further representation and world building.

The prostitute imaginary is also produced by literature and written media, is most enabled and strengthened by videopoiesis, not only because of accessibility, but particularly through what the moving image does to the body of the spectator. While Pasquinelli theorised in the context of war and terrorism rather than the subject of sex work, his focus on the spectatorship of violence and production of truth through the audio-visual are relevant here. While he does not explicitly describe videopoiesis as a spectator-video assemblage, this is essentially what it is. Videopoiesis is intrinsically concerned with the viewer, to the extent that Pasquinelli asserts that the video image 'inscribes itself into the flesh' (2007: 151). This admittedly strong statement reflects his belief that images act on the body, and that the contemporary use of images of violence and terror is pornographic. In this respect, there is significant crossover with critiques of sex worker documentary film, and Grant's critique of a surveillant and inherently pornographic prostitute imaginary in particular. But Pasquinelli becomes most useful if the argument is moved away from a literal interpretation of video

inscriptions into the body and the image is instead conceived as lingering far beyond its initial reception, strengthened by repetition, and acting upon the spectator.

Pasquinelli, drawing out alternatives to collective totalising imagery, argues for an alternative videopoiesis, with the cultivation of alternative narratives and formats. He asserts that we do not need a multitude of cameras, but a taking apart of the image, including creating a networked rather than collective image (Pasquinelli, 2007: 155). It is important to note here that his critique of many cameras is towards the multiplication of the same or near-by image, not of a multitude of cameras acting to complicate totalising narratives. Likewise, Pasquinelli's use of the term 'collective' verges closer to homogeneity. He is calling for a treatment of the moving image which aims to connect, complicate and open out, rather than close meaning or simplify multiple images into one.

Further, in considering reception by the viewing subject, it is inaccurate to think of this spectatorship as passive. As bell hooks (1992: 115-131) demonstrated in her work on the oppositional gaze, while negative representation is damaging when internalised, the spectator can both look away from, or detach themselves from an image, allowing for a critique of rather than identification with an image. The question at stake is around what limits or enables a shift from internalisation to critique. In this regard, the Stuart Hall's work on encoding/decoding theory (1993: 508) is useful. Hall held that film and television cannot be divorced from the world that produces them, nor from the distribution and consumption of those images. This means that it is impossible to view a work of documentary in isolation, beyond wider ideology and social repression, the means of production and the conditions of viewing.

Instead, Hall maps connections between the encoding and decoding of messages in relation to structures of dominance, including aspects of technical production, social context and means of circulation, consumption and reproduction. Questioning the extent to which a message could be read 'against the grain' of where it is received, Hall proposed that audio-visual works echo the power relations at point of production, and the extent to which a work can be read oppositionally depends on an interplay of production, circulation, distribution/consumption, and reproduction. This is Hall's four stage theory of communication (1993: 508). Far from being a closed system, he argues that structures of production in aural-visual media 'draw topics, treatments, agendas, events, personnel, images of the audience, 'definitions of the situation' from other sources and other discursive formations within the wider socio-

cultural and political structure of which they are a differentiated part' (Hall, 1993: 509). This means that collective imagery—including the imagined—are used to both encode and decode new representations, and that a documentary which challenges ingrained ideology will be read in relation to other representations, as well as conditions specific to the spectator.

According to this structure, there is potential for a work of representation to disrupt or challenge dominant power structures, but it also depends on a complex set of relations. Expanding Hall's thinking into the context of spoiled identity and the image/voice of the sex worker requires not only a consideration of power relations and ideology interior and exterior to the film, but how a discursively silenced image/voice can be split open to create multiple and disruptive readings. For Hall, an analysis that destabilises fixed meaning is imperative. In the documentary *Stuart Hall: Representation and the Media* (Sut Jhally, 1997), Hall states:

Ideology wants the image to become naturalized, i.e. fixed, so that you do not question it. Ideology tries to close meaning, to fix it, to stop it...Power tries to close meaning, to try to stop the sliding of meaning, but meaning can never be fixed. Because the fixing of meaning cannot be guaranteed, it can be unfixed. It can loosen and fray. The relative openness of meaning makes change possible. Makes language possible. (ibid.)

The naturalisation of the prostitute imaginary, the use of the sex worker as boundary object, and the closing of meaning is precisely what is at stake in videopoiesis of sex work. Argued here is how the prostitute imaginary emerges from the production, circulation and consumption of fixed images and narratives, through a medium which acts on the body of the spectator to form an assemblage. Totalising collective imagery is not simply produced through raid and arrest videos, but any representation that furthers stigma and violence against sex workers: that which fixes meaning rather than opens it. The prostitute imaginary is a form of poesis, one that suspends the sex worker in rhetorical silence. Undoing this suspension requires attention to flows and impediments in the re/production of meaning, and in particular taking apart and destabilising the image of the sex worker on screen. This means a taking apart representations of the face in particular, because as I will argue, it is in the face of the sex worker that so much totalisation has been made to reside.

2.4 The conflicting face of the sex worker

I argue below that the face of the sex worker functions as a particularly potent vector of the prostitute imaginary. My explorations will follow two connected strands, firstly concerning historical beliefs around the face of the sex worker as marker of deviancy, and secondly in the importance placed by society to faces. The interplay of these twin ideologies, as I will explain, have far reaching consequences. I explore how face of the sex worker has been constructed as a visual signifier of moral failings, in a pathologisation of the face moves both through what is visible, and what is not. This heightened concern with revealing what is hidden in the face has implications for the treatment of the face by the cinematic apparatus.

Historian Helen Davies (2015) attributed the 18th and 19th-century practices of physiognomy, where facial features became linked with deviant character, to a shift in treatment of the sex worker face. It was around this time that the representation of the sex worker became imbued with that of disfigurement, primarily facial disfigurement resulting from syphilis (2015: 163). This disfigurement was not simply considered a sign of illness however. Davies argues it was conflated with a broader conception of monstrosity stemming from vice rather than limited to sexually transmitted infections (ibid.). Corporeal disintegration as signifier of moral decline is evident in the art and literature of the time, including William Hogarth's print series *The Harlot's Progress* (1732) and later Emile Zola's *Nana* from 1880, in which both leading characters, once beautiful and successful sex workers, die disfigured and ruined. This is an essential part of both tales, an abject lesson, wrote Zola: 'What lay on the pillow was a charnel house, a heap of pus and blood, a shovelful of putrid flesh [...] It was if the poison she had picked up from the gutters [...] that ferment with which she had poisoned a whole people, had now risen to her face and rotted it' (1972: 470).

The face remains contested territory. The significance we give to the face arises from what Deleuze and Guattari call 'a certain assemblage of power, a certain politics' (2013: 167–191) which uses the face as a means of totalisation and classification. Central to this assemblage of power is the use of the face to know somebody. Whether we trace deviation through the face with explicit and outdated

racist ideologies, or by contemporary practices of surveillance,³⁵ or by visual interrogation via the documentary camera, totalisation is the outcome. By this I mean that the sex worker (or others subject to facialisation) is suspended in harmful ideologies, unable to be understood differently, and thus more vulnerable to material oppression.

But if the face is not natural, if it does not simply exist, then it must be produced, and in particular social and historical contexts. As Deleuze provokes ‘...we think faces have to be made, and not all societies make faces, but some need to’ (1995: 26). This is to say that the use of the face as classification tool for the means of social control is not inevitable but a particular function of power in specific social orders. This is reflected in Western attempts to ban niqabs for example, and as Julie Billaud and Julie Castro examine, attacks against women wearing niqabs in France often have explicit whorephobic elements (Billaud and Castro, 2013). I will be addressing race further in this chapter, however, understanding the coding of faces as a means of containing or exercising power allows a deeper questioning of what representations of the sex worker face do beyond the diegetic world of film. In this sense, a problem of the sex worker face is that it resists classification, because it too multiple, by which I mean, it is understood to a performance of inauthentic identities. As I will now show, it is therefore subject to an intensified gaze of classificatory interrogation.

2.5 The too many faces of the sex worker

The sex worker is a watched subject, but not necessarily a subject who is rendered fully visible by this watching. Rather, this person should be understood as a subject who challenges normalisation via obstructed knowledge of the visual field. They are seen and recognised as only partially available to the gaze. Taussig asserts that the face is a mask, and that this knowledge is an open secret, ‘a contingency, at the magical crossroads of mask and window to the soul, one of the better kept public secrets essential to everyday life’ (1999: 3). But for the sex worker, the face as mask is no longer a secret, and as I will argue here, it is not even singular. This not only has implications for everyday interactions, but, as I will show in my case studies, for the documentary gaze and the treatment of the sex worker face.

³⁵ Including now common surveillance practices but also more novel forms such as facial recognition. Alex Najibi has highlighted multiple concerns around racist algorithms in facial recognition technology and resulting discrimination (Najibi, 2020).

I return to Goffman, because while his work of stigma is also pertinent here, there is a specific intersection of sex work stigma with a different field of his work, namely his theories of performance in everyday life (1990a). While not focusing specifically on the face, Goffman laid the groundwork for ethnographic research into everyday performances of the self. Goffman differentiated between two kinds of performance: the ‘authentic performance’, in which the actor doesn’t fully comprehend they are performing, and the ‘cynical performance’, which is self-aware and calculated (1990a: 30). While he stated that in the cynical performance the actor might not care about the audience, particularly in a stigmatised context, this performance is also about protection *from* the audience. For example, a protective cynical performance is at play where transgender or gender-non-conforming sex workers perform cisgendered identities at work (SWARM, 2015), a practice that carries risk should it be discovered. Other examples include performing heterosexuality, nationality, age, desire or amusement. It is the realm of cynical performance or two-facedness that sex workers are cast.

Along with race, there are two interlocking concepts at play: the sexual deviancy of the sex worker, and the closet of the sex worker. It is not a secret that sex workers perform sexual arousal, feign affection and interest, create personas and back stories, and even less so use pseudonyms. This double life is an open secret that forms part of the stigma of sex work. The success of the sex worker’s two-facedness relies on both the worker’s performance of these identities and desires, and the client’s desire to believe them. Many parallels can be drawn to film spectatorship and suspended disbelief. Like film, belief in the performance of a sex worker does not have to be total—just enough in the moment.

Sociologist Teela Sanders (2005) describes the sex worker’s version of cynical performance, such as the making of alternate personas with different names and histories, as a manufactured identity. In its extreme, manufactured identity is not simply a performance of emotion and persona but crosses over to physical recognition, where specific visual signifiers, or absence thereof, can render someone unrecognisable. As one of Sander’s sex worker research participants noted, ‘At home I am completely different. I even look totally different and when women from the agency see me outside of here they don’t recognise me’ (Natasha, cited in Sanders, 2005: 333).

But sex worker manufactured identity should not be considered purely in terms of recognisability and the closet, as important as that is. It is a double performance with multiple objectives, including risk management, and the creation of psychological boundaries. I argue that this performance requires not just a way of behaving and speaking—it requires making a face. It requires staging. This staging is exemplified in the opening sequences of *The Good Woman of Bangkok*, where sex worker Aoi puts on make-up.

Additionally, manufactured identity can be a strategy to more subtly determine what happens in the course of a meeting, enforcing boundaries without being recognised as such. I emphasise this because these performances are not confined to the client/sex worker relationship but exists in documentary relationships. For example, even if the directors were not paying them for sex, it would be naive to assume that Aoi in the *Good Woman of Bangkok*, or Julia in *My Night with Julia*, are consistently or fully performing their ‘authentic’ selves for the camera or the directors.³⁶

The sex worker, as closeted subject with manufactured identities, does not simply have a secret life and an open life, but is rendered a subject who is difficult to know, and who therefore must be known. Inseparable from the knowledge that sex workers lie is a desire to access the interior life of the sex worker; to possess secret information that, in turn, transforms the relationship with them into an authentic and privileged one. Again, this is at play in both work and documentary contexts, which in my case studies are one and the same. However, this drive to mark out the boundaries of the sex work becomes all the more critical in the intersection with racialisation, with far reaching consequences.

2.6 Watching the sex worker become racialised

I argue the same documentary camera which probes the sex worker as boundary object is also implicated in racialisation, and that the face is a particularly powerful site where this plays out. I will map this use of the face in the following case studies, but I first need to lay bare the connection of deviant sexuality, ‘race’ and the camera, why this is so important to sex work documentary practice. By racialisation, I am referring to

³⁶ Likewise, we should not assume that we would notice, or be shown, all of Aoi’s or Julia’s own attempts to influence the course of filming.

institutional and discursive processes whereby ‘race’ is produced and ascribed. As Steve Garner notes it is where race ‘becomes salient’ (2007: 62). Understanding race as socially constructed and the result of practices of exclusion (Fox *et al*, 2012: 681), my concern here is how these practices play out on, and are enacted through, the body of the sex worker on screen.

While essentialist and positivist markers of ‘race’ (such as skin colour, texture of hair, shape of the lips) are used in racist discourse, and have been used to further violence, colonisation and discrimination, Rey Chow (2021: 92) proposes that conceptions of race have been limited to coloniser-colonised relations, restricting broader understandings of how race is used to enforce power. Instead, racism is the means, not the end point of oppression, ‘a technique of power that may be deployed whenever and wherever populations need to be brought under control’ (Chow, 2021: 106). Chow’s conceptualisation on race as a relation of power builds on Foucault’s concept of ‘biological-social racism’, and the creation of the Other from within a population, as he writes:

...the other race is basically not the race ‘that came from’ elsewhere or that was, for a time, triumphant and dominant, but that it is a race that is permanently, ceaselessly, infiltrating the social body, or which is rather, constantly being re-created in and by the social fabric. In other words, what we see as a polarity, as a binary rift within society, is not a clash between two distinct races. It is the splitting of a single race into a superrace and a subrace. (2003: 61)

This means that the discourse of race becomes the discourse of power itself (Foucault, 2003: 61). Further, this operation of power hinges on the definition of normativity, and those who deviate from it. This is not only about ‘biological-racist discourses of degeneracy’ (Foucault, 2003: 61), but institutions, State apparatus and technologies which use race to exclude and to normalise society. This does not mean that biological racism becomes irrelevant, or that the racialised body itself is not subject to violence, but that it is not the end point of a discourse.

The question thus becomes not simply who is being racialised, but for what purpose. In line with the above, Karen Shimakawa (1995: 140) argues the connection between deviant sexuality and race is used as a means of marking out limits of otherness and reinforcing nationalism. In this vein, the production of degenerate race

and sex should be seen as an overlapping project. This is epitomised in the cultural attitudes towards prostitution in Victorian Britain, where Anne McClintock argues that white sex workers became associated with the ‘primitive’ and the racialised Other became hypersexualised.

Prostitutes became associated with black and colonised people within a discourse on racial degeneration that figured them as transgressing the natural distributions of money, sexual power, and property, and as thereby fatally threatening the fiscal and libidinal economy of the imperial state. Prostitutes [...] were figured as atavistic throwbacks to a primordial phase of racial development, their ‘racial deviance’ written visibly on the body in the stigmata of female sexual deviance. (1992: 81)

This hypersexuality, carried on the body, was subject to heavy surveillance. Indeed, the role of the watchful gaze in marking out limits of deviance should not be underestimated. The sex worker was a nexus of deviance—deviant money, race, sexuality and class—and along with Jews, Irish migrants, the working class, people of colour and queers, the sex worker was ‘metaphorically bound in a regime of surveillance figured by images of sexual pathology and racial aberration’ (McClintock, 1992: 81).

I note that while this collapse of deviances into a larger field includes the white sex worker, the consequences remain greater for those who are already racialised. For example, late twentieth century kerb-crawling legislation in Britain, implemented by this regime of surveillance, was used to disproportionately incarcerate both Black and migrant sex workers, as well as Black and migrant men (clients or not), in order to criminalise a particular space (McClintock, 1992). Further, while this gaze can be concentrated in or facilitated by particular architecture and geographies, it is intensified by the technology of the camera.

Side by side with the major technology of the telescope, the lens and the light beam, which were an integral part of new physics and cosmology, which were the minor techniques of multiple and intersecting observations, of eyes that must see without being seen; using techniques of subjection and methods of exploitation, an

obscure art of light and the visible was secretly preparing a new knowledge of man. (Foucault, 1991: 171)

The ‘lens and the light beam’ are thus not simply a means of discovery, but a specific means of revealing knowledge, and crucially the awareness of being watched, in order to produce a more docile body. To use a more contemporary example, when Thai, Chinese and Eastern European massage parlours in London were raided in 2013, sex workers were arrested on migration offences and deported (Smith, 2013). These raids were accompanied by film cameras,³⁷ in addition to police photographers. In this sense, the recording of the raids is integral to the raid apparatus and should not only be understood as a production of disciplinary knowledge but also as a mechanism of racialisation. This racialisation marks out limits of both racial and sexual deviance and entrenches the authority of the State to expel ‘bad’ migrants from its borders.

For sex workers, this use of the camera is not only disciplinary and implicated in racialisation, but pornographic. There is a voyeurism at play in the recording of subjection and violence of the State, particular when it intervenes in sex work geographies. This was illustrated in my interview with Thai sex worker organisation Empower. Liz Hilton (Empower) shared broadcast images of a police raid where sex workers were forced to sit for the camera semi-naked with towels over their faces. While their faces were covered and unable to return the gaze, their bodies were offered up to the gaze. Likewise, the towelled/faces are abject evidence, not negating the power of the face, but reiterating its importance.

2.7 The ethno-pornographic

Both documentaries studied here span the ethnographic and pornographic in nature—thorny terms I use with intent given the premise and content of the works. It may seem counter intuitive to speak of the pornographic in an analysis of the face, however my research finds that the documentary lens can use and produce the sex worker face as pornographic site very effectively. While I have defined my use of term pornographic in my thesis introduction, I will expand on the ethnographic here before putting the two together.

³⁷ ‘Sex workers in London’s Soho had their doors kicked in by riot police last week. The cops brought along journalists to photograph cowering women who were desperately trying to cover their faces. These images were then splashed across the press (Smith, 2013).

In a broad and notably generous sense, Catherine Russell suggests ethnography ‘can be understood as an experimentation with cultural difference and cross-cultural experience’ (1999: xii). It is a description which encapsulates both my case studies. It should be highlighted that while contemporary practices of ethnography includes, ‘insider’ research and investigations of the self, ethnographic experimentation springs from a quest for knowledge of the Other which is ‘grounded in colonial culture’ (Russell, 1999: xviii).

Critique of ethnographic film is best summarised by Trinh T Minh Ha (1991: 35), in her assertion that it divides the world into those who are to be looked at, subject to the gaze, and those who look. The audience perceives, the documentary subject does not. Despite both director’s attempts to reveal themselves as participants in the field, O’Rourke and Bown are only ever momentarily the subject of their gaze. These are not insider ethnographies. Both films are audio-visual recordings of the sex worker in ‘other’ lands. In fact, O’Rourke specifically set out to pay for sex with a ‘Third world woman for sale’ (O’Rourke cited Shimakawa, 1995: 125).

I note here too that while the unequal relations of power are less stark in *My Night with Julia* than in *The Good Woman of Bangkok* (although both directors are clients filming sex workers), while many Russian sex workers could be considered (and identify as) white, Eastern European and Russian sex workers are also racialised and hypersexualised. I will expand on this, but it is important to highlight from the outset that this chapter is not a study of white versus Asian subjects, but of racialisation within the prostitute imaginary.³⁸

My critique also recognises and is framed by a porous boundary between ethnographic documentary film and pornography, in which race is deeply implicated. As outlined in my introduction, there are established links between documentary and pornographic genres. Christian Hansen, Catherine Needham, and Bill Nichols lay out the differences and convergences between ethnography and pornography in particular.

Pornography and ethnography serve to produce the body as a site, and to extract respectively pleasure and knowledge from that site, while at the same time taming and mastering it. It is through the body, and only through the body, that the domestication of the Other

³⁸ In addition, because discourse around sex work has been heavily influenced by racialised narratives of trafficking (Doezema 2001, Agustin 2007, Campbell 2006), avoiding questions of race here would be a glaring omission.

can occur. Hence, in pornographic films, the body is made accessible, naked, it is undressed, probed; it is shot in close-up and heavily fragmented. A common image in many pornographic films is a clinical close-up of pumping genitalia. The body is cut up so that we see breasts, legs, arms, lips as if we were looking through an anatomy text. Likewise, in ethnographic practice, the body is often naked (or nearly so), divided, and probed (intellectually). (Hansen et al., 1989: 69)

The pornographic cinematography of the body will form part of my case studies, however, I will argue that the treatment of the face, in terms of desire, voyeurism and possessive knowledge, which can render a work pornographic. More than the body, I will show that is the face which is used for ‘knowing’, and taking pleasure, from the sex worker.

In the case studies which follow, I take my analysis of the prostitute imaginary further by examining the visible face of the sex worker in documentary, particularly where these works appear to disengage the prostitute imaginary through intimate proximity to an individual sex worker, and through conflicting productions of the face. This includes treatment of the sex worker face as mask, as boundary object, and as site for possessive interrogation. Critically, I also question the extent to which a refusal on the part of the ‘foreign’ sex worker to be known is tolerated or recuperated back into the prostitute imaginary. My analysis reveals that attempts to undo collective imagery in through ‘intimate’ knowledge is a practice situated in risk, including ethical failure and danger of replicating totalising visual practices. I will also argue that while the face is produced, it is also a site of resistance.

2.8 The Good Woman of Bangkok

As outlined in the beginning of this chapter, *The Good Woman of Bangkok* focuses on Aoi, a sex worker that Australian filmmaker Dennis O’Rourke meets in a club in Bangkok and takes back to his hotel for an evening for sex, thereafter embarking on a 9-month transactional relationship for the purposes of the film. The documentary was screened in cinemas and on television, including on Channel 4 in the United

Kingdom.³⁹ For this reason I consider the work to have been unusually accessible and with a broad audience. Indeed, much has been written on this film already, primarily around the ethics of intervention and director/subject relationships.⁴⁰ My own points on interventionist elements will thus be kept to a minimum. My analysis instead concerns Aoi's suspension in the prostitute imaginary, via the camera's treatment of her face, including the pornographic.

In my initial notes, I had written that *The Good Woman of Bangkok* is a film about the face. I was struck by the way in which O'Rourke relentlessly used Aoi's close-up face after close-up face. Her face is an obsession, treated almost as a fetish object. No other face in the film is treated this way. It is an ethnographic portrait that relentlessly digs as far into the protagonist, Aoi, as it can go—and beyond. Kamila Pawlikowska describes the portrait genre as something created to satisfy a desire to know the deep interior of a person; to provide 'access to knowledge encoded in readable flesh' (2015: 1). In this light, it is the drive to make Aoi readable through her face, despite her frequent and extended silences, that is really at stake here. The film is thus not 'about the face' as I had originally felt, but is an encoding in the face, of interrogative violence, racialisation, desire, and possession.



Figure. 2.1: 'I don't want to be a bad woman'. Video still, Aoi in *The Good Woman of Bangkok* (1991)

³⁹ The following critique is based on the British Film Institute copy of the film, broadcast in the UK on Channel 4 on 7 May 1992 as part of the 'True Stories' series. It is 76 minutes long.

⁴⁰ See Linda Williams (1999).

While approximately 70 percent of the film is Aoi's face in close-up (fig. 2.1), it is not a 'talking head' documentary—there is too much silence for this.⁴¹ Speech propels the narrative forward but is always in relation to Aoi's face. It is her body language, glares, silences, and refusals that draw the viewer closer. In the verbal-vs-non-verbal channels of communication, Aoi's face is presented as a site of struggle.

Aoi is not visible in the opening of the film, and this visual absence is significant, as waiting for her to appear sets up the importance of her in the visual field. When Aoi finally appears, she is enveloped by darkness. The close-up shot is full of shadows, as she slowly blends foundation into her skin. Her hands dart in and out, obstructing our view of her face as much as the shadows do. She does not speak. The camera is so close to her face that her head is cropped off at the top. This shot lasts over 12 seconds, and there is something hypnotic about it,⁴² like an incantation. This sequence, in its repetition of movement, flickering light and shadowy darting body, is an encompassing one, and provides a powerful entry into Aoi, who is mostly in the dark and not fully visually tangible. This is significant, as she is here set up as a veiled object of desire, who is not yet fully known.

This is an important scene for Celine Parrenas Shimizu, too, for different reasons:

In *The Good Woman of Bangkok*, the first time we see Aoi she is on the bus on her way back to Bangkok, where she puts on make-up, then takes off her glasses to dust off the excess powder with her palms and fingers. Without her glasses, her face is more visible, and we notice only one eye works; the other is lazy [...] If the goal of the film is to capture the prostitute's speaking or looking back at the john with the camera, this particular prostitute can only half do so, as one eye cannot look back. (Parrenas Shimizu, 2007: 192)

Parrenas Shimizu's critique of the film is centred on the production of hypersexuality and passivity of Aoi as a Thai sex worker (2007: 18), and O'Rourke's absence from

⁴¹ This calculation is based on my own shot analysis of the film, where I broke down each shot in terms of length and composition.

⁴² I rewound this section so I could see it again, and the rewind was even better: slow and jerky, like a dance/incantation. This is an experience few viewers would have; I watched it alone in the basement of the British Film Institute. I spent all day watching it; first as an uninterrupted run through, and secondly to make detailed analysis, stopping and starting, rewinding. This was my viewing strategy for all my case studies.

the visual record. I direct my inquiry alongside that argument, into the field of the face and totalisation in particular, as well as proposing that disability is part of a greater victim narrative that places Aoi's so profoundly in the prostitute imaginary. That Aoi's face marks her as someone who cannot return the gaze is important; but in this scene the detail of her eye was not obvious to me, even without her glasses on. This shot is shadowy and full of movement, therefore not high in details. At this point, it is only stated that she was born with a disability.⁴³

O'Rourke's focus on the eyes codes Aoi as a racialised, sexualised subject who is to be looked at. Kawashima (2002) notes that while 'race' is socially constructed it is also constructed visually. The face is a key site of projection in this visual system, a site that is read continuously for codes of 'race'. It is a process that is completely naturalised, and hence unrecognised, by those bearing the look (2002: 162). This image is also a production of sex; they are almost the same thing. As Parrenas Shimizu argues, the racialised Asian woman is hypersexualised, and while historically this was aligned to geishas and war brides, representations shift in the contemporary context to sex workers and trafficking victims (2007: 41–51). I contend that as well as racializing Aoi, this early scene establishes the Aoi as sex worker, enigma, and concomitantly masked subject. She is 'putting on her face'—her working face, as opposed to her 'real' face.

Significantly, this scene is also a signal that the spectator has 'behind the scenes' access to her. This privileged knowledge is deepened as the film cuts back into the face of her aunt, who compounds the narrative of damage by detailing Aoi's poverty and abusive marriage. The unveiling cuts back to Aoi's face of shadows as she adjusts her top, fastens her amulet, runs her fingers through her hair and turns away from the camera. Aoi still has not spoken a single word. As the screen cuts to black, words begin to scroll up the frame. The apparent premise of the film, and O'Rourke himself, are finally introduced:

The filmmaker was 43 and his marriage had ended.

⁴³ I was watching this film with foreknowledge of the eye and was specifically looking out for it, and yet I found it difficult to discern. My viewing copy was recorded from a television broadcast. It was not a perfect copy, but it was also reflective of the condition in which most viewers would have seen it: on a small, standard-definition television set from the mid-1990s.

He was trying to understand how love could be so banal and also profound.

He came to Bangkok, the mecca for Western men with fantasies of exotic sex and love without pain.

He would meet a Thai prostitute and make a film about that.

This premise includes the fantasy of the special client to whom all will be revealed:

He seemed different from the other 500 men who crowded the bars every night....

He paid and was her customer, she became the subject of his film.

I include this quote because not only does he place himself in the third person, implying an objectivity which does not exist, it also echoes a client fantasy of being 'different' from other clients, a theme which runs beneath the surface throughout but not examined by himself as to the implications of this belief. I contend his difference is that he is filming a documentary with someone he is also paying for sex. Although as Parrenas Shimizu argues western men filming Thai sex workers is not novel; there is a whole genre of Stag pornography based on this practice (2007: 185). Further, even though he does not include explicit sex in the film, as I will illustrate there are pornographic elements in his treatment of her face. I also highlight O'Rourke's text narration above as it iterates O'Rourke as white, all-knowing mediator of knowledge. As a Western client he has a privileged view, that he appears to be completely honest about, and that renders him a 'trustworthy' and open source. This will become important in my later analysis of his filming of Aoi.

It is after this textual introduction that the camera cuts not to O'Rourke, but to Aoi's face, close-up, she slowly blinks and speaks at last. Her voice is slow and dejected; she looks off-camera, but as though she is not really looking at anything at all. She does not seem totally present. This is the primary shot of the film and it will be returned to repeatedly. The camera probes the opacity of Aoi's face only to emphasise her as a face to be decoded. Here, as I have outlined early in this chapter, the face is readable evidence, but also something used to classify, holding meaning and social hierarchies in place. As Richard Rushton (2002) expands, classificatory treatment of the face not only harks back to phrenology, but has implications beyond marginalised groups, 'This is the teleological end point of the face-as-object,' he

writes: ‘where every man, woman, and child becomes the equal of their face’ (2002: 223). This is starkly demonstrated in Aoi, who is made equal to her face from the very opening scene. She is made equal to her face in the sense of the stigma she bears. She is reduced to her face in tears; to her disfigured face, her ‘broken’ eye, her moody and fragile face that refuses to communicate. O’Rourke shows us suffering, self-hate and degradation through Aoi’s face. Critically, it is a face that suffers *because* she is a sex worker, or more particularly, a Thai sex worker. The narrative of the film makes this link explicit, but it is O’Rourke’s camera which cements it.

In saying that she is reduced to her face, it should also be said that Aoi’s face is veiled and that this is the ‘truth’ of her. This is not oppositional to her evidentiary face. As the camera intently studies her unmoving, unyielding, unspeaking face, what is shown is that this exterior is also her interior (fig. 2.2). As outlined earlier in this chapter, the sex worker can already be considered a masked subject, whose refusal to give her true face to others is a source of unease or mistrust. But this obstruction plays out differently here. Aoi’s masked face does not mark her as threat or as obstacle to knowledge; on the contrary, she is known through it.



Figure. 2.2: Video still, Aoi in *The Good Woman of Bangkok* (1991)

While the film does not construct Aoi as dangerous or inauthentic, nor as obstacle to knowledge/power, she is nonetheless set up as subject who should be known. The greater her reticence, the more imperative the probe of the camera. Narratively speaking, the spectator does not need her voice, as when Aoi is unforthcoming her relatives via O’Rourke tell her story instead. While many sequences use the voice over of others speaking about Aoi, with Aoi’s silence face as

image track, there are extended face sequences without any voice at all. Silence as form of voice will be addressed later in this thesis, but it is necessary to examine silence in relation to the face, as it changes how the face is read and used.

The following and penultimate sequence illustrates the silent face that is made to reveal Aoi's interior. In this scene, the camera cuts back to Aoi sitting on the floor and looking into the mirror in a medium close-up. She is crying and smoking slowly (fig. 2.3), the smoke drifting up. She speaks very little, but what she does say is important, because it reveals the possessive drive of the film, and Aoi's suspension in a reproducing collective imagery of sex worker abjection.

I don't know what's love. What is love? I don't know. I want love, but I know myself. Me is no good. No people can love me. I don't have anything good, only bad. Who can love me, no. Say love me, I don't believe. Because I think I know me. I know me, I cannot give.



Figure 2.3: Video still, Aoi in *The Good Woman of Bangkok* (1991)

In this sequence, Aoi herself tells the spectator she cannot be known by anyone but herself. But the camera also travels deeper into her psyche than at any other point in the film. It lingers. There are implications to this gaze holding the face in pain. The extended encounter with Aoi's face in close-up takes place within a documentary context which elevates the encounter with the Other as socially transformative.

There is an idea playing out in documentary with marginalised subjects that representation facilitates humanisation, which in turn produces a more ethical treatment. The face is part of this. Emmanuel Levinas provides a seed for this idea.

The face of the Other is critical for Levinas, who argued that it is alterity, revealed in the defenceless exposure of the face, which prevents us from doing violence to the Other, instead promoting a sense of responsibility toward them. This encounter does not need mediation through language or culture. Reflecting on Levinas' statement 'The face has turned to me—and this is its very nudity. It is by itself and not by reference to a system' (Levinas, 1979: 75), I find that while I desire this theory that the countenance of the stranger calls us to responsibility to be true, my doubt is significant. This doubt centres on witnessing violence done to the Other precisely by virtue of their status of being 'not us' - violence Levinas experienced and witnessed in far more extreme circumstances than I. My hesitation also stems from witnessing violence enacted by a powerful apparatus of encounter - the documentary film - mediated as it is.

But the idea of the face-to-face encounter is important, because I contend that while there is fetishisation at play in O'Rourke's work, it can also be seen as an attempt to build this encounter, as indeed much documentary can be framed in this way. The problem at the source of my doubt then, is that the face turning towards us as spectators does so from within a film assemblage (rather than in person encounter). While the face may be stripped bare and nude by the camera, it is never *by itself*. The face in film is always within systems, although the references may not be overt, and the apparatus may be veiled. While it should also be noted that Levinas wrote in the context of the in-person encounter, and not film, his work remains useful in the context of politically committed documentary where the face of the Other continues to be used as a plea against violence, if only as a prompt to consider our own ethical relation and gaze upon the subject before us.

Further, having just outlined my distrust of the extent that the face encounter on screen can provoke feelings of responsibility, I reflect that I did watch Aoi with a protective gaze, and I do feel responsibility toward her. However, this is partly reflective of my own situated gaze, and partly a response to the violence of the visual system of O'Rourke's camera. Perhaps then, taking the thought of Levinas forward, it is more accurate to propose that there are both possibilities and limits to transcendence through the face-to-face encounter.

The specific location of my gaze also means there is an oppositional analysis at work, which does not only connect me to the subject on screen, but seeks out her less visible acts of resistance. While the narrative of victimhood and compliance is

strong within the film, and is transferred via representational strategies by O'Rourke to her face, in studying Aoi's face I have found a non-compliant subject, and I propose that the oppositional use of the face to counter the gaze by documentary subjects themselves is an under-recognised act. It is necessary to examine not only uses of the gaze in producing normativity and deviance, but the uses, scope, and failures, of practices of visual resistance. For example, Aoi's gaze is not an act of self-effacement, but a way of producing a boundary between self and another. Subjected to an unrelenting scopophilic gaze of the camera, Aoi resists being known through her face, even if this resistance is largely unsuccessful. Expressionless, refusing to look at the camera, and largely silent for extended sequences throughout the whole film, she renders herself impenetrable at points. It is exemplified in the final sequences of the film, described above, where she has confronted O'Rourke about inequalities in their relationship.⁴⁴ As her suffering in this sequence becomes more intense, her face becomes increasingly unreadable and resistant to the camera. Unfortunately, this opposition is discursively limited precisely because it takes place within a narrative of sex work which imagines a mute face as proof of victimhood, and not as a resistance.⁴⁵ It also takes place within a film which, through persistent probing of the camera, elevates the face as entry to knowledge and possession of the Other. In her sullen rejection of visual interrogation, Aoi is thus ultimately rendered more readable, not less.

In contrast, there is only the barest flickerings of O'Rourke's face for the viewer to encounter. Hearing him ask questions off screen, our attention is drawn to O'Rourke the filmmaker, not client. Perhaps, in a context in which sex workers are

⁴⁴ Although I do not suggest agency can ever be absolute, nor that the relationship between O'Rourke and Aoi was an ethical one, Aoi makes decisions about degrees of participation. As she herself highlights:

You say you understand me. But I don't quite believe you. You are the sky and I am the ground. I'm just rotten garbage. You pulled me out of the rubbish heap only because you wanted to make this film. I think everything you do and say to me is to manipulate me for your film. My friends tell me that even if you promised to buy me a rice farm it's not a big thing [...] But I think it's alright. You're doing me a favour, so I can help you too.

⁴⁵ It should be noted that her opposition to O'Rourke's interventions escalate but are not framed as such. After imploring Aoi to leave sex work – telling her she will die of AIDS if she doesn't - O'Rourke promises Aoi he will buy her a rice farm on the condition she stops sex work. O'Rourke's final words on screen tell us that he bought Aoi the farm, but that she was not there when he went back to find her. She had returned to Bangkok to work in a massage parlour. Significantly, none of this epilogue was captured on film. In this final rejection of him, has she rejected the gaze of the camera too? Or are they, after all, one and the same.

stigmatised and racism thrives, he thought it revealing enough to say he was a client and he loved her. But that O'Rourke felt his own exposure was significant⁴⁶ reveals much about systems of representation and the extent to which white male subjectivity reigns. The exposure that lies at the heart of this film is Aoi's.

As well as doing the work of racialisation itself, this film amplifies the racialised Other as subject to be studied and watched, as uncompliant victim, whose resistance to the gaze only intensifies and legitimises the drive to unveil her. Aoi's face, probed and undone by the camera, does not reveal secrets. Rather, she is reduced to its mask and to the disability made evident on her face. Her face deflects, glares, sits in unmoving silence, and precisely through this she is 'known'. Aoi is narratively rendered not-whole, and the spectator's visual proximity to her disintegration via the face intensifies her Otherness whilst implying intimate knowledge. Her face is made to bear the prostitute imaginary by a possessive camera, and carry it forward into understandings of sex worker subjectivity far beyond her own.

2.9 *My Night with Julia*

Matthew Bown's video *My Night with Julia* (2003), while on the surface sharing much common ground with *The Good Woman of Bangkok*, diverges greatly in treatment of the face, and inseparably from this, the subject herself. It was broadcast just once on British television in July 2003,⁴⁷ also by Channel 4. The premise is simple; British art dealer Bown picks up a sex worker from a Moscow bar and films his night with her. Thirty minutes long, the video takes place entirely in Bown's apartment, charting the pre-sex flirting, sex itself, conversations, more sex and post-sex tea drinking. It is filmed in Russian with English subtitles.⁴⁸ I have found no evidence of screening in Russia, or indeed anywhere outside of the United Kingdom, and my critique is cognisant of this situated spectatorship.

⁴⁶ In a rebuttal to critics, he states: 'In this film I have exposed myself in order to force the audience to reconsider the whole nature of documentary film practice. Under the thrall of our separate desires, we are all implicated in some way' (O'Rourke, 1991).

⁴⁷ This was 11 years after the screening of *The Good Woman of Bangkok*, and far more controversial. After complaints to Ofcom, it was decided the film 'exceeded acceptable limits', effectively banning further broadcast. I have not been able to find evidence of further screenings.

⁴⁸ In contrast to *The Good Woman of Bangkok* – which is a mix of English and Thai, and in which the shift between languages also shifts perceptions of proximity, exclusion and connection – Bown and Julia's have a heightened ability to communicate.

In this vein, there are no video stills, or indeed any visual records available of *My Night with Julia*. While I was able to view an analogue copy of the video, it has not been digitised and I was not able to acquire research images. This is a work which seems to have all but disappeared, and I came across it by chance whilst searching the British Film Institute archives. But this withdrawal is significant. As I will argue here, despite explicit content it is less pornographic and less ethically dubious than other works which remain accessible. This absence from the visual record, and from record more generally, will be in mind as I examine the work.

Like *The Good Woman of Bangkok*, this is a work which seeks ethnographic knowledge through extreme proximity to an individual sex worker. Bown for his part plays the role of the client-director well, asking why she is working; if she has children; if she has sex with a lot of men. In this sense the work is conventional and echoes much of the questioning in *The Good Woman of Bangkok*. Unlike O'Rourke, Bown does show the sex between himself and sex worker Julia, and perhaps for this reason *My Night With Julia* is an easily misunderstood work. But I contend despite the camera ostensibly bringing the spectator into extreme, explicit proximity with Julia, the work does not conform to a pornographic reading in the way other ethnographic documentaries do. Perhaps most controversially, Julia herself is an oppositional, unruly subject, who refuses to be reduced to her face. Nor does Bown's camera treatment produce a subject who is an easy boundary object, even in the context of a racialised and hypersexualised subject.

There are two strands which need consideration here: the voice, and the camera. I will begin with the camera, as this frames every other aspect of the work. Film theorist Catherine Russell suggested that ethnographic-pornographic voyeurism is enacted by a disciplined gaze and can be obstructed by an 'undisciplined' and 'wild' gaze of the camera (1999: xiv, 122-123). She gives an example of this other gaze as using shifting, non-singular viewpoints, and argues that this can transform an image of naked breasts away from the possessive and sexualised knowledge seeking gaze. Russell hesitates to call the new gaze a subversion however (1999: 124). It is this possibility of the undisciplined camera I will first explore. Filmed on digital video tapes, inside an apartment and late at night, the footage in *My Night with Julia* can only be described as messy. It is consistently pixelated – although not enough to distort the image; only enough to add noise. There are no cut-away shots, instead, it often cuts to black, and more often simply includes out-of-focus or fumbling camera shots.

Where *The Good Woman of Bangkok* is comprised of a series of long, steady shots, *My Night with Julia* moves and trembles. It is a succession of constant micro movements of the handheld camcorder, as well as clumsy panning and zooming shots. Where *The Good Woman of Bangkok* is defined by Aoi's face in close-up, *My Night with Julia* traverses the body, oscillating between off-centre close-ups of the face and body, medium to wide shots and extended sequences of total darkness.

There are shots in which the camera is zoomed into Julia's face to such an extent that it is cropped by the frame. Her face moves in and out of frame constantly. These shots are dark and extremely grainy, using only the overhead ceiling lights of the apartment. The shadows on this close-up face are so extreme her eyes become black holes; only the edge of her nose and cheek have form.

The home-video aesthetic further aligns the documentary with amateur pornography. However, despite a pleasure in viewing, despite a roaming knowledge-seeking and tactile gaze over the body, there is difficulty in translating this videography into sexual objectification or possessive gaze. This can be understood by considering Martine Beugnet's (2007) theory of forms of cinematic vision. Beugnet (2007: 65) differentiates between optic and haptic vision, arguing that optical vision is based on an objectifying gaze, through which the subject gains mastery. It is connected to a kind of illusionistic space or picture plane, where the viewer can identify with the figures on the canvas or screen. Where *The Good Woman of Bangkok* is dominated by optic vision, *My Night with Julia*, with its extreme close-ups, underexposure and pixilation, shifts in a manner consistent with Beugnet's haptic vision. It embodies her description of cinema that:

...starts to generate worlds of mutating sounds and images that often ebb and flow between the figurative and the abstract and where human form, at least as a unified entity, easily loses its function as the main point of reference. One way or another, the cinema of sensation is always drawn towards the formless (l'informe): where background and foreground merge and the subjective body appears to melt into matter. (2007: 65)

Beugnet (2007: 68) also lists changes in focus and unusual angles as techniques that bring us from optic into haptic vision, where materiality of the image overcomes representational power. This is manifest in Bown's use of extreme close-ups, shifting

focus, and changes in exposure so intense that Julia's face becomes pure surface, losing its three dimensionality. This does not simply produce an undisciplined gaze, as Russell describes it, which reduces voyeurism. While Beugnet suggests that haptic materiality can change the spectator's encounter with the Other, it shifts sensual encounters closer to the film itself, constructing a space that 'encourages a relation of intimacy or proximity with the object of the gaze, privileging primary identification with film as event, rather than identification with characters' (ibid.).

Beugnet is suggesting that identification with the film itself invites an intimacy with its subjects which is non-objectifying by nature. My suggestion throughout has been that perceived intimacy is not necessarily an ethical relation, but can be intrusive, possessive, and still objectifying in the context of a closeted subject. That being said, my analysis here affirms that a haptic use of the camera here does reframe the spectator's relationship with the body on screen. In *My Night With Julia*, despite a proximity to her body which feels like a real and intimate presence, I also felt further away from her. The spectator almost has to piece her together. This is not in the sense that she is fragmented or not whole, but because she is shifting, beyond herself, and it is the work of the spectator to make sense of what they see and hear. Even perception of the face is unsettled by this extreme proximity and contrasting light, as other parts of the body become face-like in their significance. No parts of the body are off-limits in this respect, and it includes Julia's abstracted vulva and breasts. Again, these eroticised parts of the body are not erotic here, instead it is as if they are enigmatic entry points to knowledge of her. Or rather, they are potential points of entry, which, in their abstract form, denies access.

However, while Bown's camera is undisciplined and haptic, in contrast to O'Rourke's optic and disciplined gaze, both directors share a focus on obtaining knowledge through the face of the sex worker. The key differences are that other parts of Julia's body are treated like the face too, and that this probing gaze often fails. Julia's alterity is unable to be charted. She is able to resist the knowledge seeking gaze of the camera by diverting it to the sexual; she co-opts the pornographic. This is a stellar performance of a manufactured identity as means to influence the course of an encounter, although I would not assume it is widely recognised as such. While the filming for Bown is the 'work', the work for Julia is sex. The camera is something to be managed within the sexual relationship. The following sequence illustrates her redirection:

Julia. Why do you keep filming my face?

Bown. You've got that kind of face.

Julia. There are other things to film.

It is at her direction that the camera then moves down to her breasts before she snatches the camera off him, films the sheets and his body, stomach, hips, penis.⁴⁹ The reversed gaze of the camera is over quickly however. The spectator is jolted back to a black screen, then to Julia's body, stomach, breasts and laughing face before they start having sex again. It is the movement and sound that tells us this, as the camera is so close-up on body, her skin and the shadow of the camera moving that the image is an abstract blur. Although the video is now almost totally dark, filming continues. The denial of vision feels visceral. But this is not an erotic sequence. In discussing lubricant and opening a condom, the apparatus of sex is laid bare. The clumsy mechanics, disrupting the pleasure of it, are a disruption of the cinematic apparatus itself. More disruption follows immediately after, as they discuss 'night shot' mode.

As the sex on-screen becomes more intense, Bown speaks of the camera as if it were his own approaching orgasm, and Julia collaborates. The climax of sex and the climax of the interview are combined in the penultimate scene.

Bown. The cassettes going to finish now, any minute now.

Julia. If you've got any more questions, ask now.

It is not so different from the penultimate scene of *The Good Woman of Bangkok*, which cumulates with Aoi's face in close-up, crying. In *My Night with Julia*, the spectator is denied visual sexual cues in the face, but granted recognition at least in the voice, drawing attention to the cinematic apparatus and their own presence.

The sex worker voice, including in relation to authenticity and the obscured body, will be explored in the final two chapters. But it is significant that the undisciplined gaze of the camera is accompanied by treatment of Julia's voice which also undermines any notion that she can be fully known, or her experiences of selling sex understood. This is evident from the outset, when Bown, proposing that she is not what or who she says she is, challenges Julia as she lists her other occupations. Later,

⁴⁹ His face is not shown. Was this a deliberate omission on Julia's part, or was it edited out in post-production? Again, like O'Rourke, there is a troubling absence of the filmmaker-client face.

as they go on to discuss the word ‘prostitute’, Julia argues that it is a pointless term because no one uses it for themselves, even though everyone does it. No one does it and everyone does it - it is simply understood differently - but there will be no elaboration on this point. I pause here because while the film points to the existence of a fundamentally different cultural understanding of sex work, unfortunately the dialogue quickly moves into more sex. This sequence also frames Russia as a place where prostitution is part of its very fibre. With no elaboration, and in tandem with Bown’s probing that she is not what or who she says she is, this sequence does the work of amplifying Russia as marginal zone and producer of sex workers, with Russian women as hypersexualised and suspect subjects.

The context of viewing is relevant too, as it should also be noted that despite an association with white nationalist movements (Enstad, 2018; Varga, 2008), Russia occupies a racially marginal position in Western Europe, especially in regards to sex work. This framing of marginality alters perception of race. For example, Jon Fox, Laura Moroşanu and Eszter Szilassy, in their study of migration from within the European Union to the United Kingdom, showed that ‘white’ migrants became racialised as less white depending on from which country they had migrated (Fox et al., 2012). They reiterate that whiteness itself has degrees and constantly changing variables, and nor do definitions of race require biological or phenotypical difference (Fox et al., 2012: 682-683). Whiteness and its concomitant protections are unstable. In the case of Russia, marginality is aligned with a kind of defacement of social relations. Jan Ifversen, exploring the notion of the margin in Europe (and after the annexation of the Crimea but before the Russian invasion of Ukraine), argues that the further East we travel from the centre of Europe, the less ‘civilised’ the regions are viewed. Eastern European countries continue to be perceived as liminal buffer zones from a chaotic, brutal, and disintegrating Soviet empire (Ifversen: 2019, 35). This fear persists past the break-up of the former Soviet Union, as Steve Garner argues; ‘Fear of the East—as a source of criminality, nomadic peoples, prostitution, and wage cutting labour—has flickered in and out of political consciousness in the West over the past eighteen years’ (2007, 67). Thus, depending on the lens of viewing, and although not all Russians would identify as such, Russians are putatively ‘white’, but, by virtue of (relative) negative marginality, perceived sexual and criminal deviancy, and cultural otherness, they are also not white.

I argue that Russian sex workers viewed in a Western European context occupy a tenuous and marginal whiteness. I emphasise the sex work element with intention. As highlighted early in this chapter, deviant sex is already associated with deviant race. Amongst other aspects, including a perception of the periphery of Europe, Fox et.al. note a connection with sex work as part of racialisation. For Eastern European and Russian sex workers there is a specific association with organised crime (Fox *et.al.*, 2012: 688. Peterson, 2001: 221), and this association is with a controlling male figure who is ‘dark’ and ‘Eastern’ (Berman, 2003: 53-55). Through racialisation, the sex worker is not only a sex worker due to criminality and deviance of the East, and not necessarily their own deviance, but of a ‘pimp’ (Petersen, 2001: 221)—but also because of a crumbling society thought to be unable to look after itself.

But while Fox *et al.* describe a process of racialisation whereby the ‘white’ Eastern European sex worker becomes less white, Jacqueline Berman proposes that a process of racialisation of the sex worker conversely occurs where whiteness is the outcome. This whiteness is used to both emphasise victimhood, and threat.

The putative ‘whiteness’ of ‘the new white slave trade’ or of Slavic girls or of ‘blue-eyed blondes’ simultaneously functions to position these women as innocent victims in need of protection and contradictorily, as an internal, indistinguishable threat among ‘us’.
(Berman, 2003: 53)

This is important in terms of discursive practice, because this form of racialisation thus requires a process of marking out of boundaries otherwise unseeable. In a trafficking context, Berman argues the power of the State is heightened, as it is empowered to determine ‘which “white” women are “white” and belong within the community and which ones are not and are to be eliminated’ (2003: 54), through deportation, arrest and so forth.

While *My Night With Julia* is not a film explicitly concerned with trafficking, it nonetheless occupies the discursive landscape of trafficking. It is filmed within the heart of the imagined geographical origin of trafficking and broadcast at a time when anti-trafficking discourse was rising. Race and nation are never explicitly addressed, nonetheless, they are at play. Despite Bown objectively being the foreigner within the film, he is not the subject. It is Julia’s alterity and borders that are interrogated and visibilised in the course of filming. In Berman’s terms, the film emphasises that ‘we’

cannot know who is truly 'white', and who is not; who is a sex worker and who is not, feeding into anxieties around boundaries and invisibility. But there is a crucial difference here too, in that Julia's shapeshifting is treated as part of the pleasure of Bown's experience. In addition to a camera which operates a haptic, rather than optic gaze, the use of the sex worker body as boundary object is undermined.

Bown uses the camera as a probe to get as close to Julia as is possible, rendering her not a collective, but individual hallucination whom he knows is not real, and crucially, does not need to be. Where the sensual, undisciplined gaze renders her unpossessable, the voice renders her a rogue and unpredictable agent. This does not reduce the pleasure of viewing but shifts it away from a pornographic and totalising lens. While the camera lingers too closely on her face and the rest of her body, doing so dissolves not only the boundaries between her face and body, but boundaries more generally.

2.10. Conclusion

This chapter has charted ethical gaps in sex work documentary practices, with the stark differences in power between directors and subjects in my case studies demonstrating the necessity of my intersectional approach. More than identification of these problems however, my interventions are in unravelling how the documentary apparatus is used to further these gaps, and in how these problems can be met by sex workers themselves. My findings centre on two separate but deeply implicated fields; that of the sex worker face, and that of cinematic apparatus in relation to that face. Power and marginalisation run through both.

Firstly, while Gira Grant (2014) addressed the different kinds of video and audio-visual artifacts which produce the prostitute imaginary, my intervention reveals how this is done. I argue that the face of the sex worker is a particularly potent vector of the prostitute imaginary, because of histories of articulation of the sex worker face as site requiring visual examination. This use of the face is also implicated in racialisation, which is a significant area of the prostitute imaginary, and which must be understood within wider operation of hegemonic power.

Secondly, the tactile, undisciplined camera undermines totalisation of the face. This is connected to the second key learning of this chapter which is that the prostitute imaginary is bound with an 'objective' gaze of the documentary camera. This disciplinary, interrogative treatment of the face must combine however with a

particular use of the cinematic apparatus in order to become part of the prostitute imaginary, and there are outliers within sex worker documentary which avoid doing so. For example, while Julia does possess many of the stigmatising attributes that the prostitute imaginary summons, collective imagery is not reproduced through her. Bown's divergent treatment of the gaze on her body, whilst not actively challenging the prostitute imaginary, does dislodge videopoiesis. The dissonance of Julia, while not fully oppositional, produces an instability in the spectator's ability to decode her audio-visual representations. The undisciplined, tactile camera is not enough to displace Julia from the microscope of racialised hypersexuality, which exists exterior to the film in relations of viewing, but, the image of her is so abstract and soft that the prostitute imaginary is not *imprintable*. The face image does not hold; Julia is not an easy vector. While I can recall Aoi's face in my mind clearly, this is far more challenging for Julia, whose face is movement and shadow.

Thirdly, while the face of the sex worker is treated as something to solve, or possess, or mark out difference as boundary object, it is also a site of resistance and deflection. This resistance can be vulnerable, but its existence is important in understanding both how power is playing out in the documentary, the complex agency of the sex workers on screen, and practices of voice and opposition. For example, while Aoi is reduced to her suffering face through the camera lens, it is also through her face that her opposition emerges - limited as it is. While Aoi herself uses her face as a barrier, and to signify an unreadability, her refusal to engage is co-opted by O'Rourke to entrench the sex worker as subject without agency. In contrast, Julia's defence against the filming of her face is both overt and more subtle, outright taking the camera off Bown, and using sexual deflection respectively. All of the above approaches reveal an awareness from those feeling the camera's gaze on their face that counter or evasive action is required. This is relevant to understanding how power and dispossession plays out in documentary filming, but it also raises the question as to whether visual strategies of anonymity, such as material obstruction of the face, of blurring in postproduction, can have the dual advantage of deflecting the camera; whether facial obfuscation can be an oppositional act in itself. This will be addressed in the following chapter.

Fourth, I contend that the ethno-pornographic documentary needs to be understood differently, as the pornographic is not necessarily found in documentary representations of sex. It is likewise not absent from the face. Recognising this enables

a new practice of ethics to emerge. Both *The Good Woman of Bangkok* and *My Night with Julia* have elements of the pornographic, which is particularly questionable in the context of ethnographic documentary. But it is elements of a haptic, ‘pornographic’ camera which has countered totalising representation of the prostitute imaginary in *My Night with Julia*. Despite explicit sex scenes, Bown thus disrupts an ethno-pornographic gaze. Further, removing the sexual scenes from *My Night with Julia* would also remove Julia’s subversions, and leave Bown’s power intact. Conversely, O’Rourke’s treatment of Aoi avoids being cast as pornographic, where I contend it is aligned. Aoi, in particular, is subjected to the possessive exploitation of the face through the close-up’s scopophilia. While few sex work documentaries are made by clients, at least openly, the issue of the pornographic and sexually explicit, including censorship or erasure, expands into the sex work documentary field more widely.

Fifth, and stemming from erasure: videopoiesis of the prostitute imaginary requires transmission. This is hindered where the documentary goes too far beyond dominant ideology, for example, and is effectively confined to the archive. *My Night with Julia* does not transmit, except to a small number of people willing to seek it out and watch it in the basement of the archive. But this also means that the film’s potential to act as networked imagery, loosening stigma and undermining violent ideology, is limited.

This raises the question of if, and how, the sex worker face continues to act as vector when it is not visible, and conversely, if critical sex worker resistance to a disciplinary camera becomes less evident when the face is obscured. How can silences be fully interpreted for example, without signifiers of the face? With this question of visibilised absence and obstructions to the gaze, I turn to the face which, in attempts for anonymity, is rendered unseeable by the documentary apparatus itself.

Chapter 3: Black holes: on the limits, dangers and possibilities of facelessness

3.1 Introduction

In this chapter I explore strategies to hide the sex worker face, both in documentary film, including the ‘failures’ of these methods within my own practice. While in the previous chapter I argued that an interrogative gaze on the visible sex worker face played a part in the re/production of the prostitute imaginary, I ask here how that shifts when the sex worker’s face is hidden, arguing that this deflection is dangerous in representation terms, reinforcing abjection and loss of power.

Obfuscation of the face in sex worker documentary primarily arises as an attempt to render the subject unidentifiable; they are therefore already vulnerable in some way. This anonymity located in an intervention in the visual field can thus be understood as a facilitation of participation of sex workers in knowledge making projects of which they are subject. In contrast however, this anonymisation can be a legal requirement, where documentary subjects have not given permission for their image to be used. The power relations and ethical practices in filming should not be assumed to be similar between films even if visual protections appear the same. Strategies for facial anonymisation are likewise variable and may include the wearing of a mask, or obstruction during filming itself, such as placing objects in front of the face, filming with the face out of frame, back lighting or the use of screens. Obfuscation is also commonly produced via the cinematic apparatus itself however, through blurs, degradation of the image, and visual distortions of the face, and this is the focus in this chapter. While the protection of the identities of stigmatised and criminalised subjects is a crucial part of an ethical film practice, my analysis of blurred faces in sex worker documentary shows an element of volatility, and a vulnerability to exploitation enacted despite and even through the blur itself.

This chapter began with a curiosity around the production of facelessness, specifically, if radical and distorting transformations of the face could allow the sex worker to speak, and to move beyond the totalisation of meaning imposed by the prostitute imaginary. This curiosity was tempered with doubt that any kind of face image of the sex worker, but especially the blurred face, could bypass the prostitute imaginary and the concomitant rhetorical silence it brings. In order to understand the

limits, risks and oppositional possibilities of the anonymised face, I examine the blur of the face as a kind of stigma, marking the subject as abject, and furthermore, producing a particular kind of grotesque in regard to formlessness. I will draw on theories of the social abject in order to examine the representational consequences of the blurred sex worker face in documentary film.

I initially thought the abjection of the blurred and distorted face could be used as potentially oppositional practice, as connective force, or in defiance, as confrontation, rather than submission or victimhood. But my research found two key areas which troubled the idea of the abject as collective weapon against the prostitute imaginary. My first area of intervention is the face proxy. As I will show, the potential for a radical facelessness, or for oppositional use of the abject, can be circumvented by face proxies. By face proxy, I mean a practice where another more controllable face is used as stand-in for the face of the speaking subject. Interventionist reality television series *8 Minutes* (2015) illustrates the face proxy most clearly, as it uses the blur as a form of effacement which allow face proxies easy entry.

Secondly, I will address volatilities in producing the blur, and in receiving the blur as spectator. I will argue that distortive strategies are largely uncontrollable, and the defacement they produce is significant. Visual anonymisation strategies deployed in ‘talking heads’ style documentary *Happy Endings?* (2009) allow me to show the full workings of the relation between visual distortion and the abject, including how extreme blurs and other facial distortions can render the face excessive, rather than faceless.

Further, in engaging the failures of my practice, I find that the abject induced by face obfuscation more extensive than I originally thought. While I initially approached my practice as a means to find radical possibilities in the abject blur, and to confront my avoidance of visually distorting faces, I found the risk involved with this strategy far greater than anticipated. I will explain how this shift of understanding came about through my various attempts to undo, blur or erode the face. Specifically, I engage my video practice *Three Gifts* (2016), which uses material face distortion, and *Face Work* (2017), which uses post-production distortions as well as defacement created by light and projection. In raising questions of limits, risk and power, lessons from my own practice intervene to make visible the problems in practices of face distortion in sex work documentary more widely; not because my videos ‘worked’,

but in the specific ways they did not. Before I can address this in detail, I first elaborate on what I mean by the blur, and on its uses in documentary practice.

3.2 The blur itself in the field of vision

The blurring of a face is a variable practice. Several factors contribute to a blur that sufficiently renders a face unrecognisable, including the kind of blur to be used, the visual field to be blurred and the intensity. A gaussian blur is smooth and even, for example, a Zoom blur or Radial blur are directional. Others are pixelated. Although some blurring can be produced by the camera lens, the advantage of the blur as obfuscation strategy is that it can be produced and modified in post-production, requiring relatively little preparation during filming itself. A light blur can leave a face within the borders of recognisability, leaving intact information like feature proportions, the shape of the nose and so forth. A stronger blur can erase this information but render the face skull-like, for example, if the subject is wearing a lot of dark eye makeup. But in principle the stronger the blur, the more effective it is in producing visually anonymous subjects. It also holds true that the stronger the blur, the stranger the face produced. Erasure of facial details builds not only a face that could be (almost) anyone, but, as I will elaborate on further, a face that is more vulnerable to assignment to the abject or encoding of stigma. As this chapter illustrates, conflict between anonymity and watchability is reflected as much in the use of extreme blur as it is in the restrained. This is what makes the blur so revelatory in terms of the ideological position of the film itself.

It is also important to make a distinction between the blur of the face and a blur which covers the whole screen. The screen blur could be utilised for several reasons including to anonymise the whole body and space of filming, as well as deprivileging the face. It is however difficult to find a documentary where the field of the visible is permanently and universally obscured in this way.

These differentiations, although important to contextualise how the blur in documentary practice is implemented, belies underlying tensions, one of which is that there is not a singular line or depth of blur which one can cross and enter into anonymity, nor a universal practice of obfuscation. There is a problem of variability at work. The first area of variability is that to be completely anonymous requires a high level of destruction or obstruction of the image (and voice, to which I will extend this argument, in chapters 4 and 5), but what extreme means is subjective. Second,

there is variation in what is desired by the subject. Someone could want plausible deniability, or an image that will not be picked up by facial recognition software. A documentary subject could be happy for other members of their community to recognise them, or conversely, they could require total anonymity from those closest to them. Anonymity could be a political statement, with few ramifications to potential unmasking.

All these motivations require a different approach to filming and editing, related to self-perception, how one wants to be perceived by others, how a filmmaker wants subjects to be perceived, and how one wants to utilise processes of abjection, projection, social contamination, fear and disgust, politically. For as I will elaborate, threat to social order and boundaries is absolutely bound up with the blurred and obscured face. I contend that it is impossible to discuss the blurred face without also addressing how that blur works on the bodies of the spectator, and indeed the subject themselves, as well as without talking about how the blur feels, and how the unequal relations of power may shift as a result.

3.3 The blur, the abject, and the prostitute imaginary

While it is important to discuss sex work in terms of stigma, I argue this stigma lies specifically in its association with the abject. This abjection is situated both in the social, and in bodily terms. In this chapter I will map the connection between abjection and face distortions and blurs, but in order to do so I must first draw out theories of the abject as it relates to sex workers. In *The Powers of Horror* (1982), Julia Kristeva defines a theory of abjection as a continual process of excluding that which is a threat to subjectivity and the symbolic order. For Kristeva (1982: 10), the abject fundamentally marks a repression that lies at the formation of the self and threatens boundaries of the self. Our unstable selves are confronted and haunted by it at the same time as repressing and enforcing it (Kristeva, 1982: 15).

In simplistic terms, milk, menstrual blood, and other fluids expelled from the body can be easily understood as abject; things which used to be part of our bodies but now lie outside it. But the 'jettisoned objects' of Kristeva's abject are more than what is expelled from the body, instead they are what produces repulsion in displacement. More than this, the abject includes bodies, objects, subjects, those once desired but beyond the social order. While the sex worker is aligned with the abject in

terms of bodily fluids and contagious disease, this is not the only source of their abjection, but includes the disturbance of social orders. As Kristeva highlights

It is thus not lack of cleanliness or health that causes abjection but what disturbs the identity, system, order. What does not respect borders, positions, rules. The in-between, the ambiguous, the composite. The traitor, the liar, the criminal with a good conscience, the shameless rapist, the killer who claims to be a saviour... (1982: 4)

The social disturbance of sex work is thus multiple according to Kristeva's description; criminalised (hence, criminal), with multiple identities including hidden ones, disturbing the social orders of marriage, class, and procreative sex. While the sex worker body is designated as body of contagion, as opposed to the client's body for example, this contamination spreads beyond the body to the cultural and moral. While stigma and abjection of sex work are linked, I emphasise the need to consider abjection alongside because it encompasses not just victimhood but threat. There is social disorder existing outside of the constructs of social law.

Georges Bataille's work on the social abject asserts a distinction between those who rebel against their subjugation, or assigned abjection, and those who do not (1993: 9-11). While Bataille used Freudian concepts, such as anal eroticism and sadism in particular, he was not so much concerned with abjection as related to subjectivity in general, as he was with abjection in relation to political power and oppression (*ibid.*). He argues that the miserable – the masses in the gutter – evoke pity in the first instance, which he describes as a kind of impotence. But this does not last, and instead gives way to anger and disgust, as the miserable are always abject – it is the same thing. These reactions to abject subjects are particularly relevant for documentary practice, especially where that documentary lies adjacent to or within the field of stigma, victim stories and ethnographic voyeurism of poverty.

Sylvere Lotringer, who re-published Bataille's work on this subject,⁵⁰ highlights two different forms of abjection in his writing, or rather, two forms of abject existence. In its most absolute form, abjection is pure victimhood; 'the dregs of the people welded to their misery, were left without any possibility of affirmation

⁵⁰ Lotringer specifically examines *Abjection and Miserable Forms* (Bataille, 1993), originally published in 1934, and *The Psychological Structure of Fascism*, originally published in 1933.

whatsoever' he writes (Lotringer, 1993: 6). There is no capacity for resistance in this state, and Bataille insisted that this dehumanisation is a fundamental mechanism of capitalism, even more so than forced pauperisation. The second form of abjection includes the possibility of struggle; 'the union of miserable reserved for subversion' (Lotringer, 1993: 6). Abjection reaches its true form when internalised by the excluded subject, meaning they do not struggle against their exclusion. Conversely, an abject condition can be considered positive where there is subversion—for example, in organised collective struggle. This includes the use of abjection in that struggle. This is what I mean by the 'oppositional abject'; the abject is used as part of a counter action.

However, whilst Bataille framed struggle as critical to undoing social abjection, it is not clear that sex worker struggle easily fits this solution. While there is organised collective struggle within sex work for example, a struggle increasingly visible since 1975,⁵¹ for Kristeva this abjection get-out clause does not apply to the sex worker. She makes this explicit, writing

Abjection, on the other hand, is immoral, sinister, scheming, and shady: a terror that disassembles, a hatred that smiles, a passion that uses the body for barter instead of inflaming it, a debtor who sells you up, a friend who stabs you. (1982: 4; emphasis mine)

The sticking point is a perception of sex work as a form of duplicity, as Kristeva argues deceit always belongs to the realm of abjection. As problematic as I find it to include sex work in the same breath as betrayal and terrorisation, and not as a mode of survival or labour within a violent system, I cannot fault it as a statement of facts. The sex worker is an abject subject, excluded, 'contaminating', cast out but desired, part of the very system that rejects them. As illustrated in the previous chapter, the face and manufactured identity are integral to this idea of duplicity.

The sex worker exists in the borderlands thrice over: as a socially abject subject, as inhabitant of abject zones (the brothel, the slum, the red-light district, certain streets/highways), and as agent of the abject; sexual fluids, sweat, spit, urine, blood. These distinctions within of the broader field of the abject, including abject states

⁵¹ Indeed, *The Prostitutes of Lyon Speak* (1975), *Live Nude Girls Unite!* (Julia Query, 2000) as well as the many other documentaries made by sex workers, including my own, *The Honey Bringer* (2012) and *Common Life* (2010) centre the struggle for labour rights.

(such as mental illness) and socially appointed agents of abjection (such as soldiers), are introduced by Anne McClintock (1995) to differentiate the psychic processes of abjection, as advanced by Kristeva, from the political processes, as advanced by Bataille.

McClintock highlights the need to understand abjection as a mechanism of power. The processes of abjection enable deportations, hate crime, the clearing of areas of sex workers, incarceration and the toleration of violence towards sex workers (McClintock, 1995: 72). McClintock is essentially building upon Bataille's arguments formulated during the rise of fascism in Europe.⁵² That is, social abjection enables and sanctions systemic abuse of populations. Sara Ahmed (2004) goes further in detailing the mechanisms which so powerfully recruit abjection for this purpose, proposing that violence against abject subjects works in practice through the policing of bodily boundaries, and the use of 'disgust reactions' in creating hierarchy amongst bodies and spaces (2004: 8). The abject produces disgust: disgust is used politically to dehumanise and justify social exclusion. This disgust is not the exclusive domain of the visual, but it is the visual which allows this disgust to travel. As Ahmed argues, 'Disgust does not come from nowhere, but relies upon "histories of articulation" which bind signs of disgust to specific objects and bodies' (2004: 2; emphasis mine). As laid out in the previous chapters, these histories of articulation include film, media and literature.

3.4 Articulation of the abject and slippage of disgust in the blurred face

In terms of the documentary practice, the volatility of the abject and abject-induced disgust is especially problematic. Abjection may be produced or intensified through narrative, script and editing which emphasis victimhood and miserable existence, along with the inhabitation of abject zones and subjectivities, but the abject also moves through the visual. This includes the blur. This slippage of signification involves visual transference; visually contaminating, the abject crosses easily from one thing to another (from image to body, to another body, from screen to abject group). Ahmed locates this slippage in resemblance; if one thing resembles someone or something which is abject or coded as disgusting, that also becomes contaminated with the abject.

⁵² Kristeva, who avoided Bataille's focus on fascism in her writing on abjection, nonetheless highlights significant risk in abjection; 'if, we are susceptible to abjection, we are perhaps susceptible *to fascism*. The finger has to probe the wound as deeply as possible' (1993: 21; emphasis in original)

The abject is thus mobile, and it moves as disgust moves. ‘Disgust can move between objects through the recognition of likeness’ writes Ahmed (2004: 88). This, I argue, is precisely how the prostitute imaginary travels in the blur; the distortion looks ‘disgusting’, and it this feeling moves onto the subject which carries it, the body and face of the sex worker. The blurred face of the sex worker belongs to a history of articulation of abjection and disgust. This history is what has produced the very need for blurring, but the blurring is the thing which re-inscribes the abject. This articulation is furthered even when a mechanism such as the blur is used in an attempt to protect and de-stigmatise excluded subjects because the markers of the abject are reproduced. The blur is a bodily sign of stigma, and stigma cannot be separated from the socially abject. The sex worker is an abject subject, rendered so through repeated visual articulation, and even in documentary works that seek to undo this articulation. This is despite the fact its prime use is not signification but obfuscation, and even though the blur is not actually part of the body.

Although the blur in documentary is placed on individual subjects, and is not permanently borne by the body, and is borne by an image rather than a material body, I argue the blur effectively marks a collective body. While the blurred subject, by virtue of this blur, is therefore able to pass in society as ‘normal’ and as if without stigma, this is displaced back on to the abject group. Further, in the face-to-face encounter of the documentary, blurred subjects remain discursively blemished, even if they cannot be read individually as such outside of this encounter. The impermanence and filmic nature of the blur is not irrelevant, nonetheless, the image remains in the history of articulation, in the prostitute imaginary, in spectatorship. The image of the sex worker body bears stigma, hence the sex worker bears a stigma and marked as abject. The blur is a sign bound to the body. My following case studies illustrate why this is so dangerous.

3.5 8 Minutes, and the (totalising) uses of abjection and defacement

8 Minutes (2015) provides a useful entry into thinking about the blur in the context of marker of deviance and criminality, apparatuses of power and social control. It also demonstrates operations of what I term the ‘face proxy’ most clearly. *8 Minutes* was a documentary reality television series broadcast by the A&E network in 2015. This is a cable network based in the United States which primarily broadcasts factual television with a focus on ‘true crime’ and interventionist programming. In this

context of fast, shock entertainment, the series veers widely from my definition of politically committed documentary, although I would contend that figures involved in producing it would consider it a work of both political and spiritual commitment. This ideological conflict notwithstanding, *8 Minutes* demonstrates some common approaches to face blurs, as well highlighting the concomitant trouble of the face proxy.

Filmed in Houston, Texas, the premise for the series is that sex workers are lured under false pretences into meeting with former police officer turned pastor, Kevin, in a hotel room. Along with a team of former sex workers he calls ‘the Advocates’, they have just eight minutes to convince her⁵³ to exit the sex industry. While functioning as a narrative device which introduces an element of drama and suspense into the series, this window of time is instead framed as risk management. After this time, they say the risk her ‘pimp’ will come looking for her is too high. Threat is thus built into the very premise of the series.

The interventionist elements and hyping of threat in *8 Minutes* does not in itself distinguish it from other works I have discussed. For example, *The Good Woman of Bangkok* is also an interventionist work that seeks to remove sex workers from the industry. O’Rourke tells Aoi she will die if she continues, just as the crew in *8 Minutes* tell sex workers they will die.⁵⁴ But *8 Minutes* situates sex work as so abject that it is unnameable. Even ‘prostitute’ is too good a word to be spoken – it is never used. Only the terms ‘victims’ or women ‘living the life’ are used, as if calling it by its name would call forth the monster itself.

While on the surface the series attempts to bring excluded subjects back into society, this is conditional on submitting to authority. Hence the abject states and zones are not softened but instead borders re-enforced. In refusing the hand of the ‘advocates’, as the majority of the sex workers do, the sex workers are rendered even more abject than initially perceived. This is exacerbated by technologies of visual surveillance that make up the cinematic apparatus, and their intersection with the blur.

Each intervention unfolds as follows: posing as a client, Kevin scrolls through online advertisements before calling a sex worker he decides looks particularly at risk.

⁵³ All of the sex workers who appear in the series work as women.

⁵⁴ However there are significant differences too. Intervention was not the singular aim of *Good Woman of Bangkok*, but a more important difference is Aoi’s own involvement - O’Rourke doesn’t use hidden cameras, and he is a real client. In contrast, *8 Minutes* is made possible through a series of deceptions.

Once the sex worker arrives Kevin asks them to sit on the bed, and immediately launches into questions seeking disclosure of trauma, including direct questions around child abuse. After approximately three minutes he reveals himself not to be a client, but a pastor seeking to rescue.

Workers who hide their faces in their advertising photos are deemed to be at high risk and most suitable for interventions, the stated rationale being that they are hiding bruising, rather than protecting their identity in a highly criminalised context. In doing so the series explicitly sets up the face as privileged site of victimhood and signification, but it also invites the spectator to interrogate sex worker faces for these signs. This exemplifies the surveillant function of the documentary camera as discussed in the initial chapters of this thesis and amplifies the figure of the sex worker as someone who should be watched and studied—not only for the good of society, but for their own.

Over the five episodes, I recorded 14 of the sex worker's faces as blurred and nine unblurred. The face blur in *8 Minutes* is a combination of a heavy but smooth blur, with black dots over the top of the blur (fig. 3.1). It should be noted that reports are circulating of faces being left unblurred contrary to agreements,⁵⁵ and that several workers were arrested following appearing on the programme.⁵⁶ It is thus unclear how many sex workers, and in what circumstances, consented to recognisable participation, or indeed any form of participation in the series.

While any sequence of the series would provide a rich source for enquiry, my focus is primarily on the treatment of Lynn K from Episode Two. From the beginning of the team's interaction with her, Lynn is established as an unruly subject. Prior to arriving she asked for a face photograph of Kevin as part of her screening protocol. Sharing his face-image is a source of great consternation and perceived threat to Kevin, although he ultimately sends the picture, as 'Lynn definitely looks like she needs some help', again, reinscribing the sex worker body as site of evidence.

I count at least four different hidden cameras in the hotel bedroom where interventions take place. There is also a camera in the Advocate's room, as well as a

⁵⁵ It remains unclear at which point general release forms were signed by those who appeared in the programme. It also remains unclear whether permissions around non/blur were verbal or written. Suzy Hooker's article on sex worker produced blog *Tits and Sass* (Hooker, 2015) also cites several participants alleging they were not blurred despite agreements to do so.

⁵⁶ As prostitution is criminalised in the USA it is possible this is a coincidence, but it is also alleged Kevin was in close contact with the police. (Hooker, 2015)

surveillance feed on screen in that room, a surveillance camera in the hallway, and another two or three fixed cameras with the ‘security team’ in the parking lot. They all have radios and earpieces. The screen frequently shifts from single to three to five screens (fig. 3.2), not just of different spaces, but multiple shots with one room. The viewer thus becomes part of the security team, omnipresent, seeing everything—except her face.

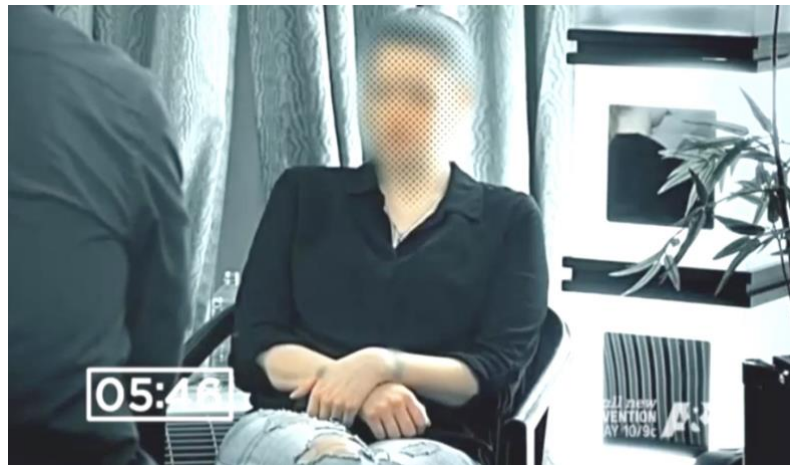


Figure 3.1: The blur in *8 Minutes*, video still.



Figure 3.2: video still, *8 Minutes*

8 Minutes works through provocations, surprise and cruelty, and deliberately so. Kevin, for example, talks about the need to induce shock in order to make the sex workers receptive to intervention. I contend that rather this approach should be understood as a mechanism to force entry into the subjectivity of the Other; to make

them visible and known. In these moments of suffering and probing, traditionally prime material for the documentary close up, that the camera cuts to the closest frame possible. But because of the inherent limitations imposed by hidden cameras, this is only a medium shot (fig. 3.3). Furthermore, it is a medium shot with a blur where the face should be. This facelessness is not left as facelessness; however, it is filled by a series of proxies.



Figure 3.3: Intervention, video still, *8 Minutes*

Proxies in cinema are not in themselves questionable. They may serve a myriad of narrative purposes, or simply provide another ‘face’ when one must be hidden. For example, a close up of a subject’s hands can be read as a proxy of the face. In both documentary and fictional genres, a proxy can communicate far more than script, performance or *mise en scène* alone. It is the use of proxy in the context of abject subjects, discursive silencing and trauma which concerns me here. Uses of proxy in cinema has been examined more broadly by Peter Mathews,⁵⁷ who builds a case for proxy to include use of the ‘I’ of other people to ‘express our deepest intimacies, a mandatory proxy’ (2006: 52). The ‘mandatory proxy’ is Maurice Blanchot’s term, which Mathews unfortunately does not explore in any detail. The concept nonetheless serves as a useful entry into conceptualising proxy.

⁵⁷ Specifically he contends that Godard creates a proxy of himself in *Vivre Sa Vie* (1962) through script, objects within the *mise-en-scène*, and actors. Mathews goes as far as suggesting that *Vivre Sa Vie* is not a film about a sex worker but concerned entirely with doubling and proxy. He concludes that the film is a coded auto-biography, which I argue is an overreach. But films ‘about’ sex work are not always solely about sex work anyway. Nonetheless his exploration of script and *mise-en-scène* as stand-ins for other people and ourselves is valuable.

For responsibility is the extreme of subissement; it is that for which I must answer when I am without any answer and without any self save a borrowed, a simulated self, or the ‘stand-in’ for identity: the mandatory proxy. (Blanchot, 1995: 22; emphasis in original)

I understand ‘subissement’ here to mean the endurance of suffering or pain.⁵⁸ Mathew’s primary omission is that Blanchot was writing in the context of disaster and trauma, and the responsibility borne to the Other, especially in contexts of wounding and threat to the self. Blanchot is proposing that responsibility to the Other is an extreme form of this endurance, one that exists even, or especially, in suffering so deep it cannot be confronted without a ‘stand-in’. It is this extremity which renders the proxy mandatory, for the proxy is what allows it to be handled.

It is this mandatory proxy that can be evoked in documentary practice to hold space in an otherwise disassembling or precarious experience, that allows the subject to give voice, and for the listener to act with empathy. It is a proxy which therefore allows the spectator to enter into a dialogue with something or someone, even if it is painful, and without which they may otherwise turn away. It is not unethical or deceitful, depending on who deploys the proxy, and who is used as proxy. I have outlined this alternative use of proxy in order to differentiate it from the proxy at play in *8 Minutes*, where blurring of the face—especially so in the context of trauma and excluded subjects—creates fertile ground for a face proxy which is used to further or enact violence.

The face proxy is exceedingly far from mandatory proxy advocated by Blanchot. Because the face of the sex worker in *8 Minutes* is already contaminated by the abject, and not a site of connection but a wounded surface, facelessness in the form of blurring does not hold space or safety but allows a face proxy that works on the side of power. Amidst a host of other ethical issues surrounding *8 Minutes*, it is the particular use of face proxies which is the problematic aspect of *8 Minutes* as apparatus. It is not a mandatory proxy borne out of subissement, but rather, the face proxy becomes weaponised against the subjects themselves. Proxy becomes not a true stand-in, but mutes the face of the original subject, whose face is ceded to another. I now show how this weaponised face proxy works in practice, as evidenced in *8 Minutes*, where the ‘Advocates’ emerge as face proxies for the sex workers in several

⁵⁸ I am indebted to Dr Caoimhe Mader-McGuinness for her translation of this concept.

ways.



Figure 3.4: Dolita as proxy, *8 Minutes*



Figure 3.5: 'Advocates' as proxies, *8 Minutes*

The first proxy in *8 Minutes* is the face of the Advocate. When a blurred sex worker discloses trauma or is not engaging emotionally in a way that is visually or aurally accessible to the spectator, the film cuts to close ups of the Advocate's faces. In extended, tightly framed shots the Advocates watch the documentary subject, frequently in horror or astonishment (figures 3.4; 3.5). This horror-face or shock-face stands in for the face of the sex worker. Where the spectator is denied the emotion on the face of the sex worker, they are given instead the emotion on the face of the Advocate. These two faces should not be assumed to be same, yet the blurred face of the sex worker is subsumed by the visible face of the Advocate.

Secondly, the voice of the Advocate produces as a face proxy. Describing what *they* see in the face of the sex worker, in a way that conforms to the ideological apparatus at play, the countenance and emotional state of the sex worker is also aurally

produced. For example, Advocate Dolita goes in to intervene with Lynn (fig. 3.6) who is uncompliant and largely silent. But Dolita-as-proxy destroys this opacity and half-spokenness, and erodes the audience's ability to read Lynn's opposition, instead recounting it thus

As I'm sitting there talking to her, she's showing no emotions, and I believe, that it's a coping skill. She has to keep what we call a game face on. (Dolita, *8 Minutes*, Episode Two)

In this sequence Dolita discloses her own personal experiences of abuse in the hope of convincing Lynn to leave the industry. She also tells Lynn her own children will start selling sex if she does not leave. Although we cannot see her face because it is blurred, her silence and lack of body movement suggests that she is not engaging with Dolita's attempts to shock her into submission. As Dolita moves closer and closer to her face, Lynn moves her body back into the chair away from her. Her body is still, her few words deflect. Leaving this sequence without proxy would be to allow tensions, gaps and silences to bloom into full resistance. The violence of the intervention would be made more evident. Instead, not only is Dolita as proxy undermining Lynn's face, her voice disallows the spectators own vision.



Figure 3.6: Dolita attempting intervention, *8 Minutes*

Thirdly, the Advocates own personal narratives act as a kind of proxy. Dolita is a safe access figure for the viewer. As an ex-sex worker turned rescuer, she offers up her own suffering to the camera readily, entwined with the possibility of reformation and catharsis. There is a slip produced between the documentary subjects and certain documentary team members, but it is not one that erases hierarchy. Rather, it produces

a kind of precarity and highlights a nagging threat; of becoming the abject subject once more, of contamination between current and former sex workers. Dolita, performing her pre-intervention pep talks for the camera, voices this collapse of boundaries; '*Remember that you were her, and be thankful that you are you, and you go in there, and you believe that she can become you*'. It is this positioning which finally cements Dolita as ideal proxy. But these sex workers cannot be known through Dolita. At best, the spectator can know Dolita through her exteriorisation of the subject's interior as she perceives it.

In itself, *8 Minutes* is exceptional not as documentary but as ideological apparatus. It does not reveal the sex worker, but rather the extent of the operations of power in documentary. This is apparent in the surveillant gaze produced, but most profoundly in the face proxies so easily created and deployed by the documentary team because of the blur. These proxies both stand in for the sex worker's face, and 'correct' and guide the spectator's view. This is made possible by the intersection of stigma, the abject, prostitute imaginary and the victimhood produced by the film mechanism itself. The key takeaway is that strategies of anonymity can be weaponised against sex workers, images of the abject produced and co-opted in order to amplify that very abjection back, in order to rhetorically silence the speaking sex worker subjects.

3.6 The oppositional abject in practice

As I have shown above, the blur poses substantial risk to abject subjects. The blur escalates the abject status of sex workers through visual resemblance, and secondly, it heightens a surveillant gaze over the obscured sex worker as boundary object. Thirdly, the blur facilitates a dangerous face proxy which furthers the rhetorical silencing of sex workers. These lessons expand how I view its uses in other documentary works, in that the blur risks ceding representational power back to marginalising forces. This limits its use as means to deflect a totalising gaze upon the face. This is a confrontation to my desire for a use of visual anonymity which embraces abjection as radical counter image, for abjection does not evade classificatory looks, but instead is used to strengthen marginalising boundaries. Despite these revelations of power in *8 Minutes*, I maintained a commitment to mapping the possibilities of an oppositional use of the abject in documentary practice,

seeking a way through the abject, rather than skirting around or attempting to escape it.

As discussed in Chapter 1, it was a concern with the volatility of abjection, and the ethics of involving others in its application, that prompted a shift away from participatory documentary practice in this thesis, and into auto-ethnography. This is not a new genre of documentary for me, as I worked in this way throughout my undergraduate fine art degree, as well as in my MA in Documentary Practice, in *Enclosure* (2010) for example. As asserted in my thesis introduction, creative treatment does not exclude a work from documentary status, even though it sits on a different place on the documentary spectrum compared to *8 Minutes*. Whilst not charting the territory I had initially expected, my practice nonetheless provides significant interventions in understanding the intersection of abjection, stigma and strategies of visual anonymity. In this section I will examine both of my videos made as part of practice elements of this thesis, first *Three Gifts*, followed by *Face Works*. A script produced as part of my practice will be examined in the following chapter.

Three Gifts: an abject object to make seeing difficult

I premise this analysis of my practice with a note that my videos became part of my wider schizoanalysis, rather than my central methodology. I address these shifts throughout my practice reflections, however this shift is not to minimise the impact of my practice in this thesis, which remains significant and connected to multiple analytical threads. For example, I will also discuss this first video, *Three Gifts* (2016), in Chapter 4, in terms of voice and the unspeakable. While some elements of voice are discussed here, my focus is primarily abjection and the image.

Three Gifts, is a five-minute black and white video that falls into the camps of video art, documentary and experimental ethnography. The image track can be described as a documentary ‘re-enactment’, which would also be at home within a work of performance art. The accompanying audio track is a monologue. An investigation into obstruction of the face without the post-production blur, as well as an exploration of the uses of abjection from an abject location, *Three Gifts* grapples with difficult narrative or harmful interactions with a client. In this sense, both the image and the narrative hail abjection and the prostitute imaginary.

The vocal track, which was recorded separately to the moving image, follows an interview questions and answer format, concerning a series of ‘gifts’ from a client. I

sought to address nuances of power playing out in our relationship, performances of managed identity, but also protective deflections, bound up with self- perception and disidentification, and bound, explicitly in this case, with the hidden face. It is primarily my own voice as both roles, although as discussed in Chapter 4 a proxy merges into my voice in places. The relation between the image/aural expressions of abjection requires some consideration. I outline the narrative here as this is integral to the image itself. The script excerpt below illustrates the extent of abjection the narrative, in both its confrontational and vulnerable aspects:

Tell me about the first gift

Well we bought a lot of tights in Paris. Department store pantyhose with gussets, reinforced toes. I mean not we, but he, the client, He bought me a lot of tights.

It seems like a practical gift

Yes practical, but not how you might think. He wanted me to put them over my face. Like a bank robber. Not that I could see myself. I looked in the mirror once and all I could see was a dark blurry shape. So I imagine my face. Squashed in, shiny and new. This is a gift wherein I am not myself. I am even more not myself than usual.

Aren't you still yourself at work? Or some version or aspect of yourself?

Yes perhaps at work it's me but with more secrets. But with tights over my face I become something else entirely.

And the client who is he, who is this guy?

He would hate to be called a client actually and I dislike him intensely. He knows my name, my real name. Although my work name is real also, but he won't use my work name, he will only use my real legal name and every time he does it's like a shock to the body.

How does he know your name?

He says that he guessed it, but that seems unlikely. He probably looked through my bag one day. But when he uses my name when

I have this shiny, other face, it seems ridiculous that my name could give him anything.

In the video, I sit on a bed with my back to the camera. Before I cover my face with a pair of tights and slowly turning around to stare into the camera. The rest of the video track consists of the act of dressing entirely in layers of tights: arms, legs, body. Beneath this surface narrative is a concern with interpersonal boundaries, working conditions and agency, as well as identity management. There is a narrative interplay between the masking of the face as fetish, site of projection and protective screen. This voice and difficult testimony will be examined in the following chapter, but it should be noted from the outset that *Three Gifts* contains references to coercive relationships. The decision to address this topic in my thesis practice is not an outlier, as I will elaborate in detail in my next chapter, a consideration of the voice of the sex worker is bound to the ‘unspeakable’. Further, the prostitute imaginary hinges on trauma narrative and victimhood, and in this regards, claiming this narrative in sex worker led documentary is a part of countering rhetorical silencing of sex workers.

Returning to the focus of this chapter, and the face, it should be stated that the filming of this video felt like a ritual enactment. I did not stop to retake shots, and in this sense there is link to performance art. I had drafted the script prior to filming, and planned what I was going to do on camera, and where, as well as basic strategies to obscure my face, but there was not a detailed storyboard. There are three obfuscation strategies at play in *Three Gifts*; semi-opaque tights fabric over the face (figs. 3.7, 3.8) which both squashes the face and removes some detail a general erosion of the visual fields, and a frequently out of frame face (fig. 3.9). None of these strategies are total. I detail the differences between these strategies below.



Figure 3.7: video still *Three Gifts*

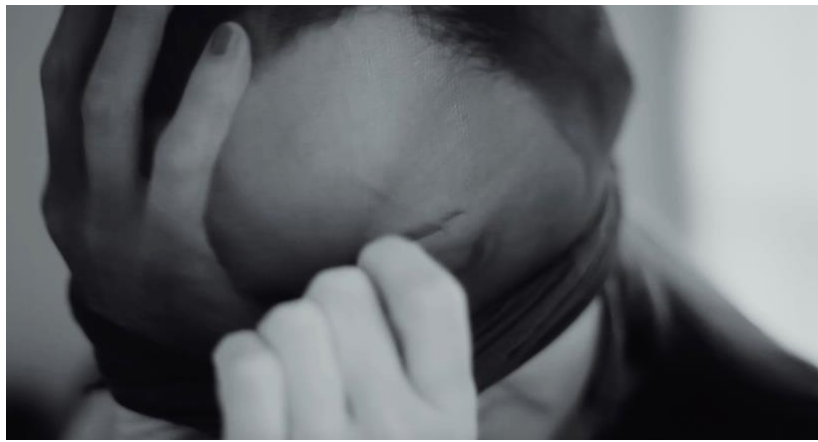


Figure 3.8: video still *Three Gifts*



Figure. 3.9: video still *Three Gifts*

Rather than a smooth blur, a significant defacement in *Three Gifts* is that of grit; a dark flickering grain removes tangible detail and renders the image less readable. This was emerged in the process of filming, and is a result of a lack of light during the tail end of filming as I lost natural light, rather than an addition in post-

production, however sequences without this grain were for the most part omitted. When I noticed this grain was occurring, I decided not to remedy it as I thought it enhanced the video. This is an example of the use of practice residing partially in the unexpected and failure. ‘Correcting’ the failing light would have made the video too aesthetically clean, and lost the lesson provided by the grain. Were the aim of this grain to be prevention of identity recognition, it would be insufficient. But this defacement of the screen is paired with a face which is either outside of the frame, or partially obscured by the dark tights that both distort the face—squashing features out of place—and removes details of the face through darkness.

Used in this way, erosion and degradation of the image itself does not privilege the face. Even though the abject image produced is total, it does not produce a full facelessness in the sense that the face is not destroyed or degraded any more than the rest of the body. On the contrary, the close-ups of the body in combination with the grain elevate the body as surface, thus complicating boundaries between the face and the body.

The squashed face and out-of-frame face are relatively oppositional to each other in terms of representational strategies, although they are linked by narrative and grain. Using both methods within one narrative allows a more nuanced analysis of the kind of facelessness they produce. As illustrated in Chapter 2, other parts of the body, particularly in close-up, can become facialised. This transference problematises the idea that facelessness is something that can actually be achieved, however, the narrative nonetheless asserts that the new, ‘shiny’ face is temporarily mine, and more so than the ‘real’ face beneath, and in this a form of facelessness can be grasped rather than just theorised. I have made my own face a ‘mandatory proxy’ in Blanchot’s sense. There is a stand-in at play, whereby the tights-as-face allowed me to pick up the experience and to speak.

Three Gifts is about an off-screen, embodied ‘blurring’ of the face, as a complex practice which only superficially ceded power. This material blur provided by the tights was protective, deflecting the gaze, and disallowing entry to my subjectivity. This was not fully evident to me before making the video. Critically reflecting upon practice through writing allowed a fuller intervention in this hidden knowledge. This highlights the role of practice research and situated knowledges in fields that are trauma adjacent. Dis-identification through obfuscation as a facilitation of voice, as opposed to a distancing which hinders voice, will become important in

the final chapter of my thesis. Significant here is that in addition to writing the script for this piece, the process of watching and editing a difficult, abject face image back allowed me to understand the connective abject differently, in that dis-identification can allow new ways of seeing the self or coming to embodied knowledge. This is consistent with an auto-ethnographic approach to documentary.

Three Gifts thus also re-emphasises two things; that I cannot separate out my own experience from either my practice or written led thesis interventions. It is always embodied, even if I do not immediately recognise it as such. And secondly, that practice is a form of embodied knowledge making that allows me to pick up, mediate and produce new knowledge from relevant parts of my own experience. Specifically, it allows a productive movement between distanced seeing and intimate seeing; it is a form of connective, mandatory proxy. Third, and more specifically to *Three Gifts* itself, it is too simplistic to think of the abject as either hegemonic or oppositional. Both can play out at once, and shift according to one's location or relation to the narrative/image on screen. This raises the question of limits of the oppositional abject, and this is explored in my next video piece, *Face Works*

Face Works, and the connective abject

In contrast to the singular narrative and visual strategy of *Three Gifts*, in *Face Works* (2017) I explored the limits and different strategies of face obfuscation in relation to abjection and 'signs of disgust'. At five-minutes long, the work is a series of drawings and vignettes rather than a comprehensive singular work. I wanted to test the limits of proximity; how close I could get to destroying the face before having to pull back and look away. I wanted to explore the role of the face itself in producing this facelessness. I wanted to pick up the volatility and fragility produced by the abject in *Three Gifts* and see if it could be used to connect and further the sex worker voice.

In *Face Works*, I used a mix of visual approaches, and both scripted and off-the-cuff monologue. This includes manipulation of the image track in post-production, and distortion of the face through projection of another face onto my face during filming itself. There are three segments, or drawings, within the video. The first sequence is a close up shot of a slowly moving face, obscured by multiple image tracks of that face layered on top of each other. The layered video is the same, with transparency reduced, and the effect is visually elusive, slippery, which feels less like an obstruction to vision, and more like a different corporeality. I liked this new body,

which felt both different and safe. There is a voice-over audio track, reading a text about the connectivity of street sex work from French sex worker, activist and writer Grisélidis Réal.

In the second sequence I explore face obfuscation through video projection of another face upon my own, treating the face as surface and screen. It is my own face here, because this is the face I felt most able to render incomprehensible, monstrous, or alien, and yet, it is also a face to which I am closest. This defacement is the most extreme of the segments; the face beneath almost obliterated by the projected face; the most abject of all faces in *Face Work*.

In the final sequence, which is a dark, heavily filtered video track, in medium shot, I speak about different clients with audio explicitly redacted at various points. This is an extension of the visual noise of *Three Gifts*, where the screen slips in and out of darkness, and the face a void of static.

My analysis of the imagery above follows, but first it is necessary to talk about defacement that I withdrew and excluded from the video, because it is more accurate to say the *most* abject material in these works became too unseeable to include. *Face Work* was thus a lesson in boundaries and proximity in practice; what is or becomes untouchable, too abject, even where the subject is myself. While it was not my intention to necessarily produce a finished video, but rather to open lines of thought through image making, *Face Works* nonetheless began with a series of failures that felt like shock. As I outline in Chapter 1, my use of the term ‘failure’ includes the understanding that there is no real failure in practice. Instead, these interventions are so often precisely where new knowledge is produced, because this forces a resolution, confrontation, or different understanding of the problem at hand. Nonetheless, it is important to note that I did experience this editing as a kind of fracturing of my understanding, and this feeling of a break or jolt watching the video back was both necessary and instructive. In this sense, while I consider failures as the points of entry into my practice, there is a concomitant feeling of rupture which must be navigated.

Face Works begins with a close-up sequence of my non-speaking face, looking to the camera, paired with voice track using a quote from the work of Réal. In the text used, Réal describes working the street as creating an invisible line. It is a connective practice between abject subjects rather than a marking out of a zone of exclusion:

She went out drinking and dancing as long as the money would last, and then she'd work the sidewalk, like me, when the money ran out. In German they say: Auf dem Strich Gehen. Exactly, "walking the line".

A line, a cord, a line of happiness that crosses the world and upon which we all walk. A sort of invisible equator that traverses the earth and grazes our souls and feet. (Réal cited Hennig, 2009: 27)⁵⁹

Asking how far I could take facelessness produced by obstructions of the field of vision, I began the work with a blur not over the face specifically, but the whole screen. I had introduced sequences of 30 to 60 seconds of blurred screen and found the complete absence of clarity so frustrating to watch during playback I eventually deleted them entirely. Lighter blurs felt as difficult as heavy ones. It provoked such a strong reaction I could not immediately articulate or locate the source of the disturbance, although with the distance of time it is closest to disgust. The reaction is instructive in itself, and illustrates practice at its most useful, because it forced me to locate the source of the disturbance in a visceral way.

In another *failure*, I then laid a semi-transparent blurred face over a non-blurred video track, but not only was the face just as recognisable, it looked like something from a 1980's soft-focus photo shoot. The resulting face was not excessive in form nor formlessness, it remained intact, but the removal of finer detail from the face was unexpectedly alien to me; uncanny, and for myself, the most disturbing face of all, because it was so close, but not *quite* my face. This disquiet was also felt in a sense of emptiness emanating from this face; a mask attempting to hide this fact.

This led to a strategies of using the face itself to obscure. Instead of using a blur, I copied layers of the same footage, with reduced opacity (approximately 25%), and slightly offset the images both in the frame (through slight modifications in image size) and on the timeline (shifting it by fractions of a second). Essentially using the self to hide the self (fig. 3.10), this is an image to which I felt absence of disgust, but rather as if my face had been refracted by light, or become multidimensional, which is in opposition to the abjection of victimhood or sex work.

⁵⁹ I am citing a volume of interview style dialogues between Jean-Luc Hennig and Réal: *The Little Black Book of Griseldis Réal, Days and Nights of an Anarchist Whore* (2009).



Figure 3.10: video still *Face Work*

But this easier image also provokes some conflict in how I feel about the video, because I observe that the image is less bodily, and that I am able to work with the image not despite the lack of visual ‘disgust’, but because of its absence. This face, in soft, floating multiplicity, was no longer too difficult to watch, but its abjection lay in its relationship with the narrative, not so much in the face itself. I had wanted to engage with the abject as a visceral, connective force, and now had to navigate the possibility that I could not tolerate the abjection I had aimed for. I thought that I should be able to view my own abjection, even if I was unwilling to produce that kind of visual countenance on someone else.

This realisation prompted me to return to Réal, questioning what could be learnt from her approach to the abject in sex work, and the possibilities or limits of its use for oppositional means. Réal (cited Hennig, 2009) used abjection in her writing as an attack on boundaries that sex workers were both subject to and used to enforce. Not only did she embrace the abject state of her own experience; she explicitly announced and linked her body to other vilified groups, such as migrant workers, through this abject state. Not by having sex with them per se, but through having sex with them in a state produced by the most extreme form of abject sex; high volume prostitution.

By the seventeenth, I had absolutely no strength left, and then I said to myself, well, fundamentally, where am I? Am I still myself? Or have I stopped existing? Do I exist differently? And then I saw that something marvellous had happened to me, you can collectivise

your body...You're like a piece of algae tangled up in other algae
(Réal cited Hennig, 2009: 102).

This dissolution of boundaries is a provocation on multiple fronts, not because Réal expressly engages with abject zones and subjects, nor because she speaks of the abject with a kind of conflicted admiration—‘The great sweat of love. You try to ignore it, it reeks, and in reality it’s extraordinary, like music’ (Réal cited Hennig, 2009: 106)—but rather because it affirms a contamination of and through the body. The boundary work that the abject serves has failed.

But I did not use Réal’s writing about sleeping with 17 men in one day. Like the face image, I hesitated to fully invoke the abject, due to fear it would be reflected back on to me; that I would be seen as going too far; that I myself would become *too abject*. Arguably going too far is precisely where a productive rift could happen.⁶⁰ The problem with this, is that I am not *just* myself going too far into the abject, in the sense I feared contributing to a harmful hallucination of sex worker collective imagery. This is the problem of stigma and the closet, and the pressure of positive representation which impedes nuance and voice in general.

With this I mind, the questions which emerged from engagement with the abject in my practice thus became; in use of the abject in sex worker documentary, which boundaries are at stake, between whom, and for what purpose? That is, who is the abject image *for*, and which voices are allowed or disallowed from within this abjection? In thinking through the abject as connective and oppositional, what really concerns me is connection with other abject subjects (including, but not only, other sex workers). But limiting the spectatorship of a video to sex workers requires the making of an un-broadcastable work, by definition unable to do the work of undoing the prostitute imaginary.

The connective abject can still produce a difficult image. As I highlighted in my thesis introduction for example, watching the ‘void’ face of another person on

⁶⁰ Contrast this with Andrea Fraser for example, who goes ‘too far’ into the abject, in a video art piece (Untitled, 2003) where she films herself having sex with an art collector (Fraser cited Bajo & Carey, 2004). Although pointing to crossovers between art and sex work, she is not a sex worker. She herself notes this difference, stating ‘I know I can’t project that onto sex work generally, or prostitution. I think it’s sort of ridiculous to say that the piece was prostitution’ (ibid.). Artist Bubu de la Madeleine conversely, who did identify in this way and filmed herself and a sex work client, withdrew her video from public view when she disidentified as a sex worker (de la Madeleine cited Herbst and Stuttgart, 2009: 282). Unlike me, she was able to push the boundaries of abjection in her video art, but did not want to stay in this abject location indefinitely.

screen provoked feelings of a shared experience of stigma, even though the cause of our abjection was not the same. This spectatorship did not dislodge abjection, but it did allow a point of entry into a suffering that was not my own. Nor was this a cathartic experience which might allow me to consume the testimony and ultimately feel released by virtue of emotional identification. Viewing the facelessness of another person from an ‘nearby’ position can be connective, even when this image is felt as a shock. In considering the oppositional possibilities of boundary loss of abjection in connective terms, I began working with video projection of another face onto my face (figs. 3.11, 3.12). This was an attempt to flesh out linkages in visual terms, as well as to see if approaching my face with a different visual strategy might allow me to push the abject further; if another kind of abjection could feel different.



Figure 3.11: video still, *Face Works*



Figure 3.12: video still, *Face Works*

In this sequence the projected face is altered as it wraps around the contours of the face-as-screen. In doing so, neither face is left fully intact; the projected face is also distorted by my own, in a mutual but not equal effacement. The choice of projected face was also considered. I used the opening scene from *Peeping Tom* (1960), where a street worker is secretly filmed by the protagonist.⁶¹ This sequence was chosen in order to connect and claim a violent image of the prostitute imaginary.

On a material level the projection in *Face Work* vanishes the face beneath, but at times it does not. The totality of this erosion is determined primarily by light and placement, which could be manipulated further and made more consistent. The projection also renders some of the face formless, so blown out with light that empty patches emerge. In other areas colour and shadow make any edges difficult to discern and place. Where the faces align it is indeed quite grotesque—far more so than I had anticipated. This is pulled back slightly in the second projected sequence where the projection is paused. The only movement comes from my own face, eyes blinking, with slight movements of the head. Pared down, made more still, the moving face beneath becomes more readable as the ‘real’ face; but this pulling back allows more space for the grotesque to be processed and met face-to-face.

This enmeshed face is an entirely other face, one that emerges from a loss of boundaries and subjectivity. Used in this way, the face is not beautiful - this is as much the case in *Happy Endings* and *8 Minutes* as it is in my own practice. But the face does not need to be beautiful in order to destabilise totalising uses of the face, or to produce a face-to-face encounter.

This grotesque face, which embraces the prostitute imaginary in order to confront the gaze, cannot control spectatorship or who and how it is gazed upon. I recognise that it requires a certain spectatorship to recognise this struggle. Crucially, it also requires a documentary subject who wants to lose the boundaries of their face-image in this way. While an oppositional abject can be produced, as evidenced in the work of Réal, it is also notable her work is written, not visual.

While co-option of the abject is always a risk, before that can happen the image first needs to be made. My difficulty in actually being able to pick up and show that

⁶¹ Omissions and decisions against a course of action are rarely discussed in writing about practice; the focus is often on what is made, rather than what is not. But clearly, I have omitted significant sequences from *Peeping Tom* in the projection, for example, the sequence where he enters a brothel and films workers there, including a sequence where one turns her head to reveal a disfigured face.

abjection, repeatedly, and in close proximity, reveals that the volatility of the blur was far more expansive than I have anticipated. In handling the abject image for documentary practice, I have found that abjection also works on the person making it, who must in turn also consider how that image works on those receiving it.

For this reason, I found myself both drawn to, and unable to look away from *Happy Endings?*, an independent documentary attempting to advocate for labour rights of migrant sex workers. This documentary deploys a variety of visual defacements in the service of the anonymity of marginalised and vulnerable subjects. It is not only the extremity of these methods which makes the film fertile ground for analysis, but the use of both ‘too much’ face and ‘too little’ face. Further, the film reveals the complexity of the intersections of the blur and power, as not all who speak in the film are sex workers, but everyone is subject to some form of obfuscation.

3.7 Happy Endings?

In contrast to *8 Minutes*, documentary film *Happy Endings?* (2009), directed by Tara Hurley and also filmed in the United States, uses a variety of methods to anonymise its subjects. Hurley describes it as *cinéma vérité*—a label which, as it is dominated by interviews, is not accurate but nonetheless communicates intention. Focused on massage-parlours-come-brothels of Providence, Rhode Island, with Korean sex workers, during a period of heightened political and police operations to shut the parlours down, *Happy Endings?* has a contrasting purpose to *8 Minutes*, and a different viewership. It was independently produced and was screened primarily at film festivals and one-off events.⁶²

Happy Endings? is distinctive in that anonymisation is not confined to the sex workers, but extends to managers, police officers and clients, who are given considerable airtime in the documentary. Where relationships are discussed, this inclusion becomes nuanced, but it often strays into managers and manager husbands repeating how free the workers are to choose sex work, as well as gratuitous reviews of sex workers that work to build a salacious atmosphere and contribute to a hyper-sexualisation of race in the film. Nonetheless, this inclusion allows for a useful

⁶² It is not currently accessible to view online, but DVDs can be purchased.

comparison and analysis of anonymity across different subjects and positions of power.

In addition to the sheer volume of anonymous subjects in the film, Hurley takes an unusually variable approach to anonymising techniques, including backlighting, extreme cropping, black lines, various distorting blurs, and static noise. There are no simple face blurs; the digital after-effects employed produce distortions more extreme than I have encountered elsewhere, producing an unintentional but nonetheless monstrous defacement. This defacement furthermore is not 'equal' across subjects, and does not always involve a lack of form, but conversely too much or excessive form. These differences are critical and demonstrate further workings and recuperations of power in obfuscations of the face in documentary.

A blur which makes the face too much

In order to understand more precisely the 'disgust' rendered in the distorted face in documentary, Therese Davis' distinction between 'excessive *facedness*', and '*facelessness*' is useful. Although not theorising in the context of anonymisation, her arguments that to be without resemblance is less a form of monstrosity, and more a particular kind of traumatic grotesque (Davis, 2004:11) is pertinent. She proposes that the face without resemblance to itself is excessive because it makes visible that which was previously unseen, the face as surface, concealing death. While Davis is writing in the context of facial disfigurement, I contend that certain practices of documentary facial obfuscation do not render the subject faceless, but rather, with too much face. While I argue both may induce shock, Davis proposes specifically that the shock of excessive facedness triggers traumatic memories. It confronts, leaving the spectator vulnerable (Davis, 2004: 11). In the context of the already abject subject however, I question how this shock is understood by the spectator.

Happy Endings provides rich material for an analysis of the trauma of the distorted face in excess. It also recruits facelessness, allowing a consideration of movements of power in relation to different visual strategies. I begin with an examination of excessive facedness.



Figure 3.13: Jen, video still, *Happy Endings?*

The blur which produces an excess of face is exemplified in the treatment of sex worker Jen (fig 3.13). Sitting in an empty room in a medium to wide shot, Jen speaks about police and migration raids, autonomy, and choice. Her face is subject to a double distortion. While one layer of this distortion is an unremarkable blur, it lies across a dynamic manipulation of her facial features, shifting her eyes, nose and edges of her face dramatically out of place. Creating a moving masked area in video with a light whirlpool or pulling effect is a relatively simple affair, but not one I have previously seen applied to attempts to anonymise. The effect is a kind of multi-dimensional rupture. Rather than sitting on top of the face, it penetrates the face itself, altering its form. For a brief moment this distortion looks cute, but it then pulls at the face downwards. While it would be challenging to recognise her, she is also now embodying a traumatic grotesque, a reading which is only exacerbated by her words and voice. This disturbance, firstly, makes it difficult to hear the voice. It is distracting and difficult to perceive her beyond the visual. Secondly, this disturbance acts on the side of power. She is reduced to her face, and her face is no longer a face, but something at the border of it, boundaries of the human.

Facelessness

In contrast to the traumatic excess of Jen's face, there are several manifestations of facelessness in *Happy Endings*. The first is a noise mask on the faces of both sex worker and client (fig. 3.14). 'Noise' is the name for this visual effect in editing software, but it could also be described as static; that black screen with flickering white flecks that is so emblematic of obsolete television sets. Whilst not a smooth dissolution of the visual, this technique should still be considered a form of blur, as it

renders the object indistinct. In this instance, while their bodies are left intact, the noise obscures all detail from the face to such an extent there is no face; it becomes a hole. It almost glows, this orifice leading not into the body but into another dimension.



Figure 3.14: surveillance camera with noise mask, *Happy Endings?*

There is no face. There is only this strange static. In the absence of diegetic sound, the moving bodies on screen take on a loaded presence. Watching them embrace and have sex, with strange dark holes for faces, the sequence veers toward to a seedy yet ethereal presence. It is also notable that the footage appears to come from a surveillance camera, which is not only echoing the disciplinary cinematic apparatus of *8 Minutes*, but reinforces the abjection or criminality and suspect behaviour.

There is a parallel here between *Happy Endings* and the final sequence of my video *Face Works* (fig. 3.15). I circle back to my practice here, because while I produced *Face Works* prior to viewing *Happy Endings*, and my practice was not therefore a response to this documentary, it does inform my critique.⁶³

In the sequence of my video in question, where I stand and speak to camera, a light grain covers the screen, which becomes extreme in the darker areas of the image. The eyes and mouth for instance consist of pure noise, but the face retains some form. This is a murky image, where details of facial features are less discernible but not obliterated; the face is not equally eroded. This need for darkness flattens the image,

⁶³ I have not seen noise masks being used in this way in any other documentary to date, it is not a common strategy.



Figure 3.15: Noise mask, video still, *Face Works*

exacerbating readings of the face as surface, pointing to alternative but unknowable existences beneath. As the eyes and mouth open and close, the body is unhooked from itself. Crucially, as opposed to *8 Minutes* and *Happy Endings*, the face is superficially still there. Although it hails something beyond the human; it is not an image of the subject; and opposed to *Happy Endings* nor does it implicate the viewer as voyeur. The body is rendered a collection of pixels, a ghost image, even a possession of the screen—but mediated, and strange.

Considering the unhuman face-void of *Happy Endings* in relation to the unknowable and digital interior of *Face Work*, I conceive of a manifestation of facelessness as a kind of absence which reaches beyond itself. The question is what this absence can be used to do, and by whom. The facelessness of the noise sequence in *Happy Endings* hinders a face proxy on the side of power, precisely because it goes too far – not into the grotesque, but something unnameable, even though it is overtly sexual. The sex worker's face is already replaced by another alien entity, and the incomprehensible strangeness of the static which on the one hand hails a voyeuristic gaze; like watching dirty tapes, and on the other disembodies the subject entirely.

The hook though, is that through my own near-by practice, I know how much work would have been necessary to produce this disembodied, alien sex scene, a scene which remains perplexing. This extreme treatment is done with intention. In a sense, the strangeness of this sequence is the most disruptive image to the prostitute imaginary. It is a glitch which will not resolve. Unlike the other distorting blurs of *Happy Endings*, in which my feelings remain consistently that of recoil, here I oscillate between fascination and detachment. This sequence is unusual in that it

shows an actual sexual encounter between client and sex worker, but its purpose in the film is questionable. No one speaks here; it reveals the sex, but not the worker. This is not an explicit disgust image, and yet the abject runs beneath, moving as the pixels do. Although this noise mask is a 'lighter' form of facelessness, abjection is nonetheless amplified through other aspects of the cinematic apparatus which connect to it, as well as the narrative of the documentary itself. Strategies of anonymisation can thus not be thought to operate separately from the diegetic world in which it is seen, nor the world exterior. This demonstration of the uncontrollability of the abject image, even in an arguably gentler form, suggests that any intent to use the abject in an oppositional way is fraught with risk.

The face blur acting on the side of power

In this vein, there is a third notable blur in *Happy Endings* (fig. 3.16), where a masculine figure sits in a car with the cinematographer. The cinematographer is in dialogue with this figure but remains unseen. This blur is like an orb, dynamic, as if his face is moving too fast to fully perceive. In contrast to the blur of sex worker Jen, there is no eyes or mouth discernible - only movement. His face then does not appear distorted, but rather, we are simply unable to see it. This could also be considered an active blur as opposed to a passive blur, with all the connotations of power that conveys. This subject is not a sex worker, speaks authoritatively, and the camera films him from a lower angle, making the viewer look up at him. The figure in the car with this 'active' blur is in fact a vice police officer, speaking at points about evading recognition as being crucial to successful police raids. The particulars of this blur, combined with camera angles and an identity aligned with power and not the abject, frees him from a stigmatising blur. This highlights a critical deviation; not all blurred subjects are equal. Not all blurs mark in the same way.

This blurred vice officer never occupies the same plane of abjection as other blurred subjects. While the specific blur itself contributes to this, more significant is the relation of power that pre-exists the blur. Whilst the police are far from the remit of my study, the collision of blurred subjects in this film does provide a useful comparison. This duplicity—this 'facelessness' of the State (which cannot be considered abject)—is not addressed by Kristeva, although Goffman touches upon it in regard to executioners (1990b: 93).



Figure. 3.16: Vice officer, video still, *Happy Endings?*

Bataille broaches the subject by locating the police as being part of the abject/miserable masses, but one which is co-opted by power to do the work of subjugation on its behalf (as the elite and the State must keep as far away from the ‘refuse’ as possible); ‘...the profound internal divisions of the miserable end up thus in an infinite subjugation’ (Bataille, 1993: 9). His note to this statement is worth including in full, as it is concerned with the reproduction of the abject.

Miserable existence consists precisely in the fact that it produces itself, contrary to the imperative instance, in the forms of innumerable divisions and dissensions brought to life by the reciprocal hate repulsion of its parts: the union of misérables is reserved for subversion and convulsive revolts against the laws which subjugate them to hatred. (Bataille, 1993: 13)

The cinematic apparatus is not outside of ‘divisions and dissensions brought to life’—quite the contrary. But it is Taussig who addresses this in terms of the mask versus facelessness; however, arguing that the State uses the faces and unmasking of others to maintain its own power - which is also based in secrecy and facelessness. If the State is ‘seen as the most masked entity of all possible masked beings to have ever crossed the threshold of the human imagination’ (Taussig, 1999: 239), is blatantly depicting it as such exposing this deeper reality or is it entrenching its power? While this blurred faceless vice officer can be read as a dialectical image, the material reality is that this blur allowed him to continue undercover work. The blurred workers depicted in *Happy Endings*, while not identifiable to viewers, continued to be subject

to violent raids and arrests by him. The police officer does not bear stigma from this blur face-image, he is instead marked by the blur as holder of power. This reveals the complexity of the blur, which cannot be read in isolation from the subject beneath, but which intensifies the power, or lack thereof, at play. Indeed, all the facelessness or other anonymising distortions found in my case studies can be understood as working on the side of power, at least on a representational level.

3.8 Conclusion: no minor defacements

This chapter has mapped the terrain where interlocking abjections meet: the sex worker as socially abject subject; and the physical abjection summoned through obfuscation techniques such as blurs, pixelation and distortion of the face. This mapping has revealed the spread of the abject through images of sex worker anonymity as more severe than I had initially recognised. The key learnings are as follows.

Firstly, the blur is not only a marker of stigmatised identity, it is abject. The blur is not a material object, but it is not *not* an object either. It does not quite belong, and in this sense is abject in itself. The blur can move as the face moves, pixels creeping, like liquid dirt, attaching itself to the body like an alien. The blur is a marker that something, *someone*, disturbs social order and boundaries, and this marking reinforces the power structures at play. However, this sense of contamination or strangeness is not contained to the blur itself, even though the blur and other distortions are effective movers of disgust images. More so, the blur belongs to who is underneath, rendering abject subjects as more abject. While image can act upon the spectator, the extent to which the blurred face can act as connective force is influenced by the location of the spectator, forging connection through shared abjection.

Secondly, in considering what this abjection does, I have discovered the risk of ‘face proxy’. As demonstrated in my case studies, both the face in distorted excess, and in facelessness, not only heightens stigma but facilitates a specific form of silencing recuperation I have termed ‘face proxy’. Anonymising defacements are laden with associations of victimhood, rendering it too easily deployed in a rhetoric which produces the sex worker as a subject who cannot speak unaided, and who requires translation via the face of another, rather than represent themselves. This is to do with who deploys this proxy, and how.

Third, my practice revealed the editing suite as a form of face-to-face encounter with abjection, one more intense than spectatorship alone. Because of this very proximity, one can become extremely close to alienating or shocking frames on screen. In spending so much time and closeness with the image, analysing and manipulating it frame by frame, it can feel as if the image is no longer fully separate to the self but is interiorised. An implication of this erosion of perception is that the extent of effacement produced by anonymising strategies can be lost for those working on those images. A face I have edited will always be known to me, meaning that stronger distortion can also feel all the more necessary in terms of anonymity.

Fourth, related to the above, connectivity and the abject also needs to be understood as a relation between the subject and their own distorted image. If dislocation from one's own image can be pushed far enough, even in the blurred face or visually eroded face, a true proxy can emerge. As found in my practice, this distance from oneself can facilitate giving voice. This will be considered further in the final chapter of this thesis.

Fifth, in questioning whether forms of visual abjection could be used by the subjugated as counter strategy, I have found that the abject sex worker face specifically is connected to a wider web of abjection which makes this a dangerous strategy. Intersecting with my case study analysis, it was through eroding my own face-image in the edit suite that the extent of the volatility of the blur was revealed. My inability to render a blur watchable forced me to re-evaluate my beliefs around blurring as a tool that could be applied without furthering the prostitute imaginary. There are, I assert, no minor defacements of abject subjects.

Finally, this chapter has revealed the importance of the way in which I analyse my own practice; my gaze inhabits positions both interior and exterior to my practice. While I remain situated as maker, I switch my view to that of spectator, at points analysing my practice as if it were another case study from a different director. In one sense, this is can be thought of precisely as schizoanalysis, and this oscillation between inside and outside is where I find my analysis most revealing. This is in turn connected to a core thread of my thesis; disidentification in self-spectatorship, and practices of giving voice as a sex worker. In the following chapter, I map foundational understandings of this voice, building upon theories of power and masking analysed thus far.

Chapter 4: Discordant lips: the voice of the sex worker as ‘revolutionary demand’ and as disappearance.

4.1 Introduction

This chapter is anchored in the struggle for power through voice. I argue that in order for the sex worker to step out of abjection and oppression, and indeed out of the prostitute imaginary, they must speak. But the intersection of power and the sex worker voice is more complicated than this. In earlier chapters I demonstrated that the prostitute imaginary moves through visual representation, but as I will chart throughout this chapter, it also moves through the voice, complicating understandings of the voice as signifier and site of power and agency. As I will illustrate, the obstacles to speaking, and to being heard, stem from both external and internal forces which are not always easy to separate. Stigma, violence, and trauma intersect in the voice of the sex worker, which in turn adapts to this intersection.

My attention in this chapter is focused on the voice that is not altered or impeded through distortion or disembodiment (which will be addressed in chapter 5). I use the term voice to mean the vocal sound produced by the body; soundwaves which hitch an identity to a person, that is not constant or steady, but perceived to be part of our very subjectivity, dissipating as we speak. But the voice is far more than this too. As I have discovered throughout this chapter, the sex worker voice is deeply implicated in the field of trauma and testimony, and this complicates its relation and response to power. This complication includes silence, which plays out in specific dispossessive ways for those already considered damaged, but these silences are also used as fugitive strategy.

In this chapter then, as part of the schizoanalysis of the sex worker voice, I begin with an exploration of the parable of Balaam’s ass, in turn situating the sex worker voice within feminist discourses of the voice as technology of power. I will use this to anchor my analysis of how power plays out in practice in sex worker voice in documentary, arguing that the voice and the ear of the director, or receiver, must be taken account of in any discussion of marginalised voice. In my case study of *Portrait of Jason* (Shirley Clarke, 1967) I will illustrate how complex this voice can be, as Jason not only creates themselves through it, but uses the voice as oppositional tool to ‘not tell’. Their voice further oscillates between speech as submission, as playful

mask, as racialised indecipherability, and as silence which is both provoked by the filmmakers and weaponised against Jason. While Jason gives voice in both joy and defiance, they also fall into silences which appear as embodied, protective blocks.

From there I engage my own ‘failed’ piece *The Proxy*, to think through silence and the body in relation to vulnerability and the failure to speak. I then expand upon the ‘unspeakable’ in an analysis of testimony and witnessing scholarship, including a consideration of compliance, and performances of healing through the voicing of trauma. While both of my case studies are linked by a concern with the voice as a fundamental medium of power and knowledge, I use opposing strategies in treatment of the voice which withdraws or refuses to yield entirely. I return to my own practice, to question why, in contrast to *The Proxy*, *Three Gifts*, allowed difficult voice to be spoken.

In this regard, Jan Worth’s film *Taking A Part* (1979) is useful in providing a counter point to the vocal rupture induced in *Portrait of Jason*, and offering alternative practices of facilitating difficult testimony. Engaging with the documentary apparatus itself, study of this film allows analysis of how boundaries and power can be constructed through the sex worker voice, without the violence seen in *Portrait of Jason*, and in turn new relations of listening.

4.2 Power, magic, and the ‘indecipherable’ voice: a parable of voicelessness

I begin my mapping of power and the sex worker voice with a Judaic story of a non-human subject; a feminised animal that should not speak, but, after a series of escalating violent punishments, does so; her voice bestowing vision to her master. This parable is a punctum into the sex worker voice, marking gendered violence that compels voice, and questions of who that serves. It also provides a lesson in indecipherability, the intolerability of closeted knowledge, and how that is used against marginalised subjects. Revealing the voice as gift and power, the tale encompasses the complexities of the sex worker voice in documentary.

In this parable Balaam, a seer and ‘word-magic professional’ (Alter, 2004: 23) has been called upon by the Moabite king to curse the Israelites.⁶⁴ Balaam begins to travel to Moab perform the curse. He rides a she-ass, an animal subjugated into the

⁶⁴ ““Look, the people that has come out of Egypt has covered the eye of the land. So, go hex it for me. Perhaps I shall be able to do battle against it and drive it out.” 12. And God said to Balaam, “You shall not go with them. You shall not curse the people, for it is blessed”” (cited Alter, 2004: 11)

service of humans. His journey does not go smoothly, however; on the journey an angel appears that only the she-ass can see, blocking the path with a drawn sword. The she-ass swerves off the path, thus avoiding both her own and Balaam's death, and is subsequently beaten by Balaam. This repeats, with violence escalating until finally the she-ass speaks in human voice. It is only then that Balaam's eyes are unveiled and he sees that he has narrowly avoided death.

While the parable aligns vision with knowledge and locates the voice as facilitator or conjuring power for that vision, it also highlights disparities of power in relation to the voice, specifically the relation of violence to the giving of marginalised voice to those with power. Both violence and the failure of perception was on Balaam's part, which notably is also gendered. He is a man whose very power is his voice, she is an 'unspeaking' female animal, whose body is in service to him.

While theologian Robert Alter (2004) views the talking ass simply as a comic touch, with vision and its absence the object of his critique (2004: 8), I contend the parable points to a problem of voice in relation to trauma and closeted knowledge, and who speaking serves. It highlights that the 'unintelligible' voice of the subjugated is considered a revolt against authority, and that the extraction of knowledge through the voice of marginalised subjects is bound to violence. Inseparable from this however, and equally important, the parable recognises the voice as a form of magic; a force which changes people, relationships, perception and allows us to 'see'. It is the twin aspects of the subjugated voice: first, the voice as product of coercion, and second, the voice as resistance to this oppression, which is so pertinent to the sex worker voice in documentary practice. As emphasised above, this violence against and through the voice is gendered. In order to fully understand this movement of power, it is necessary to turn to post-colonial and feminist scholarship on the voice and power.

4.3 Towards a feminist understanding of voice as technology of power

The idea that powerlessness is rooted in an absence of voice frames many projects that engage with marginalised or socially abject subjects, including sex workers. In this framing of autonomy and subjectivity, either one has power - voice - or one does not. The idea that any kind of speaking signals a legitimising presence is encapsulated by Stephen Conner for example;

What a voice, any voice, always says, no matter what the particular local import may be of the words it emits, is this: this, here, this voice, is not merely a voice, a particular aggregation of tones and timbres; it is voice, or voicing itself. Listen, says a voice: some being is giving voice. (Connor, 2000: 3–4; emphasis added)

In the quote above, Connor argues for the power of presence that speaking signifies, and for closeted and excluded subjects, this very presence can be a radical act. In speaking, one is alive, active in the world, recognised as a person. Any voice is by definition an expression of presence, and in the context of closeted and marginalised subjects this is important. But missing from Connor's analysis is the recognition that it does matter which being is giving voice, what they had to do in order to speak – or what was done to them - and what they are able to say. While I find Connor's words compelling and even tender, bound with a kind of idealism I want to be true, a full consideration of marginalised voice requires that I dig deeper. This is because the 'voiceless', who generally speaking are not literally non-verbal or silent at all, become relegated to a space of victimisation and Otherness where their actual voices are delegitimised. While my thesis introduction outlines the function of rhetorical silencing of sex workers more generally, it is necessary to build on practices of voice and silence in documentary more concretely. As explored in my readings below, postcolonial feminist theory offers an important critique of voicelessness.

I begin however with Mladen Dolar, who located the heights of vocal authority in representations of the voice of God, stressing that, 'If there is to be a founding law, a covenant, the voice has to play a crucial part in it' (2006: 52). The implication of this is that there can be no true power without the voice, and critically, from this starting point the power of voice is held by the white man. It should also be noted that this voice of authority also requires voice to be given up to it, and Dolar locates the vulnerability of exposure through the voice in relation to the listener in general.

...it is true that the sender of the voice, the bearer of vocal emission, is someone who exposes himself, and thus becomes exposed to the effects of power which not only lie in the privilege of emitting voice but pertain to the listener. The subject is exposed to the power of the other by giving his or her own voice, so that the power,

domination, can take not only that of the commanding voice, but that of the ear. (2006: 80)

While Dolar is not writing in the context of documentary practice, the ‘ear’ of authority is certainly critical in documentary, be that the director, or the audience more broadly. But in order to understand the voice as technology of power, the ear, and voices of authority to which it is connected to/aligned, must also be addressed.

Kaja Silverman does exactly this in her psychoanalytic critique of the female voice in classical cinema. I interject that while she uses the term ‘female voice’, I am applying this concept to any which is understood as outside of the cisgender male voice. This includes transgender voices, queer voices and those of cisgender women, which I describe as ‘feminised voice’ within my analysis. Locating elements of risk and threat in the female voice, Silverman argues this voice is then subject to containment and violence. This treatment is so necessary, she argues, because the female voice is treated as a fetish, ‘filling in for and covering over what is unspeakable within male subjectivity’ (1988: 38). According to Silverman both the voice and body have to bear the wound of castration; both are required to display rather than conceal lack – thereby protecting male subjects from knowledge of their own loss of discursive power. Silverman’s work investigating the (feminised) voice as something which needs to submit or act in service to male subjectivity is a recognition that the voice is a site through which power moves and is enacted. For Silverman, the problem is not so much that lack ‘haunts’ film theory (1988: 12), but that the ‘compensatory representation is coded as male’ (1988: 13) and at the expense of women, who are then dispossessed from their voice. And while this operates through the visual as well, Silverman argues that this voice is used in cinema to protect male power to an even greater degree:

Woman’s words are shown to be even less her own than are her “looks.” They are scripted for her, extracted from her by an external agency, or uttered by her in a trancelike state. (1988: 31)

This is a particularly pertinent statement, as although Silverman is analysing classical cinema, the latter two points play out dramatically in *Portrait of Jason*, and as I will illustrate they do so with great consequence. This extraction is also stark in *8 Minutes*. Trancelike states can be observed as Aoi speaks in *A Good Woman of Bangkok*, as well as by the sex workers in *Happy Endings*, in both cases this trance is aligned with

the suffering, wounded voice. Silverman proposes that the counter to dispossession of the voice is disembodiment, which puts the female body beyond the grasp of the male gaze:

To permit a female character to be seen without being heard would be to activate the hermeneutic codes which define woman as 'enigma', inaccessible to definitive male interpretation. To allow her to be heard without being seen would be even more dangerous, since it would disrupt the specular regime upon which dominant cinema relies; it would put her beyond the reach of the male gaze (which stands in here for the cultural 'camera') and releases her voice from the signifying obligations which that gaze enforces. (1988: 164)

Allowing the sex worker to be heard yet unseen could indeed be dangerous and go a long way to reverse the rhetorical silencing of sex workers.⁶⁵ While I examine the disembodied voice in the following chapter, it is important to grapple with this theorisation of the voice in this chapter as it also has implications for the feminised voice where the subject is visible, and where silence is not tolerated.

Missing from Silverman's analysis is the racialised voice. While not cinema focused, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's *Can the Subaltern Speak* (1993) does address voicelessness in terms of an assimilationist colonial gaze, and ear. Spivak asserts that representation of the Other is a form of disempowerment, whereby the oppressed are forced to rely on those with power to relay a message. While her critique that the (often unnamed or anonymous) subaltern voice is 'filled in', or represented by the privileged, Spivak specifically critiques projects where 'White men are saving brown women from brown men' (1993: 92). She advocates instead a systematic unlearning

⁶⁵ Silverman uses fictional thriller film *Klute* (1971) to illustrate the liberatory potential of the female voice-without-body. In this film, sex worker Bree (Jane Fonda) is trying and failing to leave sex work, whilst being terrorised not only by a stalker recording and playing back her voice to her, but a private investigator with surveillance audio recordings of her voice. Silverman focuses her analysis on Bree's voice as an acoustic mirror threatening a breakdown in male subjectivity, and as something that thus needs to be controlled (Silverman, 1988: 81). She quotes sex Bree to underscore her point that the disembodied female voice holds more power: 'What I'd really like is to be faceless and bodiless and be left alone'. It is a compelling statement, especially in the context of sex work, which is so often cast as the sale of bodies, and where sex workers voices are so discredited. *Klute* can be understood as struggle for control over Bree's voice, or rather, over women's voices in general. But it is notable that despite voicing a desire for disembodiment, Bree herself cannot and does not separate her voice from her body, or her sex work.

of colonial privilege, by speaking *to* historically muted subjects, as opposed to listening to, or indeed speaking for (1993: 91). This differentiation may seem minor, and even awkward in terms of a representational medium where the spectator cannot speak directly back to the documentary subject, thereby limiting face to face dialogue. However her critiques are applicable to the field of documentary where the means of production is not controlled by, or actively collaborated with the subject.

As I critiqued in the parable of Balaam, a fundamental problem of the voice of the oppressed is that it is not recognised that they are speaking. While Spivak critiques listening where authority remains with the listener in power, and who does not have to reciprocate voice in an equal exchange of power, Audre Lorde articulated what a radical practice of listening looks like; urgent, active and with intention:

Where the words of women are crying to be heard, we, each of us, must recognize our responsibility to seek those words out, to read them and share them and examine them in their pertinence to our living. (1984: 43)

On this note, I contend that a reflexive, politically committed documentary practice can be considered active listening, because it seeks out, examines and shares voice. But this listening can only take place if voice is able to be spoken. Giving or conjuring voice is not something that simply happens; it is difficult, painful work filled with risk. As Audre Lorde contends, fear is also involved; ‘And, of course, I am afraid—you can hear it in my voice— because the transformation of silence into language and action is an act of self-revelation and that always seems fraught with danger’ (1984: 42). Lorde’s urging for voice in the context of vulnerability and suppression signals a fundamental change in relation; a voice is not given, or allowed, but cast out into the world. This is a recognition of the voice that can heal or transform the speaker, and others. For Lorde, whilst speaking came with risk, it was far more dangerous to keep silent.

Furthermore, Lorde recognised that the demand or expectation that someone can simply speak to their oppression and in doing so escape it, assumes that the language exists to do so. Instead, she sought to find ways through voicelessness by creating new language, specifically through poetry. I emphasise that while written words are a form of voice, it is pertinent that poetry is an art form that is also spoken.

Lorde asserted:

We can train ourselves to respect feelings and to transpose them into a language so they can be shared. And where that language does not yet exist, it is our poetry which helps fashion it. Poetry is not only dream and vision; it is the skeleton architecture of our lives. (1984: 37-38)

Voice is here the sharing not only of experience but possibilities of creative resistance and world building outside of the structures of racism, homophobia, class oppression. It must be emphasised that this is voice as a form of action, as well as survival, which Lorde saw as a fundamentally revolutionary move. She states this explicitly:

The white fathers told us I think, therefore I am. The Black mother within each of us - the poet – whispers in our dreams: I feel, therefore I can be free. Poetry coins the language to express and charter this revolutionary demand, the implementation of that freedom (1984: 38)

It has to be asked then, how the ‘revolutionary’, or freedom seeking, vulnerable voice is able to be spoken. Because as this chapter will demonstrate, while the voice can function as expression and producer of agency, giving voice is also, sometimes, an act of compliance. The sex worker speaks; but not only in power. The voice is not always allowed to ‘implement freedom’. In order to understand the complex interplay between the desire and need to claim the voice in power, and vulnerability and violence of doing so, it is necessary to examine the relations of speaking in a documentary context.

4.4 The director as transgressor/ facilitator of voice.

As examined above, giving voice from a marginalised position is revolutionary, but the voice can also, and simultaneously, be imbued with fear and subject to violence. The scene in which a sex worker might tell another person something of their life is an exchange that is fundamentally vulnerable to negative mechanisms of power, because, as Judith Butler, argues, transference is always at play when someone gives an account of themselves:

In the transference, speech sometimes works to convey information (including information about my life) but it also functions as both the conduit for a desire and a rhetorical instrument that seeks to alter or act upon the interlocutory scene itself (2005: 50-51)

This is an understanding of telling which acts on both speaker and listener, but it does not act equally. It is notable that Butler suggests this is *always* a kind of violence and to this end requires a practice of ethics from all involved in the speaking/hearing relation. In other words, if:

...in the name of ethics, we (violently) require that another do a certain violence to herself, and do it in front of us by offering a narrative account or issuing a confession, then, conversely, if we permit, sustain, and accommodate the interruption, a certain practice of nonviolence may follow. (2005: 64)

The takeaway is that violence is an underlying condition of giving an account of oneself, even without forms of coercion. This is a form of rupture within the speaker, it moves between speaker and listener. I do not simply mean secondary trauma from listening to accounts of violence, although that can be at play, but that holding or giving space to this rupture is a form of dismantling rhetorical silencing. Specifically, in recognising the break that can be required to speak, and allowing sex worker voice to contain incoherencies, contradictions, difficult emotions and accounts, and in actively listening to rupture, not just the words themselves, ethical practices of listening can emerge. In fact, there is an element of subissement here, as explored in Chapter 3, if the listener is able to hold the wounds of the other given through voice. This requires consent. This is the kind of active listening advocated by Lorde, whereby listening is both an intimate relation with the speaker, and responsibility. Nonetheless it is risky for the speaker who offers themselves up through the voice, particularly in relations of unequal power, because voice is a form of exposure which is difficult to contain. Part of the reason for this is transference.

Transference is particularly salient in situations where there is a pre-existing inequality of power, such as in the filming of a documentary. Theories of transference originate in psychoanalytic methodology, and before I address this concept in relation to film, it is useful to examine the concept in its original context. In Sandor Ferenczi's seminal text on transference (1949), aimed at fellow psychoanalysts, two strands of

thought are relevant to the director/subject relationship. The first is a reflection on harm. Ferenczi argues that encouraging someone to recount traumatic events can cause the subject to re-enter a highly traumatised state, including persistent anxiety attacks and nightmares. The second point is how this trauma re-enactment impacted the therapeutic relationship. Ferenczi noted a dramatic increase of submission on the part of the subject when this occurred ‘very often the sessions ended with a striking, almost helpless compliance and willingness to accept my interpretation’ (1949: 225). Ferenczi’s expands on this to note:

Gradually then, I came to the conclusion that the patients have an exceedingly refined sensitivity for the wishes, tendencies, whims, sympathies and antipathies of their analyst, even if the analyst is completely unaware of this sensitivity. (1949: 226)

In other words, Ferenczi found a tendency to comply with the analyst, to please them - even when it harmed them - especially when he directed conversation to traumatic events. This turn to submission, and connection with the voice/person of authority despite or regardless of harm, expands out from the therapeutic context and into documentary. Film theorist and maker Agnieszka Piotrowska (2013) argues that encounters between directors and their subjects needs to be analysed in relation to psychoanalytic transference. While documentary is not a form of talking cure, as I will examine further in this chapter, there can be a transformative expectation or desire in voicing traumatic experiences in testimonial contexts. Although there is risk to the documentary subject in this kind of encounter, directors are not subject to the same ethical code or regulation as clinical therapists. Piotrowska, argues:

the gesture of speaking to and for the other holds in it a certain risk but also a promise of an intersubjective connection, recognition and maybe even love. That risk, through transference, is necessary and dangerous’ (2013: 50).

In framing director-film subject transference in the context of desire for love and recognition - which she will also go on to examine in terms of risk to the film maker - Piotrowska highlights a vulnerability with serious implications. I counter that the necessity of transference is questionable, it is not the same as an intimate exchange through the voice. Rather, I argue it enables violence and submission to be too easily

played out through the voice. As I now detail, this is exemplified in the first case study of the chapter, *Portrait of Jason* (1967).

4.5 *Portrait of Jason*: compliance, construction and disappearance through the voice

Portrait of Jason is informative in terms of fugitive voice and submission, as well as oppositional practices of the voice. I see Jason as Balaam's she-ass—beaten repeatedly and refusing to move on, and whose revelatory voice comes to be framed as the speaking body—silence, cries and tears. *Portrait of Jason* uses the voice to access the interior of the sex worker, granting vision to the non-marginalised, but on closer inspection, it reveals a voice that recognises the submission called for, and continues on regardless.

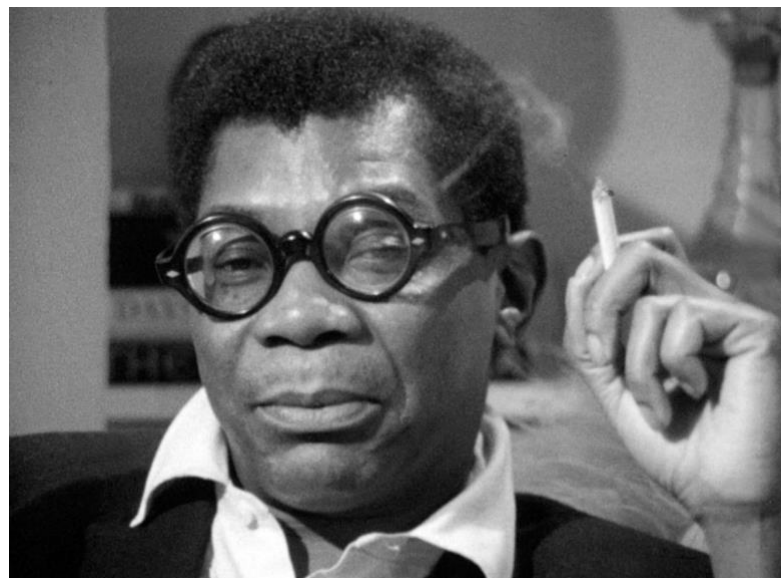


Figure 4.1: Jason, film still *Portrait of Jason* (1967)



Figure 4.2: Jason, film still, *Portrait of Jason* (1967)

Portrait of Jason is a feature-length documentary film consisting almost entirely of Jason speaking. Released in cinemas to critical acclaim, it has recently been restored and re-released (Milestone Films, 2013). Directed by Shirley Clarke, with additional direction from Carl Lee,⁶⁶ the film is a series of monologues slipping in and out of interview format. These monologues deteriorate into silences and confrontations with the Clarke and Lee as the film progresses; vocal performances are encouraged but then undermined. It is exceptional not only in form, but in who is speaking. Jason is a Black, gay sex worker, speaking about stigmatised and illegal activity. As Lee uses feminine pronouns for Jason, and Clarke masculine ones, in lieu of knowing Jason's preferred pronouns I will be using gender neutral pronouns here.

It should be noted that in 1967 only one state in the United States had decriminalised homosexuality, and like anti-prostitution laws, this law was actively enforced. Filmed one year after the founding of the Black Panther Party, and one year before the assassination of Martin Luther King. Jr. it is impossible to separate race out from issues around sexuality and sex work in this film.

Portrait of Jason is a stripped back work. Filmed entirely in one corner of one room of Clarke's Chelsea apartment, from 9pm one evening until 9am the next day, the backdrop to Jason's portrait remains pared back and unchanging. It is all Jason. The film is in black and white with primarily medium shots, although extreme close-ups are used in the scenes recording emotional breakdowns. There are no cut-away sequences or other contextualising shots in the film. There is simply Jason, speaking, singing, and sitting in silence. The voice is thus a continuous presence.

It is useful to examine the opening scene in detail, as it sets Jason up as an unknowable subject, but also one whose deviance is made evident through the voice. *Portrait of Jason* opens with an extended high-pitched beep tone and a blurred screen. Occasionally voices come from outside the frame of vision. These voices are part of the apparatus, calling 'sound rolling, camera rolling'. Fifteen seconds in, Jason slowly comes into focus as Clarke commands him to begin. Jason looks square into the camera, with the hint of a smile, but attempting to put on a serious front: 'My name is Jason Holliday.' They pause, blow smoke out of their nose, and repeat themselves –

⁶⁶ Although he is credited as off-screen cast (Milestone Films, 2013), his role directing Jason is substantial. Clarke herself notes the film was only possible with Lee taking on the role of confronting Jason. (Rabinovitz, 1983: 11)

this time with a dramatic inflection, and laughs, changes their name to Aaron Payne. Still laughing, the screen regresses to a deep blur, one which persists for over 35 seconds. Even when Jason is not fully in the field of vision, their voice thus links the spectator to them.

Initially, Jason is in control of their own narrative. By in control, I mean evasive. For example, in an early sequence Clarke asks (always off-screen) what they do for a living. Jason, a little too quickly and under the breath replies, 'I hustle.' They laugh: 'I'm a stone whore ... and I'm not ashamed of it'. But Jason complicates what they mean by this—they have a lot of hustles, including 'house boy', and cabaret performance. The subject of sex work is not explicit for much of the film, but often implied, and almost always tangled up in other forms of work. It takes a full 90 minutes before the implied sex work is voiced out right. 'I became a garden queen,' they say. 'I was hoeing, and digging it. And the johns came easily. Sweet little white boys, you can talk them into anything you know.' This also makes explicit sex work as a form of voice work.

Significant throughout is Jason's holding back of certain details, their production of gaps where viewers must draw their own conclusions, and an active veiling that co-exists with an explicit offering of detail. Sometimes this absence presents itself quietly, yet repeated throughout the film are their words *'I'll never tell'*.⁶⁷ This voicing of recognition of the disciplinary and exposing hegemonic gaze at play, and that keeping this closeted and coded knowledge from view is an act of defence and rebellion, is a significant lesson of this film.

Katherine Biers, examining the Black voice in ragtime recordings in relation to a cultural panic around race in the United States, and hence, a different form of vocal expression than in the documentary film, is pertinent here. Her concern with fugitive voices, and resistance to 'telling' highlights a perception by white audiences of resistance to comprehensibility as a form of threat. Of which Biers writes,

⁶⁷ The first time we hear this phrase is just twelve minutes in, implicating themselves in some undefined petty crime. Jason does explain the origin however; they picked it up off transgender street sex workers in New York, who they had met in prison. They in turn had been using it in the context of refusing to elaborate on the language (both bodily gestures and spoken) of Black transgender sex workers, signalling a refusal to submit to police authority and a refusal to be deciphered outside of their communities. This should be read in the context of heavily criminalised work, gender and sexual identities and racial discrimination.

...black-ness has so often featured in the American national imaginary as a failure of speech —an inarticulacy that can't, or won't, 'tell.' Historically, forces of political and social modernization as diverse as law, new economies of speculative exchange, and new media technologies have constructed the spectacle of black linguistic and gestural excesses and emphasized the materiality of the black body in order to deny their own entanglements with writing and voice. (2006: 100)

I contend this is an echo of forcing the racialised Other to speak a 'white tongue'; a fear that 'not telling' hides a collusion against the white subject. In *Portrait of Jason* this is combined with a queer voice that is also deemed disobedient.⁶⁸ But Jason's queer voice does not only reveal, it also hides within performances of itself. These performances should be heard in terms of Lorde's proposals for a new language; they are both subversive and constructive. They also counter a colonial gaze which does not permit subjectivity it cannot fully access; the enigma in Silverman's terms (1988: 164), which can be seen but not heard. Indeed, the first half *Portrait of Jason* is a series of impersonations where Jason flits with ease from person to person through the voice.

Jason is skilled at shifting identities through the voice. This is evident from the very beginning, as they use impersonation to enact boundaries, moving attention away from painful personal narratives, as well as their experiences in sex work. This deflection and redirecting of probing questions is not too dissimilar to Julia in *My Night with Julia*, although she uses performances of sex rather than voice to deflect questioning. I emphasise this aspect of Jason's voice, because it is the fugitive element of their voice which becomes a site of forceful interrogation throughout the film. When the directors find the evasion, or boundary, too much, questioning becomes more antagonistic, deliberately opening wounds and instigating a breakdown on screen.

⁶⁸ Craig Loftin, analysing the post-war World War II homosexual rights movement in the United States, describes a crisis around queer visibility--a visibility which is also audible. Loftin describes locates fears around being outed as strongly voice centred. The queer voice drew attention not only to the speaker, but those around them. He cites complaints to homosexual publications: i.e. 'Swishing and noisy 'queens' ought to be stopped' and 'flaming queens...screaming, waving bent wrists in public...When they are arrested or beaten up, they holler and shout' (cited Loftin, 2007: 582).

Jason's disintegration through the voice is amplified by the cinematic apparatus. Rupture between the face and the voice is exploited to expose this split, for example in moments where Jason's voice is pitted against his image. When Jason says, for example: 'I'm here, on the throne, this is my moment', the image cuts directly afterwards to Jason being silent, eyes slightly glazed, with a sadness building. The absence of voice, where Jason has been so vocal until now, makes the silence all the stranger. This shot is 30 seconds long. Here the fragile power of the mask of the voice is rendered void by the camera. This illustrates Butler's critique of giving an account of oneself where the violence of this relationship is not addressed. Their rupture is not simply a result of speaking, but implicated is how this voice was extracted. They are in a catatonic state where the camera and other people in the room seem not to exist and where language is not possible.

I linger on this rupture because I argue that Jason's silence is both instigated by the director, and then weaponised against them. While Jason does not speak for 30 seconds, this is treated as a pure form of witnessing; as if the body rendered silent reveals Jason's true interior state, far more than their words have done. This is the turning point in the film, where Jason begins to break down. Completely inebriated by this point, they begin to seek comfort from the filmmakers: 'Carl, please turn around and smile at me'. A conversation then begins between Jason and Carl Lee, which is aural only, the screen is black:

Carl: Alright, so we all know that you're a great actress, you play all the parts, and it's fine ... We all know you're a big con-artist, we all know you don't really give a shit about nothing or nobody but you. You still not coming down front...

Jason: The truth

Carl: Come down front

Jason: Solid

Carl: There's only one role you can do Jason, and that's you

Jason replies with a 'thank you' and asks for the bottle. The role of alcohol and drugs in the treatment of voice in this documentary is significant and can also be closely tied

to break downs in subjectivity.⁶⁹ The directors speak to Jason in an increasingly antagonistic fashion, and the cinematography likewise becomes more broken. Scenes pushing Jason towards a violent self-account, or drifting in the aftermath of emotional breakdown, are increasingly intercut with out of focus and black screens. Jason's voice becomes erratic, changing in tone and volume, emotions, drifting into soft murmurs and silence. Then, as Jason laughs while speaking about being beaten by their father every day, Shirley starts pushing them to speak about their mother.

Shirley: Jason, tell me about your mother, Jason. Did you love your mother, Jason, did you hate your mother? Did your mother ever talk to you about being a faggot?

Jason eventually submits and alludes to trauma concerning their mother but moves quickly on before repeating the mantra 'I'll never tell', and there becomes an increasingly greater disjunction between what is voiced, and what is communicated with the body. Shirley's voice from off camera can be heard saying, 'Nice Doggy'. Like her use of the word 'faggot', she is playing 'bad cop' in an interrogation scene with ambiguous consent. It would be dangerous however to assume Jason is an unwilling participant in this break down of subjectivity. Despite their now liminal state, Jason remains astute when they state 'I think I'm losing my mind. Nevertheless, it's serving a purpose'. Jason is thus not naïve to their role within the film and seems at times to seek out transformation through de-subjectification. Nonetheless, it is an antagonism which fails to meaningfully shift Jason from spells of muteness.

The directors do not share their own experiences of trauma or marginalisation. Nor can the spectator see the directors, and this invisibility heightens the authority of their voices. But they do make audible this erasure of boundaries. It is extraordinary how explicit this process is made. They themselves lay bare their roles as persecutory analysts, demanding Jason recount traumatic experiences, highlighting Jason's need for vocal reassurance and love whilst refusing to provide any, creating an analyst-like encounter in the questions they ask, i.e. around his mother, and breaking down their very perception of self (but without giving space for them to rebuild it). This is

⁶⁹ The use of alcohol here is ethically questionable, and while it should be seen within the social context of the time, Jason's altered state is also exploited by the directors.

evidenced when, after consistent berating from the side-lines, Jason breaks down and starts to cry. Sobbing, they say ‘I did everything I could to please you’: the camera zooms in to close-up. Jason brushes it off – ‘I’m lonely, I’m desperate, but I’m cool’. Clarke pushes him further: ‘You *should* be lonely’. This continues:

Jason: I should suffer.

Shirley: You’re not suffering.

Carl: You’re full of shit.

Jason: Well, that’s showbiz.

Carl: Be honest motherfucker, stop that acting, you’re a goddamn liar.

Jason: Oh, you’re right again [shakes his head]. Nobody’s business now but my own. Nothing to say.

Shirley: Very good, I think we’ve all had enough now.

In closing the work in this way, Clark reveals her frustration with a voice that refuses to yield fully to the camera. But it is also a recognition of the voice that ‘does things’ to the bodies around it, even if this movement is profoundly unequal. Over the course of the film, an intimacy has been produced, despite Jason’s evasive voice, which both grants and ejects the spectator from proximity and knowledge. Alongside coercion, Jason’s uses their voice as form of a casting out. Jason is giving voice; claiming territory. But this absolutely interwoven with ‘I’ll never tell’, and the claiming silence and performance, which are sometimes the same thing. In this, Jason reveals coercive practices against the sex worker voice, but also counter-practices, complicating notions of agency and risk in sex worker documentary.

4.6 Vocal precarity and the unspeakable in practice

In considering the means by which Jason gave voice, and the ways in which their agency and wounds responded to the voice of Clarke, I was drawn to their silences, which were sometimes oppositional, and sometimes of the unspeakable. I was confronted with my own inability to cast out my voice in my unrecorded work *The*

Proxy. Like *Three Gifts*, I wrote the script with an auto-ethnographic lens, noting scripts are my starting points. Written in 2018, it remains unfilmed, because while it was possible to write the script, it was another thing to speak it. In realising I could not translate the text into voice, visual approaches were also blocked; absence in the voice thus spread to the body. I include an excerpt of the script below.

Script draft: *The Proxy*

I decided to work in a particular kind of parlour, the kind where you can go to lose yourself in.

Busy. A walk-in place, not high paying but you can earn good money through volume. It's a town where I could easily know someone. Not my home town, but close enough.

I could easily know someone, but it's also possible they wouldn't recognise me - I was a different person then.

Last week I went to a coffee shop and noticed a group of old friends from when I was 18. One, I even lived with for two years. Our eyes met. He stared back at me without recognition. I couldn't bring myself to speak my name.

I study my reflection in the bathroom mirror. I don't look so different. Before, my hair was long and a mess, as it is now. Before, my face was bare, as it is now. I'm even wearing jeans and a t-shirt. There is more colour in my cheeks and my bones don't show themselves quite as much, but I conclude that this difference is minimal. Maybe it's my inside that has changed, maybe that's what it is. They are from before, and I am in the after. Maybe there is a proxy of myself after all.

I wondered what would happen if a familiar face did cross the brothel floor. Would I even be seen, or am I invisible now?

And if not in the daylight, then how could there be recognition in a thick half lit space of a brothel floor, in dim reception rooms intermittently illuminated by the flashing of the jukebox playing

90's RnB. The music itself interferes with knowledge of me. When I do speak, I'm told I don't sound like I'm from here. My accent has become harder to place. I have become a stranger; my voice betrays this fact. Out of context, why even bother to use another name. No one will think it's real anyway. A double bluff. No need to pretend I'm somebody else.

It is notable that this script is not about violence, or even sex work itself. Rather, it hinges on disidentification, burdens of the closet, and managed identity in a stigmatised context. When I attempted to audio record the script, I felt physically blocked, as if my body was pushing the voice down into my chest. The difficulty in transforming a written testimony into a vocalised one suggests there is a threshold the voice is uniquely able to cross—or fail to cross. Or rather, that my written language and voice are able to cross differently.

The question of written versus spoken is complicated by the presence of an audience. Working to locate the problem more precisely, I considered if I could instead translate the written text onto a video screen. That is, was there a hidden fear in making the words public in general; the answer in this case is no. This text without voice would alter other aspects of the video, as well as the monologue itself, because voice is the narrative key. This particular script asks for recognition. This means it needs to be voiced, or not be made at all.

Before attempting to translate the script to video, I was not certain that something could remain unspeakable, or that the threat of giving voice to something already written could provoke such embodied response. Reflecting back to Butler, I recognise a violence in giving this account up to another via the voice which is too great, even though in the moment of practice I was alone with a script and recording equipment. There was no sound recordist to hear me stumble, nor did I want to speak it aloud even without recording. I kept the script, and put it aside, thinking I would come back to it (repeatedly), and did not. The implications brought to light in this failure of practice, is that not only is the spectatorship of others during difficult testimony an obstacle, so too is self-spectatorship. This is relevant for stigmatised voices more broadly. I did not need an external spectator to facilitate rupture in giving an account of myself, I was spectator, and my silence was an attempt to contain this rupture. In searching for the thresholds between language and voice, between

unspeakability and voice, it is useful to take up wider scholarship on testimony and trauma, much of which can be found in studies of Holocaust testimony. I will return to discussions of my practice after addressing these voices and silences below.

4.7 Acceptable and unacceptable silences of the witness: understanding gaps in sex worker documentary testimony

Within the field of trauma and testimony research, scholarship surrounding the trial of Adolf Eichmann in Israel 1961 is particularly strong. The trial was significant not only in the sheer number of Holocaust survivors speaking publicly, but also in the international daily broadcast of proceedings. Hannah Arendt (1963) described the trial as numbing, a repetition of, and submission to trauma, imprisoning the participants in a catastrophic past. This numbing was not restricted to the speakers. Arendt highlights the difficulties of listening in public to ‘stories they would hardly have been able to endure in private, when they would have had to face the story-teller’ (1963: 8).

But this proximity to the speakers and public repetition of traumas, which so disturbed Arendt, operated differently for trauma and literary scholar Shoshana Felman. In contrast, Felman asserted that the testimonies at trial did not so much repeat as create the victims’ story. The act of giving testimony creates a new event, she argues. Further, this event is transformative, where ‘mute bearers’ of trauma become speaking subjects. She contends that the trial should be considered as a process of ‘translation of thousands of private, secret traumas into one collective, public, and communally acknowledged one’ (Felman, 2001: 227). As a revolution taking place within the victim but ‘before the audience’, Felman considers the trial as an event that allowed survivors to speak again. Bearing witness is thus a process of translation done both for an audience and for the self, as an act against sovereign power, in this case fascism.

The victim’s story has to overcome not just the silence of the dead but the indelible coercive power of the oppressor’s terrifying, brutal silencing of the surviving, and the inherent, speechless silence of the living in the face of an unthinkable, unknowable, ungraspable event. (2001: 227-228)

While this highlights what is at stake in witness discourse, I find the demand for public performance of ‘conceptual revolution’ within the survivor questionable. This reflects

a demand for visible restoration for the benefit of the spectator, perhaps to make extreme trauma comprehensible and resolvable. But nonetheless, it renders healing or restoration through voice as another burden, one to be borne as public responsibility. While there are differences in giving public testimony in trial, and in documentary film where one speaks without being watched in the moment (or at least watched by a small film crew), there are elements of agency, desire to speak, self-spectatorship, loss of boundaries, and fear, in both contexts.

Furthermore, despite Felman's insistence on the public voicing of traumatic narratives, it is the testimony of the writer and survivor Ka-Tzetnik 135633 that she details. Ka-Tzetnik 135633 was speaker who was ultimately unable to bear witness at trial, due to falling unconscious shortly into his testimony. Ka-Tzetnik 135633,⁷⁰ a previously anonymous writer whose (non-camp) identity was revealed for the first time at this trial, wrote in the third person about the camps, in a hybrid style that was not fully memoir, but not fiction either (Popkin, 2002: 345). He could write, but he could not translate this to giving voice. It is when he begins to recount something specific in the first person ("*I remember*" he whispers), as a result of the increasingly forceful prompting of the judges, that he falls to the floor unconscious.

The mute witness is elevated as the ultimate truth sign. Far from undermining the authenticity of his words, muteness validates both his limited oral testimony and his written work as authentic. This event also highlights the risk involved in bearing witness. The vocal struggle to translate the trauma into a new event is dangerous, not only in risking a numbing or collective imprisonment in the re-telling of the event, as Arendt would have it, but in the occurrence of a physiological response so extreme the body shuts off completely.

Felman highlights a loneliness in being witness, which needs to be 'broken down' in order for the person to speak. If this reignites trauma it doesn't seem to matter; 'And yet, the *appointment* to bear witness is, paradoxically enough, an appointment to transgress the confines of that isolated stance, to speak *for* others and *to* others' (1991: 15). In this way, forcing the subject to speak is framed as for their own good, and as a relation to others. In this vein, Felman (2000) describes the allowance of silence as complicity. This is an 'an alliance with the silence of the

⁷⁰ Ka-Tzetnik was slang for concentration camp prisoner, and 135633 his prisoner number. It is his testimony at this trial which reveals his 'true' other name. Prior to this he is anonymous, refusing to speak publicly, and disallowing his image from appearing on his books (Popkin, 2002: 343).

witness, the kind of empathic and benevolent alliance through which interviewer and interviewee often implicitly concur, and work together, for the mutual comfort of an avoidance of the truth' (2000, 118-119). From this standpoint, not only is an element of coercion considered acceptable, it is the responsibility of the director to do so. Further, in this context silence is considered as form of 'deadness'; breaking the silence of the other is thus breaking their deadness, even if this resulting form of living is that of pain (ibid., 119).

It is pertinent to note here that I have used no examples from Holocaust testimony involving sex work. This absence complicates the discourse around transformational testimony and ruptured unspeakability, because sex work in the under National Socialism did remain unspeakable, and remains so, given there is now no first person witnesses to speak of it. This is not because sex work was absent. On the contrary, under National Socialism tens of thousands of sex workers were sent to concentration camps (Harris, 2010); brothels were established in concentration camps for the use of non-Jewish prisoners (Sommer, 2009); within Germany brothels were institutionalised for use of German soldiers (Heineman, 2002); and complex systems of sexual barter emerged in the Jewish ghettos⁷¹ (Hájková, 2013). This abundance of sex work related practices and oppressions make the absence of first person accounts all the more stark.

Absence of first person witnessing is a problem when considering testimony of deviant voices. In this sense, it must be emphasised that while trauma and shame may induce silences, fear of voicing these experiences is not unwarranted. The gap in voices speaking to the above means there is no testimony, and without this, there can be no translation: no transformative event. There is no speaking subject, not even someone to fall into silence on the witness stand. This absence also hails a critical difference between the unspeaking body as a form of testimony in itself, as evident in Ka-Tzetnic 135633, and Jason for example, and silence which is invisible, and which not allow for language, or its withdrawal, as a liberatory demand. This absence is the difference between silence which is desired, and that which is not, acknowledging also that there is interplay between these positions.

In recognising this, I question if I could have begun recording *The Proxy* with

⁷¹ Anna Hájková, provides a deservedly complex breakdown of the forms of sexual economy in the ghetto, steering the reader away from 'prostitution' to more precise terms of 'sexual barter', 'instrumental sex' and 'rational relationships' (Hájková, 2013: 505).

a video camera instead of audio equipment, and stepped into the role of a ruthless director, able to break the subject, myself, down. But as I will examine below, these are not methods I am able to wield, or for which I find compelling evidence of ethical validity. However, taking my above exploration of unspeakability and testimony into account, I now undertake a comparative analysis between absence of voice in *The Proxy*, and my giving of voice in *Three Gifts*, asking how the threshold between writing and voice was able to be crossed.

4.8 Strategies of self-narrative, safety and vocal excess in practice.

Chapter 3 laid out my experiences of eroding my own face image while editing, which produced a kind of shock and recoil, but it is pertinent to note that I did not find it difficult to write about. In contrast, researching the voice, even in general terms, has continually brought my own experiences to the surface and this chapter has proved challenging to write in ways other areas of my thesis have not. This came to a head in *The Proxy* script I could not move forward and record. Even then, I recognised that my different video scripts were not equally unspeakable. Further, the objectively coercive experiences behind *Three Gifts* were not the most challenging to speak aloud. *The Proxy* thus took me by surprise. Examining this difference between pieces of practice, it has been helpful to take the processes of making apart, and pulling different threads of voice/power into conversation.

I note that while *Three Gifts* began with the visual recording, it cannot exist as a purely visual record. It does require voice. In fact, I did produce a shortened version without any voice (or text), and this unhitching was stark and played into the prostitute imaginary. I would not put it out for viewing without a vocal and/or subtitle track, because the body image in this video cannot be understood in isolation, without risking fetishisation. The video needs the voice to ‘see’ it.

As outlined in the previous chapter, *Three Gifts* is a scripted work of experimental ethnography/documentary with audio recorded separately from the image track. It uses transactional objects and narrative as a means of discussing self-perception, boundaries and mostly non-specified trauma in the context of a specific sex worker-client relationship. Considering then, why I could voice the script for *Three Gifts*, despite its subject matter possessing greater trauma than my *Proxy* script, I looked for differences and gaps between them. Six years had passed between events and recording, and in writing the script for *Three Gifts* I had been able to construct a

more distanced narrative of the self. For *The Proxy*, the interval of time was about six months. However, several years after initially attempting to audio record the work, I still feel a barrier to speaking it to camera.

I questioned whether it was true that I needed an authoritative voice of another to cut through my resistance; whether I *needed* an element of transference in order to speak. I questioned whether I could, or should, play this role myself. How can I coax my own voice out? And should I? Does this coaxing require a ‘collusion’ with myself, or another? To do ‘violence’ through telling, even to myself? I have language for telling, it is the voice which resists. Fundamentally, I cannot play the persecutory analyst evident in *Portrait of Jason* for example, even if I wanted to, and in examining my own practice and the case studies here I realised that I had held this as a kind of self-critique even though I find it unethically in many instances. Instead, I want to lean into and examine the ‘softer’, connective, and embodied practices of facilitating difficult voice that I have found emergent in my practice.

Firstly, the recording of *Three Gifts* began with the moving body. While I had written the script, I recorded the voice monologue separately after filming the image track. The movement on camera is important to the speakability of the piece. This is a key differentiation from *The Proxy*; my body was performing a kind of testimony, a public act of transformation and witnessing that required being both seen, and felt, by me.

Secondly, this moving repetition extended out into the act of editing the footage, itself also an act of repetitive body movement, where my movements echoed beyond the initial recording of the image. Moving, watching the moving image back, and moving my own body in the process of editing, changed my relationship with the image and voice. Both my moving body, and the moving body *image* on video facilitate voice in this instance, even though the voice came after. There are two interventions in terms of embodiment and difficult voice here. Firstly, by beginning with embodied/physical remembering, which not just a representational image but a visceral translation of events, there was an entry point for the voice to follow later. Secondly, it is not just movement of the body, but watching the images of this movement, and editing them, which is physically and repetitively in engaging with them, my relation to the event changed. This is a testimonial event, enabled by the ‘speaking’ body.

There is a further critical aspect to the voice in this video; namely, it is not solely my own, but interweaves with another. The monologue was recorded with both myself and a colleague, together. I would read segments aloud, then she would. I edited these recordings so that we both took on the same role and both speak more or less equally. My initial intention was to produce uncertainty of recognition of who was speaking; a grey zone of anonymity. This collapse of identity has confused several viewers, while others did not pick out that there were two voices at all. But the significance of this vocal strategy lies outside of anonymity. Rather, it is that we began to mirror each other, each casting out words for the other to receive and give back. The more we recorded the script, the more similar our voices became, mimicking the tone and pace of the other, lessening our accents. This was not a spoken decision, and is more than a form of solidarity, or softening of individual voice markers alone. Rather, this mingling of voices also became a hybrid form of proxy. I name this hybrid because it is partial, but the partiality allows the original voice to also be expressed. This proxy facilitates a co-existence of one more fragile voice within another. I am my voice, but I am also not my voice. This form of proxy takes the idea of the collective voice, and reorientates it, in order for individual expression to co-exist within it.

The lessons from the making of this work are therefore multiple, and not to be found in a list of particular strategies to free a reclusive or ‘stuck’ voice of the sex worker, for these strategies are fundamentally adaptive and contingent. The strategies above would not play out the same even across my own videos. But the vocal aspects of practice have revealed how difficult it can be to give voice, even in contexts where one has complete control over how and what is said. Engaging with the complexities of voice and silence in my own practice has shown how difficult it is to navigate boundaries, and conflicts between wanting to speak but fearing it also. Searching for examples of how rupturing voice can be navigated with others rather than as a solitary endeavour, and without demanding violence, I have found the documentary *Taking a Part* a useful case study, which I analyse below.

4.9 Voice magic: *Taking A Part*, and the estranged voice as proxy

Taking the lessons of absent and obstructed testimony above, particularly the expectation of public performance of trauma, and the precarity and necessity of giving voice as a sex worker, I turn to a work of documentary counter cinema where

testimony and power moves differently. In doing so I recognise I am exploring the voice across different subject positions, with different limitations of agency within the documentary, but that this agency is critically interlinked with how the unspeakable can be transformed into voice, and silences defended. Jan Worth's *Taking A Part* (1979) was developed in close relationship with two working-class sex workers Lucy and Debbie. It demonstrates a collaborative and premeditated voice of the sex worker. It was released by the British Film Institute in 2013 as a bonus film accompanying a release of Tony Garnett's *Prostitute* (1980), rather than a release in its own right. The disappearance of *Taking a Part* into the archive for so long is significant, as it is an important work both in terms of feminist counter cinema strategies, and that the narrative was driven by sex workers themselves. The documentary counters the rhetorical silencing of sex workers at a time when the sex wars were just beginning, and in addition has an implicit critique of capitalism, and both these elements mark the film as a marginal work.

Taking A Part is a participatory work. Both Lucy and Debbie wrote their own script, based on several months recorded conversations with Worth (Worth, 1980), which they then speak directly to camera. There is no attempt at spontaneous disclosure or 'naturalistic' voice. The film is not an observational work, and Worth makes her methodology clear throughout the film itself. Nor does the scripted approach to speech negate documentary status, although it is a subversion of who usually is assigned scripted roles in documentary.

Worth's primary concern with the voice was how it can be used to reveal invisibilised structures of power rather than naturalise them (1980: 113). Voice was used to produce a disruption of verisimilitude in order to provoke a double take. Estrangement of the voice was considered key to producing a critical spectatorship. But I argue that Worth's treatment of the voice is also significant with regard to trauma and stigma, where distancing the audience from the speaker also takes on a protective element. While there is an oscillation throughout *Taking a Part* between scripted and 'natural' speech, the experiences of trauma are always voiced in a controlled, pre-planned way.

The 'natural' voice is undermined further by the audibility of the apparatus, including speakers clapping for sound synchronisation and Worth's off-screen voice giving direction. Close-ups of the notebooks compound the presence of the apparatus; handwriting is annotated, crossed out and highlighted. The voice is thus shown as

process. It is something that is made, not found, something that can be folded in on itself and contradicted, erased, and above all difficult and prone to restraint. In addition, the audible and visible presence of the documentary apparatus suggests the voice itself is mediated. Despite similarities with *Portrait of Jason* in this sense, the performativity of the voice is treated very differently. While there is the occasional voice that appears unscripted in *Taking a Part*, for example in descriptions of giving birth and attempts to access social housing, the voice still appears considered and in control of itself.

Although there are cut-away shots in this film, they tend to come between sequences of speech, rather than parallel. This draws attention to the voice and its production. The cut away sequences are not unrelated to the narrative as a whole, but they are not images of sex work. Instead, the cut away shots revolve around aspirational capital, and material needs.

The following shot is typical of the film. Sitting in a bare room sex worker Debbie reads aloud from a notebook (fig. 4.3), looking at the book as she reads, pausing every now and then to look at the camera. The framing is a medium shot and lasts for an extraordinary five minutes without cuts. When she speaks there is a complete absence of the interjections of the voice, such as ‘ums’ and ‘huh’, as well as clicking and coughs, exemplifying the use of the film apparatus to create a voice detached from the body.



Figure 4.3: video still, *Taking a Part*



Figure 4.4: video still, *Taking a Part*

The intersection of estranged voice with an account of trauma is exemplified in a scene where Lucy sits in an armchair and reads aloud from her journal. It is not a straight-on camera angle but shot slightly from behind. Although it is seen in other sequences (fig. 4.4), little of her face is seen here. She describes a physically and emotionally abusive ex-boyfriend and her moment of retaliation and realisation that she ‘didn’t have to take it’. This retaliation includes throwing a glass at him and splitting his head open, a violent act and an emotional breakthrough. Yet her voice remains steady and matter of fact. It is this gap between voice and words which is important to unpick in terms of speaking to violence, particularly from a place of fragile agency. Worth herself was aware of how fraught the estranged voice can be. She describes the ‘natural’ voice as ‘a voice with life’ (cited in Brown, Harvey, & Worth, 1983: 52) and notes pushback in her subsequent work *Doll’s Eye* (1980) when she attempted to denaturalise it further.⁷² I argue that the voice ‘without life’ is a withheld voice; it has life which is not shared or made available to the spectator. The scripted voice counters the drive for total knowledge of the sex worker’s interior world, and it set boundaries on exposure.

This boundary continues in the presence of the documentary apparatus itself. Technologies of voice production and spectatorship are visible and audible.⁷³ By this

⁷²*Doll’s Eye* was another work of feminist counter-cinema concerning sex work, incorporating documentary elements but using actors in some sequences as well. More radical in form and content than *Taking a Part*, it remains accessible only in archives. I viewed this in the BFI archive, London.

⁷³ By disrupting the gaze, or its aural equivalent, the prostitute imaginary is interrupted. But critically, this is not enough by itself to shift collective imagery – the apparatus is also evident in *Portrait of Jason*

I include microphones and voices of direction, but also notebooks the participants read from. Specifically, the visibility of the script signals self-direction has been afforded to the speakers, and that the narrative is a result of process of coming to language. This process is evidenced by the close up on the notebooks where words have been crossed out. The participants have not been pushed to spontaneously speak, but they are able to give voice to their feelings on their own terms. I contend this is, to reach back to the work of Lorde, a 'revolutionary demand' (1984: 38).

Producing visible and audible boundaries in this way hinders perception of the sex worker voice as something which should be freely available for consumption, and that voicing of sex work trauma is owed, even in the pursuit of social justice. This boundary making can itself facilitate giving voice to difficult or unspeakable subjects, in the establishment of boundaries, and changing the relation of power within the documentary apparatus. This is not something to be taken for granted, as I will address in my final chapter, sex worker limits and agency continues to be eroded in contemporary documentary practice.

4.10. Conclusion

This chapter began as a means to map and challenge understandings of the voice as technology of power within documentary film, specifically the voice of vulnerable subjects or those with fragile agency. I have been struck by recognition of how tenuous this power is. At times during writing I thought the voice unimaginably powerful, and yet at other points I saw this power submitting to the voices of others. These two conflicting perceptions of power could bounce off each other in quick succession. It has been through tracing this movement of power, through post-colonial feminist scholarship, case studies, and my own silences and voice in practice, that new knowledge has been produced.

My research affirms the potential for the voice of the marginalised to signify a coming into power. But the sex worker voice in documentary only sometimes reflects this possession, and is subject to compulsion to speak by both violent and subtle means. Nonetheless, I have found that sex workers deploy strategies to hide themselves within the voice, to deflect and to trouble the drive to be unmasked through

to a lesser degree, but does not have the same effect. Wider operations of power playing out in the film influence how the apparatus is able to be decoded by the spectator.

the voice. This is a form of boundary production, which can enable the very conditions which make giving voice possible. This chapter contains several interventions into how power should be understood in relation to the sex worker voice.

Firstly, giving voice is not always an expression or signifier of power, but rather of submission. While the voice is located within a discourse which equates voice with inhabiting or moving into a space of power, giving voice in this context can also result from a sub-conscious or conscious need to comply, as well as outright coercion. Similarly, silence is not inherently a signifier of dispossession. Silence is a form of power, but one that is also fragile, co-optable, and can co-exist with a silence arising from rupture.

Secondly, giving voice in the context of trauma is idealised, and at times demanded, but it is not always transformational. While I look toward a practice of documentary that does not hinge on a violent rendering of voice, including the rendering of silence, in examining my own documentary practice as well as scholarship on witnessing, I recognise that bearing witness is not a solitary act. It requires someone to send the voice out to. It may require someone who will send it back - not simply a passive listener – and that is fraught with danger as well as possibilities. While testimony has been considered a transformative act which breaks the isolation of the individual, this is also the very source of risk for the closeted or marginalised subject.

Third, the stigmatised speaking voice can be fugitive, oppositional, forced and connective, all at once. While the voice has been considered a marker of power, and as entry to true ‘vision’ of a person, it is necessary to also think of it as something to be heard and felt even when coded, fugitive or partial. This co-existence is a strength of the voice. Where the voices in *Taking a Part* are generous, and even intimate despite the bounded way of speaking, Jason refuses to tell everything that is demanded of them, they refuse to be saved through enunciation or decipherability, and yet they continue to give voice. These voices remain magical, even when emerging from violence, or a vocal apparatus ‘without life’.

Fourth, the risks of giving voice, and barriers to speaking, can be countered by connectivity and softness. While my own practice revealed absence of voice as a complex problem, it also offered a different way of thinking about points of entry to voice. This requires a rethinking of the voice/body dichotomy, but it also demands a reconsideration of individual/multiple or collective voice. In this vein, my practice

has also facilitated an intervention on the production and limits of ‘individual’ voice. I have found ambiguous bleeding between different voices produce a ‘hybrid’, connective proxy which is particularly useful in respect to trauma. The key aspects to this form of proxy, as opposed to the face proxy I proposed in Chapter 3, is that it was a true proxy; facilitating a voice with power, which is also one of solidarity.

While the above lessons highlight the fragility of the notion that the very presence of voice equals power, and is a means of entry to power, my findings also demonstrate that sex worker collaborative practices of giving voice offer viable strategies for rendering the unspeakable able to be spoken. This is a shift away from disciplinary rupture provoked by exterior agents such as directors, towards a connective or partial proxy. What remains is the question of power and the voice where obstructions to speaking is the need for anonymity. Moving forward, it is necessary to apply these lessons to sex worker voices that are further complicated by strategies of identity protections. This includes distortion of the voice, as well as separation of voice from body. Although this thesis has been focused on representational problems in sex worker documentary, in terms of rhetorical silencing and the furthering of violence and marginalisation, this leaves a big gap, namely: that strategies of anonymisation are prone to failure. Not only is the voice itself deeply implicated in this failure, it also feeds back into further representational conflicts. In the following chapter, I make an intervention of how anonymity should be understood. I question what it means in practice, mapping out its limits, and grey-zones where power nonetheless inhabits.

Chapter 5. Anonymity, power and the vocalic body: practices of vocal distortion and dis/embodiment

5.1 Introduction

This chapter explores strategies and representations of the voice where the speaker is trying to hide their identity. I focus on two primary strategies of vocal anonymity: distortion, and disembodiment, or the visual separation of the voice from the body from which it originates. There is some crossover between these approaches. Because these methods are used to counter silencing and facilitate sex worker voice in documentary, it is important to address not only the efficacy of their use, but what the resulting representation does, particularly in terms of rhetorical silencing, abjection, the prostitute imaginary, and power. In Chapter 3 I found that facial obfuscations not only act as vectors of abjection, but that they can be used as a proxy in the co-option of the sex worker voice. However, voice and facial distortions, while intersecting in terms of abjection, also operate differently in how they obscure recognition, as well as in representational terms.

As foregrounded in my thesis introduction, as a film maker I had deemed representational problems of anonymity so great that I simply withdrew from projects which might call for the obstruction of identity. As both spectator and sex worker, I have found acoustic manifestations of distortion difficult to bear, more so than the blurred face alone. I experience a visceral reaction to hearing distorted voices, so far from *themselves*, not as performance but as if it has been harmed. At the same time, in my own distorted voice, I fear it to be an indicator of a true interior state, projected back onto myself, despite knowing objectively the infidelity belongs to the documentary apparatus, not the speaker, nor any insider spectators. While this reflects the capacity for distortion to reflect back whatever exterior forces made it necessary in the first place, it also illustrates representational bleed and the ease at which stigma moves through representation.

I began this thesis because I saw in my own video practice that so much sex worker testimony was absented by my decision to bypass my representational aversions and only film with those who were already out as sex workers. Not everyone is able to reveal themselves, even if they desire to do so. It should be acknowledged that silences can have multiple causes. As illustrated in my previous chapter, gaps in

sex worker testimony are not only about anonymity, but also approaches to the ‘unspeakable’ and trauma. As this chapter will demonstrate, these issues are not entirely separate. Anonymity does not remove trauma from the equation, even if it is part of what allows it to be spoken, rather, as my research shows in this chapter, there can be a kind of cohabitation. This union makes the power of giving voice as a sex worker more complex, and vulnerable to visual representations that are moving alongside the voice. Power plays out in complex ways in the sex worker voice, as voice is itself a marker of power, means of exerting authority and conversely form of submission. This power shifts again in the anonymised voice, and it is this movement that concerns me here.

The interventions of this chapter hinge on twin failures. The first failure is that of disembodiment. I argue that the voice which is cut from the body is not really without a body; the body can be imagined, or substituted. This has been argued by scholar Steven Connor in his work on vocalic bodies, which I detail below, but my intervention concerns what this ‘failed’ disembodiment does in the context of anonymity and marginalised subjects. This is a speaker who is subject to abjection, and already hallucinated even before the voice and body are desynchronised. This is also the case for the distorted voice, which I will contend is a form of wounded, and likewise failed disembodiment.

Secondly, the work that the disembodied voice is meant to be doing in terms of anonymity, whether distorted or intact, fails. As examined in the previous chapter, some experiences, thoughts, or desires may remain unspeakable regardless of identity protection. But in other cases the promise of identity protection is enough to open out silences and facilitate participation in documentary. This makes it all the more important that the volatility of practices of anonymity are addressed.

In order to address the problems of representation, anonymity, and power above I first examine how voice recognition works, so that the mechanisms and failures of anonymisation strategies in documentary film can be fully understood, and weighed in relation to representational concerns. I begin this chapter therefore with a mapping of neuroscientific investigations into how voice perception operates, which changes how the very possibility of anonymity should be understood. While I began this area of my research focused on identity recognition, I quickly found that representational concerns were interlinked. The desire and perceptual drive toward speaker recognition impacts how subjects on screen are seen and heard. I use this

research as entry into a different way of thinking about anonymity, and of vocalic bodies; bodies that the listener conjures from a voice they can hear but not 'see'.

With the instability of anonymity and disembodiment mapped out, I will use a series of documentary case studies to build nuanced analysis of the possibilities, dangers and limits of the disembodied sex worker voice, arguing that while power is vulnerable and tenuous in this use, there are routes to safety and connection also. I will begin my case studies with *The Prostitutes of Lyon Speak* (Carole Roussopoulos, 1975), an early work of video activism where sex workers spoke directly to camera, and where they had to construct strategies of anonymity together during filming itself. This is a complex work which allows a nuanced investigation of how power moves in the intersections of narratives of trauma, social abjection and the 'unseeable' voice/body. This documentary is also a clear demonstration of how strategies of anonymity make it possible for difficult and marginalised testimony to be voiced. *The Prostitutes of Lyon Speak* is important not only in demonstrating speech in the context of material danger to the speakers, but in its different strategies of disembodiment. Arguing that documentary disembodiment has a variety of manifestations, I define and examine two different forms at play within *The Prostitutes of Lyon Speak*, which I term the partial, and the void. I contend that despite amplifications of abjection in the latter approach, the video remains a work of collective power.

Meanwhile, in *All That Sheltering Emptiness* (Matilda Bernstein Sycamore & Joey Carducci, 2010) trauma plays out in a very different kind of disembodiment, drawing the spectator into an intimate proximity with the speakers voice, and with violence against sex workers precisely because there is no body to be seen. With this film I illustrate how power and agency can be amplified through the disembodied voice and recruited to complicate the prostitute imaginary.

I then return to *Happy Endings?* (Tara Hurley, 2009) in Chapter 3, significant in that it recruits heavy vocal distortion alongside stark visual strategies. With this analysis I make the case for voice distortion as form of wound, and extreme, failed disembodiment, illustrating how the vocalic body called forth by distortion is produced. I also use this documentary to unpick my resistance to vocal obfuscation, asking what it is about dissimulation of the voice that I perceive as so catastrophic. This includes a mapping of pleasure and 'infidelity' of the recorded voice, in which I rethink the relation between the stigmatised voice, body, and the documentary

apparatus, arguing that the technologies of anonymity and film are implicated in furthering the prostitute imaginary.

The sheer extremity of *Happy Endings?* makes it a useful piece for intervention, but for this reason I also undertake a contrasting case study of documentary animation *To Survive to Live* (Juno Mac & SWARM, 2018). This is an example of a sex worker led practice of voice distortion, and uses a notably light vocal manipulation. However, it is also an illustration of a resulting protection of identity that is partial. With this video, I draw out the struggle between affect and anonymity, which sex workers themselves engage with in order to speak, and on their own terms. This circles back to the risks of recognition, and the wealth of information which the voice casts out.

5.2 The science of voice perception: the voice reveals an origin, both real and imagined

While I began this research with the belief that strategies of anonymity were somewhat unreliable, I was uncertain as to the extent, or why this was the case. I believed vocal distortion was significantly more protective than disembodiment, but even that belief was lost when I began working on the final case study of this chapter. Initially concerned more with affect than the practicalities in the provision of anonymity, this concern was based on the assumption that identities were largely being protected. The idea that anonymity was not being achieved despite attempts to do so felt like a visceral loss, one which I needed to more fully understand in order to address the ethics of facilitating marginalised voices. While there is a lack of research within the fields of film theory and practice that considers the workings and limits of voice modification and recognition, speaker recognition and voice perception is studied in the fields of neuro-science. Bringing these fields of research into conversation provides insight into the weaknesses of methods of anonymity in film, in terms of disembodiment and distortion, as well as concomitant limits of communication. This intersectional approach also assists in mapping the extent of what is lost in attempts to hide the voice.

Neuroscientific research paints a picture of the voice as being exceptionally giving in terms of identity markers, and the ear as being incredibly perceptive. The identificatory information that is able to be gleaned, or at least interpreted from the voice is extensive. Humans have advanced capacity for speaker recognition. Neuro-

scientists Pascal Belin and Marianne Latinus (2011) for example suggest that in only a matter of seconds, without seeing the speaker, listeners can describe their age, gender and weight to a high degree of accuracy (2011: 143). The voice is read for markers of the body both general and specific, and while I argue that this is not enough alone to provide recognition in a work of documentary, because a person is more than a set of corporeal coordinates, these markers do contribute to a bigger map of who might be speaking, and this may be enough to allow that recognition. I add that Belin and Latinus, like the other neuro-scientists examined below, do not address questions of gender non-conforming or transgender voices, nor do they address how performativity may impact recognition. Despite this gap in research, their work does illustrate just how much there is to modify in the voice, how many signifiers there are in the voice (and even if they are floating signifiers), particularly when met with a drive for recognition.

Models of voice production help illustrate just how many identity markers would need to be eroded in some way to completely render the speaker unrecognisable. There are multiple models of voice production; the thread binding them is that the voice is a result of a complex interplay of organs and air within the body, and possesses multiple attributes of that unique interplay. In the source-filter model proposed by Samuel Mathias and Katharina von Kriegstein (2014) for example, there are two primary building blocks of the voice. The first, the source, is the speaker's fundamental vocal frequency, namely: the perceived vocal pitch which is determined by the rate of vibration of vocal folds. The second element, or filter, is determined by the lips and vocal tract, filters which also modify the waveform, including the peaks of acoustic frequencies (2014: 93). These peaks are highly variable even within the same speaker. In addition, the voice can be read for identifying features such as breathiness, tension, creakiness, harshness and falsetto (2014: 94). From a film point of view, it is noteworthy that some of these elements are not easily modified or removed in documentary post-production, particularly if the spectator's pleasure of listening is to be retained. This is not only about authenticity of the speaking subject, but also aural pleasures in general – looking back to my documentary *Common Life* (2011) about sex work in Turkey, my strongest memory is a particular laugh of one of the sex workers in one of the interviews. I remember the way her voice carried humour and joy as she critiqued a violent government. I can even recall the sound of cigarette smoke in her voice, and the sound of traffic below

on the street which met her voice. All this finer detail would have been destroyed by attempts to anonymise the voice.

In the context of police violence and stigma it was especially important to me that this speaker sounded like herself. But I highlight that ‘undistorted’ recordings are not without interventions. Recording the voice can alter how the interplay of body/breath/voice sounds, amplifying hisses and clicks for example, or making it sound slightly metallic. During my Masters of Documentary Practice, I was shown to reduce these unintentional distortions during recording, so that the voice sounded not only clear and audible, but rich with vocal depth – essentially possessing all the elements of voice models above. I was also to remove ‘excess’ signs of the body in the voice in post-production, such as swallowing and breathiness, because the line between too much and not enough body is fine, and the spectator is attuned to vocal nuance. There was no formula or model for this kind of editing, we simply felt, or more precisely, listened, our way through.

I use this example to contend that while documentary practice does engage with the intricacies of voice perception, it tends to do so intuitively, which is fine when not attempting identity protection. Secondly, I emphasise that the recorded voice is always altered in some way by recording, and in editing, but that when not deliberately distorted should be considered *more or less* intact, with all its aural signifiers still in place. This is at least the aim, and what I mean when I use the term ‘intact voice’ throughout this thesis; the intervention of recording aspires to be inaudible.

The discussion of voice recognition above, highlighting the skill, drive, and speed at which voice is read for speaker identity, assumes the voice is heard as an intact disembodiment and not distorted. But research on recognition of degraded or altered voice recordings also finds remarkable skill in voice recognition. And critically, in terms of implications for documentary practice, the research builds a picture of multiplicity. Yizhar Lavner, Isak Gath and Judith Rosenhouse (2001), put forward the thesis that voice recognition is based on how far a voice deviates from vocal prototypes of known people (2001: 63). Applying this to film, I note that this idea is at play in anonymising strategies which pushes out pitch shifts as far as possible from original recordings. But Lavner, Gath and Rosenhouse also argue that while modification of both fundamental frequency and acoustic peaks (also referred to as formant frequencies) are the most effective means of interrupting speaker recognition, there is no singular technique which prevents voice recognition in all cases. This is

because more than one element of the voice is used to recognise who is speaking (Lavner et al., 2001: 73). They argue that listeners can identify familiar speakers even when their voices have been modified through the creation of hybrid voice, modification of speed and rhythm (Lavner et al., 2001: 63). Pitch alteration, which is common in documentary voice modification for example, works on just one element of voice.

Samuel Mathias and Katharina von Kriegstein expand on this complexity of recognition, arguing that identification cues depend on the individual voice in question as well as the context in which the voice is heard;

...there is no canonical, closed set of cues along which familiar speakers are defined and recognised. Instead, [results] suggest that familiar-speaker recognition is a highly stimulus- and speaker-contingent process (2015: 96).

Indeed, not only do they argue that there is no set formula for voice recognition, which means there is no set model of vocal anonymity possible, but they emphasise the human capacity to work with gaps and missing pieces of voice, including eroded recordings (Mathias and Kriegstein, 2015: 92). This is a fundamentally adaptive model of voice perception. There are two implications for documentary here; firstly, it means an individual approach needs to be taken in any serious work of anonymisation. This would require an editor to take the time to map each voice's more distinctive features, and modify accordingly. Secondly, context, is critical. I propose that this contingent aspect of voice recognition is especially important in documentary practice, where contextual clues may be provided in the visual track, or in the wider film itself. There is instability here too, as it is possible the subject of sex work may actually be so far from a perceived view of a friend or family member that recognition is hindered. Nonetheless, taking this adaptability of perception in combination with the multiple, interwoven, and rich strands of identificatory elements of the voice, it is clear that documentary filmmakers have a big problem in producing anonymity.

There are several key takeaways for documentary practice. Firstly, that voice resists anonymity, or more accurately, the voice gives up its secrets to an ear which is exceedingly skilled at finding them out. Secondly, the eroded or otherwise modified voice cannot be assumed to be less recognisable than the non-distorted or intact voice – at least not significantly so. Simple pitch alteration likewise falls far short of what

is needed to keep identity secret, because this is but one strand of voice recognition, and pitch is but one aspect of a voice's unique elements.

Thirdly, while listeners do not need the face or body to assist with voice recognition, there is nonetheless a drive to imagine one. Where the body is unseen, the voice is used to glean a wealth of information about the body of the voice, and this is relatively accurate.

While I have so far been concerned with the impact of voice perception on anonymity, it has wider implications. An equally important aspect, in terms of spectatorship of stigmatised and abject subjects, is the resulting drive to imagine the body itself, because this where anonymity crosses into the prostitute imaginary. In fact, it is not only the missing body that comes into play, but all the gaps, obstructions, diegetic and wider social contexts that the spectator must adaptively recruit in order to interpret what is now missing.

5.3 Auditory faces and vocalic bodies: the prostitute imaginary and relations of power in the disembodied Voice

In the section above I touched upon the separation of voice from visible face, but I did not address this in wider terms of spectatorship, nor sex work specifically. As illustrated in chapters 2 and 3, the sex worker face is site of heightened scrutiny, and part of the prostitute imaginary. The separation of sex worker voice from the body needs to be addressed in terms of both identity protection, and the representational. While the voice alone provides fertile ground for speaker recognition, the relationship between voice and face is a contributing factor. In their seminal paper on understanding voice perception, Pascal Belin, Patricia Bestelmeyer, Marianne Latinus and Rebecca Watson argue that not only are there parallels in how we process the voice and face (Belin et al., 2011: 712), and not only do processes of voice analysis interact with and inform our analysis of the face (ibid.), but the voice is described as an 'auditory face'

Face and voice signals, despite the different nature of their physical structure (light reflections hitting the retina in the eye vs. pressure waves inducing vibrations of the basilar membrane in the ear), carry highly similar types of socially relevant information. Both contain linguistic information (phonemes for voice, viseme for faces, i.e.,

representational units used to classify speech sounds in the visual domain) but also relevant information on a range of personal biological characteristics (gender, age, size, identity, affective state, fitness. . .). From this angle, the voice can be considered as an ‘auditory face.’ (Belin et al., 2011: 711)

In other words the voice provides all the information that a face does, including affective markers of emotional states, and specific biological markers of individual identity. For documentary, this means that if both the visible, physical face, and auditory, vocal ‘face’ are present, the spectator is able to read both for convergences and conflicts in meaning or information. It may well be that a dissonance is perceived. But even without a face, the voice provides one; indeed, the voice is one. The auditory face evokes not only the emotional interior of the speaker, but a body, because it is read for gender, age, identity and corporeal signifiers. For example, if a voice sounds like it is crying, the listener can imagine a face with tears.

In the context of film, the concept of the vocalic body comes closest to theories of neuro-science’s auditory face. Where there is no body to be seen on screen at all, or only partial bodies, film scholar Steven Connor argues we fill this gap with an imagined body. But where the field of neuroscience emphasises processes of recognition, information gathering and accuracy in interpretation, Connor argues that the vocalic body emerges from a space of projection and fantasy.

Voices are produced by bodies: but can also themselves produce bodies. The vocalic body is the idea—which can take the form of dream, fantasy, ideal, theological doctrine, or hallucination—of a surrogate or secondary body, a projection of a new way of having or being a body, formed and sustained out of the autonomous operations of the voice. (2000: 35)

The intersection between the auditory face and the vocalic body is particularly pertinent in documentary film which attempts to disconnect voice and face. In fact the auditory face and the vocalic body are not different concepts, in the sense that both are based on the premise that we use the voice to imagine the physical embodiment of the speaker. Where theories of the auditory face and vocalic body differ is in the accuracy of that embodiment. Connor takes into account the effect of the cinematic apparatus on the voice and how it imbues the auditory face with fantasy. He is not

theorising in the context of documentary but in fictional film, which has different claims in regard to the real. This does not render Connor's work irrelevant, but I contend that the impetus toward accessing 'true' knowledge of a closeted documentary subject complicates both auditory face and the vocalic body models. Where the face is absent or obscured, the documentary spectator is able to determine a wealth of information about the speaker, and may even be able to recognise the speaker, but particularly where the prostitute imaginary is at play, there may also be a significant amount of 'hallucination'.

Auditory bodies have implications for both the distorted voice, and the disembodied voice which is otherwise left intact. Both of these voices are vulnerable to a negative or abject auditory, vocalic face because of the diegetic and wider social context in which they speak.

5.4 Power and powerlessness in the disembodied sex worker voice

At stake is the role of abjection and the prostitute imaginary in the production of vocalic bodies. An analysis of the intersections of power and disembodiment more generally is necessary, before I can move on to sex worker representations more specifically. As introduced in my discussions of voice and power in the previous chapter, the 'voice of god', notably a disembodied voice, has been understood as signifying ultimate power. This association is continued in the work of film scholar Michael Chion (1999), who argues that the voice without a visible body of origin is imbued with god-like power (1999: 24). This power is four-fold; 'ubiquity, panopticism, omniscience, and omnipotence' (ibid.). This is predicated on the speaker seeing, and knowing all. Chion notes this disembodied voice is a kind of 'panoptic fantasy', whereby vision holds complete mastery (ibid.), and where the person who holds this vision is themselves invisible. Because the spectator is denied vision of the speaker, the unseen voice assumes power. Chion terms this powerful off-screen voice the acousmatic voice, adding; it is 'usually malevolent, occasionally tutelary' (1999: 23). But even this occasional protectiveness amongst the more common ill-intended voice should be differentiated from other authoritative off-screen voices, such as those narrating a documentary for example. Likewise, unseen voices simply meant to be heard at a distance but are at other times visible are not acousmatic. Those voices may possess knowledge that the spectator does not, but the acousmatic voice is linked to knowledge withheld from the audience, and assumes mastery. It involves the spectator

and speaker in a dynamic of power, and this struggle plays out in the course of the film, culminating with the revelation of the speaker. For example, the ex-client in *Klute* (1971) who has been stalking sex worker Bree with voice recordings finally makes himself known and visible at the end in order to attempt to kill her. In contrast, only sometimes does the anonymous subject in documentary become fully visible, and hence knowable by the end, as part of a narrative of coming out for instance.⁷⁴

There are other differences across disembodied voices on screen too. Analysing classical cinema rather than documentary film, Chion does not fully address the possibility of a disembodied voice without power. The threat of the closeted voice is determined by how it intersects with unseeability of the speaker, and the narrative playing out on screen. Chion does not analyse the disembodied voice as protective strategy, nor the disembodied voice where the speaker is discursively cast as an *unknowing* subject. While there may be elements of threat in the disembodied voice in sex work documentary practice, as well as the uncanny, especially when associated with criminality or the abject more broadly, this gap in power is significant.

Further, while for Chion the acousmatic voice is elevated beyond the human, the sex worker voice is hitched to the body, even when the body cannot be seen. I refer here to more than the vocalic body, and rather to an association with the body more generally. As I have shown throughout this thesis, the figure of the sex worker is imbued with hypersexuality, and the abject in social and bodily terms. As argued in the early chapters of this thesis, sex is always in the background of the sex work documentary, implied if not visible, so too is the body.

I therefore argue that in order for the voice of sex workers in documentary to occupy a place of power, disembodiment alone is not enough, nor does it counter histories of surveillant documentary gaze upon sex workers. I will expand upon this in my case studies, but this exclusion from the power of the disembodied voice stems partly from the role of the sex worker body in the prostitute imaginary, as well as narratives of powerlessness or trauma, and gender.

This attributed corporeality of the sex worker voice is in addition to how gender may impact the disembodied voice. It is notable that Chion consistently used masculine pronouns in his writing about the acousmatic voice (1999: 24), and this

⁷⁴ This can be seen in the 2017 documentary *One of Us* (dir. Heidi Ewing and Rachel Grady) following three Hasidic Jews trying to leave their ultra-Orthodox communities.

reflects his argument that women's voices are rarely acousmatic (1999: 55). In fact, although he does not expand upon this line of thought, he aligns the female voice with 'the "blind" voice or the voice with partial sight', which 'may be the voice of the excluded third party' (1999: 55). Here it is important draw upon the association of sex work with the prostitute imaginary, whereby sex workers are portrayed as unknowing subjects, unable to fully see their oppression. This plays out in the rhetorical silencing in *Not a Love Story* and *8 Minutes* for example, where non-repentant sex workers are shown as being not fully conscious of their situation. It is most explicit in the use of face proxy in *8 Minutes*, where the vision of the 'advocates' is elevated and stands in for the damaged sex worker view. I argue that it is this imagined partial or damaged vision, combined with a voice which is aligned so much with body, which renders the sex worker disembodied voice resistant to possessing the power of being heard, but not seen.

I have critiqued notions of the disembodied voice as form of power, not only because it is common in sex worker documentary, including my own, but because it is elevated as a strategy of empowerment. As outlined in the previous chapter, Silverman proposed that denial of vision of the body moves the female voice into a position of power (1988: 164). She used sex worker character Bree in fictional film *Klute* to argue her case (1988: 83), who used voice as powerful masquerade in her work, and fantasises about being free of her body and becoming only voice. In practice however disembodiment in documentary film is complex and variable in its application, and the voice is not necessarily impeded by the sex worker body.

It is a strategy I have used in my own practice to varying degrees, although I would not describe *Three Gifts* fully in this way for example, because while the face is largely obscured, the body is not, and is even relatively explicit. The voice and body are desynchronised, both are equally powerful, and neither work alone. I have used disembodiment in my work pre-dating this thesis, for example where scenes of riots run alongside sex work related monologue in *Enclosure* (2010) (fig. 5.1). Even then, there are sequences of my body in places, and this has not limited my ability to give voice, but rather facilitated it.



Figure 5.1: video still, *Enclosure* (Havell, 2010)

As examined in my previous chapter, it has been images of the moving body which have enabled voice – I have not spoken *despite* my body on screen but *because* of it. In the context of practices of stigmatised voice, for example in *Enclosure*, it has been the specific exclusion of the face, and the face only, that enabled voice and its consequent power. From a representational view, which is where Silverman's critique is situated, it is more complicated, as my following case studies attest. Silverman's theory of disembodiment, gender, and power incorporates but is not focused on the face. This is a limitation in terms of intersections of the marginalised voice with anonymity, because as I will illustrate with my case studies, there is a stark difference between partial and full disembodiment.

Furthermore, barring gender, the problems that I argue impede power in the disembodied voice in Chion's theorisation – hypersexualisation of the sex worker body, the prostitute imaginary, and narratives of violence – all also impact possibilities of power in Silverman's terms. My contention however is not that disembodied sex worker voices are without power, nor conversely that power resides intrinsically in this strategy. Rather, as I will map out in the following case studies, allowing the sex worker to be heard without being seen plays out in practice in a highly fragile manner. I propose that the disembodied sex worker voice, working in tandem with vocalic bodies, amplifies power relations already playing out in each documentary film.

5.5 The voice without a face: *The Prostitutes of Lyon Speak*

The Prostitutes of Lyon Speak / Les Prostituées de Lyon parlent (Carole Roussopoulos, 1975) is historically significant in terms of feminist documentary practice and an early attempt at anonymisation. These strategies hinge on the visual separation of body and voice during filming itself. I analyse the two forms at play. My

first analysis focuses on partial disembodiment; where glimpses of the body are possible, and where stigma amplified by disembodiment is countered by a visible collective act of recording. Secondly I will analyse sequences where there is no longer any discernible body at all, only a voice which inhabits a dark screen. I will contend that because there is no partial body, only a voice expressing suffering, the voice is displaced onto the screen as void instead, producing a body from this image. In order to understand the workings and representational consequences of these methods of disembodiment, as well as the need for these specific anonymisation practices, it is necessary to place *The Prostitutes of Lyon Speak* in a wider historical-political context.

The Prostitutes of Lyon Speak records and intervenes in the occupation of San Nizier church in Lyon, France by over a hundred sex workers in 1975. Feminist film scholar Stephanie Jeanjean (2011) outlined the significance of the work in the context of early feminist video practices, which was itself ‘a gesture of disobedience and emancipation’ (2011: 5). Made using a ‘Portapak’ portable video camera by feminist collective Video Out, the documentary was one of the first to be recorded on video rather than film (Jeanjean, 2011: 6).⁷⁵ She notes that while cheaper to work with than film, video technology was still expensive and editing technology not refined. Video tended to be used in a direct manner, editing on the go, rather than as polished work of narrative cinema (2011: 8), and this will become pertinent to my analysis of strategies of anonymity within the video.

The political context of this work is important, as it impacts how the sex worker’s voice in the documentary should be understood in relation to power as well as anonymity. The occupation was a response to escalating arrests, fines and violence against sex workers (Mathieu, 2001: 107-110), including murder, but it was not the first political action of the sex workers of Lyon. Earlier protests in open spaces, where the sex workers were exposed to public and police view, had led to arrests (Mathieu, 2001: 110). The occupation was a strategy that afforded greater collective anonymity, and thus protection, of the sex workers involved. It lasted over a week before violent eviction, which the documentary does not include.

⁷⁵ In her examination of feminist video collectives in 1970’s France, Stéphanie Jeanjean (2011: 5) notes that not only was Roussopoulos one of the first people to buy a video camera in France (in 1969, and second only to Jean-Luc Godard apparently), she also ran feminist video training workshops.

Featuring both off-screen and on-screen voices, *The Prostitutes of Lyon Speak* demonstrates a contradictory vulnerability in the disembodied voice, despite being produced in a situation of collective power. Specifically, this power was produced by acting together rather than individually, inhabiting and creating a physical space where sex workers were protected from police and public violence, and collectively producing and controlling audio-visual communications for broadcast. That is, whilst the broader context of *The Prostitutes of Lyon Speak* was violence, police corruption, stigma and dispossession of sex workers, and the sex workers involved in the occupation were under threat, the documentary emerged as a form of resistance. This resistance was enabled by working collectively with other sex workers and allies, including Catholic socialists and the filmmakers. Thus, while the narrative primarily concerns a lack of power, it is, in itself, a form of coming in to power, naming their oppression, and this is reflected in practices of voice and anonymity within the video.

Pertinent to my analysis is that during the occupation itself the video was screened on monitors hung from the church building for the large crowds gathered outside, bypassing media and enabling communication with those outside (Jeanjean, 2011: 13). As such anonymity was a pressing concern. The video was not simply a record, but an intervention in real time. Indeed, I argue that the occupation should be understood as a means to speak, and this documentary, stemming from that radical action, was one of the few means of communication available to the sex workers. In this context, the focus of the documentary on the personal impact of stigma and criminalisation on the lives of sex workers (both in terms of social conditions which led to sex work, and stigma associated with sex work itself)⁷⁶ can be seen as a political tactic, and means to come through marginalisation into power through the voice.

This extended background provides critical contextualisation of the treatment of voice and disembodiment in *Prostitutes of Lyon Speak*. Forty-five minutes long, the documentary consists almost entirely of workers speaking, at times closer to monologues than anything else. Theirs are the only voices we hear. The majority of the visual track is a back and forth between sex workers sitting in a circle speaking,⁷⁷ and medium to close up images of sex workers speaking directly to camera. There is

⁷⁶ This includes growing up in the care system, to being a single mother in 1970s France, to losing access to other forms of employment, arrests, bribes and fines.

⁷⁷ This is particularly significant in that it demonstrates sex workers in connection with each other, rather than sex workers in isolation; the viewer is not the (sole) thread of relation.

a mix of face-anonymous and face-visible speakers. The voice itself is not modified, but disembodied sequences exist without anchor to a face. The face, and sometimes entire body, is removed from the field of vision, either fully or partially, rendering the voice a ‘disembodied’ voice. While there are extended sequences of a sex worker speaking to camera without any form of obfuscation, my analysis focuses on strategies of disembodiment in the film, of which there are two; the partial body; and body-void. I begin my analysis with the partial.

The partial body

The general approach to anonymity, which had to be done quickly and during filming itself, is simply obstruction of the face during filming. This includes filming from the back of the head. While there are variations to the partial disembodiment, my analysis focuses on a woman speaking from behind a blanket (figs. 5.2, 5.3). She speaks of the difficulty of surviving without support from family or the fathers of her children, in contrast to the ease of almost slipping into sex work, bit by bit. In this testimony, like much others in the film, trauma is present, structural oppression is detailed, and sex work is presented as a form of limited resistance in an abject existence. I note this because although the documentary is heavy with the burden of stigma, there is a consistent giving of voice which is almost defiant in occupying a voice which is at once human and dehumanised.



Figure 5.2: Video still, *The Prostitutes of Lyon Speak*



Figure 5.3: Video still, *The Prostitutes of Lyon Speak*

The image of the sex worker speaking with a blanket over her face exemplifies this contradiction. The coverage is not total, instead the very edge of her nose pokes out, her arm, her wrist. It is possible to catch the occasional glimpse of her eyes, but never the mouth. Another sex worker sits on the floor next to her holding a microphone. There is no attempt to obscure the cinematic apparatus, and indeed at times the visual track focuses on this person helping to record the speaker, and not the speaker herself (fig. 5.4). While this works to emphasise the voice of the sex worker as a collective act of power, it also disallows the encroachment of a fantasy vocalic body. This is partly due to the proxy body of woman with the microphone. Unlike the face proxy of chapter 3, this proxy is a true conduit of voice. But it is also a disruption of the prostitute imaginary, through the presence of the cinematic apparatus. There is victimhood in the image of a blanket over the face, but the presence of the microphone, and active collaboration in recording, means this victimhood is not able to fully settle. It is not simply that there is a woman who must hide; there is a woman who also desires to speak, and finds a way to do so. Crucially, she is not alone in this.

Instead, in the sequence shown below (fig. 5.4), and like the speakers in *Taking a Part* too, the struggle and active participation in giving voice is rendered visible. They are not only speaking but taking control of their voices and representation themselves. In showing agency through the voice as something which is constructed, and fought for, rhetorical silencing is undone. In interfering with the invisibility of the documentary apparatus, and their own work in producing voice, the sex worker is less

imaginable, and less susceptible to being co-opted as pseudo-proxies, because it is shown that they speak for themselves. In contrast to this for example, *8 Minutes* also show the documentary apparatus, as part of elevating the film crew's and spectator's power, but crucially this power of vision is withheld from the sex workers themselves who cannot even see the cameras filming them.

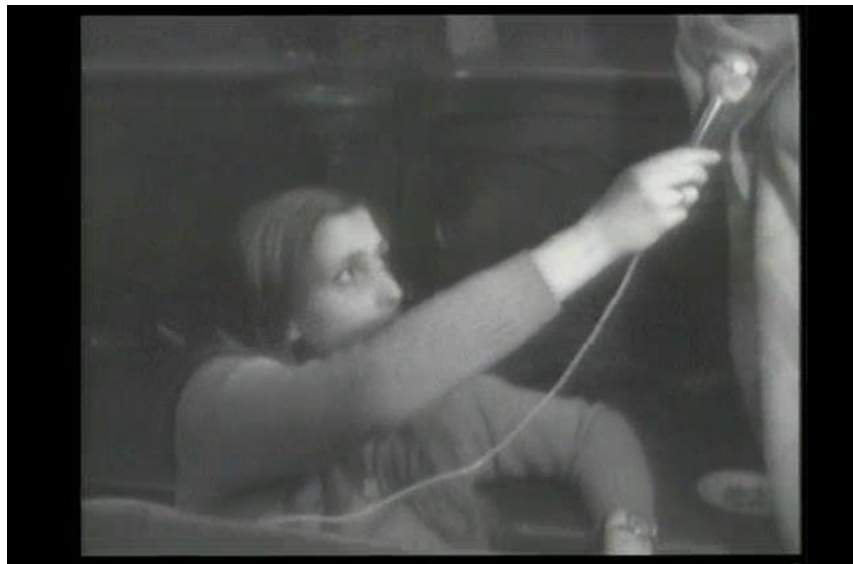


Figure 5.4: Video still, *The Prostitutes of Lyon Speak*

Full disembodiment; or, the void speaks

In other sections of *The Prostitutes of Lyon Speak* however there is no image of the body at all; only a dark flickering screen and a voice speaking at length (fig. 5.5). There are two extended sequences in this form, and both speakers address issues of violence and stigma. My argument is that in this radical practice of disembodiment, this void on screen becomes an image of the body, amplifying an abjection it is difficult to move away from.

When the image of the void begins it is not a smooth black, but a flickering grey, like a fog so thick nothing can be seen. A speaker describes growing up in poverty, resulting in social exclusion, and the need to leave her village so her parents would not find out about her sex work. She discusses her first encounters with police, and of being told by police she will not be able to escape her police record: 'Now I am and will remain a prostitute'. In combining this monologue with the void image, there is no edge to the stigma; the stigma feels infinite. The second speaker from the void speaks of aspirations for a traditional married life, the police outing her to her

family as a sex worker, multiple ectopic pregnancies, destitution and the death of her husband.



Figure 5.5: Video still, *The Prostitutes of Lyon Speak*

Both narratives are of trauma and survival, and as I outlined in the introduction to this case study, it is important these words are spoken. The voices are imbued with loss, and this in turn imbues the image with loss. If there was no screen at all, this embodiment would act differently, because there would be no interplay between image and voice. But the darkness on screen acts as an image. It specifically becomes an image of a void, which in turn becomes an image of the body. This is partly because, as argued earlier, the voice always hails a body, and partly to do with the sound /image relationship in this particular sequence. Because there is no image other than foggy, flickering darkness, from which the voices seem to emanate from, and because the voice's words themselves conjure darkness, I could not imagine an auditory face other than the image in front of me. There is no interval, no dissonance between voice and image, and in this, the void is given life by the voice. The darkness becomes image, becomes a vocalic body. If my writing here feels abstract, it is because my spectatorship has pulled me there; not only has the speaker on screen become abstracted by this void, but my own viewing position has become entangled.

In considering how exactly this void has been given such power, I contend that ventriloquism is at play. The ability of the voice to animate or give life to the visual track reflects the power of the voice. As I will address in the latter part of this chapter

it is also what renders the distorted voice particularly troubling. Film theorist Rick Altman provides insight here. Describing the image track as the dummy, which the voice track controls (1980: 67), Altman contends that the vocalic body, like cinema itself, should be considered the product of ventriloquism. In this vein, he argues that while the image in film may appear in the first instance to dominate the flow of meaning, the voice covertly controls the image. This analysis downplays the role of the image in voice interpretation and affect, and moments where the image is in conflict with the voice, but it provides a useful entry into thinking through the extent to which a 'voice with life', or conversely the abject, distorted voice, influences how the body on screen is able to be decoded by the spectator.

Complicating this model of ventriloquism is the status of the specific voice and body on screen. Altman was not theorising in the context of closeted, stigmatised identities, but with the cinematic apparatus more generally. The sex worker voice-body called forth in the ventriloquism of the documentary is particularly vulnerable, because these voice-bodies are not fully autonomous but subject to a suspect prostitute imaginary. Further, as evidenced throughout this thesis, the voice of the sex worker is already discredited. This does not mean that the sex worker voice cannot give life to the image, as the voice fundamentally animates, but that the image, wider diegesis, and even world exterior to the film are co-producers of this animation. For example, in these sequences, the void image as body confronts, and renders the sex worker more uncontainable in their voiced pain than if the spectator could locate a body in place, with corporeal limits. The voice in turn imbues the image with narratives of stigma, which, as addressed earlier in this thesis, are likewise uncontainable.

It is notable however the void sequences are shown alongside partial disembodiment where agency is rendered visible, and even fully identifiable sex workers. The operations of power in the disembodied sex worker voice are thus mobile, even within a singular work. The problem, as evidenced in *The Prostitutes of Lyon Speak*, is that the disembodied voice is not enough in itself to release the sex worker subject from the gaze and into a position of discursive power. Allowing the sex worker to be heard but not seen in these cases does not disrupt the specular regime, as, firstly, a vocalic body is produced, and this is not easily unhitched from other images. The speakers can be imagined through their voice, reaching across to other images of the sex worker and the prostitute imaginary where the narratives echo trauma. It is the surrounding images of visible sex worker agency in this documentary

which provide a counter image to the void, and even proxy in some cases, for example the woman holding the microphone in front of the blanket.

Secondly, depending on other signifiers and treatment of the voice itself, the abject or non-human may be projected on to the disembodied voice. Even a void can become a body for the voice to inhabit, where the voice speaking of violence amplifies trauma, rather than transformation or empowerment through giving testimony (even if empowerment through voice took place unseen). The sex worker continues to be bound by signifying obligations of voicelessness, even when speaking. Representational power of disembodiment is thus fragile, and whether partial or total, actually never remove the body at all. This is not necessarily negative, because as addressed in my analysis of partial disembodiment, in showing the collective work to give voice the image can counter abjection in that voice.

Thirdly, it should be emphasised that while the representational problems of sex worker disembodiment intersect with practices of voice, this also needs to be judged separately. Hiding or entirely omitting the bodies of speakers from the visual record clearly facilitated the testimony of vulnerable sex workers in this case, within a context of violence and structural oppression, and this makes it vital.

This being said, the examples above are relatively extreme, highlighting the risk in the disembodied sex worker voice where it intersects with subjugation. I have used *The Prostitutes of Lyon Speak* to mark out the representational limits of sex worker disembodiment, but this raises questions as to whether this totalisation is inevitable, or contingent. In order to locate further nuances and possibilities of power through the voice, even when a complete absence of the body on screen is paired with a narrative of violence, I turn now to an alternative case study.

5.6 Bodily power in the disembodied voice: *All That Sheltering Emptiness*

All That Sheltering Emptiness (Bernstein Sycamore and Carducci, 2010) uses a fully disembodied voice to give an account of rape by a client, yet the voice does not yield power nor offer a damaged body in its place. Rather, this voice amplifies power, and collapses space between the speaker's and spectator's bodies. The abject is present, yet undone, and it is disembodiment which allows the spectator into proximity with a graphic account of violence, without the threat of co-option, possession or voyeurism. There is an almost hallucinatory connective disembodiment at work, which displaces the spectator as being outside of the narrative. This is possible because a slow

approach to production was able to be taken, rather than filming unfolding events, but there are lessons here for shifting the way in which politically committed documentary, and the closeted voice can be approached.

All That Sheltering Emptiness is a short experimental documentary film shot on Super8 film by artist Joey Carducci. The monologue belongs to sex worker, writer and performer Mattilda Bernstein Sycamore.⁷⁸ The work is an anomaly here, in that the disembodied voice is not actually required in terms of anonymity: the speaker Bernstein Sycamore is already ‘out’ as a sex worker.⁷⁹ However, it is a significant film in terms of the production and uses of the vocalic body, including in relation to trauma testimony, and in considering broader uses of anonymity.

Bernstein Sycamore and Carducci describe the film as a meditation on sex work and hotel lobbies, and while that reflects the tone of the work, it implies a gentleness rather than the brutal account which unfolds. The violence and loss communicated via the voice is intensified by the image; exquisite, intangible and removed not only from the body of the speaker, but the body in general. Even when Bernstein Sycamore speaks of moving through hotel lobbies, this is less about an architecture of luxury and capital (although that is an underlying theme), but rather about moving through a space unseen and unrecognised as a sex worker. The film is about the closet of sex work, violence, self-perception and risk, and it highlights how critical it is that sex workers are able to speak of their own personal experiences.

Although *All That Sheltering Emptiness* recruits full disembodiment, and is a first-person account of trauma, a very different vocalic body is called forth than in the void of *Prostitutes of Lyon Speak* for example. Both the image and the voice are very different, as is the relationship between them. I begin with the voice, which is an intense presence, so powerful I argue that any kind of embodied form would actually undermine it. This is because the body in this narrative is incredibly vulnerable. It is being attacked. The voice visually unhooked from this body allows instead the viewer to imagine what is being recounted, which is a far greater intervention. But this power is also about the images that are put in the body’s place, for it is not the case that

⁷⁸ *All That Sheltering Emptiness* was screened internationally at film festivals and sex worker events. It is now accessible on online platforms.

⁷⁹ It should be noted however, that considerable differences and grey areas exist in what sex workers consider anonymity, and what they want from this. Someone may be out as a sex worker in written contexts, but still not want their image to be widely associated with sex work, or to be linked to a specific account or experience.

images are simply absent. Instead, hotel mirrors, chandeliers, ceilings, lobbies, lights—like some kind of beautiful hallucination, or disassociation—provide a safe chamber for the voice of the speaker (figs. 5.6, 5.7).



Figure 5.6: Film still, *All That Sheltering Emptiness*

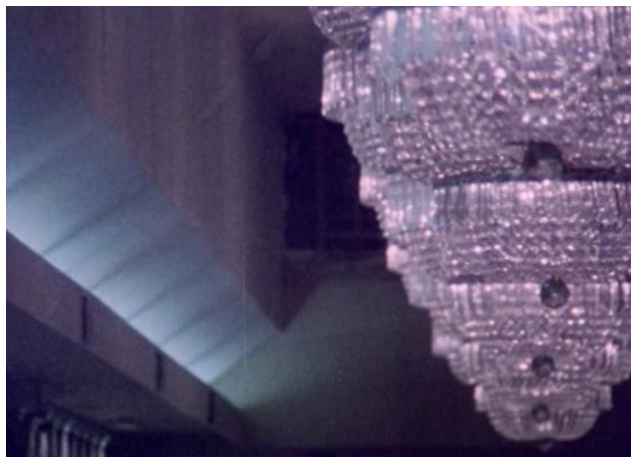


Figure 5.7: Film still, *All That Sheltering Emptiness*

The visual treatment provides not only a safe space to dwell within a difficult narrative, its shimmering play of light is a form of the sublime and this provides a counter to abjection. For example, chemical marks from film development veil the image at times, as do dust marks and scratches. Light flares and strings of cut-glass shimmer in the darkness. Whilst the visual field moves in and out of focus, it is never entirely crisp. It is amidst this imagery that Bernstein Sycamore begins to introduce the scene, conjuring the body of the client-come-assailant. ‘This guy had the features of someone very popular in the 1980s, swept back hair and walled muscularity, disdain in his eyes,’ she says. She continues to narrate the blurry slip from consent to non-consent, attempts to negotiate, rape and its aftermath. In fact, it is in the

production of uncertainty where Sycamore leaves no space for vagueness or filling in the gaps.

I was thinking about lotion. What good would a condom do with lotion. Maybe I should get a washcloth. His dick remained in my arse, so different when it slides in smoothly like foreplay instead of that frantic push to stay hard. I started to push myself upright [...] Oh, this is what's happening.

Alongside this voice the visual is intangible, and this amplifies the voice that is intensely present. There is an excess of detail of violence done to the body, recounted in a heavy New York Jewish accent that is unmistakably queer. Bernstein Sycamore is gender non-conforming and her voice resists the coding signifiers of gender. Rather than flitting between different performances of gender, it is hard to assign to any gender in particular. Unlike Jason's evasive voice in *Portrait of Jason*, this queer voice makes itself consistently exposed and vulnerable; it is a voice that is 'too much'. There is overwhelming precision in the way violence is recounted, spoken in a way where the spectator cannot move or look away from, because it is in the voice and not the image on screen. More than any other film discussed in this thesis, Bernstein Sycamore comes the closest to a voice that is all too near, and present in the moment, even though the narrative is clearly scripted and written from a place of temporal distance.

I contend this closeness to Bernstein Sycamore is at least partly because she is never seen, so she cannot be placed. In addition to the visual, this is reflective of how the voice was recorded. Her voice was close miked, rather than recorded at a distance. Because of this, there are no interruptions to the soundwaves, such as doors, furniture, or even wind, nor the soft dissipation of soundwaves that open space would produce, all of which would locate the voice in a physical space. This includes a lack of location in relation to the spectator. Without a physical space acting on the voice, and without a body to anchor it, there is no way for the spectator to measure their distance as separate from the voice. Neither the narrative nor the tense emotion within it stay put. Rather than being perceived as 'off-screen', near-by, or obscured, this is a voice which feels uncontainable. Rather, her voice is more like an enveloping force, drawing the spectator in to intimate but not voyeuristic or co-optive proximity to sex worker. It is a proximity which demands to be heard and related to.

In this sense, *All That Sheltering Emptiness* conforms to Silverman's theory, that the disembodied voice protects the feminised subject from appropriation, objectification and silencing. This outcome is particularly important given the testimony subject. The film also provides an intervention on Silverman's theory, as power is not achieved through an absent body alone but through the summoning of a vocalic body, and the collapse of boundaries between spectator and this conjured body. The extreme dissonance between pained voice and beautiful image, combined with the intensity of the corporeal in her voice and the absence of (any) body on screen, leaves a gap for the 'unimaginable' to be imagined. Rather than consuming the pain of others, there is connection here.

It follows then, that a sufficient gap between the visible and the audible, indeed a complete denial of visual access to the body that speaks, and where the resulting voice cannot be contained or anchored, could produce a voice that is far more powerful than one emerging from a synchronised voice/body which renders the speaker known or knowable. This is an 'anonymous' sex worker voice which manages to speak through, not despite, stigma of sex work and abuse. The film works precisely because the visual body cannot be seen, it must be imagined, but this vocalic body is difficult to place, because the voice is so intimate and hard to place. In collapsing the space between speaker and spectator, the vocalic body crosses over. The violence can be visually conjured in such detail, but this imagery shifts from the violence done to the speaker, to that of the spectator, who is now both inside and outside the narrative. This split position is amplified by the way Bernstein Sycamore gives her account, which is both reflective, and at a distance, and visceral, raw with emotion.

In being fundamentally connective, despite the narrative of trauma, despite the absence of the visible sex worker body, the disembodied voice does not hail the prostitute imaginary in this instance. This shows that narrative content and subject alignment with the abject alone does not determine the prostitute imaginary. As is evident comparing the voice in *All That Sheltering Emptiness* and *Prostitutes of Lyon Speak*, the body remains conjurable and uncontainable, but this can produce translucent links across subject positions. These vocalic bodies have implications for distorting forms of anonymisation strategy too, as I will now address.

5.7 Vocal distortion as an act of body distortion/ total disembodiment

Thus far I have argued that voice alters perception of the body, and, where vision of the body is obscured, even produces an image of the body—the vocalic body, or bodies. This ‘disembodied’ voice, rather than simply producing a voice imbued with power, amplifies the relations of power already at play within and around the voice. My analysis has focused on the voice largely left intact, even where the image of the sex worker is not. This leaves a significant and related vocal anonymisation strategy still to be addressed: the distorted voice. Voice distortion is an extension of the disembodied voice, in that the accompanying body is often obscured in some way, and this distorted voice also produces a body. I will argue that this is the case even where the modification renders a less corporeal voice.

On a representational level the distorted voice works in a similar way to the blurred face; a dangerous wound, acting as a vector of the prostitute imaginary, and hindering connection and reception. But I argue these elements are amplified in the voice. While abjection is more commonly associated with the physical, I have found that the voice is an exceptional marker and expression of the abject. The voice is of the body. This body in the voice is not only part of what makes it so easy to recognise who is speaking, or for listeners to summon a vocalic body, it is I propose what renders the distorted voice so difficult to hear; what renders the speaker so abject. But erasing the body from the voice is precisely how anonymity is, in theory, produced.

As part of my early research for this chapter, I applied distortion to my own recorded voice. Using basic pitch shifts, I wanted to feel out the parameters of the unhearable, of the destruction of pleasure or even tolerance in listening to a voice. The result was –aural tracks which I abandoned, regardless of degrees of distortion or whether it was higher or lower pitch modification. I could not listen back to or share my distorted voice, because it felt so far from my perception of myself, and also contaminating, as if listening would spread this damage further. Despite, or rather because of this exclusion, the process was illustrative. Unlike listening to my intact recorded voice, where familiarity has produced a relative ease of hearing, or at least tolerance, repetition did not alter my initial aversion. It was not a comfort that, to my ear, my voice distorted sounds even less like me. Rather than divorcing the distorted voice from myself, I fear that this is somehow my true voice, that I have become it, or that it will be perceived as my true voice, even though I know all of this to be false.

In this state, the voice lets out a secret, the truth of my abjection; and in doing so embodies it.

Vocal modification in documentary practice tends to centre on a slight shifting of the pitch/ fundamental frequency of the voice, either higher or lower, and by just a few semi-tones. The greater the shift, the more effective it is in veiling signifiers in the speaker's voice—although as evidenced earlier in this chapter, there is no guarantee. Additionally, unlike the blurring of the face, which tends to cover rather than move information, anyone in possession of sound editing software and a copy of the video could easily reverse engineer a simple shift in vocal pitch.⁸⁰ Vocal dissimulation is made more secure by additional modifications, including altering the formants, changing the speed, and using multiple vocal tracks, each with a different pitch shift. However, it is uncommon for films to use multiple vocal masking strategies, and this is echoed in my research interviews in the following chapter where participants noted their voice distortion had been limited to pitch shift and occasionally speed alteration. In other words, multiple and extreme vocal distortion strategies can theoretically be deployed in documentary, but generally they are not.

The problem for documentary practice is, like facial distortions, the less embodied the voice becomes, the more that is 'lost' of the subject, as is the *pleasure* of listening. This is not a superficial concern. In her formative work on sound in early cinema, Amy Lawrence (1988) argues that pleasure of hearing voice was an essential driving force in sound development (1988: 3). This is partly about 'fidelity', which I propose distortion fundamentally counters, and 'desire to maintain the recorded voice as holding a special, essential connection to the individual' (Lawrence, 1988: 6). In other words, Lawrence found that early sound technology was judged and valued by so-called truthful replication and link to the individual, original voice, and in this magic connection lies pleasure. This is precisely what is severed when the listener can hear displacement of pitch in anonymised voice; when they can hear the voice has lost fidelity.

Additionally, I contend that loss of pleasure is also about the body of the voice, and its absence. Roland Barthes (1977) articulated the pleasure of hearing a sublime voice singing lies in the 'grain' in voice, which is not simply the corporeal. The grain is 'the encounter between a language and a voice' and 'a dual production of language

⁸⁰ This is explicitly addressed by one of my interview participants in the following chapter.

and music' (1977: 181). At the height of pleasure the grain offers the sublime: 'am I hearing voices within the voice? but isn't it the truth of the voice to be hallucinated? isn't the entire space of the voice an infinite one?' (1977: 184). Critically, there is an element of friction or struggle to the grain of the voice, and this is a definitive quality for Barthes (1977: 185).

I argue that the distorted voice not only impedes the audibility of the body in the voice, it does so by intensifying the grain; it goes too far. This not only removes the pleasure of listening but helps shift the voice into the realm of the abject. To expand; the distorted voice carries abjection, like the blurred face, but it also goes further than the face. This is not only due to the 'magic' power of the voice I spoke of in my previous chapter, nor is it solely a problem of grain, it is a problem of this voice going back into a body.

There are significant differences between the ventriloquism of the 'intact' sex worker voice and the distorted one.⁸¹ The distorted voice operates differently, because as well as animating the visual, the distorted voice also undermines the visual. It animates the visual, with a wound, lack and artifice. The distorted sex worker voice in documentary displays this lack far more effectively than the voice left intact. The threatening void in the distorted voice is twofold. Speech reveals the first wound—through what is said, as well as how it is said—and distortion amplifies this wound, multiplying the bleeding stigmata for all to hear. While the speaking subject may in some circumstances desire this wound to be seen and heard in this way, as was at play in *The Prostitutes of Lyon Speak* for example, distortion echoes that as a form of testimony itself. Vocal dissimulation communicates an essential lack which runs concurrently to whatever is being said. By this I mean that when spoken word is combined with a technology which causes a loss of soundwave complexity (including loss of identificatory signifiers, as well as other elements that make up the voice), and signifies this loss by its very drive for anonymity, the distorted sex worker always speaks in the multiple. Distortion speaks, intervening in the meaning of language beneath.

I have not found an application of vocal modification which works in an oppositional way. The distorted voice is one that refuses to fully yield to exterior

⁸¹ I note that technologies and performances of voice mean the voice in documentary is never truly unaltered, however the perception of distortion or alteration, or of 'natural' voice is critical.

forces, yes, but this in itself does not render it liberatory, beyond whether it allows one to speak or not. It does not act against the suspension of the sex worker in the prostitute imaginary. Distortion does however disrupt spectatorship, not in a practice of feminist counter cinema for example, where this disruption is aimed to induce distance from the subject, but as a kind of uncontainable rupture of viewing pleasure which is turned back on the speaker. While feminist counter cinema holds that pleasure impedes radical possibilities of cinema, I propose that the redirection of abrasive voice back onto marginalised subjects likewise holds their abjection in place. This was the case in my spectatorship of *Happy Endings?*, which I examined in Chapter 3, and return to now as it demonstrates the displacement which distortion can produce. Like the treatment of the sex worker's faces, voice modification is extreme in this documentary. This degree of distortion is not common in documentary film, but nor is it unique, particularly in works that are prioritising anonymity over the pleasures of spectatorship. For this reason it is a useful work with which to probe the affective limits of distortion.

From a filmmakers point of view, it is notable that one does not have to modify soundwaves of the voice very much to produce a significant change to how it is heard. Even minor changes in pitch move the voice outside of the normal human vocal range to where it does not seem to 'belong'. In *Happy Endings* however, the fundamental frequency of the migrant sex worker's voices have been raised to extreme levels. The voice's timbre is thrown to the extent it skirts the boundaries not only of real/fake, but the human. I will focus my analysis on one sequence in particular, which encapsulates the documentary's approach. In this sequence the sex worker's body is backlit, so that she becomes darkness, visually unfathomable (fig. 5.8). When she speaks, it is about police raids and being treated as if she is not a person. But this dehumanisation is enforced by the documentary apparatus itself, which echoes the work of the police in this instance. Voice, which, as argued in the previous chapter is supposed to a reflection of the true self, here becomes part animal. I emphasise that this is not a *more* than human state, but less. This is not about duplicity of a voice which will not reveal itself, but disruption of the aural boundaries which the human voice inhabits. This displacement renders it abject, and subject to marginalisation.

The voice in question is not simply 'off', or uncanny. This might be the case if vocal modification was used with a light touch. Instead, the extremity of the distortion is perplexing, as if the argument is that migrant sex workers should be left

alone because they are already so powerless and outside of society they cannot threaten the social order. It is echoed in the language of the sex workers, who appear to have internalised their abjection, saying for example ‘There is no life for me. And I don’t want a life for me’ (fig. 5.8).

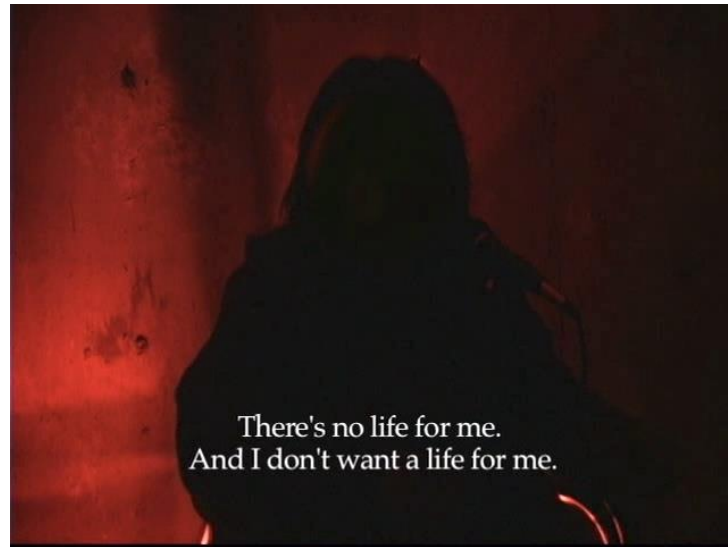


Figure 5.8: video still, *Happy Endings?*

The issue is that I believe the filmmakers were trying to counter stigma. Given the lengths to which the filmmaker went to protect identities, it can be extrapolated that the participants did not speak to camera lightly. Their participation can be deemed an act of bravery, undertaken with risk, but this is not made evident in the documentary itself. Instead, while the lack of fidelity is jarring, it is the lack of conflict between voice, image and words which work to cement the sex worker in place. Even more so than the void image of *Prostitutes of Lyon Speak*, because that voice was intact, the excessive, scratching grain of the distorted voice spills back into the body. In the case of *Happy Endings?*, while there are no full body voids, it comes close at times. In the sequence critiqued above the body is shrouded in darkness, and the body even more unseeable. Red light sometimes catches the edge of her face. Her voice animates this formlessness; the wound of the sex worker.

Further, in considering if the extreme distortion was applied intentionally to obstruct pleasure of spectatorship, I find no deepening of engagement with testimony resulting from its use. *Happy Endings?* is not a work of counter-cinema, and the practices of blurring and distortion do not undermine the documentary apparatus or function as critiques or reflexive engagement with the victim documentary genre for

example. While I do not expect difficult testimony to be pleasurable to hear, or even feel containable, when the voice itself produces abjection to an already marginalised subject I propose that a kind of violence has been done. The dehumanisation of the police raid recounted in testimony is replicated in the documentary apparatus.

I recognise here my specific location as a spectator, but, as I argue in the following chapter, I also contend it is an important one. Before I move to address sex worker spectatorship in detail however, it is necessary to examine a sex worker led practice of distortion, noting also that it is not possible to determine what level of influence the participants of *Happy Endings?* had in their own representation. As I stated in my initial analysis of this work in chapter 3, the involvement of brothel management in this work complicates notions of agency further. Nonetheless, this video illustrates the importance of paying attention to how distortion is used, and how it interacts with other elements of a film, and for this reason I widen out my study to include a video which uses distortion as a strategy of ambiguous or opaque identity, rather than as an attempt at comprehensive anonymity.

5.8 Proxy bodies and ‘soft’ distortion; sex worker led strategies of anonymity

To Survive, To Live (2018) is a short, animated documentary film, produced by sex worker Juno Mac in collaboration with Sex Worker Advocacy and Resistance Movement (SWARM). It provides rich ground for analysis as not only is the vocal distortion relatively light, but voices are combined with animation, rather than blurred, shadowed or absent faces, producing a very different embodiment of voice. Audio was recorded with five sex workers and focuses on working and life conditions. Violence is framed both as perpetrated by clients and state apparatuses in the broadest terms, for example austerity is discussed as form of structural violence. The animation is hand drawn and bodies and faces of sex workers progressively take on form and colour, even showing the process of animation itself (fig. 5.9). Each voice is assigned a different face, which, as expected, bears little resemblance to the speakers’ actual faces.⁸² This is a fundamentally different use of the face as proxy highlighted in *8 Minutes*, for example—as well as being ‘imaginary’, they are deployed by the sex workers themselves.

⁸² It is pertinent to add here that due to my involvement in various sex worker related projects, I had met the participants before, albeit some only briefly, and was therefore already familiar with their face and voice. I did not however expect to know or recognise who was participating in the work.

The visual track often echoes the visual framing of speaking subjects common in non-animated documentary films, hailing a traditional sex work documentary form and aesthetic despite abstraction. This replication includes scenes of sex workers in work spaces without clients, when it could have easily included visual representation that is more difficult in filmed documentary, such as interactions with clients or management. This decision holds focus on sex workers themselves, rather than voyeuristic elements of their work. This focus is heightened by the style of animation. These drawn-bodies do not move the way a real body moves, or even in ways less rudimentary animation moves. There are no moving lips in a literal sense, but surrogate faces to which the voice gives expression, and the ink gives form (fig. 5.9).

In laying bare the construction of the sex worker's image in this way, voice is shown to be a collaborative, active process, and representation itself is likewise shown to be an intervention. This, I argue, influences how the distorted voices are heard. Like the sex workers in Lyon holding up microphones to colleagues behind blankets, the diegetic closet of the film is opened, and sex workers are shown to be agents of their own representation. This interferes with the casting of abjection. In the instance of *To Survive, To Live* the image accompanying the voice leaves the speakers whole, connected to other sex workers and visually intact. There is no image of abjection for the voice to amplify.



Figure 5.9: Video still, *To Survive, to Live* (2018)



Figure 5.10: Video still, *To Survive, to Live* (2018)

Participants include street based workers and migrant workers, not only higher end escorts who can be seen as more socially acceptable. While not as explicit as the other case studies of this chapter, *To Survive, To Live* does contain difficult passages. Like *Happy Endings*, the distorted voices recount experiences of violence, or fear around deportation or death, and this intertwining is difficult to separate, but nonetheless acts differently. In part, this is how sex work itself is framed. *To Survive, To Live* is not a work of 'positive' or 'negative' representation. By that I mean it does not assert that sex work is a valid and fulfilling career, nor that it is a form of violence in itself. Rather, it frames poverty as violence, and states that sex workers deserve and need rights, and can advocate for themselves (fig. 5.10). This aspect of political struggle is also a factor in how distortion is perceived, as it counters abjection by rendering the speakers as agents rather than victims.

It cannot be overemphasised however, that the light level of distortion plays a role in how its representational effects are able to be offset by narrative and visual approaches off the video. This also means that effectiveness of this modification in terms of anonymity has to be addressed. Up until seeing this film I had considered vocal distortion a confronting but essentially effective means of concealing identity. I had not experienced any personal loss of anonymity in documentary, nor had I studied films in which I could have known the participants. In immediately recognising all the speakers voices in this work, my own belief in tangible anonymity unravelled. Indeed, it was this video which prompted my deeper research into voice recognition, because I realised that the different approaches to anonymisation were failing.

Looking back, it is no surprise that light distortion failed to impede recognition. The approach in *To Survive, To Live* relocates the voice to a slightly different position on a frequency scale, but not a new one. Affect wise, it is certainly still in the boundary of the human, although where exactly this boundary sits is contingent upon the spectator, voice and the image together. Other identity markers of the voice also remain in place, such as how a voice might rise and fall. Speed, phrases, and other verbal clues seep through; ‘slips’ of the self are not easily kept at bay by pitch interventions anyway. The alteration signals a degree of unknowability and doubt, as the modification is audible despite the gentle approach, but it does not provide identity protection in any comprehensive sense. There is instead a softening of certainty: a misdirection that could work on specific audiences. Perhaps that is enough, especially if it allows the speaker to step outside of abjection. It is this critical question which is addressed with sex workers themselves in my following chapter.

5.9 Conclusion

Studying attempts to render the sex worker voice anonymous has revealed a wildness in the voice. There is a resistance to confinement; the voice communicates and reveals itself despite attempts to separate it from its origin. But this wildness also exists in the sense of power, and relationship to the body image on screen, where the disembodied voice can both emancipate or intensify the prostitute imaginary. My findings reflect this unruly and delicate power of the voice, and concern both affect and identity recognition.

Firstly, I have found that neither disembodiment nor voice distortion offer identity protection. Anonymity is not at home in the voice. In investigating why, an intersectional approach including neuro-science has revealed that my experiences of spectatorship and recognition were not outliers; the voice is rich with signifiers, and listeners are highly skilled at voice recognition even when there are gaps and obstructions are in place. This failure has serious implications, as there are representational consequences to strategies of anonymity.

This is connected to my second finding, namely that the sex worker disembodied voice is never fully disembodied. The unseen body can nonetheless be imagined through the voice. This auditory body is contingent upon the accompanying image track as well as narrative and other qualities of the voice itself. While the drive

to imagine vocalic bodies impacts anonymity, it is also a representational problem where it amplifies the prostitute imaginary.

Thirdly, the distorted voice is a form of disembodiment, which also produces a vocalic body. This body is however far more vulnerable to the perception of damage than its counterpart, the intact voice. Vocal distortion renders the speaker abject in a way that goes beyond that of visual blurring. This is a result of an interplay between excess 'grain' in the distorted voice, the aural materiality of this voice that ranges from jarring to painful, the 'specialness' assigned to the human voice, and ventriloquism, combined with a sex worker subjectivity that is considered wounded. While a lighter touch and a safer visual track does mitigate abjection to some degree, it also leaves the speaker vulnerable to recognition, in which case it must be questioned whether distortion is any use at all.

Fourth, practices of disembodiment of the voice in documentary are highly variable. I have defined and examined two forms in particular; the partial, and the full. Both partial or fully disembodied voices produce an image or body in turn, but total absence of the visible body can abstract these vocalic bodies, or shift the location of spectatorship. All forms are inseparable from their interactions with other aspects of the film's diegesis, including preceding images, narratives, and treatment of the voice itself.

The implications of the lessons above are serious, for if strategies of vocal anonymity are prone to failure and precarity in terms of both affect and power, how is anonymity in documentary practice to be negotiated? It is this question which sex workers themselves grapple with, and, as my following chapter will address, this is deeply related to power and ethics within the documentary relationship, stigma, self-perception and the drive for collective liberation. While this chapter has largely focused on representation, and intersecting failures of anonymous vocal strategies, practices of giving voice in the context of difficult and tenuous anonymity continue to be carved out by sex workers. It is these practices which must now be addressed.

Chapter 6: Practices of anonymity

6.1 Introduction: research interviews

My thesis has throughout turned to schizoanalysis as a way to produce new and deeper insight into documentary practice of rhetorically silenced and ‘hallucinated’ subjects. This includes integrating embodied knowledges with practice and textual analysis. The vantage point of this position has oscillated between that of maker, film subject, and spectator/reader of other films and texts, and both the crossings and gaps between these positions has enabled new knowledge to be produced. In this final chapter I take embodied knowledge further, centring and engaging with sex workers who have participated in documentary film. In doing so, this chapter addresses questions of agency, power and voice running throughout my research, and critically, it does so from the point of view of the documentary participants themselves. Presenting the core findings of my research interviews, my analysis in this chapter is divided into three strands, although these threads are often linked. These strands are all grounded in practices of giving voice, but focus on intersections of this practice with power, self-spectatorship, and anonymity. Critically, because my research in this chapter stems from interviews with sex worker documentary participants, this analysis furthers understandings of how ethical and vocal documentary practices can be forged.

Firstly, I examine material practices of giving voice, and the various dynamics at play in speaking on camera as a sex worker. I will make interventions into how agency and marginality in the sex worker documentary context should be understood, arguing that the problems of transference and boundary loss outlined in Chapter 3 are heightened by the closet, social abjection and the drive for collective liberation.

Secondly, I examine self-spectatorship of the stigmatised voice in this light, tracing the limits and desires for giving voice from the perspectives of sex workers themselves. While my previous chapter examined sex worker led strategies for anonymity, my interviews shift the focus to explore instead how that *feels* in practice. I argue that how their own voices feel to the speakers is a critical consideration, both ethically and in terms of facilitating documentary participation in the context of stigma, managed identity and the prostitute imaginary.

Thirdly, I will argue that it is more accurate to speak of anonymity not as a destination of which one is inside or outside, but as an unstable fog, hailed but not fully occupied. That is, the desired anonymity can be constructed, via pseudonyms, and distortions for example, but is never able to be fully realised. This opaque territory must be made and remade: it is a practice. This intervention into anonymity reflects continued demands from sex workers to speak ‘anonymously’, even though they have experienced both its failure and negative affect. It also stems from conversations around negotiations of anonymity in the context of sex work itself. My conversations with sex workers reveal anonymity as grey-zone, as a multiplicity, and as something which one *does*, and there is much to learn here about the possibilities of voice and agency within this ‘failed’ anonymity.

As outlined in Chapter 1, I undertook research interviews with five sex workers who had participated in documentary film anonymously. Some had also participated in film on the condition they would not be obscured and had been subsequently anonymised without consent. For this reason I reiterate that the contributions of Chanta and Laovilawanyakul are presented in this thesis under their real names as requested. Other contributor names, Alex, Sophia and Emma, are pseudonyms. Except for Alex, who is non-binary, my interview participants identify as cisgender women. All participants were over the age of 21 and had been working in the sex industry for several years. Interviews took place via zoom or in person, with participants based in Thailand (Chanta and Laovilawanyakul), New Zealand (Alex and Sophie) and the United Kingdom (Emma), respectively. Of these countries, only New Zealand has decriminalised sex work,⁸³ but this did not seem to lessen the desire for anonymity when participating in a documentary. Outreach was via email and in person conversations with sex worker organisations and collectives, but it should be emphasised that making contact with sex workers who have participated anonymously in other projects is inherently limited. This is not only because of the desired anonymity, but the transient nature of sex work. Sex workers may move in and out of sex work, and in leaving may lose ties with sex worker networks. This is exacerbated

⁸³ Although the New Zealand government describes sex work as decriminalised, this comes with the caveat that those without permanent residency status are excluded. Many migrant sex workers therefore continue to be exploited, illegalised and deported (Mac and Smith, 2018: 191- 207., Abel and Ruguski, 2018). While none of my New Zealand interviewees are migrant sex workers, this exclusion is notable.

by practices of anonymity within sex worker communities, where it was my experience that ‘real’ names were not asked for and not necessarily shared.

I am grateful to all the sex workers who have shared their experiences and knowledge with me and I acknowledge their work and expertise in doing so. All my research participants had already engaged and reflected deeply upon their participation in documentary projects. It mattered to them how they were seen and heard in the world, they thought about their representation, as well as what they wanted from a documentary work in which they had participated. All had been involved in multiple documentary projects, although this was not a condition of interview involvement.

6.2 Speaking from the closet / speaking from stigma: sex worker practices of giving voice

From the outset of my interviews it was apparent that the work to manage anonymity and closeted knowledge in documentary practice is not only in how the voice sounds and is perceived by speakers, and others, but is in the very conditions of speaking during filming itself. To speak anonymously does not mean that everything is on the table. While motivations for participating in documentary vary and noting that not all documentary subjects are able to give informed consent,⁸⁴ it is a general principle that sex workers participate in documentary because they have something they want to say or show. They want to give testimony and bear witness, which requires an audience. This means that somehow, boundaries between film subject and director need to be negotiated and maintained. This is not easy in a context where the desire to speak runs concomitant to a need to withhold voice. Further, by participating in a documentary, sex workers are engaging with someone whose role it is to encourage voice, who may be seeking difficult narratives, and who may wittingly or unwittingly encourage transference.

Boundaries during filming can be porous, and asserting them in a filming context, even when one *wants* to speak, can be extremely challenging. This was articulated by participants of my research interviews. As examined in chapter 4,

⁸⁴ While consent can be complicated, there are examples where informed consent was clearly not given. This includes the hidden cameras of *8 Minutes* and contested consent forms (Hooker, 2017). Further, it is alleged BBC3 filmmakers of *Sex, Drugs, and Murder* (Nick Mattingly, 2017) approached sex workers they knew were under the influence of drugs or withdrawal and needed the money that was offered by the director (Basis, 2017).

relations of transference can emerge in any documentary involving trauma, but my interviews showed that the desire for intersubjective connection through voice was explicitly linked to, and exacerbated by, closeted subjectivity. For example, interview participant Emma described an audio interview where she had been asked about the very first client she saw as a sex worker, a pivotal experience she thought was funny but had talked to very few people about. She recognised a difficulty in withdrawing or holding back when given a space to be listened to, but she also framed this desire to speak as a form of risk-taking stemming from the pressure of keeping secrets.

With a thing that's always been this big secret for years and years, there's always part of you that's wanting to say it. There's always a part of you that's wanting to tell those stories, and then you get an excuse to do it. You find yourself willing to take a risk to do it just because you're so sick of having these big secrets, I guess. (Emma. 2019, Appendix 1: 4)

Anonymity, or the practice of it, in this sense provides a form of shelter where secrets can be released, but there is risk that the shelter leaks, or takes more than one intended. This vulnerability is not always bound by trauma and transference but does still relate to difference in power and boundaries between filmmaker and subject, which, as noted above, is compounded by experiences of the closet. In my interview with Sophie, she said she felt less able to negotiate boundaries with filmmakers than with clients for example.

I feel like I have more of an ability to negotiate boundaries in a booking with a client than in a doco. In a booking, I know that it's about my sexual consent and I know what my boundaries are, and I know my legal rights. [...] I've never even been in the case where I've had the opportunity to negotiate boundaries [in a documentary]. [...] I worry that I could have let too much of my voice or image be used actually. I feel much more powerful negotiating and discussing my boundaries with clients. (Sophie. 2019, Appendix 2: 14-15)

Sophie noted that, as with clients, she wanted to please the filmmakers. This is not simply about wanting approval, but an awareness that she could not control her

inclusion in the final film project. She felt that she would not be able to give a voice that could be heard if it did not conform to the desires of filmmaker.

You want to please them. You want to say something they like. I don't want to say something they are not going to like. You know that they have the power at the end of the day if you don't go by their rules, you're not in it. It doesn't get out there. (Sophie. 2019, Appendix 2: 15)

This form of compliance to an authoritative voice is less about desire for recognition or approval on an individual level, but part of an experience of stigmatisation where giving voice is a considered strategy for collective power and as an act against rhetoric which constructs the sex worker as unrepresentable and unhearable. It is based in desire to counter the prostitute imaginary by providing a real sex worker voice, which can only happen if the voice is 'out there' and able to be listened to and heard. This is in part linked to access to the means of production and distribution. Filmmakers ultimately have the authority to include or exclude narrative according to their vision of the film, as well as to edit the film in such a way that meaning can be altered, for example through decontextualization. In this sense, the power of giving voice, which is bound to the power of being able to be heard, is absolutely mediated by the filmmaker. The sex workers I spoke with understood very clearly that unless they were participating in a collectively made video, they had little power over how their words would be used. This awareness impacts both what is omitted from their testimony, as well as what is shared.

This erosion of boundaries does not only impact power and what is able to be withheld from the camera, but also impacts anonymity, because the more speech is unguarded, the more is revealed of the speaker. By unguarded I mean both what is said and how it is said. For example, Sophie noted her voice changed depending on the context and to whom she was speaking: softer with clients, more changeable with friends.

It's only on miniscule notes, but it's subtle changes that you often don't think about until you are forced to. When I'm talking matter-of-factly my voice is a bit lower, when I'm talking with clients, I'm often trying to sound slightly softer with my voice. A little bit less of vibrato in it. Or, when I'm talking to large amounts of people, I

try to speak properly, or with an audience, I slow things down. Whereas if I'm just with my friends my voice varies constantly throughout the conversation depending on what I'm talking about. (Sophie. 2019, Appendix 2: 9)

Importantly, when I asked about her 'on-camera' voice, Sophie highlighted a relation to interpersonal boundaries, whereby a sense of ease produces a voice that is more 'herself'.

I suppose it does come down to the level of comfort that you have. Almost unfortunately, the more comfortable I am, the more normal I am. The more normally I speak the easier I am to identify. I know the way that my voice varies, and people who know me know when I'm excited about things, or really on a roll, it gets much faster, gets a little bit higher, it's kind of more jesty as well, I'm making jokes. (Sophie. 2019, Appendix 2: 10)

This is a double exposure via the voice, as in addition to speaking in a voice richer in vocal traces of 'her', and this erasure of boundaries can lead to more being said than intended. The voice is rendered more recognisable, more able to be hitched to a specific individual, impeding the production of anonymity.

Importantly, there are aspects to this unravelling of boundaries that is specific to the subject of sex work. Alex identified a crossing of boundaries relating to trauma specifically located to the subject's sex work. That is, they describe a breakdown where sex workers are seen as having less boundaries than non sex workers, both in terms of receiving stories of trauma from others, and expectations to share their own.

I feel like people feel like they can intrude on sex workers boundaries so much more. And when you say you're a sex worker, particularly with women actually, they'll immediately tell you all of their sexual trauma, and ask about yours, and it's this bizarre thing where they feel because your work is so intimate, they're invited into the most intimate area and almost don't have to have boundaries like they would with any other person. (Alex. Appendix 3: 14)

This is particularly troubling in the intersection with documentary practice. As expanded upon Chapter 4, transference can occur where documentary participants are asked to speak about trauma, with the consequence that more is said, or given, to the director than the speaker would otherwise like. While Alex is speaking of encounters outside of the documentary relationship as well, this builds a picture of a generalised erosion of boundaries, where sex workers expect to be asked difficult and painful things, and expect to hear them unbidden as well. This normalises the expectation that the sex worker should, and will, enter into trauma narratives; that voice is owed to the non sex worker.

This expectation produces a double wound. Not simply because the trauma is recreated through testimony, but sharing their experiences *as a sex worker* furthers a dispossession from their body and an already fragile agency. This is an expectation of the sex worker to participate in a denouncement of their experiences, in a mapping of illicit knowledge, offering it up to the eyes of power so that the testimony may enter into a disciplinary discourse. While this is a granting of freedom to speak of the illicit, it is one which simultaneously disallows the sex worker to refuse that offer. Further, for Alex this demand for voicing trauma occurs most often in the context of feminist discourses aiming toward social and political transformation, rather than in a context of entertainment or pure voyeurism. This makes it more difficult to challenge, as there are in a sense shared aims.

There is an additional and significant finding in terms of documentary boundaries, voice, and power, and that is the involvement of a sex worker's manager. It is not possible to say definitively how common a practice this is, although it is also one of my critiques of *Happy Endings* (analysed in Chapter 3). But Sophie began our interview saying that.

...out of all the [sex worker documentaries] I've done, I've never had direct contact with anybody. It's always been through [name], through my manger / pimp. Like I've never had any contact information, or emails or anything like that. (Sophie. 2019, Appendix 2: 1)

Sophie's critique of her manager's involvement is not absolute; Sophie saw it as a problem that she didn't have unmediated contact with the film crew, and emphasised that she wanted this contact, coming back to this point throughout the interview (2019,

Appendix 2: 2). But Sophie also notes a protective element in her manager's actions, who imposes conditions on the film crews, such as participants must be able to approve or give feedback on the edits.

[The manager] says if we can't see it before it goes live then it's a no go. Which I think is important because, I've learnt from experience of how many times we've had to say 'that's still not very anonymous'. It's important to have that feedback loop. For me personally if I didn't have the right to say 'no' before it went live I wouldn't ever talk about sex work. Even anonymously. (Sophie. 2019, Appendix 2: 3)

While it should be noted that Sophie does call her manager a 'pimp', as well as 'manager', she is working in a decriminalised context, where management is legalised and subject to police vetting. Sophie does not suggest she was coerced into participation or note her presence during filming itself. While Sophie is not critical of her manager's aims, her involvement has both enabled and limited Sophie's autonomy in regards to participation. This highlights the complexities of manager involvement, particularly where it is less evident in watching the film that they are involved. In this instance, the manager becomes another person the sex worker needs to protect from negative representation, and limits the scope of Sophie's voice, as only other work places can be explicitly critiqued. To do otherwise would not only damage a personal relationship, but potentially her earning capacity.

6.3 Distortion and its impact on self-recognition and practices of giving voice

While the relations of filming influence how a subject feels about what they have said, the act of listening and watching back is a critical aspect of self-perception and voice giving. A common understanding of the aversion to hearing one's own recorded voice is that it does not sound like how the speaker hears their own voice in normal life. Unrecorded, we hear our voice as sound waves filtered through our body. Recorded, these bodily filters are absent, thus resulting in a voice that can sound different to us, or not our own. Agreeing to take part in a documentary means a version of one's voice to which one is ambivalent, or feels displaced from, is out in the world. I wondered how that intersected with managed identity, stigma and documentary, whether hearing a difficult or negative version of one's own voice made it more challenging to speak

about contested or painful aspects of identity, or experiences someone wanted to dissociate from. In this same vein, I was curious as to how participants with ‘multiple’ voices, for example the managed voices of work and ‘authentic’ voice, connected to their own recorded voices, and to what extent this facilitated or hindered their desire to speak on camera. However my interviews reveal that listening back to the voice, both intact and modified, is far more complex in this context. Further, the difficulty of listening back to the voice is not necessarily an obstacle to giving voice. On the contrary, disidentification can work to facilitate speaking, even when this distortion is disliked.

It should first be noted that experiences of listening back to the voice are generally contingent upon different factors, including how the process of filming was experienced and how much personal information was revealed. The problems of boundary loss illustrated in the preceding section are thus also a problem of self-spectatorship, and potential hindering of further participation in documentary works. It is significant to note however, in the context of closeted sex workers, that I found no simple division of positive and negative feeling between listening back to the intact or distorted voice. Nor can it be said that research participants disliked their voice in all contexts. Instead, there was a recognition that voices change in different contexts, and that speakers can feel differently about each. In the following for example, Alex compares two different voices of their ‘real’ self.⁸⁵

I like my reading voice. I don’t like my talking voice [...] Like if I’m reading a poem, I’ve got my reading voice on, and it sounds quite calm to me. I feel calm, because it’s quite mumbly. But this voice, whoa, it’s like I’ve brought Minnie Mouse to the table. It gets so squeaky and so low so it’s just jarring. (Alex. 2019, Appendix 3: 1)

The ‘squeaky’ voice Alex refers to above is their speaking conversation voice. Or, more accurately, one of them, as different conversations call for different voices. Thus, because the voice is prone to ‘leaking’ information about the speaker, and because the voice is generally volatile when it comes to listening back and perception

⁸⁵ By ‘real’ self, I refer to their non-manufactured identity, rather than one of their voices deployed specifically for clients in sex work. This does not imply their sex worker identity and voice is divorced from their ‘real’ self.

of the self, the distorted voice poses additional challenges. As discussed in the previous section, there is anxiety around giving voice on camera, in terms of how much is revealed, either by accident or coercion, how they will be judged by those watching the documentary, and how their voice will be edited. There is a concern with representational authenticity, which is inseparable from the power dynamic at play in filming itself, but also involves spectatorship. This spectatorship is both their own, and that of others, but this distinction is often porous. As I will illustrate, there is a watching back of themselves on screen that is concerned with how they are seen by those who are not sex workers, or possess more power than them. This inside/outside self-spectatorship is bound to the management of stigmatised identities, and I argue it is part of what must be grappled with when coming to speak as a sex worker in documentary. Having said that, while listening to any form of recorded voice can also be difficult, research participants described strong reactions to hearing their own distorted voices, and this should be delineated from the listening back to the voice more generally. More specifically, problems in the distorted voice are twofold: on the one hand relating to fears of what is present in the unmodified voice; but on the other, what is missing in the distorted voice.

In term of presence, the distorted voice magnifies what the speakers already found unhearable in their own voice. For example, what Alex most disliked about their everyday speaking voice—dramatic changes in pitch—becomes extreme in the distorting treatment of their voice in documentary film.

The sound changes, the high-pitched voice, I don't know, almost gave the idea of us being quite child-like. (Alex. 2019, Appendix 3: 4)

I highlight this connection because it reveals how much the documentary can feel like magnifying glass for stigmatised documentary subjects, and, the extent to which stigma imposes a self-critique on the most intimate markers of identity, such as the voice, that makes it difficult to speak freely. The performativity required in the management of stigma and closeted identities thus circles back, casting anxieties around performance back onto the sex worker voice. Alex was not the only participant who repeated the same criticism of their own voice across different recording scenarios. Like Alex, Sophie highlighted aspects she did not like hearing in her undistorted voice— elements which she perceives as infantile, or simply aggravating

or unpleasant—which also appear in her distorted voice. For example, she says of her undistorted voice.

Admittedly I don't massively like my own voice, but I like it a lot more as it is than when it's been raised or lowered by silly amounts [...] Um, I guess I find my voice very annoying [laughs]. When I hear it back I'm kind of like 'ohhhwf, god it's even more annoying than I remembered'. But it is still me. When I hear it I'm like, 'I've got to work on that'. I feel like it's whiney and childish, but it's me, it's still me. (Sophie. 2019, Appendix 2: 9)

These are elements she will go on to criticise in distorted voices. Although she locates it within a general unease with the distorted voice.

The distortion changes how I feel about my voice but it's more that I'm distracted by distortion in general. Maybe everyone's different. It automatically sounds, kind of, funny. Especially if the distortion is to raise the voice [...] I find it very hard to take it seriously when girls have had their voices raised for it. They did that to a few of the girls in the [Documentary A] doco and it sounded stupid, it sounded so stupid. (Sophie. Appendix 2: 8; emphasis mine)

This is about the relation, or dissonance, between voice and body. It is not simply a dislocation from the voice, but the concomitant awareness that her body would be imagined and imagined differently.

I suppose in a sense I almost felt embarrassed in a dumb way that people were assuming, trying to figure out what my body would be to match that voice. I don't know how to explain it without sounding really shallow—I feel like you hear that really low drawl of a voice, and I don't picture me? (Sophie. 2019, Appendix 2: 8)

This is the element of disembodiment in the distorted voice, and concern with how the missing body is filled in via markers in the voice. The feeling of the voice not belonging to the speaking subject thus spills out to a feeling that the body is likewise dispossessed. As argued in the previous chapter, disembodied voice allows the listener to imagine the body, but vocalic bodies are more complex when the bodies in question are closeted and are subject to the prostitute imaginary. In the context of anonymity

in sex worker documentary, anonymous subjects need the audience to conjure a different body to their own: but not just *any* body - a body without stigma - which does not undermine or counter their words, and enables them to be fully heard.

When I hear higher voices I automatically picture younger childish, women, girls or whatever. I don't imagine women when I hear high pitched squeaky voices. I automatically imagine young and childish and immature. And with overly lowered voices I have more of a bogan, messy vision of a person [...] I don't like how I feel, I sound like a bogany, unintellectual kind of thing.⁸⁶ (Sophie. 2019, Appendix 2: 9)

Sophie is concerned and disturbed by the distorted voices of other sex workers, and this is reflected in how she feels about or interprets her own. She recognises that listeners imagine speakers they cannot see, because she herself does, and that the distorted voice produces deviant, infantile and abject bodies. She acknowledges how easy it is to project stereotypes onto the voice, even when consciously reflecting upon that perception. Finally, she wants to be able to picture herself, but cannot. This is a reflection of the pressure sex workers face in speaking in documentary film to conform to a collective identity that can counter the abject assigned them. Sophie cannot only view herself as an individual, but must assess her performance in terms of collective representation. But it also reveals the extent to which the prostitute imaginary is recuperated back into sex worker subjectivity, even in their attempts to cast it off. The prostitute imaginary is a sticky, shifting hallucination that does not discriminate in terms of spectators, even if it lands differently depending on who is viewing. The added implication here is that the amplification of stigma through documentary should not only be considered in regards to harm from outside forces, for example increased criminalisation or social exclusion, but to the ability for sex workers to come into their own voice.

Verisimilitude, however, is not always sought after by documentary subjects and dis-identification not always negative. There is instead a comfort in feeling separate from one's voice and image. In contrast to Sophie for example, Emma described a much greater discomfort in hearing her 'real' undistorted voice than in a

⁸⁶ New Zealand and Australian slang for those in a low socio-economic status, usually white.

piece where her voice was altered. While there was self-critique when Emma spoke about her participation in non-distorted documentary works (2019, Appendix 1: 4), I noticed an ease in relation to disidentification when we spoke about her participation in an animated documentary with modified voice. She said she felt separated from her voice, because it did not look like her, and did not sound like her either. Although I would qualify this by noting that the pitch modification of voices in this piece was done with a light touch, enough to nudge her voice out of its usual space, but not extreme enough sound dehumanised. The voice was not quite ‘hers’ to her mind. This double face/voice cloak produced the only documentary work that feels safe for Emma, where she feels positively rather than negatively about her voice and participation. When I asked how she experienced seeing her voice attached to a different body, she answered.

Yeah, funny. Like kind of you, but also not you anymore. I guess I felt fairly detached from the whole thing by the time it was produced because it doesn’t sound like me, and it doesn’t look like me, and like not detached in a bad way. I think it’s a great piece of work that was produced and I’m proud to have been in it, and I don’t feel any emotional attachment and I don’t feel any fear or regret like that podcast I did. (Emma. 2019, Appendix 1: 6-7)

This dissonance between voice and body can thus be productive in that it enables voice to be given, or conversely, it can be something to be managed. This is not simply about the body and individual disidentification, but about what participants fear will be projected onto them via the voice. This is not only about the production of vocalic bodies, but negative bodies. For example, shifting the pitch lower was deemed even worse than higher pitch, linked to both criminality, even a traumatic rupture of identity. This is more than an association with anti-social or deviant behaviour, it is the implication of shame, of loss, and internalisation of stigma that is so striking and considered a greater danger than infantilisation.

They originally gave us this very slow deep voice, it made us sound like criminals, it was a voice distortion which I’ve only heard in crime shows, or from people fleeing their identities. And I expressed being quite unhappy with that. It made us seem like we

were ashamed of what we did, or we were criminals essentially.
(Alex. 2019, Appendix 3: 4)

When it comes to discussing a lot of sex work, when we're discussing sex work, as sex workers, we're trying to educate. Like I'm an advocate for sex worker rights, I want what I'm saying to be listened to and taken seriously, and when you're trying to make an important point *and it comes out sounding [so high pitched]* no one's going to take that seriously! (Sophie. 2019, Appendix 2: 5)

In this sense, in the context of giving voice, the distorted sex worker voice in documentary complicates the task of identity management, because it no longer pertains simply to individual stigmatised identity. As the blurred face is a collective marker of stigma, the distorted voice likewise bleeds out beyond the individual speaker. This pressure to be taken seriously concerns collective voice. When I asked Alex about watching their interviews back, they noted a feeling of being divorced from themselves, but this separation was in service to a critique of their own performance as a speaking sex worker, rather than as Alex.

I do slightly divorce it from myself [...] It's my words, but they are doing a job, in a way that's different from poetry or, even I think, strangely enough, from a lot of the media I do as my sex worker persona (Alex. 2019, Appendix 3: 8)

It is relevant to note that Alex undertakes sex worker rights advocacy publicly on their client-facing twitter accounts, as well as personal social media accounts, and considers both forms of performance. But these are different performances of voice than in documentary practice. In documentary, Alex noted a performance in order for the audience to feel 'at ease' and this is linked to removing sex work specific stigma, such as victimhood or trauma signs, from the voice.

I don't want people to watch someone who seems sad or hurt or afraid or cautious in talking to the media. So, I want to make the audience members

feel at ease, and not like I'm unsafe or hurt or that I need to be rescued. And so, there is that element of being, I guess compensating for that view of the traumatised sex worker, where I almost feel like I need to be slightly more upbeat. (Alex. 2019, Appendix 3: 13)

This is important because anonymity, regardless of its manifestations, is in itself a signifier, one that is in conflict with being seen as safe or possessing agency and strength, because someone who is safe does not require anonymity. This is a lot for sex workers to work against. Not only must stigmatised documentary participants concern themselves their own individual and collective representation, and concomitant judgement, they must also do so considering the feelings of the audience. This requires a performance of being 'whole', which actually means being less so in practice, as they cannot fully express painful or problematic experiences in the way in which they would like. I do not refer simply to what is said, but how it expressed in the voice and face. It is in this sense that in 'anonymity', or its signifiers, something is lost for those managing a stigmatised identity, even before distortions and blurs come into the conversation. There is therefore a personal cost for participants in speaking in this way, even before the broader representational problems of the abject and distortion are taken into account. That anonymity continues to be sought, when it is painful in itself and so often fails, and is known to fail, reflects the extremity of harm sex workers risk in speaking, the depths of stigma countered with the drive for liberation, and above all the dissonance with which sex workers must engage in order to give that voice.

6.4 Practices of anonymity

This brings me to documentary participant's perception of how anonymity operates, or fails, in the distorted voice, and concomitantly, how the closet is enacted. As I will illustrate, this enactment is not something which transforms the speaker into a securely anonymous subject, or converse, leaves one outside the closet. Rather, it is a practice of grey zones and ambiguity, of oscillation and temporality, contingent on who one is speaking to, and what they are speaking about. Anonymity is perceived as vulnerable, and something to which needs tending. It should be noted from the outset that it is not sought by all sex workers, nor seen as productive. As I will shortly expand, even those who insist upon it do not necessarily want it, and this complicates how it is approached

and experienced. This ambivalence, and completing needs to be both visible and invisible, coexists with arguments that strategies of anonymity are harmful and should be abandoned. This complexity and conflict needs to be taken into account when analysing practices of anonymity and giving voice, because, like the voice itself, anonymity in this light can be interpreted as an act of submission rather than coming into power. All of this impacts the kind of anonymising strategies deployed or asked for by sex workers, and the risks they are willing to take in speaking.

Chanta and Laovilawanyakul for example both argued that distortion in particular renders the subject a victim, thus intensifying stigma against sex workers. In order to counter the shaming of sex workers, one must speak without shame: ‘We are trying to show that we are women in society, we’re not outside of anything. We don’t want to be looked at as something that needs to be disguised’ (Laovilawanyakul. Appendix 4: 5). For Chanta this means to speak without obfuscation, or not at all. ‘If you’re not ready to show your face and want it out there,’ she say, ‘then it’s better not to be in it then be disguised, because it’s some kind of admission that what you’re doing is shameful or wrong’ (Chanta, 2019, Appendix 4: 5).

Both Chanta and Laovilawanyakul are out as sex workers, even though they are speaking in a context where the legal and social repercussions of sex work are severe. It is significant that they are involved in Empower, which is an established sex worker led organisation which conducts its own sex work research, advocacy, as well as produces its own video projects. This collective power is not divorced from the contexts in which Chanta and Laovilawanyakul decide to speak, as even though they have repeatedly encountered unethical documentary practice, their concern lies not in being outed but in representational failures.

In contrast, while sex worker organisations exist in the United Kingdom, the geography of sex work there is isolating. It is illegal to work with other sex workers, large scale brothels do not exist, and street work, arguably a form of open, connective space, is highly policed. I note this to highlight that the sex work geographies across my interviews are different, and this does influence approaches to the closet and giving voice. This shifts again in New Zealand, where even though sex work is decriminalised, there are relatively few brothels, with independent, indoor work being more common. As opposed to the United Kingdom and Thailand, New Zealand is has a relatively small population and it is harder to be unknown.

Everyday practices of anonymity in sex work also vary within locations, including differences in independent and managed work. For example it is not common for cisgendered women sex workers in the United Kingdom or New Zealand to advertise with their faces shown, but more common amongst transgender and male sex workers. Furthermore, being ‘face out’ does not mean someone is out as a sex worker, simply that they allow the additional risk of their face being visible. It is also common for potential clients to request face pictures in the United Kingdom, and the ability of a sex worker to refuse this depends on their financial precarity. Street work renders a sex worker visible to passers-by, who may or may not see them as sex workers, but out of the visual record of online spaces. This is similar for workers operating out of bars or walk-in venues reliant on foot traffic, and not online advertising, for example in many Thai sex work geographies, although conversely they are more vulnerable to covert filming.

There are, in other words, multiple practices of risk and identity protection within sex work which change depending on location, intersection of identities, ways of working, and personal experiences. These ongoing and shifting practices of the closet crossover into documentary participation, where decisions around documentary anonymity are combined with embodied knowledge that there is always risk, and that strategies of identity protection may fail. For documentary practice, this means that sex workers already grapple with being seen or hidden in different contexts, and filmmakers should not assume what anonymity means to individual sex workers. It should certainly not be assumed sex workers are naïve to the risks of speaking, whether from the closest, or openly.

All my interviews touched upon the failure of anonymity. My research participants had experienced being recognised in numerous documentary projects, despite vocal distortion or disembodiment. For some this also included additional modification such as vocal speed alteration. Alex, Sophie and Emma: each considered the mechanisms by which distortion masked their voice. Alex reported some improvement to their voice distortion after they critiqued a draft edit, but noted that the filmmakers did not make subsequent changes as asked. Sophie recalled giving feedback on voice manipulation which was ignored. In fact, Sophie was so dissatisfied with her vocal masking in one documentary that she tested out how easily her voice could be recovered.

I understand that there are limitations in voice distortion in what you can and can't do. And there is one doco a while ago I can't remember what it was, but they did a voice distortion that was a very basic one, that I, out of curiosity, extracted the audio file, put it in my own audio program and reversed the distortion. And it was *one* step to get my voice back [...] my voice was lowered and I put it into a thing that raised it [...] and there it was, my voice. (Sophie. 2019, Appendix 2: 4-5)

While this confirms how easy it is to undo voice distortion, this also illustrates that sex workers make interventions in their own anonymity and are not naïve to how the risks to identity protection play out in practice. As opposed to filmmakers, sex workers must grapple with the making and remaking of their anonymity on a daily basis. In this vein, it is not only failure which is interrogated by sex workers, but the making of anonymity. Sophie also argued for example that anonymity and affect are not separate, concluding instead that vocal distortion works in its very capacity to render the voice unhuman.

Changing the pitch of someone's voice really doesn't change all that much, it throws you off the scent. Partly because I think you get thrown off the scent when someone adjusts their voice higher or lower, because it sounds so alien in general. (Sophie. 2019, Appendix 2: 7).

It is the 'break away from a real human voice' (ibid.) which allows a distraction from vocal markers which may out the speaker. In this sense distortion was believed to contribute to a 'grey' anonymity, whereby it is via signification, rather than purely the distortion itself. Obvious vocal modification acts as signification that the voice is cloaked, which contributes to the production of anonymity, as much as, if not more than distortion itself. The distorted voice signifies that the speaker is unknowable. For Sophie, it is enough that all distortion may do is produce doubt or distraction, even though there is a trade-off with how she is perceived. 'It doesn't sound real,' she says, 'which I think also detracts' (ibid.). She reasserts, like Emma and Alex, that she would not, at this point, participate in documentary without some form of vocal distortion. This demonstrates the need to *feel* the closet, even when accompanied by painful self-spectatorship, or failing identity protection. It also highlights the complexities of

practices of anonymity, whereby markers of anonymity are used as stand-ins for the object itself.

This desire for distortion, even in its failure, reveals a degree of ambivalence that runs underneath negotiations of risk of recognition. Alongside an insistence on practices of anonymity in film, both Emma and Alex spoke of a desire to not be closeted. There was an element of leaning into that desire in how they approached participation in documentary that might out them. This includes a desire for anonymity that is *just enough*: ‘Plausible deniability. That’s all I want. I don’t mind if somebody suspects’ (Alex. Appendix 3: 13). There was also an engagement with the idea of being outed more generally, for example by a client, as part of being a sex worker. In taking the actions needed in order to be closeted, because it is not a default state but must be continually attended to, one must necessarily confront the possibility of loss of the closet. As Alex points out, there are multiple points where identity can be betrayed, and this vulnerability of anonymity is something to work through even as it is held on to.

Like you never know when you’re going to be outed anyway, and talking to the media there’s that added possibility, that they won’t do due diligence in disguising you. But equally, a client could out me. Or a friend could out me. Or. An ex-partner could out me, and I’m aware I have no control over it, and that’s, that is a reality of the discrimination we have as a sex worker. You don’t really have total control over that. And it’s something I’ve worked through and I’m aware of and I wouldn’t like it to happen, but at the same time it’s something I knowingly took on when I started the job. And there’s people who would encounter far worse than me if they were outed than me. I could really handle it. And one day I would actually like to be out, I think it’s important. I have no weird feelings about being a sex worker. (Alex. 2019, Appendix 3: 9-10)

Alex also described experiences where they were contacted and told they were not acting closeted enough (2019, Appendix 3: 10), which they experienced as both threatening and as reinforcement of stigma. There is an intersection here, where the ideals of anonymity held by non-sex workers encroach on the voice of sex workers. As noted, both Chanta and Laovilawanyakul for example, reported being blurred

multiple times despite explicitly ask filmmakers to *not* be (2019, Appendix 4: 4-5). Chanta describes the experience as an infantilisation which did not even protect them from recognition ‘...they protected my identity from wide society who don’t know me, but all my friends and family could recognise me easily anyway. Their reasoning is bullshit anyway. I’m still really angry about that, and it’s not the only time it’s happened’ (2019, Appendix 4: 3). This is an extreme manifestation of the prostitute imaginary, whereby sex workers are not considered able to give their own consent, and can only be understood as sex workers when they are unable to speak for themselves, and unable to be seen. As Alex argues, this stems from the idea that sex workers must exist in fear in order to be understood as a sex worker.

Existing as a sex worker in fear isn’t my duty. And that isn’t to criticise sex workers who exist in fear of being outed, like I understand that fear, and it’s a real fear and it’s valid. But I shouldn’t have to have that fear in order to be seen as someone who, yeah, has a right to be a sex worker. I have a right to be seen. If people think that’s immaturity or me being careless or me not knowing better is really none of their business, because, *I* get to negotiate those boundaries, and I get to choose not to live in shame. (Alex. 2019, Appendix 3: 16)

The above highlights the difficulty in negotiating boundaries and zones of anonymity, because while Alex asserts their right to be seen, this exposure is furtive and opaque in practice. They are not out, yet, as a sex worker, but they nonetheless push at the boundaries of their opacity in different contexts. In this vein, my interview with Emma raised the question of grey zones as space for furtive testing out of these boundaries.

And I think for me, I’ve been in this place because I write about sex work, and write in a way that it’s kind of probably pretty obvious that I am sex worker, so I’m in a bit of a grey area of being out. And I think maybe when I did things like that it was an experiment, dipping my toe into the water of what it would be like to be out, publicly. (Emma. 2019, Appendix 1: 4)

Emma also highlighted the risk of losing identity protection in the context of shifting political landscapes and advances in technology. The United States still prohibits non-citizen sex workers from entering the country, for example, even to transit through.

I've got three friends who've been turned away from the States now, one of them has a 10-year ban, and things feel like they're getting more repressive and that the dangers of being out are more dramatic than they were even a couple of years ago. So, I even regret writing under my real name. I would advise everyone to be really careful. Things change so quickly, and you think you're ok, and then the whole legal situation might change, and you'd be really screwed if your identifiable. God knows what technologies will exist around the corner, where you could be found out for being a sex worker. I don't know, some of the stuff that would have seemed really paranoid 5 years ago now is reality. (Emma. 2019, Appendix 1: 4)

It is notable that these laws also target former sex-workers, as immigration guidelines state someone must have not done sex work for at least ten years to be granted entry to the United States. Given the current backlash in the United States against transgender access to healthcare and legal rights, as well as roll back on abortion access,⁸⁷ it is understandable that sex workers might look to present anonymity in the context of future precarity. This also reflects that decriminalisation alone is insufficient to protect sex workers where stigma still exists, and indeed the desire for documentary anonymity by sex workers in New Zealand supports this argument. In this regard, I contend that while a feeling or condition of relative safety in the moment of speaking on camera is necessary, and even though there may be other power inequalities unfolding at the same time, the quest for anonymity is founded in the

⁸⁷ Candice Johnson contextualises the overturning of *Roe vs Wade* as not only an attack on reproductive access, but on reproductive justice and the broader rights of marginalised communities, describing the United States as 'rights reversal ground zero' (Johnson, 2022). I contend this description captures broader fears around what other rights may be dismantled, and how this reversal may spread beyond the United States. This is not only based on rights but amplification of stigma and violence. For instance, significant volumes of homophobic, misogynistic and violent anti-transgender rhetoric is appearing in New Zealand, which researchers Sanjana Hattotawa, Kate Hannah and Kayli Taylor have linked to foreign influences connecting with local white nationalists (2022: 36). There is a bigger picture of contemporary precarity of subjects at risk from a growing far-right, which Emma for example recognises they are not excluded from.

precarity of sex work. This precarity which does not resolve even when someone is no longer a sex worker, but continues to haunt, and temporal extension of stigma is anticipated by sex workers.

To the question of how different, or nearby, practices of work and documentary anonymity feel, it became apparent that these anonymities are not felt as the same, but there is also complex links between them. Emma for example, would rather be identifiable to her clients than to be generally outed as a sex worker.

It's funny because they feel really different those two types of anonymity. Like if I had to choose one or the other, like my two twitter accounts – my work twitter and my real name twitter and someone was like 'right, either you have to tweet a picture of your face and your real name on your work account, or you have to tweet on your real name account 'I am a prostitute, and I have been one since I was 18', I would choose the work one. Because even though I hate clients and I don't trust them, basically everyone in that world is in that world, already. Whereas doing that in my real name account, the repercussions seem much bigger. (Emma. 2019, Appendix 1: 5)

There is an element of exposure to this. Risk is complicated by potential exposure to clients knowing what they 'really think' and the undoing of managed identity in a work context. That is, being recognised in documentary can not only harm sex workers in contexts outside of work, but negatively impact their work and work relationships.

You've got a work persona and it's protecting yourself, but you're also keeping this fake persona for keeping up a front. Whereas when you're doing interviews, it's you, you're saying what you really think and talking about your real circumstances which are usually wildly different than the ones of your escort persona. It feels much more fraught and risky, and scary. (Emma, Appendix 1: 5)

This was echoed by Sophie.

I would hate it if I were in a doco, and it came up and linked to my sex work file or my twitter or anything, you know? I'm ok with it saying [my name], but I wouldn't want that direct [work name] link to be emphasised. In a weird way. I don't actually know why though. Hmm, I guess partly because that anonymity in the bedroom with a client is catered anonymity. Whereas in the documentary it's going to a broader audience and an audience where you don't know exactly who's going to be in it, you can't cater your anonymity to them, the way you can to a client [...] Some [clients] they ask questions about the industry, where you feel 'I know you're asking me, but I feel I know what answer you want to get and it's not truthful so I'm going to give you the answer you want to get because I don't want to break this bubble we're in for this hour'. (Sophie. 2019, Appendix 2: 10)

Sophie highlights the existence of multiple anonymities, further demonstrating anonymity as a practice and a shifting one. The above demonstrates not only the multiple pressures on sex workers in documentary projects, who must consider not only being outed, and being heard, but also managing clients feelings if the image they have of the speaker is shattered. In other words, practices of anonymity in documentary relate to the ability to manage a client encounter. This includes the ability to get or continue a work relationship, the loss of which could cause material hardship, which can subsequently put sex workers at greater risk of violence.

It is perhaps not so surprising therefore that there is a willingness tolerate the distorting practices of anonymity despite the risk of recognition. No closeted sex worker I spoke with would be willing to give up that scrap of identificatory doubt it provides. Knowledge and experiences of failing vocal anonymity were set aside in order that voice may be given. The desire for a grey zone of recognition, even if not total, was too much. This is another form of risk negotiation that sex workers are so familiar with, which combines in documentary practice with a drive to give voice in whatever way they can. This demand for an 'anonymity' despite its precarity speaks to the extent to which stigma still operates, even in New Zealand where sex work has been decriminalised for two decades. But it also testifies to the very complex agency of sex worker voice.

6.5 Conclusion

Critical lessons have been learnt through my research interviews with sex workers. The problems of fragile agency, anonymity, stigma, self-spectatorship and giving voice are far more interconnected than I had previously thought. Conversely, this strand of my research has also highlighted the resilience and agility of sex workers, who speak with awareness and critical lens on the documentary apparatus and strategies of anonymisation. The interventions produced through my research interviews are significant, and span territories of power, documentary apparatus, and understandings of anonymity itself. This approach illuminates the depths to which sex worker voices are suppressed within the apparatus of documentary itself, and the risks sex workers take in order to counter this suppression. This risk in giving voice goes beyond recognition and into the territory of self-perception.

Firstly, documentary participants recognise and resist the negative affect produced and amplified by the distorted voice. But critically, the sex workers I spoke with bear this defacement of their voice knowing it provides only partial cover of their identities. This is precisely where the persistence of the sex worker voice is most emphatic and most wild. Fear of speaking without vocal alteration persists. Only research participants who were already ‘out’ as sex workers rejected the deployment of voice distortion, even though closeted subjects were also critical of its use.

Secondly, even when recognised as a form of wounding, distortion can also provide the very possibility for voice. In my interviews for example, participants expressed conflicting feelings about both their distorted and intact voice. Voice distortion is at once a magnifying mirror for elements they perceive negatively in their voice, as well as for the stigma they experience. But while this modification was generally considered to produce an infantile or nonhuman subject—both qualities seen to delegitimise their own voices and the sex workers more generally—it also provided a space for disidentification which could be positive, and actually allow them to speak, precisely because it *did not* feel like them. This distance is not necessarily negative, as at times voice distortion even produced an element of self-disidentification which is sought after: indeed, it makes giving voice possible. The lesson here is that vocal distortion can be useful not despite but *through* its very separation of the voice from the body and production of alienation. Its use is not confined to the partial provision of anonymity but extends to a rupturing that facilitates the voice of the stigmatised or traumatised subject.

Third, for sex workers in my interviews, the contribution of the distorted voice to anonymity lies less in the alteration of the voice itself, and more in the signification of that alteration. This includes both minor and more extreme forms of vocal distortion. This reflects a distrust of the capacity of the cinematic apparatus to produce comprehensive anonymity, alongside a concern with how identify protection can be enacted in practice, and the role of affect in anonymity. It also stems from a tolerance or desire for ambiguity of anonymity; the signification alone of a hidden voice works *enough*, because the anonymity is not required to be total. In short, representation and anonymity are not separable issues.

Fourth, and following on from the above, management of vocal distortion is a form of management of stigmatised identity. Refusal to allow documentary subjects input into anonymising strategies such as vocal distortion is thus an unethical documentary practice. For example, while it would be speculative to assume that the sex worker documentary subjects in *Happy Endings* were not involved in post-production editing of their voice and image, I would be concerned if non-involvement was the case, particularly given the extreme levels of distortion at play. Regardless of the level of voice distortion, I argue that sex workers should be given active input into its application. This is not only about individual needs around identity protection, but construction and perception of the self in the context of abjection.

Fifth, anonymity should be reconceived as a practice, not a state. As an ideal, anonymity is prone to failure. While I have argued in previous chapters that obfuscation in documentary does not hide the identity completely, my interviews revealed just how widely this is understood by participants. But partial and shifting anonymities nonetheless are practiced by sex workers, and this act allows voice to be given, despite risk and fear in doing so.

Furthermore, sex workers feel power inequalities in the practice of documentary filming and experience this struggle for withholding voice and creating boundaries as more challenging than in client relationships. While I examined coercion to speak and transference in previous chapters, my interviews with sex workers reveal an added and jarring depth to this power inequality.

Finally, I reiterate that sex worker documentary participants should be considered expert sources of information when it comes to documentary analysis. Necessarily critical of their own and collective representation, they have done the work of interpretation from the inside out. Sex workers are not naïve documentary

subjects, they recognise the fallibility and risk involved in speaking on camera, even with vocal distortion, they likewise recognise pitfalls of distortion in terms of how they will be perceived by others; and yet, they speak. This negotiation of harm, negative perception, including self-perception, stigma and silence shows the sex worker who gives voice as resilient, reflective, yet vulnerable, and highlights the extent to which the rhetorical silencing of sex workers therefore both harms sex workers and furthers the prostitute imaginary. Documentary that excludes sex workers from the means of documentary production therefore causes harm on multiple levels. This exclusion negatively interferes with sex worker practices of anonymity, which are complex, variable and skilled, but also impedes the ability of sex workers to counter their own abjection, to speak on what they want and in their own terms.

Conclusion: Claiming translucency, claiming risk: the wild, volatile voice given against all odds

Research aims and embodiments

I began this thesis with a preoccupation with absence. Of closeted sex worker voices within my own documentary work. Of sex worker voices with power in documentary more broadly. A question arising from my practise, as I saw it, was a need for a kind of anonymity which facilitated participation in documentary, but also countered representational problems of this anonymity. I was also a closeted subject within my research, veiling in my writing how close I was to the sex work subjects I filmed, and in the films I watched. This deflection was not at play in my video practice, and this aspect of practice as bridge will be expanded upon. While absence has continued to haunt this thesis, my own location is no longer a part of this haunting but made explicit. As a work of feminist research practice I hold this acknowledgement as pertinent to both my own and the work of others. Noting that silences within the research process can reflect wider social marginalisations also present within academia, this is not a critique of the closet, but a call for ongoing and nuanced conversations around omissions and the unspeakable in academic discourse.

As I conclude, I revisit my thesis aims, before addressing the limits and challenges of my research practice. As a significant amount of learning emerged from these obstacles, I spend some time reflecting upon these limits as entry / impediment to the production of knowledge. I then move on to the key findings of my thesis. To this end there are twin threads to my interventions, the first focused on sex work documentary practice, and the second regarding practice integrated research and schizoanalysis. Directions for further research are addressed throughout. Finally, I extend my reflections on the implications of my findings.

My research aim can be summarised in two questions: *how / is it possible for sex workers to speak in documentary, and not be undone by doing so.*

This question does however require some expansion. In considering how to speak as a sex worker, I include positions of both closeted identity and an 'open' one, acknowledging that neither of these positions are necessarily total. There are different practices of giving voice as a sex worker in documentary, including covert ones. I use the phrase 'not be undone' with deliberate openness, as I have found that marginalised

subjects can be undone by far more than a lack of anonymity. One can also be undone for example through being rendered anonymous against one's wishes. Further, I have also found undone-ness of abjection, stigma, rhetorical silencing, as well as disciplinary or coercive practices of prompting the documentary subject to speak. In considering the voices of individual sex workers on screen, a wider analysis of the documentary cinematic apparatus, and power exterior to film is also necessary. This is then not only about protection of the speaker from harm, as much about coming in to power through practices of voice and visibility, as well as representation and its effects both on speakers and social discourse. From this central query stem many lessons. These are outlined below, in order to build a comprehensive map of my thesis journey and interventions. My findings will be more fully expanded upon after I have addressed the limits of my thesis.

In my thesis introduction, I revealed limits to a sex worker voice with agency stem from stigma and intersecting marginalisations, and this limit includes sex work exclusionary feminist discourse emerging from the sex wars. I found that sex worker documentary representation is located within histories of marginalisation enacted through audio-visual representation and the cinematic apparatus, including the prostitute imaginary. In questioning relationships between the sex worker on the documentary screen and world exterior to that film, the boundaries between disciplinary, pornographic, ethnographic, and politically committed film making were revealed to be porous in practice.

Addressing the marginalisation produced also through knowledge seeking lens of the camera, *Chapter 1* revealed both the necessity and complexity of a feminist and schizoanalytic approach where research is bound by closeted knowledge, fragile agency, and absence (of voice, of films themselves). Using schizoanalysis initially as an intersectional tool to counter these limits, it became even more important in allowing me to produce knowledge from my split locations within the thesis, as well as look outwards to exterior operations of power.

In *Chapter 2*, I identified dispossessive practices of documentary, revealing a suspension of the sex worker in the prostitute imaginary. In mapping the intersections of the ethno-pornographic lens, racialisation, and the interrogative gaze enacted through and upon the face, I found the visible face of the sex worker is subject to possession and totalisation, but that this easily goes unnoticed, as the face is not considered a typical site of exploitation. I have found however, that this use of the

face is recognised by those subject to this gaze of the camera, which is countered and met by documentary subjects themselves. These resistances can be subtle, but need to be looked for in order to understand relations and possibilities of power.

In *Chapter 3*, I found that despite the face acting as vector of the prostitute imaginary, the ‘unseen’ face does not allow for a more liberatory opening of representation and power. Locating the sex worker within discourses of abjection, I found significant risks in becoming ‘faceless’ as an already abject subject, to the extent that the obfuscated face allows others to insert their own pseudo ‘face proxy’ in place. As protective or oppositional practice, the blur is volatile, undoing the speaking subject beneath; it is not on the side of the subjugated.

In *Chapter 4*, in examining what it means to give voice as a ‘voiceless’ subject, and in documentary specifically, I found a level of coercion and demand to be decipherable which is at odds with the perception of speaking as form of coming to power. In considering the means by which vulnerable voice is called forth, I found the need for thorough examinations of how power plays out in filming itself, not just in forces external to it. But I also found a need to address the ‘unspeakable’ and difficult/trauma narratives, as how these are handled not only influence being able to speak from a position of marginality in the first place, but can also reproduce dispossessive or violent relations of power. Likewise, silences were revealed to be both wound and act of resistance, and this multiplicity must be taken into account in any examination of dispossessed voice and the cinematic apparatus.

Locating unspeakability as also being connected to the need to speak from a closeted identity, I examined strategies of vocal anonymity in *Chapter 5*. Mapping the limits of anonymity, and finding an almost catastrophic failure in its provision, the representational problems of anonymity become even more urgent. This is the case for both strategies of disembodiment where the voice is left intact, and in voice distortion, because I have found that ‘disembodiment’ also fails; a body is conjured. While a voice with power can be found despite this failure, depending on specific relations between voice and image, the intervention of the prostitute imaginary renders the disembodied sex worker voice highly volatile. The introduction of voice distortion pushes this precarity into the realm of abjection.

In *Chapter 6*, my findings revealed the need to reconceive of anonymity as practice. I also re-drew understandings of vulnerable agency and power in the documentary encounter. In dialogue with sex workers themselves about experiences

of anonymity, documentary participation, disidentification, as well as spectatorship of their own stigmatised identities, extensive documentary silencing and harm is revealed. Critically, these conversations also reveal sex worker opposition and adaptation. Sex workers negotiate stigma, power inequality, silence, and safety in order to speak; to speak and to not be undone.

Research limitations

This thesis has been a process of questioning my own anonymity as a closeted subject within my own research. This initial limit was instructive, forcing an engagement with the complexities and negotiations of the closet and giving voice. It likewise allowed a close analysis of the barriers of disclosure, and what must be weighed in moving from ambiguous positions to speaking openly in the context of stigma and material risk. While as a filmmaker I was already embedded within my research, this is a form of closeness not considered discreditable to any significant degree, or disruptive to insider/outsider dichotomies. There is a lens of knowledge seeking in this position not at odds with the knowledge seeking project of a PhD thesis. A documentary maker takes on the role of researcher to some degree, even in self-reflective subjects; the camera is ultimately an instrument of vision. To be situated as a filmmaker is not seen to contradict or imply the absence of objectivity, despite being a subjective position which requires as much reflection as other situated knowledge. In contrast, my position as a sex worker, even though seeking knowledge and knowledgeable in turn, required that I repeatedly map my positionality and analyse my view. This requirement was not necessarily imposed from the outside; it reflects my own internalised critique as well. However this limit, and active tracing of it, has facilitated a deeper engagement with my research material and embodied experiences which have only benefited my thesis. Indeed, this thesis can be framed as an intervention on the moving limits and interactions between anonymity and speaking.

These productive limits have been accompanied by other restraints, which can broadly be categorised as concerning absence. The missing sex worker voice is the foundation of this thesis. Recognising that even in my own video that some sex worker voices were only partially present, and others, who wanted to speak anonymously, were completely absent, I have sought to find pathways for practices of giving voice amidst precarity. But absence appears more frustratingly in the withdrawal of sex worker made or centered documentary from the visual record. Relatedly, there were

several works which I had hoped to include in my thesis, but had been withdrawn from public view. This includes Bubu de la Madeleine's *Pornography made by me and my client*, which is no longer screened, by direction of de la Madeleine herself. I had seen this in 2007, Berlin, at the art exhibition *Sex Work: Kunst, Mythos, Realitat*. While the video presented a form of auto-ethnography highly pertinent to this thesis and my own practice, I nonetheless hesitated to write in depth about it, as the artist has asked to disidentify as a sex worker. As a researcher defending sex worker agency, this means respecting sex worker as artist disappearance too. Considering this thesis as a form of archive of marginal works, I have instead chosen to flag her decision, which is public, but not detail the work itself.

De la Madeleine's video was not the only work which I would have otherwise analysed. Further missing works include other experimental documentaries which were screened in gallery contexts and without wider distribution.⁸⁸ The disappearing videos become ghost works, haunting the possibility of a new, alternative video-poiesis. In a sense, it is impressive that this kind of withdrawal in the digital age is still possible, as once a copy of a video leaves one's hands it is largely uncontrollable where it will end up. Indeed, an experimental video I made in 2008 for an off-line exhibition ended up in an online gallery archive without my consent. I contend that in any ethical documentary practice the possibility of this withdrawal is critical, particularly when concerning marginalised subjects. Noting the loss engendered from this withdrawal, this points to a need for 'closeted' archives; a subject for further exploration.

Absence is also evident in works that are still available but only in non-digitised archives, for example *My Night With Julia*. This particular absence signposts the challenge to this thesis in uncovering films which counter the sex wars paradigm for example, or present marginal subjects. While I was able to study this film in depth, its relative inaccessibility means other people will have difficulty making their own counter critique. I am glad to be providing a record and critique of such work missing from academic discourse, and in this sense, this thesis acts of an archive of knowledge. This absence highlights the importance of shifting conversations around sex work documentary ethics, and countering the rhetorical silencing of sex workers in the

⁸⁸ Including Tammy Rae Carland's *Lady Outlaws and Faggot Wannabes* (1995), which only exists in physical archives in analogue form in the United States.

academic sphere, because if a film can be withdrawn from wider view into the basements of the archive, there exists the possibility that in discourse shift it can re-emerge also.

Further, it would be valuable to trace how particular works became saved by the archive, and conversely confined to the archive. This is important as much of this radical and experimental sex work video counters the prostitute imaginary but cannot act as an alternate videopoiesis because it is not broadcastable. Studying the moving in and out of the closet would be highly valuable in terms of facilitation and preservation of marginalised voices.

This absence of sex worker video in the accessible visual record illustrates the precarity, vulnerability and status of the sex worker produced documentary, particularly when the work counters the rhetorical silencing of sex workers, and when a very partial or non-existent anonymity is practiced. This is even more the case where the documentary takes on experimental or video art forms, which can be understood as a practice of ambiguous anonymity, but which may not be very broadcast friendly, either because of sexual content or oppositional, marginal discourse. However, the use of video art strategies within sex worker documentary, sometimes a practice of ambiguous anonymity in itself, is something I would like to research further.

Absence in this thesis extends beyond the films as objects to those who have produced them. At points throughout this thesis I wanted to have conversations with directors of the films I studied. The majority of filmmakers were uncontactable, and this absence is notable, reflecting, as I discussed in Chapter 1 in an academic context, the problems in aligning oneself with sex work subjects. This absence was also the case for sex worker made documentary, and where there was always an underlying element of anonymity of authorship, even if they still want the work to be in the public sphere.

In this vein, it was ambitious to seek out research interview participants who had participated anonymously in documentary projects, and was only possible because of my own location as sex worker. That I was able to do so at all highlights the importance of situated practices of knowledge. I would like to expand my research interviews to include a larger number of participants, and to those who had participated in more historical videos as well.

Finally, although my practice in itself was not a limit, there were limitations to my practice. There are two aspects to this. Firstly, there was ethical limits that I

imposed on how my practice was to be undertaken, which meant that I would not film interviews with other people as part of my creative research practice. This was about risk of recognition, but also concerned ethics of boundaries in the filming relationship, trauma testimony and self-perception, and the intersection with academic structures of power. Specifically, I did not find it ethical to discuss problems of power in documentary interviews, within a setting that replicated that structure. This limit was applied to both my creative practice and research interviews, meaning that my interviews with other sex workers exist in written form only.

Secondly, in addition to the early decision to limit how I filmed, there came a point where I felt blocked in my practice, specifically in areas of difficult narrative and voice. This revealed the necessity of exploring the unspeakable when addressing marginalised voice and power. While there was not an accompanying block in my written explorations and analysis, and indeed the very impossibility of making further new creative work was instructive to my thesis as a whole, accepting the volatility of voice of which I wrote was enabled by my schizoanalytic approach. There are learnings here for creative research practices, which I will address further in the following section, and indeed for feminist research practices in general.

Research findings

The above reflects learnings stemming from my thesis limitations. Below, I present my main findings concerning the sex worker in documentary practice, and my methodology. Both concern marginal practices of voice, and cross at points.

The face of the sex worker is used as a vector of transmission of the prostitute imaginary.

While it could be assumed that the body of the sex worker carries the representational weight of sex work stigma and repression, I have found instead that the face is subject to totalising practices. The face is used to signify both site and entry of a wounded subjectivity, to which the sex worker becomes equated. This transmits; it is a vector which moves easily across different works of film, and across genres, as a form of video-poesis. This is a result of centuries of sex worker representation, intersecting with totalising treatment of the face in western societies generally, as well as the nature of video broadcast itself, which come together to create a collective imagery or hallucination of the sex worker which holds them in place.

The face is understood to be a site of struggle by sex workers themselves.

I have found that sex workers are aware of objectifying, possessive, and totalising uses of their face via the camera, and they employ both visible and more covert strategies to counter this, albeit to varying degrees of success. While there is a certain kind of visibility which counters the prostitute imaginary, for example positive representation, I have also discovered a kind of visibility in sex worker documentary that feigns obedience and access, and like the closet, reveals operations of power as well as weaknesses of that power. This is evident in *The Good Woman of Bangkok* for example, but also more covertly in *My Night with Julia*. This feigned submission to the gaze of the camera includes the face itself as mask, which may leave the face and the voice of the subject bare on the level of identity recognition but conceals the interiority of the subject. Visibility is therefore a protective strategy which has the advantage that, despite sex workers being discredited at least in part by virtue of unknowability, can be used overtly or discretely. Recognising these acts of resistance is critical in understanding how power is playing out in documentary encounters, as well as in helping to build practices of feminist spectatorship and listening.

With this conflict in mind, it should also be reiterated that the strategies deployed by sex workers themselves in order to speak, to reveal or to resist being known, are at times contradictory and are vulnerable to co-option. A refusal to fully engage in the revelatory process does not necessarily impede the drive of possessive knowledge of the sex worker, as I have shown in Chapter 3. Instead it can be used to confirm the sex worker as wounded, voiceless subject, or conversely as masked subject. This combines with a heightened interrogative lens in documentary practice, whereby the sex worker is rendered a subject who resists being known, therefore must reveal themselves, but is also revealed by this very mask. This can amplify racialisation, as silences and performances of voice and face are used to construct particular sex worker subjects as victims precisely through, not despite, this furtiveness.

The blur does not confer facelessness, and is part of the collective hallucination of the sex worker.

My analysis reveals that the blurred sex worker is not faceless; they have too much, or too little face, neither of which unhooks the subject from the abjection the blur

intensifies. In addition, this face is used to classify the sex worker in the same way as the 'visible' does. The blurred face remains a signifier of interiority, and likewise acts as a vector of the prostitute imaginary.

At the same time, while this distortion is treated as an individual face, it is also a collective one. The blur affords the sex worker on screen a heightened ability to pass unseen as a sex worker outside of the film, and therefore unstigmatized, however, the collective sex worker body is marked. This is not even necessarily a marking in the subject's stead; that conceptualisation excludes self-spectatorship of documentary, where the subject see their own marking. I contend instead that blurring should be reconceptualised as both a collective and individual stigmata, even where its intent is protective.

The blur does not act upon all subjects equally.

I have found that the facelessness of power is resistant to the abjection that is assigned to other subjects through the blur. While practices such as visual distortion and pixelation amplify stigma, where it is applied to someone in order to preserve repressive power, such as vice police, power is retained in both material and representational terms, and at the expense of marginalised subjects.

The blur does not only amplify sex worker abjection, it facilitates 'face proxy'.

A key finding of this thesis is that 'facelessness', produced by distortion, blurring, dark voids and other visual obfuscation not only amplifies abjection, unknowability and concomitant threat already present in the figure of the sex worker. These practices allow the emergence of what I have termed 'face proxies'. Most dangerously in the context of disobedient subjects, these face proxies can take the form of 'safer' or more whole faces such as non-sex workers within the film, to enforce rather than subvert hegemonic power structures. Critically, the face proxies in this form are pseudo-proxy, not neutral stand-ins, functioning as mechanisms of co-option of sex worker voice.

Further, the face proxy does not necessarily require the actual face of another as stand in, it simply needs a voice of another person to speak as if they can see what the audience cannot. Face proxy first requires 'facelessness' in visible and negative terms, as a facelessness with agency (as evident in *All That Sheltering Emptiness*, for example) does not require or give space for stand-ins. This means that while face

distortions are vulnerable to face proxy, strategies of the disembodied voice can be used to circumvent this recuperation. This highlights the volatility of face obfuscations, and an overall tendency for the face blur to work on the side of power, and not for those repressed by that power.

The sex worker voice is powerful, but it is also vulnerable in a compulsion to speak.

My research affirms the possibilities of empowerment through voice, and the radical production of new ways to speak, however I also discovered elements of submission in giving voice. This compulsion operates in both subtle and overt ways, such as deliberate probing of painful experiences by directors, provision of alcohol and drugs, and transference more generally. This is grounded in the expectation of deviant, closeted subjects to confess, and can be framed as for their own good, or as a responsibility to others. While this thesis has focused on the facilitation of sex worker voice, an intervention of this thesis is that sex worker silence requires more protection.

Sex worker skill in managed, performed identities also produce unheard silences within the voice.

As a response to the above, I have also found that sex workers can deploy strategies of resistance of their own, performing, deflecting and hiding via the voice. This is a form of boundary production, which is tied to the managed identities and practices of sex work itself, and it can make the giving of voice, and refusal to give voice, possible.

There are heightened vulnerabilities in the director/participant relationship in sex work documentary.

While the pitfalls of transference in documentary practice more generally have been addressed elsewhere, I have found added vulnerabilities in sex work documentary. In the most extreme, this is evident where the clients are themselves directors, with the documentary participant also paid to have sex with them. This is not to conclude that there is a complete lack of agency in these situations, and the sexual transaction is not necessarily the most problematic aspect of this relationship. While the above examples are extreme, sex workers in my interviews stated that boundaries in a filming context are routinely undermined, and were felt to be much more tenuous and difficult to assert in the documentary context than with clients. While this is partly stemming from the exploitation of closeted subjects desire to speak, I have found an added vulnerability

where erosion of boundaries are tolerated by sex workers in some instances in order to contribute to collective empowerment. Given that sex workers are practiced at managing boundaries and identities with clients, this is significant and reveals a serious ethical weak point in documentary practice.

The 'disembodied' voice is not truly without a body, and this plays out in complex ways in the sex worker subject.

It has been theorised that vocalic bodies are imagined by spectators where a voice is heard, but the body from which the voice springs cannot be seen. My research supports this claim. Yet my intervention also expands the idea, in terms of the impact of collective imagery and the prostitute imaginary on sex worker 'disembodied' voices. Disembodiment does not free the speaking subject from their body, or from the collective hallucination of their body, because the voice is read for bodily signifiers, and a body is easily imagined. This body/voice link is exacerbated by sex work, because sex workers are assigned to the corporeal. The prostitute imaginary, while transmitting via the face, is concerned with the body; this is where the full abjection of sex work takes place. I argued from the thesis outset that sex is always in the background of sex work documentary, even when not shown; so too is the body of the sex worker.

This has implications for how power is understood in the sex worker disembodied voice, as while disembodiment has been theorised as a voice with intrinsic power, I have found this operates differently where the voice belongs to a stigmatised subject. Rather, my case studies revealed that the disembodied sex worker voice amplifies power relations already at play in an individual documentary work, meaning that the disembodied voice can embed powerlessness or forms of the abject, just as easily as it can dislodge it. This is the case even when what is being spoken is laden with trauma and the body, and hinges on the aural-visual relationship and not simply the voice itself.

Disembodiment is not a singular method

Extending the intervention above, I contend that there are different types or degrees of disembodiment in documentary practice, and this influences the agency and representational power of the sex worker on screen. Specifically, I have found *partial*, and *total* disembodiments, both of which are contingent of the wider film diegesis.

While partial disembodiment in sex worker documentary focuses on absenting the face, there is variation as to how much of the body is shown. In providing a visible link to the speaking body, this strategy limits the amplification of abjection, and can counter totalising gazes of the documentary lens. Total disembodiment, where no body is visible on screen at all, is a particularly volatile practice. I have found that whatever is on screen can become the body, a void, for instance, or conversely the body can be displaced into proximity with the spectator. This is contingent upon interactions between the voice, including how the voice is recorded (in terms of spacial location and closeness to the spectator), narrative, and image. This complexity renders disembodiment a disobedient practice in representational terms. Critically however, neither forms produce comprehensive vocal anonymity.

The distorted voice is a form of disembodiment.

While distorted voice tends to be accompanied by partial or full visual obstruction of the speaker, it should be considered a form of disembodiment in itself. In altering the voice in this way, the editing apparatus cleaves bodily markers from the voice. The extent of this removal varies but given that the voice is produced by the body, and is so rich in individual signifiers from this body, even comparatively light distortion hinges on cutting audible ties with the body. While a (damaged) vocalic body emerges, aligning the voice with the abject in doing so, this does not rehabilitate the wounded voice.

Disidentification facilitated by blurred faces and distorted voices can be the very condition which allows sex workers to speak.

A key contribution of this thesis is that voice distortion can produce a kind of proxy which allows the subject to speak not only because of risk mitigation, but because of this very self-disidentification. By this I mean that even though it is the speakers own voice, if it is perceived as being so far removed from their own it can effectively act as a proxy. This is particularly useful where testimony is aligned with difficult narrative.

Although I did not initially set out to address trauma in this thesis, my analysis of strategies of anonymity revealed that these practices facilitated the voicing of traumatic experiences not (only) because of the safety of speaking from an unknown identity—the belief in anonymity—but because of a concomitant displacement. It is

this disidentification, which is produced also by the performative voice and distanced voice ‘without life’, as well as the distorted voice, which can give subjects the emotional space to speak. It extends to the voice without the visual body. To ‘not sound like oneself’ can allow a listening back to voice and narrative. In other words, distortion and other obfuscations can be positive not because they are oppositional, or protective in material terms, but because of the distancing effect on the speakers themselves.

In terms of distortion in particular however, productive disidentification is highly contingent on the degree of distortion, and the speaker. Even light distortion impeded my own voice for example, and heavy distortion did not reach a point where it was brought back into the tolerable. Similarly, two of my (already out as sex worker) interview participants will only participate in documentaries where there are agreements not to anonymise. The implication for documentary practice is that there is no singular degree of acceptable distortion, and the point where distortion likewise crosses over into the territory of disidentification is entirely subjective. This points to the necessity of involving documentary subjects in the processes of their anonymisation.

Anonymity in documentary is not only contingent. It is largely impossible to achieve. Studies in the field of neuroscience show the ease in which listeners identify voices, including fragmentary and distorted voice, but my thesis has addressed and recorded the failure of vocal anonymisation strategies in documentary film in particular, illustrating how weak these methods are in practice. While possibilities of anonymity are contingent on individual and intersecting audio/visual strategies, identity protection also depends on the degree to which these methods are applied, which is subjective and variable, and subject to representational concerns which tend to lessen rather than enhance identity protection. Nonetheless, I encountered an unexpectedly large degree of failure of anonymity across my research interviews, to the point where participants had been recognised in every documentary they had participated in. Given that anonymity likewise fails on the level of representation, this is a break-down of protection with consequence.

Anonymity is a practice.

In light of the failure outlined above, which is recognised yet often combined with a refusal to put aside strategies of anonymisation, I contend anonymity needs to be reconceptualised altogether, as something which one *does*. A key intervention of this thesis is to reconceive of anonymity as a practice, not a state which is clearly achieved or failed. The idea of anonymity as contingent and temporal already exists in stigmatised and criminalised communities such as sex workers, who know that security measures can be broken. My findings go further than this, however; anonymity is not fully reached in the first place but rather enacted and invoked. This day-to-day striving for anonymity, through alias use, performativity, masking, distortion and so forth, should be clearly recognised as a practice. It is a threshold without arrival, an ‘almost’ that must be continually made and remade. Further, I contend that it is anonymity as a practice that is a condition for giving voice. The invocation facilitates voice, rather than the promise of total anonymity, which is recognised as a fantasy.

I have found that sex workers participating in documentary are well aware of the failures of anonymity. Speaking despite risk and even despite lived experiences of this failure in the documentary context, sex worker desire for (at the very least) ambiguities around identification means that many sex workers insist on speaking with a distorted countenance and/or voice knowing that it will not fully protect them. This is new knowledge, and an important finding of this thesis, changing the way agency should be understood, and emphasising the need for filmmakers to work collaboratively with subjects asking for identity protection. This is even more significant considering many sex workers also recognise negative affect of this distortion in terms of both spectatorship and self-reflection.

For the documentary subject to know that anonymisation measures do not fully ‘work’ yet still insist upon them reveals the magnitude of stigma against sex workers—but also an element of self-sacrifice where participation is motivated by collective sex worker liberation. I propose, then, that management of a spoiled identity also includes management of identity distorted by practices of anonymity. This finding highlights ethical failures in documentary practice that disallows sex worker participation in how their voice and countenance is obscured, as this disallowance suppresses sex worker management of their own stigmatised identities.

This is separate but related to the desirability of anonymity, as I have also found that the practice of anonymity runs alongside a disavowal. That is, sex workers recognise that distortion and blurring mark them as abject, or unable to speak for themselves—or both—at the same time as not fully protecting them from recognition, but this does not necessarily hinder the recruitment of obfuscating strategies. As I demonstrated in Chapter 6, this insistence on speaking regardless is not naïve. While it is a response to stigma and not divorced from fear, it also reveals a radical self disidentification, and willingness to erode the boundary of the individual self.

Practice integrated research is a form of embodied schizoanalysis.

While I have been concerned with how knowledge is extracted from, produced and in turn concealed by the sex worker body in documentary practice, it became evident early in my thesis that these questions must equally be directed at the research process itself. This includes consideration of how trauma can be voiced without re-enacting violence, and relations of power in an academic interview context. This aim, coupled with a subject that is closeted and whose silence is multi-faceted, led me to develop my own approach to practice-integrated research, which I also term schizoanalysis of practice. As both practice-based and practice-led PhDs, while becoming more common, remain relatively novel and fraught, I want to emphasise my learnings here.

Rather than attempting to fit my methodology into a practice-led/practice-based model, Hope's proposal that practice should be reconceptualised as existing on a spectrum (2016: 74) allowed me to chart the nuance of my practice within my thesis, shifting my perspective of what aspects were actually producing knowledge, and what I wanted from it. This opening out of the role of practice remains critical, particularly for subjects at the margins. However, even within the spectrum model I felt oscillations as to where my work sat. My abandonment of practice, which I contend is a method in itself, was difficult to account for in existing practice research models, as was my split critiques of my practice; writing of my practice from both inside and outside positions. This is complicated again by my use of practice to shift and link my critiques of other texts. For this reason, while I locate my thesis on a spectrum of practice, I define it as a piece of practice integrated research more broadly, and a schizoanalysis of practice more precisely.

In this thesis my creative documentary practice connects interviews, writing and documentary case studies. But it is not simply a valuable means of opening

analysis to outside forces, for my use of practice can also be described as a schizoanalysis of my own location within the research. For this reason it can also be termed embodied schizoanalysis, and understood to be a marginal practice. This way of working is way of entering deeply into contact with the subject of research, one which uses emotion to further understanding. In a research field where feelings are heavily embedded, including in filming, in speaking on screen, in watching, as well as in the subject matter itself, I contend that a rejection of emotion in analytical strategies would impede the production of knowledge. The role of situated emotion does however need to be recognised, as I have done throughout.

Further, schizoanalysis revealed failures, blocks and abandonments of practice as keys sites of knowledge. This is connected to the use of emotion, as an intervention here is that practice can also be seen as a form of productive rupture; I learnt as much from video I could not progress, as ones I could, and it should be acknowledged that this required care. In this sense, this thesis extends understandings of strategies of feminist embodied research practices to include the emotional and rupture, and I reiterate that singular, 'objective', non-wounded vision would not have allowed for the depth of reflection this thesis has called for.

Research implications

While power imbalance and boundary erosion between director and film subjects has been highlighted in other research, I have addressed this explicitly from the perspective of documentary subjects themselves and found it even more fraught than I initially suspected. Sex workers do not necessarily speak for their own sake on camera; there is an element of service and collective responsibility at play, even where they emphasise their own individual experience. This can result in greater acquiescence to the director at the expense of their own needs and boundaries. While on the one hand this can be avoided by rejecting documentary projects without a clear participatory or sex worker led approach, the reality is that film continues to be made without the directorial control of sex workers, and agreements over anonymising strategies also continue to be broken.

In terms of ethics of anonymity specifically, greater recognition amongst filmmakers of the failures and limits of anonymising strategies is required. The idea that anonymity can be achieved in documentary through the traditional means of blurring, shadowing, voice distortion and disembodiment should be abandoned, along

with the notion that there is a practice of anonymity which does no representational harm to the speaker, or liberates them from abjection. This does not render the practice of anonymity intrinsically negative or fruitless. When in the hands of sex workers themselves, the practice of anonymity, like the practice of disappearance, remains crucial and is the foundation of an ethical documentary practice.

In short, the giving of voice and face as a stigmatised subject is a dangerous and fragile practice. It is rarely able to be taken back. Hiding identity in blurs, disembodiment and distortions can enable the casting out and finding of sex worker voices, but it can also further a collective and totalising hallucination of sex worker lives, preventing the possibility of true knowledge and connection, and amplifying material harm.

Towards a practice of translucency

I have redrawn the intersecting threads of my thesis findings above, but I want to conclude with a more singular answer to my research aims: *Yes, is it possible for sex workers to speak in documentary, and to not be undone by doing so.* This requires a centering of sex worker led practices of anonymity, of giving voice, and of risk. The fragility of the sex worker voice is inseparable to elements of perseverance and fugitive power in that same voice. Sex workers speak on camera knowing that it may harm them personally, and also refuse to speak in this same vein. They also understand the risks of ambiguous and failing anonymity and intervene in their own representation in covert and overt ways. If politically committed filmmakers want to fully understand anonymity, and the ethics of representing closeted and marginalised knowledge and identities on screen, it is with sex workers that they should speak.

In addition to the above, I contend that the practices of anonymity undertaken by sex workers point to an alternate approach to documentary with vulnerable subjects: translucency. This is focused not on the struggle against opacity and the closet, nor with the complete and dangerous visibilisation of sex worker lives and interiority, rendering them intimately knowable. Not incidentally, this is also pertinent to research practices in general. Rather, it is a letting in of light, but not all light. This filtering, like poking holes in a screen, or dappled shadows, is an advocacy not only for the shifting ambiguity of identity desired by many sex workers, but a translucency in disclosure, and including vision of the cinematic apparatus itself, in order to shift documentary relations of power and knowledge altogether.

Appendix 1.
Interview transcript: Emma

Interview date: 27th June 2019

Interview via zoom.

[Information sheet and transcript process run through, consent forms. Interview begins]

Clare: Is the film that you sent me, the animated film, is that the only documentary that you've been involved with or are there other ones as well?

Emma: It is. I've done radio interviews where my name wasn't used by my voice used. And my brother heard me on one of those and recognised me immediately, so that probably wasn't the best idea. I hadn't ever really thought about how identifiable voices are before that, and I woke up one morning and there was a message. It was a big Radio 4 programme, and he was like, 'I'm listening to this thing about brothels that you'd find interesting', and then 10 minutes later there was another message saying, 'oh wait, I recognise this voice' and it was me talking! He'd heard his sister talking about 'and here's the lube...'. They wanted a bit of colour in the interviews. And so that was me. They cut out all the interesting political bits, and it was me, just showing them round V's flat, being like 'this is where we keep the toys'.

Anyway, so that one I didn't anonymise my voice, just my name, and it was a mistake.

Clare: So that wasn't a live interview? It was pre-recorded?

Emma: It was yeah.

Clare: Were you already out to your brother before that?

Emma: I was yeah, so it could have been worse. But I just thought, it was [radio documentary A], she'd made a show, made a programme about sex work and there was a segment of the programme that I was in. And then I was like god that's just the thing my aunties and stuff might listen to. So, it hadn't crossed my mind. I don't listen to the radio and I was really surprised that my brother might be listening to that. But I wonder who else listened. But, I don't know how close do you have to be to someone to recognise their voice?

I have never really thought before about voices being so identifying. But they are. No one else ever said anything about that.

And then what else have I done? I did a podcast for [Documentary E]. They were doing a series about 'first time' things. I think they were all to do with sex. So, like the first time having sex after abuse, or the first time doing a particular new kink I guess, and then mine was like first time as a sex worker, which I've got quite a funny story for, and it's a really long time ago. But that, that is just sitting there, and that feels more permanent than the radio show. Obviously, it is. It's just if anyone wanted to go back. And one of my friends recognised me, but she was a sex worker as well. And I've not heard that, I never listened to it, I couldn't bear to hear my voice. God knows what I said. It's weird, I feel like, with that sort of thing where you're just remembering stuff, and it's not planned before what you're going to say, it's quite easy to just start talking especially when it's friendly. I mean that's the whole skill of being a good interviewer I guess, you just feel like you're having a conversation and before you know it, 'oh good, I've said all this stuff!'. I think I asked if I could hear it before it went out and she was 'oh no we don't really do that'. So, after it had come out I was just like, I can't listen. And will just be still floating around.

Clare: Which one was that?

Emma: The podcast yeah. Does that come under your research?

Clare: Well yeah, yeah. But for the radio one did they say could have input into the editing?

Emma: No, neither of them.

Clare: The BBC have guidelines saying, 'we will never show documentary works to participants beforehand, we will never do this' basically.

Emma: I don't know if you saw a bit kerfuffle here with a stripper who was in a BBC documentary, and it was scheduled to be broadcast, this was last week, and literally a week before it came out she decided she'd changed her mind. The BBC was like 'well we can't take it off air' so two days before it was supposed to be shown to air she was freaking out, and loads

of people tweeted about it. And they took it down. They are going to take her part out, which is amazing.

Clare: That's really amazing, that's so good.

Emma: I think because of the twitter stuff, there were academics tweeting and managed to whip up a fuss. Because that must be a nightmare for them reschedule stuff that's already in the listings and then they've got to re-edit it. She was freaked out about not being anonymous anymore. She'd probably speak to you.

Clare: Yeah, do you have a contact for her?

Emma: I could find her yeah.

Clare: That would be amazing.

There was a [Documentary D] film crew at [location name] last week, and that was a director, a sound person, and a sex worker, a sex worker from Europe. It was supposed to be a conversation between the sex worker and us. They interviewed me first, and I only really spoke about legal stuff. I kept steering it away from really personal stuff. And I don't know if they got what they wanted from me! But after that one of my colleagues was filming with them, and it was so personal, it was really, really personal the stuff they were talking about.

Emma: That's what they always want really, it's just so exploitative

Clare: I mean, it was interesting, but I don't even know if (personal and abusive relationships) was what their program was about. I didn't think it was, but that's where they went. And it's hard to know sometimes what the angle is really going to be.

Emma: There's something about being interviewed and just that, 'somebodies really interested in what I have to say' that people quite like, and then you want to keep talking and telling them stuff. People quite often say much more than they planned to just because they've got this whole space of time of someone just listening to you.

Clare: Also, I wonder, the way they were filming it was like, no faces, and they are going to do *some* things to the voice but I'm not sure what yet. I definitely had the feeling they were paying a lot of attention to how they were making it anonymous, and asking us how we wanted it done.

But, I guess I also wondered if we talk about different things, when we feel more secure that nobody will know it's us?

Emma: Yeah, that podcast I did, that's for [Audio Documentary E], which is something that people I know would be following and listening to. And I knew, I guess I knew, that people who knew me would recognise my voice, and I guess I decided I didn't mind that, because all my friends know. That's a risk that I was aware of, that felt bad, but I wanted to do it *enough*. With a thing that's always been this big secret for years and years, there's always part of you that's wanting to say it. There's always a part of you that's wanting to tell those stories, and then you get an excuse to do it. You find yourself willing to take a risk to do it just because you're so sick of having these big secrets I guess. But, if I could take that podcast offline now, I would, because I don't like the thought of that being out there. Not least just because I think I probably sound a bit idiotic. Not just being out as a sex worker.

And I think for me, I've been in this place because I write about sex work, and write in a way that it's kind of probably pretty obvious that I am sex worker, so I'm in a bit of a grey area of being out. And I think maybe when I did things like that it was an experiment, dipping my toe into the water of what it would be like to be out, publicly.

But then even since then, that was maybe two years ago, even since then, FOSTA and SESTA has come in, I've got three friends who've been turned away from the States now, one of them has a 10-year ban, and things feel like they're getting more repressive and that the dangers of being out are more dramatic than they were even a couple of years ago. So, I even regret writing under my real name. I would advise everyone to be really careful. Things change so quickly, and you think you're ok, and then the whole legal situation might change, and you'd be really screwed if your identifiable. God knows what technologies will exist around the corner, where you could be found out for being a sex worker. I don't know, some of the stuff that would have seemed really paranoid 5 years ago now is reality.

Clare: yeah, exactly. The [Documentary D] people they were asking me, that given it's decriminalised here, why I'm so concerned about being anonymous. And yeah, I'm out to my friends, but I would like to be able to (cross borders). And you just never know what's going to happen.

Emma: Exactly, and the States is like a real genuine fear. People are not getting in to the States. I'm too scared to go visit my brother there.

Clare: The way you think about anonymity in film and documentary and radio interviews, do you think that changed how you feel about being anonymous at work generally?

Emma: It's funny because they feel really different those two types of anonymity. Like if I had to choose one or the other, like my two twitter accounts – my work twitter and my real name twitter and someone was like 'right, either you have to tweet a picture of your face and your real name on your work account, or you have to tweet on your real name account 'I am a prostitute, and I have been one since I was 18', I would choose the work one. Because even though I hate clients and I don't trust them, basically everyone in that world is in that world, already. Whereas doing that in my real name account, the repercussions seem much bigger.

And I guess doing radio interviews and podcasts is different, because of the persona. You've got a work persona and it's protecting yourself, but you're also keeping this fake persona for keeping up a front. Whereas when you're doing interviews, it's you, you're saying what you really think and talking about your real circumstances which are usually wildly different than the ones of your escort persona. It feels much more fraught and risky, and scary. Because it's reaching the general public as well, not just clients.

Clare: I guess also you have more control over your work images/and persona, how you are presented, whereas for a documentary film, you may, or you may not?

Emma: Right definitely, you've got no idea how they'll edit it, and which bits they'll use and what the audience will be. It's much more scary

Clare: What was the process for the [Documentary F] piece?

Emma: So that was someone I know making it and I went to her house, and recorded it, and she had told us that the voices will be changed. And I'm pretty sure we saw the edit, yeah, we did. And that one, I talked for quite a long time and actually only quite a small part was used. And I would not have recognised my voice in that. I think all she did was just make it a bit higher pitched and speed it up a bit maybe. But I wouldn't have known. And I know all the people in that and I wouldn't have recognised any of their voices. I know what they're saying tells me who they are. Weird that that is enough to make your voice sound so different.

Clare: It's really interesting. Because I was reading a study a few weeks ago, and they recorded people's voices and played them back, and they were much better at recognising other people's voices than their own. Because we hear them differently. We hear our voices differently anyway. But then at the same time, we are, well I am, very critical when I hear my own voice recorded. I listen so carefully to it.

Emma: Oh, I hate it. Everybody hates hearing their own voice don't they. I feel like it sounds so weird. Like in the animated documentary would you have been able to pick out which one was my voice, not based on what I was saying?

Clare: It's really hard to separate those two things, I guess, because the more you know somebody, and the more conversations you have on the topic, you kind of know their opinions on things. So, it's hard to separate the context out from the voice. And she did it quite subtly, the voices don't sound weird.

Emma: They come very fast don't they. I feel like the whole thing is quite fast

Clare: I think you can pick out that they are modified in some way, but it's quite subtle.

I was also wondering how the process was, of having your voice attached to a different body, or face in some way?

Emma: Yeah, funny. Like kind of you, but also not you anymore. I guess I felt fairly detached from the whole thing by the time it was produced because it doesn't sound like me, and it doesn't look like me, and like not detached in a bad way. I think it's a great piece of work that

was produced and I'm proud to have been in it, and I don't feel any emotional attachment and I don't feel any fear or regret like that podcast I did.

Clare: Were you filming one-on one or was it a more of a group conversation?

Emma: It was just two of us, just me and [name], and we talked for ages, said loads more stuff than that, more than she could really have used. The whole thing is just 5 minutes I think. I just waffled on, it was quite a good conversation. And it's always like that isn't it, just pick out a tiny bit to use.

Clare: It is really hard picking out things when you're editing.

Emma: It's a nightmare when you got hours of transcript. You're going to have to do this.

Clare: But I mean the whole conversation will inform my writing. I will grab a few things in particular that you say, but the whole conversation informs the work.

Do you think you would participate in documentary things again? After that?

Emma: Probably, it's that same mix of feelings that I still have of really wanting to tell your story that you've not been allowed to tell ever, versus being scared of the repercussions and they're both really strong drives those two things. Yeah, I would. I think at the moment only anonymously. Who knows in the future.

Clare: Have you done things with a blurred face, or a hidden face, or just the animation one?

Emma: Just the animation. No, someone filmed me at a protest, talking, and she put that on her website, and I made the mistake of watching. I think I was hyper manic that day and I look so mental, I'm being so weird. And that's my face. I don't think she's put my name on there, and I'm not out as a sex worker but it was a sex work related event. But it was mortifying so definitely put me off being in anything filmed!

Clare: I guess that's kind of like another grey area, when you're in something, but not explicitly as a sex worker?

Emma: Yeah people could use it to connect the dots if you've done enough other stuff but there's plausible deniability, you're just there as an ally maybe.

Clare: It's so hard. It's great having people willing to talk about stuff but it's so difficult to make work that protects people how they want to be. I mean I do loads of stuff just filming myself, and I've got work, video pieces, in the exhibition opening next week, and I've shown them in the UK lots of times.

Emma: I feel like I've seen one, rope related?

Clare: Yes. Yeah you have, and I've re-edited that to take out bits where I think I'm too recognisable in it. Because, well my brother could go to that exhibition.

Emma: Do none of your family know what you're doing?

Clare: They probably can guess, they probably have guessed. I haven't decided whether to tell them to go or not

Emma: Oh that's such a shame, because that's a really big deal and a really big venue.

Clare: I really have re-edited them so they're more anonymous, so maybe I will, I haven't decided.

Emma: It's such a loss for people's families as well. Like [name], [book title] writer, her mum doesn't know, she doesn't know her daughter wrote this amazing successful book. It's just so sad that stuff, when people having to be anonymous about their work itself means you also can't tell your family about the really amazing other bits you're doing.

[wraps up]

Appendix 2.
Interview transcript: Sophie

Date: 17th July 2019

[In-person interview]

[Information sheet and transcript process run through, consent forms signing.
Interview begins]

Clare: Ok, so, you've been in a few different documentaries, right?

Sophie: Yeah, there's 2 that I remember the details about, or to an extent, but there's another 2 or 3 that I can't quite remember. There was the [name] one, where they used my voice for a bit, and the movie that I was in, like silhouetted. But there's been 2 or 3 other times where I've talked to people and I don't know what's eventuated with the footage and or audio.

Clare: You've not actually seen the final pieces?

Sophie: I think there's one a while ago that I just simply forgot and there's a couple where yeah, I just haven't seen the final pieces. Which is actually one of the things I was thinking about, because I was thinking about my experiences and trying to remember so I'd have it a bit more fresh in my mind. It kind of made me think about how I've done things in the past where I've done similar things for other employers – everyone is kept in the loop. But I feel like, I don't know if it's a confidentiality thing, but when there's done stuff like that it's all done through, through your 'pimp'. Which I found interesting to think about today. But that's just based on my experience.

But yeah out of all the [sex worker documentaries] I've done, I've never had direct contact with anybody. It's always been through [name], through my manger / pimp. Like I've never had any contact information, or emails or anything like that.

Clare: So actually, there's no way of you getting in touch.

Sophie: Yeah, it's all though [name], when they send clips to [her] for like sampling, they send it to [her] then [she] has to show it to the people involved.

Clare: How do you feel about that?

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Sophie: Um I never really thought much about it at the time, but now in hindsight when I think about other experiences I've had, because I've been recorded for a few things before, like I've been interviewed about being ADHD, I've been interviewed about mental illness, at university. I think it's because I'm quite outspoken. I've been interviewed for lots of things, and while it's been through various different organisations, I only realised while I was thinking about it today that this is the only scenario where I haven't had any direct contact with people making the final thing. Which honestly, I don't actually like. I understand that it's complicated because of the anonymity element, but it would have been nice to have at least some opportunity to have at least some contact. Because I have an email address for my sex work persona. Things were available for me to have more direct contact with the creators, which I would have liked, in hindsight. Because you're was left so out of the loop, which is a standard part of any documentary or filmmaking, there's big delays and stuff.

Like even it came to the [Documentary A] thing, the only contact I had was hearing from [my manager], cos [she] gets a few mundane emails, we don't really hear about the little ones, because they're not worth telling us about. You do it, and then months later you get a 'oh do you want to listen to this, view of this' from [manager], and then it's live!

It just stands out to me as the only place where as the talent you don't have any contact with anyone, it's all done through your manager, or in this case, it's one of those few things where it has that echo of being 'owned', in a weird way.

Clare: For those ones did you do a release form, with the filmmakers?

Sophie: Yes

Clare: So, they have something from you, but you don't have something from them?

Sophie: Yeah, yeah. And I mean I can have copies, of release forms and stuff, but I mean, they have my names, and think there was a couple where I gave my email address but you know, I never hear from them. And I do understand that for the makers it's easier to have a collective contact, but it's interesting that it's done directly with [manager] rather than with any of the

other talent, because it's rare for someone to come in and talk to more than 3/4/5 girls tops, which isn't an obscene number of people to have to keep in touch with.

I know in the beginning they'll say to [manager] nothing will go live until unless all the people involved sign off on it, or [manager] will say we don't want anything live until everyone signs off on it. I get the impression that [manager] is the one that says that element, and that if it were up to the creators or producers I wouldn't be surprised if they allowed a pimp to sign off on behalf of the girls. But that is very much speculation. It's how I feel. I don't know if there's more due diligence that I just don't see. But I think it's noteworthy that as one of the members of talent that I haven't met at all.

Clare: I wonder how common it is, like the BBC are quite notorious for not letting participants see the work beforehand.

Sophie: Really, see that's one thing I think is really good that [manager] does is putting her put down. [Manager] has an across the board rule where if we're not allowed to see it then she's not going to let us, not not let us, but if [manager's] not in, they would never bother trying to contact the girls individually. So yeah [manager] says if we can't see it before it goes live then it's a no go. Which I think is important because, I've learnt from experience of how many times we've had to say that's still not very anonymous, it's important to have that feedback loop.

For me personally if I didn't have the right to say no before it went live I wouldn't ever talk about sex work. Even anonymously.

Clare: Have you watched back everything you've been involved in, apart from the ones which have just disappeared?

Sophie: Yeah apart from the one's which have just disappeared into the ether I have watched back, yeah. It's actually interesting again as well, with the, what was the name of the long form doco that was done... [name] or something. So, [manager] was sent a copy, and for me to see it I had to watch it either through a link that [manager] was sent, or to go and pay and go see it. Which I would have if I had been able to, but I was actually not in the country at the time. But also, I don't know how standard that is for different media places. Because I've worked in the media side of things as well, filming other people, I always make it custom that anyone that's in it can see it, before it goes live, and have access to it, and be like, hey here's that story about

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you. But I don't know if that's common practice across the board or if that's just my experience from the media place that I was working at.

Clare: I mean in my opinion people should be given copies of things they're in. It's like research studies at a university – people get told they will get access to the final results. But for documentary it can be a bit of a wild west I guess.

Sophie: Yeah, and the things that I've done include having my voice changed, mostly it's been voice ones but there's been a couple of a camera ones where there's been me at different angles or my face but my face cropped out - also not cropped out – silhouetted, with lighting so that I'm all blacked out, and they adjusted the silhouette a little bit as well. But yeah, I never, it was only through [manager] I had the opportunity to view it. I had to come in to see [manager] to watch it or listen to it, and then to let them know if I wanted it changed, if I was happy with it or not. Which was also difficult for [manager] I think, because she had a few people involved, she had to get each and every one of them in to listen to it or see it and confirm how they felt about it.

Also, I know with one that was recent, for a [Documentary A] doco where our voices were used, we gave feedback on what they'd done to anonymise our voices, and the feedback, it wasn't, ah it wasn't feedback, more that 'I feel really strongly about this', but it's noteworthy that none of the feedback was taken on board.

Clare: It didn't change?

Sophie: No, because our feedback wasn't so much along the lines of, you know, we were anonymous, and we weren't easily identifiable based on what they'd done, it was more that we thought that the way they had done it was stupid.

Clare: What had they done?

Sophie: It was the different voice that they used. So, I understand that there are limitations in voice distortion in what you can and can't do. And there is one doco a while ago I can't remember what it was, but they did a voice distortion that was a very basic one, that I out of curiosity, extracted the audio file, put it in my own audio stuff and reversed the distortion. And

it was one step to get my voice back. And it was like wow, I hope other people don't figure that out, that they can literally...like because yeah, my voice was lowered and I put it into a thing that raised it a few decibels and there it was, my voice. Not decibels, I just raised it a few pitches and there was my voice.

That was with that one.

Clare: Was that the [Documentary A] one?

Sophie: That was a different one, I can't remember. For the [Documentary A] one it was more that the lows were too low and the highs were too high. It sounded silly, it sounded really silly.

I think when it comes to discussing a lot of sex work, when we're discussing sex work, as sex workers, we're trying to educate. Like I'm an advocate for sex worker rights, I want what I'm saying to be listened to and taken seriously, and when you're trying to make an important point *and it comes out sounding like this [so high pitched]* no one's going to take that seriously! Or when you're saying, you know: "It's actually really important to communicate with me" and it comes out as "*It's actually really important to communicate with me*". As someone listening I'd be more likely to take the piss and to listen, which kind of bugs me a little bit. I feel like, because the thing I would prefer, I know it's just not quite feasible

Clare: Which is?

Sophie: One of the things I think would be a better way of portraying the sex worker voice would be utilising, not necessarily paid voice actors, but just other people's voices in place and saying that the voices have been dubbed or something. Even if it was just people from the content creation team using their voices and trying to mimic the inflection to, to the extent that they can, I think that would be quite a lot easier, and be easier to take them seriously, and I honestly don't think it would be that difficult.

I assume, part of me assumes, that there must be a reason why people haven't done that before, as an alternative, but the other part of me reckons that, there isn't much in the way of realistic documentation of sex work, you know?

Clare: For the [Documentary b] documentary, do you know what they did to your voice for that one?

Sophie: I think they raised it a little bit? I think? Yeah. That one was quite distorted, like, I mean, if you knew me, and you knew I did sex work, or you knew me and had a suspicion, then watching that you'd probably put 2 and 2 together, but not because of their negligence, but more because the way that I talk, the way people talk in general, there's subtle nuances that are identifiable to people that know them. And you can't avoid that, and making a voice a pitch higher or lower doesn't take away the staccato of someone's voice or the patterns in others. And the way that I ramble and rant, and my pace picks up when I get going, is quite identifiable, so I had people who didn't know I did sex work know that the [Documentary A] doco was me.

Clare: So, people recognised you who didn't know you did sex work?

Sophie: Yeah. People who knew that I was sexually *open*, but they didn't know I did sex work and they suspected and one person told me while drunk, and I didn't bother lying. I was just yeah, you're right. Because you don't think about it at the time, you think that the experts know what they're doing. But they don't know you. They don't know the way you talk, they don't know how obvious your speech patterns are. So admittedly after the [Documentary A] one it did make me a little be wary about whether I'd do it again. Because I really want to speak, I think I have a lot to contribute about sex work, just having been in the industry for 6 years, and been active and done a lot of research about it. But having been identified twice -nothing nefarious or anything - but it does make me a bit nervous.

Clare: so, you were identified in the [Documentary A] one and from another one as well?

Sophie: From the Vice one yes, and from, I think someone had, I get the 2 crossed over because it was similar timing, but from the [Documentary B] one, someone picked me up from that as well. That was someone who knew I had done it before but didn't know I was still doing it. Having watched it I can see how anyone who really knew me could pick up that as me and it's more reliant on the fact the majority of people in my life would never assume that I was doing sex work. So, I'm quite reliant on that.

Clare: so, I guess if you think vocal anonymity as a kind of minimiser but as total?

Sophie: Exactly. Changing the pitch of someone's voice really doesn't change all that much, it throws you off the scent, partly, partly because I think you get thrown off the scent when someone adjusts their voice higher or lower, because it sounds so alien in general. You can always tell when a voice has been lowered or made higher. You can't necessarily tell what they sound like automatically but you're distracted by that break away from a real human voice. It doesn't sound real, which I think also detracts from the message, but also in terms of the anonymity, it's quite naïve really.

I mean I've seen some docs where it's done really well, and others where it's done poorly, I guess it always depends on budget and everything, but it's unfortunate that the level of anonymity someone can be promised is compromised by the level of funding.

Clare: Would you participate in a documentary where they weren't going to do anything to your voice?

Sophie: No. No. I'd love to, I'd really love to, but if my voice was going to be left as-is entirely then no. Someone as chatty as me, I think quite a few people would recognise me. It would be a dangerous game to play. Because you never know.

I suppose as well; my previous experiences benefit from the fact that the audiences of many sex worker docs is unfortunately smaller than I'd like it to be as well. Because when you pose a sex work doco as being positive, and people are massively opposed, they're already going to avoid it a lot of the time. But just in general the widespread reception to sex worker docs isn't necessarily as enthusiastic as to maybe other topics. So, I've benefited from the fact it's unlikely my friends will go to a cinema to watch a film called [Documentary B] you know? It's a niche audience. It's sad that it's a niche audience I think it should be much more

Clare: And for [Documentary B] what had they done to your face for that one?

Sophie: They did fancy stuff with the lighting so I was just a silhouette. I was just an outline. But I believe they also adjusted the outline a bit too. I think my face was also stretched a little bit or something. I can't remember what exactly it was, but something to make it slightly less me as well, you know, without making it an obscure black blob. And I was happy with that. I

don't think I would have recognised myself from that. It's definitely the voice stuff that gives it away.

Clare: And when you hear your voice in those films, do you feel attached to it? Or does the distortion change how you feel?

Sophie: The distortion changes how I feel about my voice but it's more that I'm distracted by distortion in general. Maybe everyone's different. It automatically sounds, kind of, funny. Especially if the distortion is to raise the voice. I understand women with lower voices need to have their voices raised, but I find it very hard to take it seriously when girls have had their voices raised for it. They did that to a few of the girls in the [Documentary A] doco and it sounded stupid, it sounded *so* stupid. I think they had like, [****]'s voice was raised and she sounded so squeaky, and it was just to take it seriously to be honest

Clare: So, did they lower yours?

Sophie: I think mine was lowered. Yes, mine was lowered because the first time I listened to it, I think they changed what they'd done between the sample they sent us and what they did in the end, thinking of it now. They sent us a sample asking for feedback, we gave feedback, and then we didn't actually see any more samples. But the first time they had lowered it, it was too robotic. And the final one, it was a bit low, but it didn't sound *too* ridiculous, but it changes the image a lot I guess. Yeah in a weird way. I suppose in a sense I almost felt embarrassed in a dumb way that people were assuming, trying to figure out what my body would be to match that voice. I don't know how to explain it without sounding really shallow - I feel like you hear that really low drawl of a voice, and I don't picture *me*?

Clare: Yeah

Sophie: So rather than that wasting your time, no, I don't feel very attached to my voice

Clare: It's not wasting my time, and I don't need yes or no answers.

Sophie: It's interesting, because when I hear higher voices I automatically picture younger childish, women, girls or whatever. I don't imagine women when I hear high pitched squeaky

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voices. I automatically imagine young and childish and immature. And with overly lowered voices I have more of a bogan, messy vision of a person. Yeah, I never really thought about that much til now. I don't like how I feel like I sound like a bogany, unintellectual kind of thing. I'm just getting in to dialect stereotypes.

Clare: But we do that, when we hear people's voices

Sophie: We do. Admittedly I don't massively like my *own* voice, but I like it a lot more as it is than when it's been raised or lowered by silly amounts.

Clare: But when you listen to your voice undistorted, what don't you like about it?

Sophie: Um, I guess I find my voice very annoying (laughs). When I hear it back I'm kind of like 'ohhhwf, god it's even more annoying that I remembered. But it is still *me*. When I hear it I'm like, 'I've got to work on that'. I feel like it's whiney and childish and stuff, but it's me, it's still me. I feel a little embarrassed by it, I'm like why don't you just shut up and stop talking. It's not often you hear just a *little* bit of my voice!

Clare: I mean who likes listening to their own voice? But do you feel you have different voices in terms of like who you are talking to, or the context in which you're speaking?

Sophie: Yes, definitely I would say. It's only on miniscule notes, but it's subtle changes that you often don't think about until you are forced to. When I'm talking matter-of-factly my voice is a bit lower, when I'm talking with clients I'm often trying to sound slightly softer with my voice. A little bit less of vibrato in it. Or, when I'm talking to large amounts of people, I try to speak properly, or with an audience, I slow things down. Whereas if I'm just with my friends my voice varies constantly throughout the conversation depending on what I'm talking about.

Clare: What about if you're on camera?

Sophie: I suppose it does come down to the level of comfort that you have. Almost unfortunately, the more comfortable I am, the more normal I am. The more normally I speak the easier I am to identify. I know the way that my voice varies, and people who know me know when I'm excited about things, or really on a roll, it gets much faster, gets a little bit

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higher, it's kind of more jesty as well, I'm making jokes. Whereas if I'm being more in a sterile environment, more sterile responses I guess.

Clare: Do you feel like there's a correlation between your work anonymity and your documentary anonymity?

Sophie: What do you mean exactly?

Clare: Like do you feel like the way you are anonymous online for work, do you feel differently about that kind of anonymity to your anonymity in film?

Sophie: I do actually, that's really interesting, I've never thought about that. But I do.

Whenever I'm doing doco stuff I'm always torn about whether I want to be – not fully anonymous- or even anonymous from my clients, or if I'm ok with it being known that this is what [I] have to say. It also depends on the content. Sometimes when you're talking a bit more realistically about the downsides of sex work or so, I don't necessarily want my clients to hear that. It falls in to what the topic is and also, as with anything where people are taking cuts of you, what things they choose.

There's been a bunch of times where I've remembered certain points I've made, and felt like I would have preferred clients to hear points that weren't used. But yeah, I would hate it if I were in a doco, and it came up and linked to my sex work file or my twitter or anything, you know?

I'm ok with it saying [my name], but I wouldn't want that direct link to be emphasised. In a weird way. I don't actually know why though. Hmm, I guess partly because that anonymity in the bedroom with a client is catered anonymity. Whereas in the documentary it's going to a broader audience and an audience where you don't know exactly who's going to be in it, you can't cater your anonymity to them, the way you can to a client. Because depending on the client, there's some clients I'm more open with about myself and some where I'm less. Some where they ask questions about the industry, where you feel 'I know you're asking me, but I feel I know what answer you want to get and it's not truthful so I'm going to give you the answer you want to get because I don't want to break this bubble we're in for this hour'.

Clare: Well it's your livelihood

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Sophie: Yeah exactly. It's a tricky one, like when they ask how much you're earning, or if they ask what the clients are really like. And I always, with clients I don't know really well, I always to defer to 'oh honestly', trying to paint a picture where I don't know of a bad client. Because as soon as I paint the picture of clients in the negative it puts the idea into their head they're one of them. So I try to avoid acknowledging the existence of negative clients. 'There's the rare bad egg' is the kind of thing I'll say, I'll emphasize that 'No I generally just love meeting you smelly fucking old men, I love it!'

Whereas when it comes to having that voice out there for a wider audience I'd hate for clients to see me and say 'oh, well, in this doco you said this, is that true?' kind of thing.

Clare: So, when you're in a documentary film, I guess there's different ones, but like, have you talked about really different things with them? How personal has it been?

Sophie: I haven't necessarily gone too personal about, like childhood trauma or anything like that. I've never had someone in a doco capacity try to ask what led me to sex work, as if trying to imply there was some kind of negative thing. The things they discuss it does vary a lot. And sometimes, sometimes it's a bummer we don't get an opportunity to tell them what points we want to make the most. Because if someone asks you 8 questions and you really enjoyed answering 2 of them you can't tell them which ones to use in their film. Sometimes when you're talking, like you'll answer all of them but they'll be one or two where you think to yourself 'that's a message that I really want out there' but we don't have any of that creative control. But, that's not exclusive to this industry. I've been an editor, I know. But it's disappointing when you are doing a doco because you want to help put some of those messages out there, and to help educate and the final result is a repeat of what's already been done. I guess, yeah, there's been quite a few times where I was like why is that what you've kept in instead of the far more insightful things I had to say, you know?

When they stick for the ordinarily more boring things over the more insightful things then you wonder did you go into this with an agenda? Or was that just the best audio clip you had or did you actively choose that as the thing to be said over these other things I said?

There's the cutting and pasting and putting things together to make that, that just happens in all forms of media where you don't get to have much of a say in things, but it is disappointing that we don't have much of a say over it.

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It would be great to have a sex work doco where they went in to saying we want to put out what sex workers want put out there, as opposed to 'we're doing it about this, we'll find sex workers that want to talk about *this* with us' because once again it's kind of like able bodied people making documentary about disability or white people making documentaries about Black people's rights. It's non-sex workers, being 'the voice of the voiceless'. We're not fucking voiceless! We are the only voices you can put on this thing! You think you're being a voice for the voiceless but no you're being a channel for that voice. We appreciate having being a channel but it would be nice to have more control over that channel.

Clare: Do you feel like you watch you sex worker documentary generally, not just the ones you've been in, in a different way than you watch other things?

Sophie: I think so. There's a feeling of being in a secret club, like 'I know all about sex work because I do it', the kind of way you get a kick out of anything you feel like you know stuff about. But admittedly a lot of the time I watch sex worker doco I'm just kind of disappointed. I find a lot of them disappointing. It's a delicate topic, it's a tumultuous topic, with a lot of different ideas about it. I don't like it when sex workers are portrayed as victims, but I don't like it when what's emphasised is an 'us and them' message. I've never watched a sex worker doco that really, and I understand that the audience want to hear about someone who's a sex worker, but I'd really love for it to be more emphasised that *we walk among all the people*. Me being a sex worker is not my defining thing. It's something that pays bills well, but I have far more defining features. And not in terms of I've got other things that make me more identifiable, no, there's just far more to me than just being a sex worker. So, I don't like that a lot of docos show the sex workers, and then 'the people'. Or sex workers that stop being sex workers and return to being 'the people'. No no, we are all normal people.

Well not all - there are definitely people that are in the industry out of damage or out of pressure and that is definitely not ok, but I wish we could recognise that there is at least a subset of the sex industry that are just a bunch of normal girls, paying their bills.

It's like you get these docos about musical prodigies and then they show you all about their home life. If you get docos about a supermarket you wouldn't just be staring at the retail assistants the whole time, you know? You'd find out more about them.

I guess honestly, I feel a lot of the messages that our out there in sex work docos, they've already been heard. So, it would be nice to get some new messages out there. Not necessarily changing the message. I did like the [Documentary B] one, but there's been quite a few short docos, by [Documentary C] and same with the [Documentary A] one. I feel like they're not teaching us anything that hasn't been taught in previous doco. And it would be nice to change with the times at least a little bit, but I don't know exactly how.

Clare: In terms of facial recognition, would you ever agree to be in films that used different methods, such as pixilation or blurring?

Sophie: Yeah, yeah, I'd be ok with that. So long as I could see it, my only caveat be that I was able to see it in advance, see what I look like in advance, and be sure. I don't really mind the method that's used to obscure me so long as it doesn't add an unintentional humorous element or be so obtuse that it's just a distraction.

I mean I feel like what could make a truly ground breaking doco could be like, you get documentary about crimes and thing like that where they've got actors recreating things, and maybe there is something out there that I haven't seen, but I feel like being able to watch sex workers engaging with one another, and / or engaging with clients in a way that is obviously a recreation but is closely based on actual stuff I'd find that a lot more interesting and daring. Because it's hard not to be distracted when there is blurs or silhouettes or pixels in a screen. It confuses the human brain. It's not what we're accustomed to looking at, we try to fill in the gaps, it distracts form what is being said.

So, I'd love an opportunity where I could just see and hear what sex workers have to say without those distractions. But I know for most budgets it's just not feasible it just sucks is all.

Clare: It does.

Have you ever wanted to not be anonymous anymore?

Sophie: Yeah, yeah, there's been a lot of times. I would love to be able to be able to stand up more, to be more of an advocate not just for sex work but for sexual education. The way that sex ed is done is one of the things that feeds in to both negative ideas about sex work but also a lot of the negative interactions as a sex worker. The majority of my bad interactions in sex

work, it's because I'm dealing with someone who's never had good sex ed and that's the key difference.

It's something I've grown to care a lot about, I would love the opportunity to stand up and say, and be fully 'This is who I am and this is what I do and I'm not in any way ashamed of it' but for one thing I can't do that because I know that my family would not approve. I'm nervous about my youth and I don't want my life to be forever tied to that. I'd love to be an advocate about how sex work is part of my life, but I'm doing other things now. You can be a confident strong sex worker without always being dedicated to being a full-time sex worker. I definitely consider myself a sex worker even though I'm doing it part-time as well as a fulltime job and I'd love to be able to advocate for that but it's tricky. And I feel like people take it more seriously when you stand up and have a full voice as well. When you have to hide behind false names, false voices, false images, I think that that sends a false message to the audience as well.

Clare: I'm just going through my questions...Do you feel like negotiating boundaries in a documentary interview has any similarity to that of negotiating boundaries in a booking with a client?

Sophie: In a weird way I feel like I have more of an ability to negotiate boundaries in a booking with a client than with doco stuff. In a booking, I know that it's about my sexual consent and I know what my boundaries are, and I know my legal rights. I don't have a legal right to have my say in somebody else's doco, I mean I have a right to not be forced to lie or say things that aren't true, but I feel like I'd be much more likely to give in to something I wasn't quite happy with, for example having stupid voices instead of a voice I would be ok with being used. Because I think there's much more of a power imbalance, when I'm being a sex worker being talked to with media. Not that they're putting it on to me, but I'm grateful for the opportunity to put some of my messages out there and I don't want to compromise that opportunity. I've never even been in the case where I've had the opportunity to negotiate boundaries. I've been lucky that [my manager] has done that on my behalf because I worry that without someone as staunch as [her], because I'm not very good at that, I worry that I could have let too much of my voice or image be used actually. I feel much more powerful negotiating and discussing my boundaries with clients. Which is interesting, I've never thought about that.

Clare: I've just been thinking about, because there has been a little bit written about similarities between psychotherapy relationship and the documentary project, but there's also perhaps similarities in relation to client interactions?

Sophie: I think there's definitely an aspect of that. You want to please them, you want to say something they like. I don't want to say something they are not going to like. You know that they have the power at the end of the day if you don't go by their rules you're not in it. It doesn't get out there. There's definitely similarity.

Clare: Do you ever feel like you've said too much? In the documentary or you've regretted something?

Sophie: The only thing that I've regretted saying is something is a message I very much wanted to put out there, it's a message that I've also repeated a lot in my personal life, and it's a unique message. So, essentially in the [Documentary B] doco I talked about when I was younger. I have [personal health condition] I didn't know they would use it or not and they did. So, part of me is like, ohm, at the same time, it's an important message so I'm *tolerant* of that. I didn't ask them not to use it.

In some ways, no, I do regret some of the things I say sometimes, because sometimes when you get a bit more relaxed you kind of get back in to changing room mode, where, in the changing room you talk shit about your clients, in the changing room you complain about the things they do, whereas I think that complaining about clients in a documentary environment is never going to be an effective way of curbing unsavoury behaviour from them. I think a much better way of doing that is some form of media catered to clientele as an audience. But just casually having a doco in which I'm talking shit about dumb things clients do, that's not a nice message or a nice image. I would hate people to connect [me] to this person in the doco that doesn't like clients. That's not it at all. I don't think I've had anything really bad used in any docos but there's been a few times in my head where I've been 'ouwl, that's getting a little bit too relaxed, a little too broad and blunt'. Because while when I worked in retail I could talk shit about how useless clients were all the time and no one would ever say 'do you think it's not a good environment to be in?'. But if you're a sex worker and you go on a doco and talk about how difficult clients are, you're going to have people saying 'well you shouldn't be doing

sex work'. So, the things I feel I have to be careful about, it's not, I feel like I can't be too honest because it will hurt the cause rather than help.

Clare: That's quite a lot to be on-guard about

Sophie: Mmm, yeah. It's interesting being asked questions about it, you are on guard for all these different things, because you can't be too specific about your own experiences in your outside life, you can't be too specific about clients, you can't be too specific about all sorts of things, because at the end of the day you don't know who is watching. And you don't know who can figure things out.

(Interview wraps up)

Appendix 3.
Interview transcript: Alex

Date: Friday 5th July 2019
[In-person interview]

[Information sheet and transcript process run through, consent forms. Interview begins]

Alex: I like my reading voice. I don't like my talking voice.

Clare: It's funny how those things are quite different

Alex: Like if I'm reading a poem, I've got my reading voice on, and it sounds quite calm to me. I feel calm, because it's quite mumbly. But *this* voice, whoa, it's like I've bought Minnie mouse to the table. It gets so squeaky and so low so it's just jarring.

Clare: What kind of voice do you think you use in documentary stuff?

Alex: My voice I think gets higher because I'm a little bit unsure of myself.

Clare: I feel like I've got so many voices

Alex: Like when I'm dating someone I'll discover their adult voice, the voice they use when they want to sound like a grownup. Usually like the same as their phone voice, but all of a sudden will be like, oh, whoa, is that your actual voice?

[vocal feedback starts. Resolved, recording resumed]

Clare: Take 3. Ok. That was so weird

Alex: A little bit of possession to start the day.
I've been watching lots of documentaries about possession stuff

Clare: I love possession stuff. I was reading this book about the cultural history of ventriloquism, and it talks a lot about possession

Alex: yeah!

Clare: and where the voice comes from, throwing it, all this kind of stuff. If you ever want to borrow that book

Alex: I'd love to

Clare: I'll bring it in

Alex: I've got so many books at the moment that I want to tell everyone about, and lend. We should start a little book club

Clare: We should.

So, this research, it started off being mostly about the voice but it's also about the body and face in documentary as well, the ways they are obstructed from view. You've in quite a few documentaries right?

Alex: Yeah!

Clare: Have you been anonymous in all of them?

Alex: Yeah, yeah, I have

Clare: Do you think you will ever not be?

Alex: I would love, really love to not be anonymous. The thing holding me back is, well there's a few things holding me back. Although I'm relatively out, I'm not out to my older brother and his family and they're very whorephobic and there will be a backlash. And I could live without their input in my life but because I don't have other family, I quite like having family in my life and their people I couldn't educate. I'd rather have that relationship for now. But I think eventually I would make a decision about that.

The second thing is I don't want people approaching me on the street when I'm off duty. And approach me as my sex worker persona, which obviously being out and being seen as that brand in public spaces means that it could potentially affect my personal life in ways I couldn't control. Which already happens, anyway, but I think it would be more likely to happen more often. And because I do, obviously, as a sex worker, experience stigma already from people who know and I hear the way people talk about sex workers. I know that it could influence things like finding a flat, other jobs, and so that's a bit of a deterrent.

The flip side of that, is that these are exactly the reasons why I would like to show my face, and be a proud visible sex worker.

Clare: Yeah, I guess it highlights that there are different groups of people that you want to boundaries with and anonymity with, kind of separating things out a bit.

What are the kinds of films you have been involved in?

Alex: I've been in, well as a sex worker I've actually only been in 2 documentaries. I was in one for [Documentary A], and the recent Swedish one, and my other forays into the media has been writing. Which is also anonymous. But I haven't constructed one anonymous sex worker persona, it's all been anonymous in different ways. Which is kind of strange because I sometimes glimpse my first media appearance which was an article I wrote about 6 months in to being a sex worker. My ideas around sex work were quite different, I had different blind spots, and also felt such a - because I was so aware of the stigma, and the way sex workers were portrayed - I was so, so wanting to rally against that always negative depiction that I almost felt a pressure to sanitise it for other people and completely hide the ways in which stigma can cause danger. And that sort of stuff.

Which, in the recent documentary, the way that changed was, I described the way I had experienced trauma and the way that might change my experience of being a sex worker. But I just gave really good context to it, and made it clear that that was my experience and that I didn't think that trauma meant that my ability to consent going forward should be ignored, or

that my sexual encounters past that traumatic incident should be seen as a result of that trauma. Specifically, like a continued wound, I guess.

Clare: Do you feel like they gave that context in the final work?

Alex: For that one I haven't seen it, for the [Documentary A] documentary they really chose the salacious, silly, super sexual elements and glossed right over. The sound changes, the high-pitched voice, I don't know, almost gave the idea of us being quite child-like. Which was frustrating, and I think, because the way they talked about the complexities of the job and it was limited, it was edited out, was presented as me being quite brash, and immature and young. The bits that were selected was the bits that made it look like I was just this super horny super sexual childish person who didn't understand the complexities of being a sex worker or negotiating boundaries or stigma or my privilege and place in the sex worker world, which are hard things to talk about and articulate and get in to in a very short documentary. But obviously it's hard when the people watching choose the bits which are most entertaining, rather than the bits which serve the sex worker community or reduce stigma, they choose the salacious or fun to watch bits.

Clare: For the treatment of the voice, did they talk to you about what they were going to do to that beforehand?

Alex: They originally gave us this very slow deep voice, it made us sound like criminals, it was a voice distortion which I've only heard in crime shows, or from people fleeing their identities. And I expressed being quite unhappy with that. It made us seem like we were ashamed of what we did, or we were criminals essentially. Which I thought was unhelpful. And there really wasn't many options and we weren't that involved. It was hard enough getting them to be cautious about cropping our faces out and that sort of thing because originally, they said they'd crop the face out but then they'd show about half of my face.

And even so, I've heard from people that know me they recognise me, without my face in the documentary and with my voice being changed. Just based on my movement, and how much they did show of me.

Clare: Like from your body?

Alex: Yeah, yeah

Clare: Well I guess the pitch and tone from people's voices does play a big role, but then there is also, I think, the way people talk, people have particular sentence structures that they use and filler words

Alex: Definitely, and I'm someone who has a lot of pauses and ums and ers, so you'll have fun transcribing this! But I haven't been a very confident speaker in the past, I'm much better in writing and I'm cautious of saying things. Because particularly when it comes to sex work, because I sit in quite a privileged place within the industry, for lots of reasons, and I'm aware that as sex workers we're very very rarely given the opportunity to represent ourselves in the media, and usually even when we are representing ourselves to an extent, it's edited and altered and manipulated by someone who's not a sex worker to serve a particular salacious and exciting narrative, which is usually either the sex worker that needs to be rescued, or where the sex workers are doing sex work from a place of desperation. Or the sex worker where there is absolutely nothing wrong. It's Belle du Jour, I don't know, it almost condemns other sex workers who might not exist in that super privileged space. So, there's so many depictions which I think are so harmful, that I really don't want my voice, which is amplified by my privilege, to talk over other sex workers, who won't be given the platform that I am. Because even though I'm part of a group which isn't represented there's sex workers who have even less representation and encounter even more stigma. And just don't have tools and are not given a platform to speak about their experiences at all and are often talked about, and talked about by non-sex workers, and then, on occasion, highly privileged sex workers, who kind of don't check their privilege

Clare: Do you feel that pressure when you're talking to documentary film crews?

Alex: Absolutely, and it's why I'm quite cautious about talking about sex work in general, because I'm only an authority on my own experience, and I can't talk to other people's experience. I try to listen as much as I can, but I really try to situate any conversation in my own experience, and make it really clear that that's the context. I only can represent me as a sex worker, not all sex workers. But it's also something that limits the amount I'm willing to speak about my experience in some ways, because I'm aware if I talk about the discrimination

we face, it's something where it might make people pity sex workers. Sex workers who are more discriminated against than me will get more of that pity. And then if I talk about how great and easy things are, that's giving people a sanitised view, and it's a view that isn't true for many people's experiences of the job, and isn't consistently true of my experience of the job. I enjoy the job but there are ways where the stigma causes the violence, or threat of violence, and that's an everyday reality.

Clare: So, for the [Documentary A] film they put your voice higher,

Alex: Yep

Clare: Do you know what they did to the other one you were talking about, that was more trauma focused?

Alex: Not yet. Not yet. I know the way they filmed me was kind of different, and I felt like the process of, I felt like they were more respectful of the way they talked to us, and gave us a bit more input in terms of how they were going to disguise our identity in filming us. Because the people at [Documentary A] just left us the camera and was like 'go for it, we'll edit it later' and were quite hard, and just didn't understand that showing just half our face could put us in danger or out us. So, it was quite hard to make it very clear that it was important that they were really cautious.

But with the other documentary they were pretty good about showing us how they were going to hide our identity, and just filming backs.

Clare: Was this the [Documentary D] film crew?

Alex: Yeah. But I'm not sure about the voice yet, because, although I know I'll get to ok it before it goes out

Clare: Do you feel like, because you're not face out, in your work advertising right? Do you feel like there's any correlation between that anonymity and anonymity in film that you've been in?

Alex: Strangely, I feel at work I have a lot more control over representation because I'm representing myself more. Although I don't have say over my advertising at [name], I've got my own social media, so I very much have a voice, control and curate my images and the identity I'm putting out there, my sex worker persona, not just, what I say when I say it, and find my audience and respond to them directly. Whereas, in a documentary obviously, I encounter them as my sex worker persona, and I'm talking from that experience. Also talking just as a person, who happens to be a sex worker, but a lot of the time I will be talking about my sex worker persona, or show aspects of that, explain how that persona would act in situations. I'm not just me wholly separate from that when I'm being talked to on film.

But I feel like I have far less control over what they chose to put in to the world, how they choose to edit things, and the context my words will be placed in. I'm not sure what footage it will be pressed against. And obviously, any kind of documentary kind of creates a narrative to make it interesting for the viewer. So, when I'm telling my own stories and experiences it will be read in relation to other people's experiences and stories. And I don't have any control over what the documentary as a whole might say about sex workers. So, it feels quite different and pretty divorced for me.

Clare: The documentary feels more detached?

Alex: Yeah, like I have less control. It's similar to writing pieces where they will edit things out. It's not having the final say in how you present yourself. Even though the words are yours, they can change so much just in the context of presentation. And that's something you have to prepare yourself for, when you're engaging in any kind of media thing where you don't have the creative control of it. For me it's important to participate in those things still, and try to put my story in the world, but there is always an element of anxiety. Because the media is always, just, kind of harms sex workers. Mainstream media consistently harms sex workers in the way they portray us and doesn't do due diligence in talking to us and including us in the process of representing ourselves a lot of the time, so, you're always concerned that you might be added to the canon of media that just dumps stigma on sex workers.

Clare: Do you feel when you're watching back yourself in those films in that context then, do you feel like you're watching yourself in terms of *you*, are you looking at *yourself*? Or as a kind of character I suppose, that other people might watch?

Alex: I think, when it's a media thing I tend to think of myself as doing a job, in terms of, trying to put a positive representation of a sex worker in to the world. So, I don't tend to watch it and think oh I look a bit awkward there. I think 'did I do a good job representing sex workers?', did *they* do a good job, in choosing parts of the interview that serve the community and are strong. So, I do slightly divorce it from myself, and in the way, I would be putting writing in the world. It's my words, but they are doing a job, in a way that's different from poetry or, even I think, strangely enough, a lot of the media I do as my sex worker persona is doing a job slightly less, because it's almost as if the stakes are slightly lower. If you're talking to the media you're out in to the world in a way where your claiming to be an expert, or should be listened to about something. When you're representing a group that is not listened to, and encounters so much danger because we're not listened to, you kind of have a job to do, if you're choosing to engage with that. If you're going to seek it out, or accept the job of representing a very unrepresented group you kind of have to take that a little bit seriously.

Clare: For the [Documentary A] documentary, so did you do all that filming yourself and just send it to them for the editing?

Alex: Yeah

Clare: That's quite an unusual way of doing it actually

Alex: Yeah, it's very unusual yeah. It was kind of strange

Clare: Did they tell you what they wanted?

Alex: Well it was a little bit of a surprise, basically. I had come out of a booking with another sex worker and we were a bit tipsy at the end of the day, and they just left a video camera and was like 'you girls can film a little bit'. So, I'm guessing they wanted something quite loose? Which is what they got, yeah.

Clare: Was it just filming from here that was in the final piece?

Alex: No, it was a few different sex workers, including some face out sex workers. And the documentary itself there were some really stand out moments in it that I thought were great, strong representations of sex workers. But it was very 'vice', not to slag them off, in the way it also had the need to shock and be salacious and be show this sexy glamorous and then the very ordinary, and show them as disparate ends, and dramatic differences. Like it's almost like they wanted a belle du jour then a very ordinary one just to show you 'oh it's very ordinary isn't it'.

Clare: But do you still worry, because you were recognised in that, do you worry about it still be out in the world and being viewed?

Alex: I think when I choose to, like I get asked a lot, because I've kind of been criticised in general because I've had relatively visible social media in the past, and I've stood up for sex workers, and I've shown off my body in my personal life and had people say, people who know I'm a sex worker say, 'well you're making it very obvious you're a sex worker, you're asking for trouble' to me. When I started the job, I thought to myself, there's a possibility that when I take this job it means that at some point I'm going to be outed. And so, I considered that as a possibility and worked through those feelings when I started the job. So, I do have a lot less anxiety around it. I would love it to be a choice about how I came out to people, but I'm out to most people that I care about in my community and if people find out, although I'm aware that it could affect my future career, I'm pretty proud of being a sex worker. I don't think it should be something that causes me to be discriminated against, so it wouldn't be something that I'm ashamed of. It would be something that could prevent me from doing certain things but I think, within that, I would take that as an opportunity to educate people.

I'd likely be outed in small ways - similar to as a queer person - I've come out, but I've come out again and again. It's like being a sex worker, you don't just come out once. You come out individually, in lots of ways.

Like you never know when you're going to be outed anyway, and talking to the media there's that added possibility, that they won't do due diligence in disguising you. But equally, a client could out me. Or a friend could out me. Or. An ex-partner could out me, and I'm aware I have no control over it, and that's, that is a reality of the discrimination we have as a sex worker. You don't really have total control over that. And it's something I've worked through and I'm

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aware of and I wouldn't like it to happen, but at the same time it's something I knowingly took on when I started the job. And there's people who would encounter far worse than me if they were outed than me. I could really handle it. And one day I would actually like to be out, I think it's important. I have no weird feelings about being a sex worker, it's something which, I've found such a home in this community, and I don't have that family which prevents lots of people from being out. I'm quite separate from my family, and I found my own family, made that family. So, and the career I'd like to pursue, I imagine it would slot in to my experience of being a sex worker quite well.

Clare: For the quite paternalistic view of like 'you should be more careful with your identity' how do you respond to that?

Alex: Um, for that, the last time I have a really good example of that, where someone sent me a PM and was like 'OK, this is ridiculous, it's so obvious.' I got sent a PM to my sex worker account, using my real name, which was, was the added insult as if they were choosing to use my real name they should have used my other social media, where they clearly followed me and knew from my personal life. But they basically said 'this is ridiculous, it's so obvious you're a sex worker, everyone can tell, it's obvious your pictures are you, anyone who knows you will know that you're a sex worker, you're asking for trouble, or to be straight up outed' was the message. And my response to that was, I acknowledge that there's quite a strong possibility that people in my community would suspect I'm a sex worker based on my social media presence. It's relatively likely that if you followed my twitter account for long enough and knew me well in real life, you could see that that was me. And I have no problem with that. If someone deliberately tries to out me, tries to prevent me from getting work because of that, that's something which I would deal with if it happens, and I hope it doesn't happen, but someone deliberately choosing to harm me because I'm a sex worker that's an act of harm on them that I'd respond to, rather than live my life in shame and being cautious. And I'm aware that that is a danger that I face being a sex worker. But I disagree that I'm putting myself in danger, I think the stigma is putting me in danger. And by being a little more visible, that is the way we slowly shift the stigma. Being more unapologetic about this kind of thing. And it is hard and it is scary but that's not a reason I don't want to do it.

Clare: Do you think in a way it's considered improper to be out as a sex worker?

Alex: I think people almost think that you are a bit dim, or that you don't understand the consequences. It's generally to me, people who say it, act like I'm childish. It's always this infantilising, patronising language. I'm always so frustrated, because I'm an adult woman with a job that requires quite complex emotional labour. And to assume that I'm unaware of the danger or the stigma that I encounter in my job or that I'm unable to negotiate my own boundaries and safety. It's so patronising and it's almost this same idea of sex workers needing to be rescued. It's this idea that I'm not being cautious with my own safety, rather than considering the fact that that might be decision, and it might be a decision that I'm trying to be *as* out as I can while trying to retain *some* anonymity, so that I can separate out my sex worker persona from my private life, to an extent.

But also, I don't show my face but people who know me might recognise me. But if they do, I kind of don't want to talk about being a sex worker necessarily, unless I choose to bring it up, but equally if someone came to me and said 'Hey, I know you're a sex worker 'I would say yes, I am', and I have no problem with that. There a certain jobs which I want in the future where it could impact it, but I'd like to think that career that I'd like to pursue, I could be out in terms of my identity, in some way. Particularly the way I want to go, career wise, that's something I see as, I could bring up being a sex worker, quite comfortably, in that job still. But if that wasn't the case I could delete my sex worker twitter. Someone could have screen capped things, someone could choose to out me, but that's still a deliberate action then, someone trying to cause me harm and anyone could do that at any time. Someone could sneak a video camera in to the room. I'm taking some precautions, but I can't live in fear, live in shame, and absolutely try to erase my identity as a sex worker in every way, just in case someone finds out and tries to hurt me because of that.

Clare: So, you've only been in films where they've cropped your face out?

Alex: yeah

Clare: You haven't been in ones that used blurs or pixels? Would you? Have you thought of ways preventing recognition that you would be happy with?

Alex: I would quite like to have actors reading my writing. That would be interesting. Obviously, the possibility would be them encountering some stigma or being perceived as sex

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workers. Or being perceived as knowing sex workers, being seen as dirty by association or whatever. But I think that would be really interesting, especially because that sex worker persona is a kind of performance, and you are kind of acting. So, it would be really creating a character and a performance of your character/performance, which would be quite fun and interesting.

Yeah, I'd also, cos I think the problem with lots of depictions of sex workers is we're given quite inhuman voices and it's quite hard to connect with us because we're often given these cheerful chipmunk voices, or these deep kind of criminal voices, or just robotic voices. And the voice is pretty important in terms of connecting with people, and creating that empathy and humanising us, so I think actors would be really cool, giving us some sort of face, so actors would be cool. Obviously, there are face out sex workers but that is such a small amount of the community, so, yeah, I think anything that humanises us in that way would be cool, even animation, I'd take that. Or puppets.

Clare: I'll show you an animation after this. Yeah, it's interesting the different strategies people use.

Alex: Yeah

Clare: It's interesting the different strategies films use, because a lot of films not change the voice at all. I've actually encountered more of the voice changes in New Zealand documentary.

Alex: To me that would make sense, as Europe is so much bigger. New Zealand is so small! You're so likely to know someone who would recognise your voice from seeing it.

Like with my pictures, basically, someone who knows me well would recognise me, probably. But if I was in a job interview, and they saw that picture they might not know for sure. And that's all I want.

Clare: You want doubt?

Alex: Yeah. Plausible deniability. That's all I want. I don't mind if somebody suspects. And obviously suspecting might mean that I don't get a job. But that's something I'm willing to put up with to vaguely start having some sort of representation without being full out.

Clare: For your sex work, obviously you have your sex worker persona, and then for documentary - I mean people have personas in all sorts of interactions in life - but have you felt like you have an extra persona for documentary? Or if it's more of 'real' self in the documentary, or something you negotiate in the moment?

Alex: Yeah, I think it is a negotiation in the moment. I try quite hard to be honest, but I'm also cautious about the amount of information I share and how I share it, and creating context for that information, especially when talking about violence, or negotiating my safety in the job. But I do feel like I have a little bit of a persona, because I do want to represent some who gives an idea of who my sex worker persona *may* be, but also shows the human element of me. And also, something that keeps stuff for myself. Because I don't want to share *all* my life with people, and things that aren't relevant, and things that might cause people to assume that all sex workers have the same qualities that I have. So, I think it is kind of me, it's me in real life, with a little bit of my sex worker persona and then, this layer of trying to negotiate boundaries, and seem relatively upbeat and engaging, because I don't want people to watch someone who seems sad or hurt or afraid or cautious in talking to the media. So, I want to make the audience members feel at ease, and not like I'm unsafe or hurt or that I need to be rescued. And so, there is that element of being, I guess compensating for that view of the traumatised sex worker, where I almost feel like I need to be slightly more upbeat.

Clare: For the [Documentary A] film crew, did you feel like they were quite respectful of that boundary? Or were they wanting you to open up more?

Alex: I think they respected that boundary. I think I naturally opened up a little bit more because there was a sex worker involved interviewing me. And they went through the actual process with me more and were so much more respectful and had done their homework. Obviously, they were touring with a sex worker, and had already had a lot of discussions, and made me feel comfortable. So, I think I was slightly more my real persona and slightly less my sex worker persona, more my real self. Because there was a little bit of trust there.

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Clare: That makes sense. When I was talking to them I was talking to them about legal stuff mostly, and when they turned to more personal stuff they didn't get much from me really!

Alex: See that's good. I feel like people feel like they can intrude on sex workers boundaries so much more. And when you say you're a sex worker, particularly with women actually, they'll immediately tell you all of their sexual trauma, and ask about yours, and it's this bizarre thing where they feel because your work is so intimate, they're invited into the most intimate area and almost don't have to have boundaries like they would with any other person. And they expect you to take on their emotional labour because they know you're a little bit sensitive, but are also often a little bit patronising and that weird thing of entrusting us with all this trauma but also seeing us as so filled with trauma that we can't be trusted to make decisions about our body.

Clare: And launching straight into it, 'so what's the weirdest thing you've done...'

Alex: Yeah, or what's the grossest client you've had. I kind of want to ask what's the grossest thing about working at McDonalds? What's it like being a lawyer, are you dead inside?

Clare: But also, a friend of mine is a paramedic and people also ask her all the time, what's the most horrific thing that's happened to you. Certain jobs, maybe also it's gendered?

Alex: Yeah, yeah

Clare: Do you feel like there's something else you want to talk about?

Alex: I waffle a lot. I'm really bad at answering the question I've been asked.

Clare: Same. But you were answering, in act you were answering before I could even ask the question.

Alex: That sounds like me.

I read the first article I wrote being a sex worker, oh it's bad. It's not as bad as it could have been, but it also just so glossing over things and trying to pretend everything was perfect, which

I think is just me being a bit insecure about the job, because I had only just started encountering the stigma.

Clare: I think that, as a response to quite extreme stigma, it's a defence mechanism, and it's also about safety, because like you can actually put yourself in quite an unsafe emotional position, if you start talking about other aspects, with people who are not very.... I Guess who can't let you feel bad about something that's happened without also putting stuff on you

Alex: It's so hard too, because so many people don't think we have the right to exist, to be sex workers, they just treat our job *as* trauma, so you also feel you have to justify first, and be like 'I'm OK, it's OK that I do thing' and then it's so hard to unpick any complexities, because you just start from a place or, because that's still being negotiated, our very right to exist, let alone, to be like, it's ok if not every encounter is entirely positive, because people pounce on that, and go 'a ha!! See you are traumatised and you didn't know it' so you can't talk about that, or say, that's actually as aspect of stigma and that's what harm has to do. 'a ha! you are being harmed, see, you shouldn't exist'

Clare: But with that, do you think there is an expectation that you should just talk to anyone about trauma more?

Alex: I think there's almost, something I encountered as someone who's quite vocal around feminism in general, was this idea that I owed everyone my trauma, and that people could use my trauma and my story for their personal political furtherment, or for their grievances with people. They could, people who had harmed me, if they were pissed off about someone they could use that as 'this person is unsafe, they've harmed this person' which was *my* experience, *my* stories, they didn't have a right to. There's almost this culture of accountability but the people who are comfortable holding people accountable are predominantly people who are in positions of power who have co-opted that language, and taken it away from vulnerable voices, and using it as tools to beat people over the head with. And yeah, to use other people's stories and experiences of trauma to justify their actions and just of their wanting to call out particular people particular groups, and they often frame it as this is what is right, you have a responsibility, when really you don't have a responsibility to talk about trauma, you don't have a responsibility to talk trauma in any way. You don't have a responsibility to hold people accountable for the trauma you experience, or protect other people.

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I fully respect people who can do that, and do that, that is incredible, but don't put onus on victims of trauma or stigma or societal harm or say it's their job to educate people, and to prevent themselves and others being harmed by others. It's just so deeply unfair and wrong and punishing the already punished. And placing responsibility on victims to not be victims, rather than looking the groups and the attitudes that are harming particular groups. And I think that there is a balance within that, where people in positions of power need to support and amplify marginalised voices, and stand with them, and ask how I help – and can do the work – and rely on those groups doing the work. And also know when to take a step back and listen. Not take charge and co-opt their stories. So, it's complex, and that's why people step away from it. For sex work, where often people almost feel like every sex worker has to educate them, and should answer all their questions about it, and be ready to fight to justify themselves to them, as if we have the responsibility to justify our job to anyone who asks, and anyone can out us at any moment, and kind of go 'a ha, you're a sex worker, I know' or tell other people. And people will come to you and you to justify your job and educate them 'this is why I do it' when really you owe that explanation to no one but yourself.

And that's why I'm quite comfortable with the idea of being outed – it's not something I would seek, someone trying to harm me, but I absolutely wouldn't take that on. I wouldn't take that on as something that I did, or that I was so careless that someone harmed me. It would be 'someone chose to harm me, and that sucks' and I could recover from that but I didn't do that harm. Existing as a sex worker in fear isn't my duty. And that isn't to criticise sex workers who exist in fear of being outed, like I understand that fear, and it's a real fear and it's valid. But I shouldn't have to have that fear in order to be seen as someone who, yeah, has a right to be a sex worker. I have a right to be seen. If people think that's immaturity or me being careless or me not knowing better is really none of their business, because, *I* get to negotiate those boundaries, and I get to choose not to live in shame.

[Interview wraps up]

Appendix 4.

Interview transcript: sex workers Thanta Laovilawanyakul, Mai Chanta, Liz Hilton. (Empower)

Interview date: 3rd July 2019
[Group interview via zoom.]

[Information sheet and transcript process run through, consent forms. Interview begins]

Clare: You can sign the form and send it to me but I wanted to go over a few things with you. The Ethics process is concerned about anonymity, and preserving anonymity and names, so I wanted to ask what names you wanted in the interview, and to be clear if your conditions for participating is the use of your real name.

Liz: So Pingpong would like to use her real name Thanta. And Mai also wants to use her real name, Mai. And her last name Chanta.

Clare: OK, thank you. Also; you can ask me questions any time, and you can ask me to stop recording at any time, and if there's a question you don't like you don't have to answer it.

Liz: She said 'yeah, that's for sure'

Clare: Thank you again for agreeing to this

Liz: Sorry, can I just say that one of the things that Mai said that I forgot, she said when they don't get their real name recorded on research or in documentaries, it means we have no academic history. When actually they have contributed to so many PhD's, Masters degrees and other studies. But for themselves they don't build up an academic history, because they are always treated as anonymous.

Clare: Yeah, exactly. Yes, I 100% agree with that. I consider the interviews a co-production of knowledge. Do you get asked a lot for filming requests and documentary requests?

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Liz: Yeah, they said yes, a lot. And I said what does a lot mean? And they said we average at least once a month.

Clare: And who is asking, what kind of filmmakers are asking?

Liz: Oh, maybe not only documentary. That would include other print media as well.

So, if it's documentaries, about 4 or 5 times a year, so about two months there will be documentary itself. Usually, mostly, westerners, foreigners. A mixture of freelance and journalists and people wanting to make their name. Some artists.

Clare: Artists?

Liz: Mai was saying I just always feel like the word documentary is something you apply to a nature animal, geographic and discovery channel. So, she always feels like that when they ask her 'I want to make a documentary'.

Clare: How do you decide which documentary requests you want to be involved with?

Liz: Two things. Thanta looks at what is the concept? Or what is their concept. And also, Mai adding but we also mainly look at is what they want to do any use at all to what we are doing?

We don't let them decide the direction of the documentary. We are the ones that decide the direction. Not follow them - they have to follow us.

Clare: So now you like to have a lot of control over what they are filming?

Mai: If we let them do what they want to do it ends up being a very sad story, about our parents and how terrible it all is and the same twenty questions over and over. And it's absolutely no use to us.

Clare: I wanted to ask you a little bit about the films that made you anonymous. Can you tell me a little bit about them?

Mai: I'm really angry, I really want to share this experience.

So, it was a freelance journalist doing a documentary they wanted to sell to mainstream Thai news people, whatever that means. So, I insisted along with others that we wanted to show our full faces, and not be pixelated or anything. They were surprised when they said ‘If you want that, you have to say that to the camera. Otherwise I can’t do it’. So, I looked directly at the camera and said, ‘I’m a sex worker and I don’t want my face blurred after” and they led me to believe that they wouldn’t blur my face. So then, they did what most of the documentaries do - they don’t show us first, it comes out, we see it when everyone else sees it. And then, it came out on national TV, and my face is all blurred. And the other people that didn’t say they were a sex worker, sex workers sitting around, they didn’t get their faces blurred, only me. So, it shows me that it means that I’m a [incomprehensible] – like a weird thing, a strange thing in that group. And when I rang and complained about it, they said that they had to do it to protect me.

It’s ridiculous because OK, they protected my identity from wide society who don’t know me, but all my friends and family could recognise me easily anyway. Their reasoning is bullshit anyway. I’m still really angry about that, and it’s not the only time it’s happened.

Liz: And then, are you ready for Thanta?

Clare: How did they do it to your face? Was it a blur? Or pixilation or what did they do?

Liz: They blurred it.

Clare: And did they do anything to your voice?

Liz: No. They put all the other details – that it was Empower, and the address in Chiang Mai, and everything. But just this blur.

Clare: Ok, I am ready for Thanta

Thanta: When they blur my face like that it makes me feel like I’m a criminal. I’ve been fighting against this issue for many years. And for the last one I said to them, look, do not blur my face. If you blur my face or disguise my face there will be big trouble. And they kept their promise.

Liz: Clare, they blurred her whole body!

Thanta: It's just a blur going through the video. Maybe they weren't sure I was a sex worker so they didn't want to take the risk. But this is protecting women from themselves.

Liz: We had a woman come here, it wasn't a documentary, she came to do her PhD. She was doing a PhD on sex workers and consent, according to the law, the prostitution law, and international thinking. Anyway, she came to interview these guys, about you can ever give consent or not. And then after it was over, the interviewer said oh I forgot, you have to sign a consent form, and I said yeah ok do you want me to make lots of copies? There's probably about 9 of us.

'They're not allowed to sign only you can sign Liz. Because they're sex workers, they can't give consent to be interviewed, by the ethics committee'. I said, well we can't take this. We'll only sign it if you include as a main chapter, that sex workers can't give consent about consent. It should be the basis of her theses. Anyway, that's a side issue. It's protecting you from yourself.

Next!

In Thailand there's a national human rights commission, and the head of the commission was actually a very high society, highly respected woman, in her 70's. I think she's 72. She came to our bar, our Empower bar, and when she was here the media was also here, and when they put her photo in the paper, they also blurred her face, because she's a woman in bar! She was furious!

Thanta said it was good in a way that it made people of her rank really understand what it is like to not even be able to have your face out there.

Clare: So how many films have you been in where they blurred your face against your wishes?

Mai: probably 2 or 3 times.

Liz: And Thanta very old lady (laughs) so double. Probably 5 or 6 times now.

Thanta: I stopped counting because it's too often

Liz: It's also common for the other women here who've been involved in documentaries, not just these two that they don't like their face.

Clare: Was there a time that you wanted to be anonymous, or have you always wanted to show your face?

Thanta: No not really, there hasn't been that time. Sometimes there has been times when I haven't been happy with the end story and I would like to be removed from it, but that's not the same thing. Some of it is the context of Empower as well, that when people contact Empower to do any kind of media, only the women who can really say no, are the women we ask if they want to be involved. So, most people have done that process already. But it's not much of a process, it's not like in the West.

Liz: They're just saying, they know when they've seen a lot of other sex workers and been to other things, Western sex workers are much more worried showing their face and their name, like they wear masks, and we don't know what they're doing.

Mai: If you're not ready to show your face and want it out there, then it's better not to be in it then be disguised, because it's some kind of admission that what you're doing is shameful or wrong.

Thanta: We are trying to show that we are women in society, we're not outside of anything. We don't want to be looked at as something that needs to be disguised or have the little black, you know the small little black strip to hide your eyes.

Liz: They used to use those, and we had a big conference, and we gave those out, to everyone at the conference, to shut their eyes. A little black card.

Ok, next Clare!

Clare: Do you always watch the films that you're in?

Liz: Yes. We usually try, we tell them every time, to send to us to have a look at before they put it out but no one ever does that really.

They both look at ones they are in, but Thanta also had the experience of being in documentary where, they follow you around for 3 days, bother you for many days, but it never comes out, it just disappears in to the ether. We never see it again.

Clare: So, it was never finished? Or never sent to you, or you don't know?

Liz: Don't know. We presume never finished, because somebody would see it and tell us. But we don't know they never get back to us. They're rude!

Clare: yes, that's very rude.

Liz: I remember when we opened Can Do bar Al Jazeera spent 5 days with us leading up to the opening of the bar, while we were all painting and decorating and getting ready, and they filmed us solidly for 5 days. But then the editorial team in Doha refused to broadcast it, because it's about positive sex worker activity, and they don't run those kinds of good stories. We asked for the footage and we never got that as well, which is historically important footage to us and it's lost. It's gone.

Clare: Do you feel like all kinds of hiding the face and voice are equally 'bad' or are some better than others?

Liz: Do you mean the methods they use?

Clare: Yes, like blurring, or the thing across the eyes, or a ski mask or balaclava

Liz: They are saying go and film something else. The interview is the voice over. Go and film a table, a bottle, whatever you like. And have the voice as voice over. Don't try to disguise the human being. Don't film pieces of us, like a foot or a leg or a hand, or a back of a head (laughs). Our nails.

Clare: Putting on makeup from behind...?

L: (laughs) Yes. Film you in the dark! You know that one? When they film you in the dark and we look like a ghost.

I'm going to send you some photos I think you will enjoy Clare, how they have disguised people here. Also, I will send you the link, I don't know if you saw it or not, a couple of years ago a group of the women here made a short clip about this very issue.

Clare: Yeah, I watched it. Yeah, I really liked the video. I was surprised to see the balaclava, the ski mask.

Liz: They really use it here, na. Do they not use it in New Zealand?

Clare: In England, they use other kinds of masks sometimes, like a carnival mask

Liz: They use that themselves? Or the authorities put that on them?

Clare: They use that themselves

Liz: We were showing what other people put on us. So here the media, police, and other NGO's will put ski mask on you to protect you.

Thanta is saying, as somebody that believes in the right over her body, the right to show our face, and saying to people we aren't weak and we aren't victims. We have the power and we will show our face. So, when somebody else covers it up like that, it's like they take away our power.

Clare: Do you have any worries about being recognisable or being known as a sex worker?

Liz: We are well past worrying about that now!

We're just discussing why is there a big difference it seems to us as we see across the world. They are wondering what are the consequences? Are the consequences in other countries

higher than being exposed as a sex worker then they are in Thailand? And we're not really sure what the consequences are for sex workers in other countries, if it's known they're sex workers.

Clare: Some people are worried that they won't be able to cross international borders any more.

Liz: Mai says bad girls go everywhere! You just tick no on the box!
That's your next thesis Clare!

Clare: Some people worry that they will lose their children.

Liz: We don't have any threat of that in Thailand. I think that's a big one yeah.

Yeah in Thailand it's only the worry of the reaction of the family. But we don't have anything like the threat of losing children or things like this. And going over borders they don't take borders seriously these guys here, I don't know what to do Clare! They think their right to travel is real.

Clare: But going back to an earlier part of the conversation, where you said that, for one of the films where they blurred your face, that wide audiences wouldn't know you but your family would still know you –

Liz: They're saying, really, like your family your close family and friends, you know or your lover or husband, they will know your body and your voice. So, the more you try you end up like a blur with a mechanical voice and then what are you? You're no longer a human anymore.

Also, too, like some of the older methods, I don't know if they use them now so much, but there's actually a thing I read many years ago Clare, and you'd have to check and make sure I'm not fake news, but how people do facial recognition is not the same. The covering of the eyes is pretty much a western thing. But actually, I read that Asian people identify from the lower part of the face not the upper part. If you know what I mean. Check that it's not some sort of eugenics, terrible argument, I did read it a long time ago, that its absolutely useless to hide the top part of the face, because Asians don't recognise from the top.

Clare: Yeah, I mean I think we use a lot of things to identify people

Liz: Sorry we're just practising on Mai! (laughing)

Clare: Recognition software will even look at somebody's ears.

So, do documentaries there not often change the voice?

Liz: I didn't ever, I've been here 27 years, I've never had a documentary made with women in Empower where they even talked about changing the voice.

No, never even been any discussion of it.

Mai: They don't respect us from the beginning. They know all this stuff but they don't do it, because they just want to get their documentary and get their footage and get out.

Thanta: Actually the issue isn't whether they disguise our face or don't disguise our face, the issue is the media do not respect us, and our decision to whether we want our face out or not. So, it's not an issue of anonymity, however you say that, anonymity, it's an issue of respect for decisions of women who do sex work make.

Clare: Yeah respect is a big one. While you are filming, do you feel respected *while* you are filming? or no?

Liz: They say yeah usually during the process of filming they behave very respectably.

Mai: Yeah, they're really, really, good until they get what they want. But it's after that.

Liz: Pingpong is also talking about, what do you call it when you do the, ah my English is gone! Like sneaky filming.

Clare: Hidden cameras?

Liz: Yeah that's it, na. That's another kind of documentary altogether

Clare: Is that a big issue, hidden cameras?

Liz: There's actually, Clare a New Zealand NGO, came here, called themselves Invader,

Clare: Invader? Ok

Liz: That's right, and then they changed their name recently to Lift International, and they come and, like Cops for Christ, they are doing vigilante rescues. And they do a lot of filming during their raids, and filming of women after the rescues. And they hide women under bath towels. So, we look like Casper the ghost.

And then hidden filming, it gets used a lot here but I wouldn't call it documentary, because most of its, just, you know, crappy tourists putting on their YouTube or Facebook. I wouldn't call it a documentary, even though some of them call it their documentary, I do not.

Pingpong: the Lift International Invader group, their documentaries are so they can get really big donations and money. They've got millions, they're so rich.

Liz: Sorry Pingpong just reminded me there's another group called Paladin, they're from the US and they're running very expensive tours, for people to go on an anti-trafficking tour, and they promote that using the film taken with hidden cameras.

Anyway, that's off topic, you have to come back to topic your thesis will never be finished Dr Clare.

This is too much information

Clare: No, it's good, I want to look in to the NZ one especially .

Liz: We actually got in contact with Catherine and Anna at the NZPC at some stage and sent them some information, sent them a letter and asked them to go and give it to the funder, it's Tear fund, it's a lot of crying, but I don't know if they ended up doing it or not. Also, to give them an invoice, because we've had to spend a lot of money cleaning up these NGO's.

Clare: I bet. I wanted to ask about some of the pictures in the video you made, of the women all in a line holding numbers and they have lines across their eyes. What is that picture of?

Liz: Yes. That's a regular photo. They've now changed to the towels over their head which I'll send you. That's the story of women being rescued from the sex industry. Again and again and again

Clare: And is that police doing that or is the Christian groups?

Liz: In the beginning it was police, then it was the police and the Christian groups, now we're under a military government so we also have soldiers coming with war weapons as well now.

And now, it's a combination of police, military and the Christian groups, the one from New Zealand.

Clare: And they have camera people with them?

Liz: Yeah, they invite the mainstream media to go along plus their own filming people.

Clare: They do that in England too, whenever there's a raid they always take the media too.

Liz: This off your topic now but last year Mai a complaint to the national human rights commission that this kind of behaviour is a human rights abuse, and their report came out last week, and they agreed that this is entrapment and the use of women's photos in the media is a human rights abuse and they have to stop. So, at the end of this month we're having a launch of that report and also meeting with the head of police, and saying that's it you have to stop now. So, we're hoping.

Clare: I hope that goes well. Because, why, it's just a form of voyeurism.

Liz: Yeah, no, it's more than that it gets money. Mrs McGillicutty in New Zealand will give ten dollars to help those poor girls. And it's very exciting, you know, it's all men. All men running around being the hero. They write that about themselves, that they're the hero.

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They just got a big contract from an energy drink called Lipo that's sponsoring - 'Lipo, for heros'

Clare: Oh really.

Liz: They don't go in to arrest women, they go in to 'help' you.

The other thing that they are just adding, is that, one of the thing about the documentaries, in terms of how they can be better, is, what we find is every 2 months, they turn up with the same idea, from all over the world, from inside of Thailand and out, all with basically the same idea, and it's so boring. They want to follow a sex worker through her, you know this Clare, through her daily life, go to the market, we want to show her normal blahblahblah and it doesn't go anywhere.

If it was really ethical and even good, good, quality media, come and develop the concept together. Not arrive with a concept. We've got lots of ideas, but by the time they come to see us they've already passed their processes. They won't change their idea. Their editor or the person their selling it to has already decided to go that way.

Clare: I mean it's also arrogance.

Liz: Yeah, they can't think you know

Thanta: Not only does the repetition of the same old stories not go anywhere, it actually keeps society thinking in exactly the same way, the same rut. It doesn't give anyone new ways of seeing things or new ways of thinking or behaving. Same same.

Clare: Is there a lot of stigma against sex workers in Thailand?

Liz: Oh! Yes. Sure

Thanta and Mai: We don't have the levels of violence of some other countries, but for sure there's the stigma of being bad women. If you're raped then you know, it's your own fault. It's part of your job.

Liz: Translation machine broken, one moment.

Lazy women, they just want to do everything easy. And immoral. Immoral and against the religion and moral code of religion. Stupid. Backward.

Sorry a lot of people going past saying hello and goodbye.

Materialistic, all these things. Yeah there's a lot of stigma. Plus, the stigma of criminal because we're still illegal, working illegally here.

Clare: Is it illegal to be a sex worker or to sell sex in certain ways?

Liz: It's illegal. It's illegal to buy or sell sex.

Clare: And do people get arrested for it?

Liz: Probably about, the last police statistics was about 35,000 sex workers last year (arrested). It's not so much.

It's not really the arrests, so much, but it's the tool that the corrupt authorities use. So, paying bribes to not get arrested. Everyone pays. Some people pay every day, some people monthly. And it's kind of the pin that begins everything. So that's where all the corruption, that where your employers don't have to follow labour law, it's extra stigma. The actual arrest is not, I mean of course you have a criminal record, so it's bad, but the main thing is it's just the lynchpin that causes a whole lot of other issues.

Thanta: It's the thing, it's the law that makes sure we can't get justice under any other law.

Clare: Yeah, it's very effective for that. Well I think I have a lot of stuff here! I will write up a transcript, and send it to you to look over. You can change things or add to things or whatever you like.

[interview wraps up]

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