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# Power, Pleasure, and Performance: Belle de Jour and the Girlfriend Experience

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**Power, Pleasure, and Performance: Belle de Jour and the Girlfriend Experience**

By

Marisa Lenay Carter

Accepted in Partial Completion  
of the Requirements for the Degree  
Master of Arts

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## Master's Thesis

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Marisa Lenay Carter

May 31<sup>st</sup>, 2018

**Power, Pleasure, and Performance: Belle de Jour and the Girlfriend Experience**

A Thesis  
Presented to  
The Faculty of  
Western Washington University

In Partial Fulfillment  
Of the Requirements for the Degree  
Master of Arts

by  
Marisa Lenay Carter  
May 2018

## Abstract

Brooke Magnanti, under the pseudonym Belle de Jour, sparked a peculiar dialogue on prostitution through her novel *Secret Diary of a Call Girl* and its Showtime television adaptation. Through these mediations, Belle's experiences—a duality of fiction and Magnanti's "real life" experiences—are entwined together into a confession about Belle's work as a "high-quality" call-girl. Her narrative provides an inquisitive glimpse into the world of escorts who navigate complex networks of hidden rules in order to be financially prosperous, safe, and happy with their work. Belle de Jour's account familiarizes her role in sex work to a large audience through a mass media platform. While her narrative brings a marginalized voice into a larger conversation about feminism and women's empowerment, it simultaneously reproduces and reinforces a heteronormativity that makes the profession illegal and dangerous for many sex workers excluded by heteronormative ideologies. In my analysis, I explore these discourses through the lens of Foucault's Repressive Hypothesis. Belle provides the Girlfriend Experience which includes sex, but also fulfills the role of a "perfect girlfriend" momentarily. The Girlfriend Experience, or the "perfect girlfriend," implies the escort will do emotional labor for her client including managing his emotions while suppressing her own, but also in faking sex and orgasms in a way that looks and feels authentic. Foucault identifies the progression of "normal" sex codified by science to be strictly heterosexual and within the confines of a monogamous relationship. Thus, Belle

de Jour's account calls into question the contradictions that appear evident in the values and sexual economy within neo-Liberal capitalism.

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## Introduction

*Secret Diary of a Call Girl* sparked a peculiar dialogue on prostitution. Published anonymously by Brooke Magnanti as *Belle de Jour* in 2005, the text was reprinted in 2008 after the Lucy Prebble's television adaptation. Magnanti recounts her experiences working as a "high-class" call girl in London under the alias "Belle de Jour," though it was years after the initial publication of *Belle de Jour* that she revealed her identity in "real life," or, her life as a Brooke Magnanti. Her novel provides an inquisitive look into the complex network of hidden rules among call-girls. Written as a memoir, her novel resembles a confession through first-person narrative in the form of diary entries with moments of authorial intrusion. Many of the entries, including reconstructions of conversations, are written after the fact and others are told as though in the present-tense. Public narratives—despite anonymity—explore the dimensions of prostitution and reclaim agency over those bodies, but failure to address the ideological apparatuses that determine who may sell their body and under what circumstances can harm the majority of less privileged sex workers. *Belle de Jour's* narrative functions as a discursive reproduction of the heteronormative marriage market even if she familiarizes a mainstream audience with the day-to-day life of a prostitute. Belle's narrative demonstrates that the "virtuous hooker" has become secularized into an ambitious, educated, young woman with big dreams, working in pursuit of a better future. This is a very different narrative from the "hooker with a heart of gold" who is trapped in unfortunate circumstances. Belle could lead a conventionally successful life

without working as a prostitute, which adds value to her services as an escort but also as an author. Michel Foucault's Repressive Hypothesis explains that sexual feelings which deviate from heterosexual relationships are discursively released into prostitution and psychiatry. But the Repressive Hypothesis also illuminates the discursive forces that enable Belle's narrative to succeed in a mass media and pop culture driven entertainment medium on-screen, reinforcing and relying on heteronormative ideologies. Belle claims she is part of the Girlfriend Experience because it is the "most requested thing" (231) available in the industry. The Girlfriend Experience adheres to the attractiveness and conventionality of a heterosexual woman who possesses, or at least signifies that she would make an "excellent wife." Belle admits she has "been cuddled to within an inch of my life by well-meaning chaps whose previous acquaintance with me was via a website" (231), even though the context of her service implies an assurance of sexual services.

Belle de Jour's adventures have sparked public dialogue over the sex industry by bringing a marginalized narrative into mainstream media—both on television and in the literary world—but discursive forces in her story reinforce the ideologies that make sex work illegal and stigmatized for many demographics of sex workers who do not adhere to heteronormative expectations. For one, Belle's on-screen character played by Billie Piper adheres to conventional and privileged beauty standards. While heteronormative forces focus on the heterosexual partnership and sexual relations, Belle's body is not policed and surveyed in the way that women of color or queer sex workers are in these economies. She is able to pass for an upper-middle-class, heterosexual woman with

minimal effort, according to the expectations of her clients that reflect greater ideological prejudices. Shortly after Magnanti revealed her identity, mass-media news outlets focused closely on graduate school having been a major influence on her decision to pursue sex work and her vocation as a PhD scientist-researcher after leaving the industry, as a signifier of middle-class values. *The Telegraph's* "Belle de Jour author unmask[s] herself amid 'perfect storm' of feelings" included an interview with the Archbishop of York who said there is "'little mention of how destructive sex for cash can be'" (2009). His concerns are redressed and simultaneously reinforced by an interview with Billie Piper, Belle's actress in the television adaptation. Piper, who was the face of Belle in various articles on Magnanti even when the writings had very little to do with the television series, told *The Telegraph*, "'We've only been exposed to the drug-fueled, sex traffic side - but the fact is, there are middle-class, cultured, well-read women who take part in this job'" (2009). The idolization of the Girlfriend Experience is remarkable in that it provides a new job category for prostitutes who are from the middle-class: often cultured, and well-read women. Criticism of prostitutes in film and television veers towards the fallen woman in need of state intervention and moral reform regardless of her social status and conditions. Prostitutes are seen as vulnerable to violence and male lust, but they are simultaneously expected to be permeable sexual objects of feminine purity in order to receive acceptance when they go public with their work and/or transition leaving the industry.

Belle experiences pleasure in gender performance and in the monetary gains she makes from willingly fulfilling the male gaze. Through performance, Belle exemplifies

an irony in legitimate forms of social relations, by replicating the very dynamics that institutionalize and privilege these relations through civil contracts. Essentially, she employs neoliberal values by putting a price tag on the social expectations that would be expected of her regardless, as it is among “normal” women, or women with legal professions. The pleasure Belle takes in willingly playing the role of spectacle demonstrates an ownership in a category of work that is otherwise stigmatized. Each discursive manifestation of these pleasures and exercises of power are media-specific, but deeply rooted in the Girlfriend Experience as a safe alternative to the security, stability, and social status of the heterosexual marriage. Therefore, among the various threads of discourse that have created a conglomerate of Belle de Jour’s narrative, teetering between confession and an exaggerated fiction, a pleasure in being desirable as a means to economic advancement reigns dominant within a heteronormative economy that privileges the heterosexual partnership and conventional beauty standards in mass media and popular culture. For Belle, the Girlfriend Experience fulfills the expectations of clients, of readers and viewers alike, and last, of her own desire for achieving what Laura Mulvey calls *to-be-looked-at-ness*. This analysis examines these media-specific discourses to bring light on the ideologies that determine who may sell their bodies and under what circumstances.

## Mass Media and Psychiatry

Discourses on bodies, men and women, the heterosexual economy, and feminism all contribute to how we articulate sexuality. Understanding the public discourse on *Secret Diary of a Call Girl* requires close attention to Brooke Magnanti who did not disclose her identity until after her novel was published, first as *Belle de Jour* and later as *Secret Diary of a Call Girl*. Laura Donnelly released the news of Dr. Brooke Magnanti in an online *Telegraph* article, assuring that “the petite scientist said she had no regrets about the 14 months she spent as a prostitute” (2009). Magnanti worked as a call girl between the years 2003 and 2004 while completing her doctoral studies in forensic pathology. As Paul Gallagher describes in *The Guardian’s* “Scientist announces that she is call girl and blogger Belle de Jour,” Magnanti’s primary reason for starting sex work was because she was in “the final stages of her PhD thesis when she ran out of money.” A fascination and preoccupation with Magnanti’s “real life” as opposed to the construction of *Belle de Jour* highlights the privileged place middle-class values have in marginalized occupations despite defying those values.

### *New Technologies*

First, it’s essential to understand *Belle de Jour* and the cultural shift in sex work occurring at this time. In “Sex in the Middle Class,” Elizabeth Bernstein found that while outdoor sex workers, those who work on the streets, experience engaging in heterosexual relations was sufficient preparation to enter sex work; for middle-class women, cultural capital, worker experience and special training such as graduate

studies in social work and therapy constituted crucial components of their transition into sex work (482). Examining the dot-com economies of postindustrial cities such as San Francisco in the 1990's, Bernstein emphasizes that the cultural groundworks of new technologies are discussed less often than the efficiency of new technologies that made sexual commerce more efficient and accessible. Bernstein's research pursues the relationship between these new technologies and the cultural changes of middle-class sex workers, overwhelmingly white and class-privileged women, who transformed the meaning of sexual commerce for sex workers and their clients. She argues that "[d]espite the huge expansion of jobs in postindustrial dot-com economies, patterns of gendered inequality within the high technology sector meant that even white, college-educated women were likely to be excluded from the highest-paying positions (475). The economic developments of new technologies created a "highly stratified occupational sector [...] with a limited number of time-intensive, highly paid, and hard-to-acquire professional positions, but with poorly paid temporary and part-time 'junk' jobs that exist in ample quantities" (485). In Magnanti's novel, Belle parallels Bernstein's observation when she initially explains her decision to start working as an escort:

I'm required to fuck [clients] regardless of whether they're covered in hairy moles or have a grand total of three teeth [...]. But it's better than watching the clock until the next scheduled tea break in a dismal staff room. So when my friends pull out the tired analogy of corporate-employment-

as-whoring yet again, I nod knowingly, and commiserate  
with them (1-2).

In addition to the implication that middle-class sex workers could work in “normal” jobs, Bernstein identifies the embrace of sexual experimentation and freedom as a means of class differentiation. The recent development of blogging has played a peculiar role in the middle-class sex workers who write about their experiences in order to cultivate a sense of bounded authenticity that invite and maintain client satisfaction (484). What’s essential to clients, and to middle-class sex workers, is that the work is meaningful in a sense separate from monetary gain. Brooke Magnanti initially entered the literary world by blogging about her experiences as an escort like the sex-workers Bernstein interviewed. Once her blog gained popularity, she wrote *Belle de Jour*, later reprinted as *Secret Diary of a Call Girl*. The fast popularity her narrative had in the literary world and among audiences interested in popular culture suggests that the meaningfulness of a sex worker’s experience is relevant to a broad audience, even after the sex worker stops clients.

### *The Repressive Hypothesis*

The Girlfriend Experience illuminates Foucault’s genealogy of the relationship between sex, power, and knowledge, which is omnipresent and relentlessly evolving. In *The History of Sexuality*, Foucault argues that the development of capitalism throughout the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries depended on the “availability and docility of bodies are methods of power capable of optimizing forces, aptitudes, and life in general without at the same time making them more difficult to govern” (141). The



development of institutions such as the family, the army, schools and the police, medicine and psychiatry, were developed alongside and reinforced by discursive policing of sexuality operating amid economic development and its supporting ideological forces. According to Foucault, licit and illicit divisions of major explicit codes have determined violations of sex (37), which centered on matrimonial relations: “the marital obligation, the ability to fulfill it, the manner in which one complied with it, the requirements and violences that accompanied it, the useless or unwarranted caresses for which it was a pretext” (37). The codes inundated the sex of husband and wife, which were and have been under constant surveillance as means of policing economic development. Until the eighteenth century:

Doubtless acts “contrary to nature” were stamped as especially abominable, but they were perceived simply as an extreme form of acts “against the law”; they were infringements of decrees which were just as sacred as those of marriage, and which had been established for governing the order of things and the plan of beings (38).

The emergence of “population” is a discursive device that Foucault identifies as a technique of power in economic “problems,” including labor capacity, growth and resources, and as a means of calculating wealth; sex is the center of all these “problems.” Birthrates including calculating illegitimate births, the data of marriage, contraceptive practices, and issues of fertility and sterility are all rooted in the act of sex (25). Therefore “normal sex” enmeshed itself in

discursive protection of nature and lawfulness prized the monogamous heterosexual couple. Foucault argues this eventually became a norm that was “stricter, perhaps, but quieter” (38). The Girlfriend Experience exemplifies this normality in the sex industry, as an emerging demographic of middle-class sex workers either use the class-privilege they already had or quickly adapt to these social codes in order to attract and maintain clients. Foucault argues that the prostitute and the client “seem to have surreptitiously transferred the pleasures that are unspoken into the order of things that are counted” (4) to keep their abnormality and mischief away from the permeable sexualities of the public. But the Girlfriend Experience in Belle’s narrative indicates that the gendered power relations in heterosexual marriages and relationships are as forceful in the realms of sex and profit, as they are in ensuring capitalistic economics are maintained and, in fact, thrive.

In *Secret Diary of a Call Girl*, the reader is implied to be the listening audience who consumes and appreciates Belle’s confession. Belle is explicit in the details of her sexual encounters with clients and in her personal life. She uses undeviating language when describing the pleasure she derives from earning and spending money, to being desirable, and to practicing and improving her sexual skills. But almost every other aspect of her narrative revolves around sex work as well; it serves primarily to highlight her experiences working. While Belle grows increasingly more cognizant of her work, there is little indication of her personal growth in any other sense, not only as Belle but as the anonymous

Magnanti who is implied at all times, although anonymous. Her narrative style embodies Foucault's concept of the confession:

The confession is a ritual of discourse in which the speaking subject is also the subject of the statement; it is also a ritual that unfolds within a power relationship, for one does not confess without the presence (or virtual presence) of a partner who is not simply the interlocutor but the authority who requires the confession, prescribes and appreciates it, and intervenes in order to judge, punish, forgive, console and reconcile (Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, 62).

Although Belle's memoir, or confession, recounts her experiences as a call girl with unwavering strength and matter-of-fact language, she does have moments of doubt, or as Foucault describes, the confession becomes "a ritual in which the expression alone, independently of its external consequences, produces intrinsic modifications in the person who articulates it" (62). For Belle and her *Secret Life*, what Foucault identifies as the external consequences of the confession include the media backlash post-publication. Foucault identifies various aspects of the medical confession, or the Repressive Hypothesis, which allowed for immense and traditional extortion of the sexual confession to be scientifically codified. For Foucault, the clinical codification of the inducement to speak largely focused on "the personal history" along with an interrogation, and an "exacting questionnaire" which would extract crucial elements. For Belle, the crucial elements of her novel are about sex acts, while the history of her

person serves to support the sex. Second, Foucault argues that through the postulate of a general and diffuse causality all consequences in one's life could be traced to even "the most discrete event in one's sexual behavior—whether an accident or a deviation, a deficient or an excess [...]" (65). Reflecting on her first encounter with a client, she asks herself: "Was something supposed to be different? Should I have felt victimized, abused? I couldn't say. The finer points of feminist theory didn't seem to apply. Things felt as they always had" (41). While Belle is consistently offhand in describing her work, she interjects rhetorical doubt akin to Foucault's concept of "diffuse causality" in questioning her motives. Moreover, while Belle's memoir is framed by her year working as an escort—each entry marked by a date—the progression of plot is otherwise muffled. Two major events include her breakup with the Boy and a short period of time in which her agency manager stops calling. Belle's lack of character growth in the events outside of escorting, while charming, is tantamount to a long-winded admission of what she does sexually.

Aside from clients, who themselves make inconsistent appearances in the diary entries, Belle's primary friends include N, A1, A2, A3, and A4, and her boyfriend, who is referred to as "the Boy" throughout the plot. Despite her steady cash flow brought in from seeing clients, who very rarely goes to a day-time job, Belle only takes a few short vacations. She writes about her experiences traveling to Spain. She reflects on yearly family vacations to Brighton where "the beach is horrible, wet, and windy," and "the mothers stay in and watch telly" while the children look for arcades and cotton candy (240). She dreamily reflects on her cousin loudly singing Madonna in the shower, the

“frankly sexual lyrics [...] disturb me somewhat” (241). In the following entry, she writes in the present-tense about staying on a “river in Spain” without any extrapolation of her travels and the emotional significance the break from sex work may have on her. Instead, she ironically mentions singing Divinyl’s “I Touch Myself” in the hotel shower despite having been bothered by her cousin’s singing. She also writes that Spanish men are quick to take notice of a woman’s hair (241) without deciphering cultural differences. The vagueness of these events contribute to the genuine feeling that readers are indeed flipping through Belle’s novel, but they also provide a blank slate in which the explicitness with which Belle describes sexual acts is brightly highlighted as the most important aspect of her identity.

Belle briefly mentions other working girls or “WGs” but generally does not delve into their histories or experiences. The most notable instance of Belle’s discussing other sex workers is in her recollection of accompanying her father, a man of “altruistic efforts” in the habit of taking on “impossible projects” (78). The “impossible project” Belle met, was a woman with children attempting to recover from criminal activity:

As a restorative jaunt my father suggested I go with him to visit one of his “friends.” She, I was told, had just been released from prison on fraud charges related to her drug habit. Having regained custody of her children, she was working as a cleaner in a hotel and trying to stay off the game (79).

While Belle recognizes her father's pleasure in restoring the community, the absence of any other sex workers posits the criminal as a defective figure and inadvertently focuses on Belle's position as a charming, well-educated sex worker. Moreover, Belle's emphasis on her father's desire to restore, or heal, as a means of pleasure signifies that despite her own presence in the sex industry, she takes pleasure in the role of interpretation, Foucault's third code in the Repressive Hypothesis. In *Abnormal, Lectures at the Collège de France*, Foucault asserts that the psychiatrist will step forward in the event of a motiveless crime and predict the cause which is otherwise undetectable: "[p]sychiatry can say that it can recognize them when they occur and even predict them, or enable them to be predicted, by diagnosing in time the strange illness that consists in committing them" (121). Belle's father takes on the role of community psychiatrist in his efforts to restore the community at large from the dangers of criminality. Belle takes the connection further by making the connection between the woman's drug addiction and her involvement in "the game" (79). On the other hand, Belle also seems to believe she knows what is best for unnamed female character towards the end of Magnanti's novel. Belle explains that she knows a "nice girl, a well-brought up girl" who, like Belle, has a "useless" degree (235) and is struggling to get by in London. Belle extrapolates that the girl "doesn't really know what she wants," and has "been struggling with depression for some time, with—literally—the scars to prove it" (235-236). Belle tells herself and readers that the girl would benefit greatly by becoming a prostitute for a year, not only because of money problems, but because the girl is "intimidated by every woman who comes within a quarter-mile radius of her current

boyfriend” (236). While she admits escorting is “no cure-all” it can do a “world of good [to have to] primp and smile for once” (236). Although the nameless girl is waiting to hear back about PhD funding in the following autumn, Belle believes the unnamed woman is actually in need of sexual capital rather than more education.

### *Belle de Jour and the Public Psychiatrist*

The dialogue around the novel and television series has remarkable similarities to the clickbait sensation Natalie Dylan, who auctioned her virginity on the website of a legal Nevada brothel by the name of Moonlite Bunny Ranch in 2008. In *Virginity for Sale: A Foucauldian Moment in the History of Sexuality*, Jennifer Dunn uses Foucault’s theory of discursive production, the production of power, and the propagation of knowledge from *The History of Sexuality* to tackle the discourse in public responses to the auction. For Dunn, Dylan’s auction threatened the heterosexual economy, an ideology that embodies the ways in which heterosexual couples exchange goods and security for the reproduction of the species, by undermining the acceptable roles of womanhood despite those same ideological forces making the auction possible. An important facet of Dylan’s publicity included her comments that she would get to know the men who were bidding, rather than giving into the highest offer. Dunn explains:

When the sexual part of this transaction was highlighted, Dylan’s footing as an active agent was not as sure as it was when it came to the business transaction. Additionally, focusing on the sexual act led to characterizations that

depicted what Dylan was doing was wrong because the winning bidder was not buying sex but her self, body (or parts of it), or innocence (497).

Although Dylan's intentions were to sell sex, the transaction was discursively conceived as heteronormative by drawing allusions to women who marry for money. Dylan attempted to use her virginity for monetary gains and pursuit of power but, as Dunn argues, she "did not start with (re)conceptualizing the value of her virginity or revealing sexual double standards; rather, she decided to do what prostitutes do, put a monetary value on sex" (491). It was not *so wrong* of Dylan to put a price tag on her virginity because it remained, despite tensions, within the realm of a heterosexual economy. Headlines around the debut of the *Secret Diary of a Call Girl* included similar, but inverted, concern regarding the threat of prostitution to the order of things. Belle, like Dunn, succeeds at capitalism's own rules by pursuing compensation for the social values already assigned to heteronormative sex, even if doing so is a destabilization of the institution of marriage itself.

While Belle insists on liberation through the reclamation of the derogatory word "whore," her inconsistency in addressing the semantic implication of "whore" reinforces the cultural ambiguity concerning the differences between various types of prostitutes including streetwalkers and the Girlfriend Experience. Throughout *Secret Diary of a Call Girl*, Belle includes "Belle's A-Z of London Sex Work," which outline and quickly encapsulate key concepts for each word. On "Whore," Belle writes, "Working girl, prostitute, call girl, woman of negotiable affection, ho. I don't think any one term is



any more or less degrading than another. It's simply a label, go with it, have fun with it" (271). In defining her work and the derogative "whore," Belle steps away from making an allegory out of her work as a prostitute. Instead, she insists on celebrating pleasure in sex, pleasure in being desirable, and pleasure in earning and spending money. Belle's rhetorical method of confession and her evaluation of bodies and relationships within her confession demonstrate the interconnectedness of these three pleasures. Her explicit discourse on sex is juxtaposed with omission and vagueness in every other aspect of her narrative. Without the dates assigned to each diary entry, it would be difficult to gauge the progression of time as there are long stretches without meaningful contact with friends, family, hobbies, and other "real life" activities. The sex, including sex with clients and sex in her "real life" as Brooke Magnanti, is privileged throughout the novel. While the explicitness appears to defy mainstream cultural norms, what Michel Foucault identifies as "normal" heterosexual sex, her rhetorical devices closely resemble Foucault's theory of the Repressive Hypothesis.

Belle enthusiastically participated in emotional and sexual labor that satisfies male self-empowerment, and critics were quick to find pleasure in condemning and challenging her work with a self-righteousness indicative of that self-empowerment. Aside from demonstrating pleasure in talking about sex, the public's response to Brooke Magnanti revealing her "real" identity validates Foucault's preemptive concern for criminality. Like psychiatry, mass media in the form of online blogs and news articles functions like Foucault's "science of mental illness" in the form of knowledge and discourse; it "will be able to detect precisely this danger that is opaque and

imperceptible to everyone else” (121) by codifying it as abnormal, criminal, or false. At the crux of the public dialogue is a great deal of confusion, sometimes deliberate, about the classifications of sex workers. One of the greatest distinguishing factors is between working outdoors by “walking the streets” and working indoors by visiting clients in hotel rooms and the privacy of one’s home. The term escort<sup>1</sup>, for example, generally applies to indoor sex workers and is synonymous with call girl, or a woman who receives appointment requests and client referrals through the use of telephone calls.

Some journalists closely encapsulated Belle’s conceptualization of her work and writings. For example, in “Brooke Magnanti: Sex for money, why not?” Hannah Betts interviews Magnanti on her attitudes about marriage and the industry. Despite Magnanti’s explaining, “[t]hat’s the amazing thing, this infantilisation, even by people who beat the feminist drum; they still feel my thought processes are somehow subhuman, or sub-adult” (2012). Betts also recognizes that Belle’s high level of graduate education and brightness “foxed people who preferred the no-better-than-she-ought-to-be streetwalker stereotype” (*The Telegraph*, 2012). Nonetheless, other news outlets demonstrated an intense preference for disapproval of Magnanti. In the *Guardian’s* “TV Hall of Shame: #2 *Secret Diary of a Call Girl*,” Jim Shelley complained that Belle’s television adaptation did not “seduce” him and claimed it gave the “wrong message to [Magnanti’s] young fans.” Other headlines include “The Hooker Behind ‘Secret Diary of a Call Girl’ Comes Clean” from the *Frisky* and “The ‘Glamor’ of Prostitution and The

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<sup>1</sup> In my analysis, I have chosen to use the term escort as it signifies a sex worker who uses various technologies sometimes including, but not limited to, telephones. Call girl and escort refer to an indoor working prostitute paid by the hour as a companion, rather than per sexual act provided.

Outing of Belle de Jour" from *Jezebel*. Ironically, both have the reputation of promoting sexual exploration and prowess in women as a means to sexual empowerment. *The Independent* published "Father of Belle de Jour Admits Using Prostitutes," which explored Brooke Magnanti's relationship with her father: "[t]he estranged father of a research scientist who outed herself as former call girl and blogger Belle de Jour revealed today he had used more than 150 prostitutes himself and had even introduced his daughter to some of them." Unlike Dylan who was praised for being a virgin, the emphasis on Magnanti's father's behavior having some effect on her choice to enter sex work accentuates the public's concern for sexualities that defy heteronormative expectations.

## Sex Pedagogies

In “Sexercising to orgasm: Embodied pedagogy and sexual labour in women’s magazines” Hannah Frith identifies two interconnected changes in the representation of sexuality in popular culture. Focusing on women’s lifestyle magazines, Frith identifies a shift towards a “postfeminist sexuality” in which women are desiring subjects and empowered in their sexualities and a “neoliberal shift towards a rational and managerial approach to sex” (311). Akin to contemporary women’s magazines, *Belle de Jour*’s narrative subverts canonical texts but is rich in opportunity for understanding cultural power structures. Magazines aimed at women demonstrate that an increasingly important concern for the postfeminist subject is that of the orgasmic experience—the presence, its intensity, and its opportunity for an experience of empowerment. Frith found that in *Cosmopolitan* magazine, four key areas of pedagogical instruction for the accumulation, development, and implementation of sexual skills include:

- (1) ‘knowing the body’ by becoming aware of the sensations and knowing how to touch the body;
- (2) ‘sexercising’ the body by exercising muscles and mastering bodily responses;
- (3) ‘positioning the body’ by understanding the anatomical architecture of the body and understanding how male and female bodies fit together to ensure maximum pleasure and
- (4) ‘pedagogy for the boys’ by being involved in teaching and training men in understanding how to touch and manipulate women’s bodies (315).

Belle asserts that one of her favorite things that clients rarely want is for her to have an authentic orgasm, to “come for real.” Belle explains that they should not want to make her orgasm because they “don’t know the unspoken road map to my body” but she will fake it, “when asked at all” (115). Belle’s narrative-confession is poignantly explicit in depicting sexual acts often including step-by-step recollections, measurements, and precise terms to convey the exactly-what-happened in her sexual experiences. Moreover, an essential aspect of Belle’s conceptualization of her sex work is that she is not only an object of desire as an individual and as a prostitute, but a desiring subject in both realms. It is through what Mulvey calls the element of to-be-looked-at-ness that Belle de Jour’s adventures are entirely performative in Magnanti’s novel. For Frith, the personalized knowledge of willing the body to arousal is “not seen as intrinsically valuable or pleasurable in its own right; instead it is secondary to the more important function of being able to train the body to perform at will” (318). While Frith’s argument is useful in various moments of *Secret Diary of a Call Girl*, Belle explicitly writes that the practice of sex is not her immediate goal. Instead, she seeks the pleasure of being an object of desire and the process and experience of earning and spending money. Nonetheless, in describing masturbation, real life sex, and sex with clients, Belle frequently employs language similar to the pedagogical moves detailed in *Cosmopolitan*.

Belle suggests that her desire to develop and control sexual functions is a pleasurable experience in and of itself, as a process and a goal. In *Cosmopolitan* articles, Frith identifies a reoccurring presence of an expert who prescribes scientific validity to

sexual advice with “a delicate balance” necessary between “‘instructing women’ about how to train their bodies and treating women as already knowledgeable sexual subjects” (319). The expert instruction is not intended to teach women to produce new body functions, but to tap into an innate knowledge of how the body is scientifically programmed to function. Frith explains:

The body is depicted as having natural and automatic reactions which can be exploited by those who have the right ‘know how’. One [*Cosmopolitan*] article instructing women in how to achieve multiple orgasms, advises them to ‘fake it before you make it’ by moaning out loud, breathing faster and harder, and tightening and loosening your pelvic muscles’ [32]. [...] Mindful mastery also involves managing the ways in which the ‘natural’ orgasmic response of the body can be disrupted by intrusive thoughts, lack of confidence or self-consciousness (319).

Akin to *Cosmopolitan*’s owner-manual approach to orgasm and emphasis on innate ability, Belle describes her sexual experiences as though she has the ability but may not know how to be empowered through action. In her earliest diary entries, she introduces her fantasy of fisting, a sexual activity involving inserting a hand into the vagina or rectum. She expresses impatience that “even with regular erotic exercise I prove a bit too constricted for the Boy’s fist” (26). She proceeds to recount a “history with the practice of fisting” which is divided into a procession of attempts: first, with her teenage

boyfriend; second, with her friend N; third, with a woman in Italy whom she is paid to give orgasms as many times as possible in an hour; and fourth, with a customer (27). Belle blames naïve clumsiness as a result of inexperience for a negative first experience: “his fingernails hit my cervix: ouch” (26). In the second experience, Belle decided to try it again because her sexual partner was experienced and “knew about the finger-curling wrist thrust necessary to get a whole fist in without the woman experiencing involuntary hysterectomy” (26). Belle’s description is a diagram-like recollection of the experience and her use of the term “hysterectomy” is an overt warning of the potential harm inexperienced users may cause to the body. In her experience with a customer, Belle writes that her own hand “is slender and small enough to make it in. Contortionally awkward, but successful nonetheless” (27). A progression of body-competence in these four memories extends into later diary entries in which Belle happily proclaims that “the self-fisting is getting remarkably easier with practice” (114), which proves to be popular among clients. However, she draws attention to the many clients, those who would rather watch than participate, suggesting that Belle has reached a state of competency, experience, and know-how that allows her to take on the role of instructor to her clients. The progression of fisting skills, and the immense satisfaction it brings Belle, also confirms that the know-how is what is essential to sexual empowerment.

While Belle writes about enjoying her work, sex in her life outside sex work, and in masturbation, self-surveillance of her body is an essential part of her gender performance. Considering the Girlfriend Experience is primarily aimed making men

feel as if Belle is their girlfriend for the designated time of the appointment, self-surveillance of the body to ensure clients are satisfied is remarkably similar to sexual partnerships. Belle familiarizes herself with the peculiarities of her body in order to give clear, concise, and effective directions for men. Considering the essential performance, the goal is not to give pleasure to herself in the presence of a male partner, but to convince the male partner that he is giving the pleasure. Frith argues that “although women are given responsibility for reading men’s minds and for soothing their emotions, they are also given responsibility for ensuring their own orgasmic pleasure by instructing and training men in how to please them” (323). A pedagogy of the body with precise teaching is a means to empowerment but depends on carefully delivering instructions to the men—a “pedagogy for the boys” (315). Belle recounts an experience with a “pedagogy for the boys” when she worked with a nineteen-year-old client. The young man said, “Do tell me what to do. That’s why I wanted it to be a call girl. Girlfriends never say anything useful” (186). For the young man, “useful” is of a practical concern because in his past experiences, girlfriends have proved to be inexperienced instructors of their bodies. Belle proceeds to ask the young man’s age, which makes him frown in discomfort. Addressing the reader, she says, one “[m]ust be careful here. Say something truthful, but nice, and not obviously flattery” (187). As Frith points out, while gendered power relationships make it difficult for heterosexual women to have safe and pleasurable sex with men, “mediatized representations [such as *Cosmopolitan*] depict women as in control, sexually experimental and adventurous, and able easily to direct men to do their bidding” (322). Belle’s encounter with the



young man enforces the expectation that women must confidently know their bodies. While Belle clarifies that her services are considered to be part of the Girlfriend Experience, in which a call girl plays the role of a girlfriend temporarily, the excessive and explicit emphasis on sexual acts throughout the narrative make the distinction slightly ambiguous as to which aspect is more important. In this particular interaction, she is taking on the role of emotional-laborer as in heterosexual relationships. As part of her gender performance and sexual service as a Girlfriend, she must carefully manage the emotions of her young client so as to not bruise his ego while simultaneously convincing him that the sexual experience with him is authentic and *real*.

A central focus of Belle's experiences is the orgasm in having sex with her boyfriend in her implied real life and as a prostitute having sex with clients. Hannah Frith identifies the instruction and mastery of the body—and of the orgasm which is incredibly insightful in understanding Belle's explicit excerpts on sex. In "Visualizing the 'real' and the 'fake': emotion work and the representation of orgasm in pornography and everyday sexual interactions," Frith argues that visual representations of orgasm in the moment and through the screen produce a discourse on authenticity in the context of tremendous ambiguity about what is a tangible bodily event. She argues that the performance of orgasm and pornography's production of orgasm share "a [common] concern with producing orgasms which are see-able, knowable and recognizable by others (audiences and lovers), and (visually) displaying or performing orgasm" (387). For Frith, the commercialization of pornography production threatens the notion of a real orgasm as female pornography actresses dramatically writhe and scream. Belle's

Girlfriend Experience service is akin to Frith's concept of the orgasm in "real life" because clients relate to their past experiences with women when choosing a call girl. Frith explains that surface acting is often performed through faking an orgasm by disguising one's true emotions in order to please one's partner. It satisfies the expectation that in heterosexual relationships women should orgasm (393). For example, when Belle's agency manager asks Belle if she would allow a client to urinate on her body, Belle declines telling both her manager and addressing the reader directly, "'You know I don't do degradation.' Not at work, at any rate." The manager responds, "Oh, no, not like that at all, darling. [...] He doesn't want you to be degraded. He wants to pee on a girl who enjoys it" (89). Eventually, Belle agrees and goes through the client's request, but she does not include any commentary on enjoyment or repulsion. Instead, her writing resembles Frith's "surface acting" in which she suppresses disgust through omission of details.

## The Girlfriend Experience

Prostitutes in film and television are depicted as being vulnerable to violence and male lust, but are also expected to be readily-available sexual objects and professionals in the act of gender-performance, in order to be accepted going public with their work. Call-girls who play the role of girlfriend momentarily satisfy desires safely existing in the heteronormative marriage economy but in the inverse to most prostitutes who first sell sex acts, then emotional intimacy, if any at all. The television adaptation of *Secret Diary of a Call Girl*, written by Lucy Prebble, which is loosely inspired by Belle de Jour, employs film techniques and character development that construct Belle with an uncomplicated and naive indifference to the industry. In the opening scene of the first episode, Prebble's Belle manages to proudly reclaim the word "whore" but simultaneously dismisses the distinctions amongst sex workers:

Escort, hooker, prostitute, whore—I don't mind what you call me. That's just semantics. There are as many different kinds of working girls as there are kinds of people, so you can't generalize. But, I can tell you about me. I should say upfront that I wasn't abused by a relative. I've got no children to support and I've never been addicted to anything (Prebble, *Secret Diary of a Call Girl*).

Belle acknowledges there are plenty of working girls, but that the audience does not need to concern themselves with their differences. Instead, Prebble's Belle entices

viewers to concern themselves with Belle's experience, that of an expensive escort. Indifference makes for an ironic and somewhat cheeky soliloquy, but Belle overlooks her privilege as a white, young, Girlfriend Experience provider, in suggesting "hooker," "whore," and "escorts" are semantically interchangeable. Escort and call girls are synonymous, but "hooker" signifies an outdoor sex worker, or a "streetwalker." While "hooker" is a synonym for prostitute, it doesn't encapsulate Belle's service. And last, Belle occasionally uses the derogatory word "whore" in the television series as a cheeky way to humor herself. Belle is, after all, in a safe position as an escort who works indoors. The Girlfriend Experience Belle provides is semantically distanced from anything intended to be pejorative, although a broad audience is likely unaware of that distinction. Moreover, the movement of Belle's confession from the format of a written memoir to a television adaptation creates a spectacle of her articulation. Prebble's Belle confesses, for example, that molestation is not a "diffuse causality" for her devious sexuality as a sex worker. In the novel, Belle draws a connection between the diffuse causality of violence as a reason for many women to enter sex work, but in a much quieter, discreet manner:

I know my place in sex work is a privileged one, as far as having sex with strangers goes. Many—though not all—prostitutes are addicts, in damaging relationships, abused by clients, or all of the above. It is probably the measure of my naïveté that I do not ask the few other [working girls] I meet if they are happy in their work (140).

While the novel *Secret Diary of a Call Girl* reinforces heteronormative ideologies and values, the television adaptation extends these expectations to a broader audience. The distinction between the television soliloquy and the novel excerpt indicates a similar confession, but the latter deviates from that expectation in Belle's attempt to empathize with other sex workers. Here, Magnanti refrained from using any distinguishing terms at all and instead identifies a stark reality devoid of sensationalism.

### *On Pornography*

In "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," Laura Mulvey identifies a quality of *to-be-looked-at-ness*, which is styled correspondingly to the defining male gaze. For Mulvey, the cinematic narrative divided by the active/male and passive/female, and the woman "displayed as sexual object is the *leitmotif* of erotic spectacle: from pin-ups to strip tease" (837). Mulvey asserts that Freud's ideas on isolated scopophilia in film technique occurs by subjugating others to a curious gaze: cinema satisfies this primordial wish for pleasurable looking, and gazing, by "developing scopophilia in its narcissistic aspect" (836). The subjugation provides a pleasure separate from the erotogenic zones and instead focuses on voyeuristic activities that strike a curiosity in other people's genital and bodily functions, the presence and absence of the penis, and retrospectively the primal scene (Mulvey, 836-837). For Mulvey, a female character's lack of a penis implies the threat of castration and is therefore unpleasurable to watch; women are situated seamlessly into cinematic narratives as erotic spectacles rather than meaningful agents.

Complicated by the role of men as active agents and women as passive sexual-objects, the pleasure of looking at the female characters is reinforced by film technique. As an essential element of spectacle, women tend to “freeze the flow of action in moments of erotic contemplation,” but Mulvey’s argument is complicated by Belle who is forthright about her eroticism. For Mulvey, “a woman performs within the narrative; the gaze of the spectator and that of the male characters in the film are neatly combined without breaking narrative verisimilitude” (838). Belle, as the central figure of *Secret Diary*, partially fulfills the role of the male protagonist, who for Mulvey, “is free to command the stage, a stage of spatial illusion in which he articulates the looks and creates the action” (839), while inviting the very scopophilic eroticism that otherwise reduces female characters to serve the narrative in which they are passive entities. In the opening scene of *Secret Diary of a Call Girl*’s first episode, Belle walks down a bridge in central London dressed in a tightfitting black designer suit and pearls. Addressing viewers as the implied audience, she expresses her love for London—the “anonymity” and the “greyness.” She goes on: “the first thing you need to know about me is that I’m a whore.” Akin to the authorial intrusion that underlies Belle’s narrative in Magnanti’s novel, the front-shots and close-ups in the television adaptation encapsulate a comparable sentiment of emotional intimacy between Belle and the viewers. But the intrusion and direct-dialogues with the implied audience is difficult to predict and therefore breaks the illusion of cinematic image. In a *Secret Diary of a Call Girl*, Belle’s character beckons the gaze by possessing the look, but in moments of intrusion, the gaze is reversed onto viewers. Though it is brief, occurring in the immediate moment of

turning toward the camera, the subversion of roles and invited scopophilia pervert the role of spectators who are abruptly reminded of their voyeurism.

Nonetheless, *Secret Diary of a Call Girl* enthusiastically beckons a pleasure in looking by appealing to pornography technique. Notably, Belle's face is often turned away from viewers especially in opposition to the moments she addresses them directly. While she is the active agent in the cinematic narrative, she fulfills the role of passive sexual object in erotic scenes in particular. In *Film Bodies: Gender, Genre and Excess*, Linda Williams asserts that women are the main figures who portray pleasure, fear, and pain. The portrayal of women as passive and receptive objects is particularly evident in horror films, melodramas, and pornography that seeks to provoke bodily responses in viewers: usually crying, disgust, and arousal:

...even when the pleasure of viewing has traditionally been constructed for masculine spectators, as the case in most traditional heterosexual pornography, it is the female body in the grips of an out-of-control ecstasy that has offered the most sensational sight. So the bodies of women have tended to function [...] as both the *moved* and the *moving*. It is thus through what Foucault has called the sexual saturation of the female body that audiences of all sorts have received some of their most powerful sensations (4).

In *Secret Diary of a Call Girl*, Belle's visual character, played by Billie Piper, is

constructed for masculine spectators even if the narrative appeals primarily to women. In the opening episode of the series, Belle performs fellatio on a client, which is the first work interaction the audience is shown. Before the appointment, Belle explains that some of the rules of her trade include proper hygiene, accepting cash immediately, and never wearing perfume so as to protect the client's confidentiality after leaving (traces of a foreign scent may be alarming to the client's wife). In black lingerie and stockings, Belle turns to the audience propping one leg up on her bed. Although her genitals are not visible in the frame, she applies a handful of lotion to her vagina while explaining to viewers, "convince them [the clients] that you're wet and you're halfway there" (4:45-5:10). On pornography, Williams identifies diegetic illusions in the pornography, or hard-core, genre in *Hard Core: Power, Pleasure, and the "Frenzy of the Visible."* In cinema, sounds, including music, sound effects, and speech, serve to support the fantasy of an imaginary narrative including its space and time. Viewers imagine their own body in the cinematic illusion, in part, because the visual-image is layered with diegetic illusions, to provide what feels like a real-life aural image.

For Williams, the role of diegetic illusion in pornography differs from cinema because it does not have the "function of avant-garde deconstruction" of dominant cinema (122). In pornography, or hard-core film and video, Williams points out that the characters lips often fail to match the sounds produced. A "dubbed-over 'disembodied' female voice" (saying 'oohh' and 'aaah') may stand as the most prominent signifier of female pleasure in the absence of other, more visual assurances" (123). Other sounds include moaning, the smacking and slurping of kissing, fellatio, and cunnilingus, "the



whoosh of penetration-engulfment,” and the sound of screeching bedsprings” (123). Many of the scenes depicting sex in *Secret Diary of a Call Girl* employ these diegetic devices to enhance the illusion of “real sex.” Therefore, there appears to be a fantasy of authentic sex in Belle’s profession, but it exists congruently in the delivery of her story as well. In various scenes, extradiegetic music such as slow jazz and upbeat electronic music contribute to the illusion and fantasy of pornography, either synchronized with the mood of Belle and her clients, or as an auxiliary element, adding an additional sensory perception to the visual-image. That is, the clichéd music in *Secret Diary of a Call Girl* serves the image. But these scenes also employ silence as a means to emphasize eroticism. In the opening scene, for example, slow-and-whining jazz accompanies Belle as she applies lotion to her genitals. Once she is with her client in their appointment, straddling him as he lays limp-as-a-board on the bed (see Figure 1), the music stops.



Figure 1 Belle and a client

Instead, the spectator hears smacking of lips and saliva as the two negotiate the type of service he would like to receive, the soft movement of the sheets, and the loud slurp of fellatio. Rather than highlight the male orgasm, the combination of music, movement, silence, diegetics of the body–slurping, kissing, moaning–highlight and emphasize the sexual act itself.

### *Monetizing Identity*

While the television series *Secret Diary of a Call Girl* employs film techniques that give Belle an element of to-be-looked-at-ness, the narrative employs aspects of the Girlfriend Experience and appeals primarily to women who are also invested in performing in heteronormativity. The third episode of *Secret Diary of a Call Girl* follows Belle as she goes on an overnight appointment. Belle encapsulates the quintessential Girlfriend Experience and provides a conclusive explanation for the service. Speaking directly toward the camera, Belle explains to viewers, the implied audience, that the Girlfriend Experience is more about being a flawless girlfriend than providing sexual services although those services are expected as well. She explains that this facet of her service does not include “getting paid to be moody and forcing [the client] to try and work out what’s wrong” (1:58). Instead, she says, “this is a particular service. I’ve never been a good girlfriend in real life. But for one night only, I am the perfect girlfriend. Some of my clients, they’re not just after sex. They want the intimacy, the exclusivity of a real relationship (2:27). Belle’s articulation of women’s roles in heterosexual relationships enforces the expectation that they must be readily available to do emotional labor for their partner by providing emotion-management for the exclusive

male partner. But in addition to emotional labor, Belle must also manage her own emotions by masking any irritability and withholding all expectations for reciprocated labor in any form from the male partner. It isn't relevant whether the male partner, or client, is incapable or simply unwilling to perform emotional labor, but that the price of the Girlfriend Experience provides the luxury of opting out. The client's access to indulgences of emotional labor is what makes Belle a "perfect girlfriend" for the duration of their appointment. Shortly after this scene, Belle laments to the implied audience that the client is married, "but his wife hasn't had sex with him for five years so I suppose they're both breaking the marriage contract" (3:30-3:47). For Belle, because the client's wife doesn't have sex with him, or doesn't provide sex, he is entitled to have extramarital relations elsewhere. As long as the client's wife continues to provide other expectations for marriage including emotional labor, maintaining a public image and status, homemaking, providing entertainment, and so on, then the marriage itself is salvageable as an economic contract.

In "'It's Just Acting': Sex Worker's Strategies for Capitalizing on Sexuality," Teela Sanders reports on indoor prostitute markets in Britain, which includes Belle's position as an escort. While Sanders argues that prostitution cannot simply be analyzed as only a form of labor or a result of patriarchal economic structures, it's useful to compare prostitution to the exploitation of female sexuality in jobs that are codified as women's work, including waitresses, secretaries, and beauty therapists (320), as women must also perform emotional labor by managing sexual undercurrents and their own emotions and identities in their respective work places. She found that for most indoor

sex workers, falsifying an identity for clients was an essential aspect of their work as it created an emotional distance between their working and private lives. Moreover, in order to create the “impression of a mutual exchange of sexual intimacy” considered to be a “sign of quality in heterosexual relationships” (333), sex workers needed to invest in their work role, or their work identity, in order to prosper while maintaining a healthy balance with their private lives. She explains that in interactions with long-term clients:

Investing facets of their personality into their working identity, rather than constructing an entirely fake working identity, appears to be necessary for these sex workers to create an ‘authentic performance’ that retains their clients and ultimately achieves their goal of making financial gain through emotional and sexual labour. (334).

Considering the economic and structural conditions that privilege heteronormative partnership through marriage and the ideological apparatuses that control women’s work, the emotional management strategies of prostitutes signifies that gender performance is the key indication of financial success. As femininity is constructed and enacted as part of various occupations, the popularity of the Girlfriend Experience among escorts demonstrates that the hegemonic manifestation of femininity means being sexually receptive, but also to seem as much like a “real girlfriend” as possible.

What Sanders found in interactions between sex workers and long-term clients is embodied poignantly in the eighth episode of the *Secret Diary of a Call Girl* television

adaptation when Belle unexpectedly abandons her opportunity to be a courtesan. She is nominated to work for Diamond International Courtesans by long-term client Mitchell Rothman, a multimillionaire filmmaker whom Belle affirms really “knows his escorts” (30-41). In an interview with Diamond, three courtesans, noticeably older than Belle, emphasize that “a man who wants company for weeks wants someone with life experience, something to say” (3:24-3:31); that they started their organization because they felt there wasn’t any “real upmarket quality in [the] industry” (3:39-3:44); that “languages, etiquette, golf, knowing how to ski” (4:20-4:28) are examples of necessary skills; and that they are “not just about servicing the clients; instead, they are “genuine companions” (4:30-(4:35). Shortly afterwards, Belle sees Mitchell Rothman within these parameters. Although the monetary difference is not made explicit, Rothman gifts her a penthouse apartment overlooking London as part of his payment. The apartment symbolizes Belle’s movement away from being a Girlfriend and a provider who more likely resembles a long-term partner with stability and commitment.

*Agency, Financial Gain, and Being Your Own Boss*

In “The Agency Line: A Neoliberal Metric for Appraising Young Women’s Sexuality,” Laina Bay-Cheng argues out that young women have a tendency to “ascribe victimization – both their own and others’ – to personal shortcomings: not being assertive enough, not being savvy enough, not being in control enough” (285). Like Frith, Bay-Cheng argues that Neoliberalism has created a paradox in which women are stuck in the virgin/whore dichotomy while under heavy expectations to perform

sexually, but to do so with agency. Instead of celebrating agency, neoliberal ideologies have manifested a tit-for-tat approach to sexual experience in which the agency one takes in their sexual actions construes sexual violence to be the outcome of poor decision-making rather than the aggression of an abuser. In other words, as the idea of sexual agency permeates discourse on sex as a form of empowerment and strength in young women, victimization will continue to develop as an earned, sometimes deserved consequence of poor-planning and decision-making. Bay-Cheng explains:

Previously, women's placement along the Virgin-Slut Continuum was primarily based on specific behaviors, whether actual or supposed. The weight now assigned to agency, however, reapporitions evaluative attention to the stories women tell about their behaviors and how they cast themselves in those narratives. The subjective nature of agency means that women may have some sway over others' appraisals of their sexual conduct and therefore some opportunity to navigate and strategically situate themselves in relation to the agency and activity axes (286).

The binary opposition of being a virgin and a whore is complicated *by* and *in* sex work considering that in many transactions both halves of the binary are working at once. All that is codified in the Girlfriend Experience is magnified by the courtesan in which the sex worker willingly, and often happily, fulfils the role of a long-term partner but is sexually available at all times, embodying the gender performance of the "whore," but

also of the “wife,” a safe alternative to the virgin. The nuanced progression of Belle from Girlfriend to courtesan provides insight into the various services provided to clients, but it enforces the paradox of agency and sexual availability that Bay-Cheng identifies as being potentially harmful to some women. What’s more, considering agency is so subjective, as Bay-Cheng points out, *Secret Diary of a Call Girl* carries a great deal of ideological responsibility despite its genre as a mass media television show.

Similar to the accommodating and tolerant victimization and repressed female sexuality that Williams criticizes, and which Foucault identifies as being coded “natural,” is the cultural liability contract of agency in sex work that diminishes sex workers’ credibility when sexually assaulted. The public dialogue around sex workers often asserts that because many enter into sexual contracts with clients, they do not have agency in those encounters. This, of course, is a myth. While Belle shows the public that she uses condoms, carefully vets and verifies her clients, and checks in and out with a third party, she must do this, in part, to satisfy a sexual contract in which she does not have the same agency as her clients. On courtesans, whose contract resembles a legal marriage, Rothman insists that the more men Belle sees, the less prestigious she will be (12:23). Nonetheless, she enjoys the interview process of finding potential companions, which she sees as akin to dating in the “real world,” or the search for a companion without monetary parameters.

In her interviews, sentimental jazz indicative of a romantic-comedy plays in the background as she flirtatiously converses with the new men. As the frames change from

one man to another, all of whom are all conventionally attractive, Belle tells the audience:

Being at the top of my profession means I'm completely in charge. I sort through the applicants judging their spelling and grammar. Some of those go onto a conversation. And a small number of those are arranged to meet for a sort of mutual interview. [...] They all want something more than sex (11:28-12:00).

Belle's articulation of the courtesan experience encapsulates various practical aspects of the service. Like the three women who conducted Belle's interview for Diamond, a concern for a mutual exchange of pleasure and intimacy underlies the experience, whereas the Girlfriend Experience is primarily about seeming to enjoy oneself at all times. Belle emphasizes the importance of spelling and grammar presumably as indications of education and etiquette, which are important to her. While Belle exhibits a sentiment of empowerment by choosing her clients as a courtesan, her emphasis on class signifiers, such as spelling and grammar, inadvertently imply that any negative outcomes would be a result, at least partially, of her own judgement. The cultural liability contract of agency falls on Belle who must screen for potential danger.

However, in this episode, Belle also changes her mind about being a courtesan. After Mitchell Rothman and Belle go to Scotland for his work, Belle returns to escorting as an independent (20:19) rather than working for an agency. At the remote Scottish cottage, Rothman spends most of his time working on set while Belle waits in the



cottage. Belle is depicted in a close up shot sitting next to the window, watching a rainstorm. Rather than verbally express her isolation and boredom, she turns to the implied audience with an expression of miserable ennui with non-diegetic bag pipe music. A satirical encapsulation of the courtesan experience occurs in the vexatious music juxtaposed with Belle in the elegant, cottage bedroom. In the following scene, Rothman bathes Belle with a large yellow sponge as she steeps in the tub water (see Figure 2). After asking about her university studies, Rothman emphasizes her brilliance and charm:

Rothman: You could do so many things.

Belle: Mitchell, you're not trying to save me?

Rothman: Hell no. I live in the real world. (13:35-13:40)

There are various implications in this exchange. First, Belle does not live in the "real world" because she is a courtesan despite having a private identity. The only identity that concerns Rothman is that which fulfills his ego. This is emphasized by the time Belle spends alone in the cottage bedroom while Rothman advances in his work outside of the cottage. The second implication is that Rothman would consider saving her if she were in the real world, but the monetary price Belle places on her companionship spoils her value as a potential partner once she is agent in the "real world." Rothman gave Belle a glamorous penthouse apartment as part of her compensation package for being his courtesan, which suggests that economic and social stability can replace monetary compensation in legitimate relationships. In this framework, the emotional labor that heterosexual women perform in the service of their long-term relationships is signified

as a legitimate social relation by the stability she gains from performing that labor. In order for Belle to gain stability with Rothman in the “real world,” as he calls it, she would need to decline compensation for her services and accept other forms of economic and social stability.

As the episode advances, Belle grows increasingly bored staying in the cottage alone. As the cottage is in a remote location, Belle cannot make phone calls to any of her friends in London. When Rothman finally returns to the bedroom, Belle is eager to have contact and connection. Instead, Rothman hunches over his laptop with an expression of frustration and boredom. In response to his observable frustration, Belle receptively undresses her silk robe and kneels on the floor in submission, to which Rothman replies, “You’re demanding” (15:30). Then his phone rings and Belle flirtatiously tosses it on the floor. She leans in for a kiss and he responds by aggressively intimidating her:



Figure 2 Mitchell Rothman gives Belle a bath.

“What the hell are you doing. Christ. What, you think that’s cute?” Belle patiently waits on the floor until Rothman threatens, “Great, this is how it’s gonna be. Huh?” (15:40-16:00). The mutual exchange of intimacy as a sign of value in heterosexual partnerships reconfigured in sex-worker’s identity-formations appears to have a reverse-meaning in courtesan-arrangements. A client in this arrangement demonstrates an economic and social stability, communicating to the courtesan that he might not walk away from the arrangement as quickly as he would in an arrangement with an escort. The economic commitment clients make to their courtesans extends to the privilege of belittling her.

After Rothman’s aggressive comments, the following frame shows Belle entering the penthouse apartment, moving from the left side of the frame to the right in a full shot. Distressed, she calls Diamond International Courtesans hoping to meet with the other women for a sense of community, but finds that the courtesans don’t have time because everybody is so “busy and diffuse” (16:18) with their clients. The courtesan uncaringly tells Belle that Rothman is a “collector” and inquires to make sure he’s doing well, ending the phonecall shortly afterwards (16:30-16:40). Within Bay-Chen’s crux of agency and action, Rothman’s belittling and intimidation could be easily interpreted as a consequence of placing so much trust in one client; that is, because Belle willingly entered a sexual-contract with Rothman, the responsibility of any negative outcomes falls on her. But Belle subverts the implication of responsibility in the contract. She emphasizes that the lack of stimulation and community expected in the courtesan experience proved to be a deal-breaking factor. Though it’s nuanced, the choice privileges Belle’s ability to navigate difficult choices and trust her intuition, rather than

defy a potentially aggressive man within an interaction that some audiences assume robs her of her sexual agency in the sexual-contract. Belle's agonizing boredom is communicated through the visual-image specific to cinematic techniques that emphasize the solitude of the cottage room. Later in this episode, Belle tells the audience that she much prefers short appointments and lots of clients, and most importantly, that she doesn't "want to be a paid wife" (20:25-20:30). While working as an independent escort does not offer the same monetary opportunity as being a courtesan, Belle proudly decides that being her own boss provides her a sense of ownership over her work, flexibility for other pursuits, and the authority to create her own schedule. Essentially, Belle decides to "be her own boss" by accepting lower pay for a better work-life balance.

In the novel *Secret Diary of a Call Girl*, Belle asserts that she experiences pleasure in a multitude of ways besides sex and achieving orgasm. She explains:

The inability of punters to produce an orgasm in me is not a way to comment on their shortcomings. As far as their part of the bargain goes, they're doing a great job, and I enjoy sex for more than the merely physical tingle. Being desired is fun. Dressing up is fun. (96).

Belle conceptualizes her agency in defiance of gendered expectations. Bay-Cheng argues that neoliberal ideology is not a celebration of agency, but instead the "hegemonic institution of agency" (283), and "the contempt at the crux of contemporary slut-shaming [...] may have less to do with a girl's adherence to gendered sexual morals

than her lack of neoliberal agency" (282). Not only does Belle deviate from hegemonic institutions of gender in her sex work, despite being part of the Girlfriend Experience, she simultaneously diverts readers' attention from agency in sex and redirects it to gender performance.

For example, Belle takes great pleasure from spending and earning money. In a boutique clothing store, Belle writes that the young girl assisting her parents in running the shop had an extremely disrespectful attitude. Belle writes:

I recognized instantly the cadence of speech indicating an intersection of private school education, indulgent parents, and general overtones of Southerness. Nothing quite raises my hackles like a prepubescent who believes she is the greatest thing going and, in all probability will someday be hailed as such (198).

Belle decides not to purchase anything from the shop and leaves abruptly after an encounter with the owner. Against her principles, Belle demonstrates that how one spends their money may be indicative of one's character. Two days later, she meets with A4 at a Polish restaurant for lunch. The waitresses, for Belle, "were authentically heavy and dour in their tight-pulled blonde pigtails and gray aprons tied around rolling middles" (201). Every item on the menu was fried and served with a side of cabbage, which enamored Belle. She writes to the audience that sex work is "like the Army, I have fun and get paid to do it. Sometimes it's not as fun but I always get paid to do it" (104). A juxtaposition between high-class and low-class pleasures demonstrates

that Belle, despite having a great deal of disposable income, takes pleasure in deciding how to spend her earnings, which are consistent and reliable.

Aside from sexual performance, Belle affirms that of the many pleasures of being an escort, keeping up with her appearance and wearing lingerie are pleasurable. On one Tuesday afternoon, Belle visits her parents and listens to her mother and grandmother chatting in the room around the corner. The entry is written as though it were in the moment. Her mother complains that her pubic hair is turning grey and her grandmother's is falling out. In response to their banter, Belle sardonically writes, "I think I had better kill myself now, before it's too late" (176). Although, in an entry a few days prior, she records example grocery lists which allow her to avoid embarrassment at the store. For Belle, purchasing tampons, vaginal pessary, condoms, lubricant, razor blades, individual postwaxing wipes all at once is "cruising for jokes" (157-158). When introducing her line of work to the reader, Belle insists that there are many benefits to taking a few days off from sex work including the chance to do errands and take a spiritual break from client interactions. She emphasizes, "it's nice to let hair grow out a bit to get a good, clean waxing. Also, you remember what the hair was there for in the first place. Lubrication. No, really. Pity the clients will never know this" (20). The repetition of concern for shaving and waxing is indicative of a peculiar preoccupation with gender performance. Though she emphasizes these aspects of her routine and day-to-day life, her approach to pubic hair, despite inconsistent attitudes, demonstrates a steady commitment to removing the hair. In an earlier account, Belle catalogs the photo trends of most agency and escort advertisements including "the bending-over

bumshot," "the tit grab," "knee-high boot and pencil skirt combo," "bending backward," and the "girlish pigtails and teenage clothing sense" (50). On the "tit grab," Belle writes, "[a] double-A could take on Dolly-Partonesque proportions given the right tilting of the chest-flesh. What is the point? Many men like small breasts" (50). But later, on a shopping outing, Belle's mother insists she should purchase a garment that makes her "busty." Belle "quiver[s] in the shadow of a superior intellect" (171). The evolution of Belle's articulation of the feminine body and performance divert what Bay-Cheng identifies as the institution of agency. Instead, Belle celebrates the experience of being a desirable object to men rather than a subject that desires—that of all pleasures, being an object of desire constitutes an act of agency. The quality of to-be-looked-at-ness, for Belle, is a choice that offers monetary opportunity especially when the quality emphasizes her ability to pass as an attractive woman who is also well-mannered, well-read, and well-cultured.

### *The Parody of Good Girlfriends*

Parody is often complicated by the need to be "in on the joke" in order to be effective. For this reason, satire is most often accomplished in visual performance. Belle's narrative takes on a new form of parody in its movement from written text to visual image. The authorial intrusion in the novel, in particular, is intensified in the television adaptation in which viewers share an intimacy with Belle that the other characters do not. Whereas the novel resembles a confession with intermittent commentary by Magnanti, or the "real" Belle in her "real life," the television adaptation employs film techniques that quote pornography tropes. A heightened instance of this

intrusion occurs in *Secret Diary of a Call Girl*'s episode about a ménage-à-trois when Belle and Naomi, a hired escort, communicate verbally while their client is unaware of their exchange. Belle tells viewers, she's hardly a "girl's girl" but she "will go gay for pay" (6:50-7:05). While Belle explicitly expresses a genuine attraction for women in the novel, the television adaptation calls for exaggeration in all aspects of Belle's performance, in order for the audience to be "in on the joke." Considering girl-on-girl sex is commonly considered as a safe fantasy for heterosexual couples, as it is in service of the straight-man's desires, it serves the purpose of parody seamlessly in the cinematic narrative. In a way, both men and women are "in on the joke." Belle also posits feminine hyper-sexuality in the service of male desire and dominance. But a woman who leverages hypersexuality and desirability may be seen to use male desire to command authority. For Belle, this is represented in monetary gains that affirm her value in the heteronormative marriage. Rather than dismiss the existing power structure of the active/male in a place of privilege, Belle emphasizes her role as the passive/female so that it takes on a dominant role; she undermines and subverts the male gaze by willfully fulfilling it.

Returning to Laina Bay-Cheng's work on young women's sexual activity in relation to their perceived agency is helpful in understanding the parody in Belle's gender performance. For Bay-Cheng, popular discourse on and by young women emphasizes an shameless, desiring, and sexual initiation, and being liberated or "free," in some sense, from gendered sexual expectations and norms. She explains that in these new discourses:



[These] sexual exploits are not cautionary tales of the disasters that follow sexual indulgence, are never out of their control (though it may be raucous, irreverent, and excessive), and are not meant only as solicitations of male desire and approval (though seduction may be part of the fun). Instead, their pleasure-seeking is volitional, savvy, and self-interested (282).

Belle demonstrates a similar concern for control by emphasizing her use of condoms, checking in and out with her escort agency to confirm safety, and by expressing and celebrating her own sexual satisfaction. Similarly, in *Hard Core: Power, Pleasure, and the Frenzy of the Visible*, Williams addresses the conundrum around sexual agency in pornography. She points out that anti-pornography discourse often constructs women as already-victimized and passive objects, which appears to contradict their aim to attack the patriarchy. She argues against thinking of pornography and sexuality in terms of "natural sexuality;" that is, "free of power:"

Although the idea of the natural may seem to offer the utopian promise of change, of liberation from power, actually it impedes resistance to existing forms of power by reducing power to a matter of personal agency, with (gendered) individuals controlling other (gendered) individuals. (23).

Belle derives pleasure from various aspects of prostitution including sex itself, but

especially from monetizing her gender performance. Williams draws attention to the puzzle over sexual agency in pornography by emphasizing the need to look beyond power and agency. For Belle, this conundrum is flipped upside down through parody by exaggerating stereotypical aspects of femininity. In the virgin/whore dichotomy, Belle fulfills and subversively undermines the cliché of the “whore” by breaking the narrative verisimilitude.

During the *ménage-à-trois*, Belle and Naomi, an escort hired from outside the agency for the evening, satirically exaggerate their moaning. For the two women and viewers, it’s also noticeably pleasing for the client who has an expression of pure bliss. While Belle straddles the client from the front, Naomi taunts Belle from behind him. She procures a dildo from outside the frame and Belle shakes her head “no” (see Figure 3). Naomi then offers Belle a guide book *London A-Z*, and they both proceed to giggle. Meanwhile, the client moans and gasps in pleasure. The overstated performance of femininity in Belle’s enactment has very little to do with over-the-top sexual performance and instead, turns the joke on the client who believes the two women are enjoying themselves as much as he is. This is intensified when Naomi instructs the two of them to moan in ecstasy at the count of three, while the client is having intercourse with Naomi. Belle and Naomi fulfill the quality of *to-be-looked-at-ness*, beckoning the gaze, and inviting scopophilic pleasure. But for the audience who can hear and witness the ongoing giggling and conversation between the two women, the heightened pleasure and ecstasy passes the role of the passive subject onto the client.



Figure 3 Naomi and Belle during their ménage-à-trois

## Moving Forward

Considering new technologies continue to change the economies of sex work, scholarship must move past cataloging knowledges and instead construct thick genealogies of sex workers' histories and narratives, an archival approach to sex workers' identity-formation through their stories and their texts. There is an abundance of scholarship exploring the dimensions of sex workers' experiences within a sociological and empirical frameworks. But moving towards discourse analyses of sex workers in media-specific platforms paves way to explore these texts within their own genres of meaning-making. That is, sex workers create genres through the services they provide, and the texts that construct and reinforce those genres are fruitful places to explore sex work economies. Considering there are material consequences in response to the ideological constraints of who may sell their body and under what circumstances, it's valuable to consider whether current literature and television shows accurately reflect the sex work economies which they represent. As new technologies shape the ways in which marginalized communities share knowledge and communicate publicly, it's likely more narratives like *Secret Diary of a Call Girl* will emerge into mass-media platforms. In Magnanti's novel, Belle encapsulates the Girlfriend Experience: "[c]onsidering the economics of sex—in which a man is prepared to invest some time, and a bit of money toward gifts and entertainments, in order to coax a woman into bed" clients ensure that the cost of seeing a call girl is "on par with the price of picking up a woman on a business trip" (202). When Magnanti's novel was translated into a television series, the transformation of the text to a visual-image allowed for a

prostitution narrative to reach a broader audience in a nonthreatening manner, opening the way for consumers to consider the ways in which sex work intersects with gender, power, and economics.

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