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Source: *Feminist Studies*, Vol. 40, No. 3 (2014), pp. 693-721

Published by: Feminist Studies, Inc.

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.15767/feministstudies.40.3.693>

Accessed: 24-09-2017 14:54 UTC

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HEATHER BERG

Working for Love, Loving for Work: Discourses of Labor in Feminist Sex-Work Activism

IN THE LATE 1970S, CAROL LEIGH (a.k.a. Scarlot Harlot) coined the term “sex work” as a means to best describe the labor she and other workers in commercial sex industries performed. Leigh hoped the term would unite workers, provide an alternative to stigmatized language, and “acknowledg[e] the work we do rather than defin[e] us by our status.”¹ Thirty years later, the term “sex work” is widely used, particularly in progressive scholarship, worker-directed activism, and worker narratives. In many respects, Leigh’s hopes seem to have been realized: groundbreaking anthologies and activist undertakings inclusive of workers in various sex industries have been organized under the umbrella of “sex work,” and the term remains the standard in value-neutral language. Indeed, its uses might be too value neutral—the *work* that emerges from much sex-worker activist writing is not the same work of anti-capitalist critique. Instead, it is the work of free exchange between equals, the dignity of a living *earned*, and a heady blend of both self-sacrifice and fulfilling escape from the drudgery of a nine-to-five job. It is sometimes work that is barely work at all, but instead a performance of the innate self for which the lucky just happen to be paid.

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1. Carol Leigh, “Inventing Sex Work,” in *Whores and Other Feminists*, ed. Jill Nagle (New York: Routledge, 1997), 203.

This *work* rhetoric offers a welcome reprieve from the anti-sex-work rhetoric in which sex workers appear as voiceless victims. It does so, however, while avoiding a sustained critique of systems of capitalist exploitation and by reproducing key facets of the peculiar rhetoric of work under late capital. Discourses of sex work, at least since white slavery's first appearance in the public imagination, have served as a virtual repository for anxieties about sexuality and capitalism.² We see this when, for example, anti-sex-work feminist Sheila Jeffreys condemns the contemporary pornography industry for its use of economic force in compelling performers to take hardcore scenes: "If they do not accept, then the money dries up and they are on the street once more."³ Jeffreys' suggestion—that tethering wages to the performance of the labor that employers demand is unique to the pornography industry—scapegoats one industry rather than engages in a critique of the problem (universal under capitalism) of what Marx called the "silent compulsion of economic relations."⁴ But what emerges in much activist sex-worker writing is a counter to rhetoric like Jeffreys' that insists that coercion (economic or otherwise) was not a factor in workers' choices to enter commercial sexual exchange. This does very different—and more conservative—discursive work than a response reminding us that labor *is* coercion, but that coercion does not foreclose resilience, resistance, and pleasure.

Mine is an argument, then, against sex-work exceptionalism. Commercial sex exchange is not exploitative because of anything unique to sex; it is exploitative because it is labor under capitalism.⁵ That sexual labor is for many a better paid, more fulfilling alternative to other forms of waged work does not unsettle this premise. Our critique of work under capitalism cannot be restricted to its most sensationally harmful forms. Such a frame invites one-dimensional narratives of Others'

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2. See Jo Doezeema, "Loose Women or Lost Women? The Re-emergence of the Myth of White Slavery in Contemporary Discourses of Trafficking in Women," *Gender Issues* 18, no. 1 (1999): 23–50.
 3. Sheila Jeffreys, *The Industrial Vagina: The Political Economy of the Global Sex Trade* (London: Routledge, 2009), 78.
 4. See Kathi Weeks, *The Problem with Work: Feminism, Marxism, Antiwork Politics, and Postwork Imaginaries* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011), 57.
 5. See Brooke Meredith Beloso, "Sex, Work, and the Feminist Erasure of Class," *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 38, no. 1 (2012): 47–70; and Melissa Gira Grant, *Playing the Whore: The Work of Sex Work* (London and Brooklyn: Verso, 2014).

victimhood while it simultaneously mystifies more privileged workers' position vis-à-vis capital. I come to this project as a worker and comrade implicated in various and shifting systems of exploitation and resistance, including those within the neoliberal university. I operate from a Marxist perspective informed by queer and feminist commitments to thinking otherwise, and I am critical of the "evidence of experience," including my own.⁶

In a discourse analysis of four key texts in US-based activist sex-worker writing, I explore workers' narratives of sexual labor, identity, and political economy. Three problematics emerge: the construction of a version of feminist sex-worker agency that is dependent on the ability to work for noneconomic reasons, reification of normative treatments of domestic or intimate labor as non-work, and an avoidance of critiques of sex industries as players in advanced capitalism. These themes overlap — discussions of noneconomic motivations for entering sex work focus instead on sex work as higher-calling care work, which in turn leads to positioning sex workers as servants of a cause rather than laborers in an economy, for example. I have classified activist sex-worker writing by theme in an attempt at organizational coherence, but all strands lead to the larger question of the vision of labor that emerges from sex-worker calls for legal and social recognition. This question animates the analysis of Los Angeles's condom mandate for performers in adult film (legislated on November 6, 2012), which I discuss further at the close of this article. The discourses surrounding the condom mandate represent a microcosm of the conservative work rhetorics I trace in much US-based activist sex-worker writing and operate as a reminder of the contemporary necessity of a critical labor focus in discussions of sex work.

PROBLEMATIZING CLAIMS OF SOCIAL NECESSITY

The stakes are high in at least two ways: given sex workers' historically marginalized status — both in formulations of dignified labor and in a broader sense — we can very much understand why activist workers would call upon what Kathi Weeks terms "the legitimating discourse of work."⁷ However, recognizing the manipulative force of that discourse — acting

6. Joan Scott, "The Evidence of Experience," *Critical Inquiry* 17, no. 4 (1991), 773–97.

7. Weeks, *The Problem with Work*, 13.

as it does as a highly effective preservative of capitalist exploitation — it becomes clear that we cannot afford to ignore that that legitimization comes at a cost.⁸ Weeks's analysis of feminist efforts to counter the depiction of reproductive labor as unproductive by insisting on its status as "real work ... a comparably worthy form of socially necessary and dignified labor" is exceptionally useful here.⁹ While acknowledging the short-term usefulness of this frame in bids for expanded rights, Weeks warns that its effectiveness comes at the cost of an uncritical appropriation of capitalist logics.¹⁰ Sex workers encounter both interpersonal and structural hostilities stemming from anxieties surrounding sexual politics. However, countering that hostility by redefining commercial sex as a higher calling rather than a despised sexual practice makes workers more vulnerable as *workers* even as it hopes to make them less vulnerable as sexual subjects.

Los Angeles County's recently passed condom legislation for the adult film industry is, as we shall see, a striking example of the policy ramifications of a frame that erases sex workers as *workers* while it simultaneously makes them responsible for the (real or imagined) consumer impact (seen here as "public health") of the products their labor is extracted to produce. The soldering of a job's social value to workers' rights entitlement foists onto workers ethical responsibility for a product or service's consumer impact; this responsibility should be borne by the employing class. I follow Leopoldina Fortunati in locating the capitalist state as "employer" even when sex workers labor as independent contractors.¹¹ Making rights entitlements dependent on social worth (seen here as, for example: I nurture lonely [middle class, white] men and am thus entitled to respect and recognition) reinforces a work ethic discourse that locates personhood in one's contributions to systems of value production. This is particularly risky in a late-capitalist labor market in which the erosion of boundaries between work and worker has proven to be

8. I elaborate this point in Heather Berg, "An Honest Day's Wage for a Dishonest Day's Work: (Re)productivism and Refusal," in "Debt," ed. Meena Alexander and Rosalind Petchesky, special issue, *Women's Studies Quarterly* 42, nos. 1–2 (2014): 161–77.

9. Weeks, *The Problem with Work*, 66.

10. *Ibid.*, 68.

11. Leopoldina Fortunati, *The Arcane of Reproduction: Housework, Prostitution, Labor and Capital*, trans. Hilary Creek (Brooklyn, NY: Autonomedia, 1995).

such a powerfully exploitative tool.¹² My point, then, is not that sexual labor is not valuable or socially necessary—it seems very clear that it is those things and, arguably, to a greater extent than many other forms of waged work. Instead, I am arguing for a theoretical frame that recognizes that those factors only matter if we are to buy into a dangerous and imagination-squelching romanticization of work under capital. The radical potential of sex-worker activism rests at least in part with how we approach this problematic.

SEX WORK AS LABOR: THEORETICAL GROUNDING

Feminist and Marxist scholarship on labor animates the understanding of sex work with which I operate here. Marxist feminist theories of domestic (or reproductive) labor give us the tools to understand as work the historically un- and underpaid labor that maintains, or reproduces, waged workers. Sex, paid or otherwise, is a fundamental piece of this maintenance. Capital's ability to maintain an image of such labor as non-work—what Fortunati calls the “natural force of social labor”—allows it to secure for one wage the labors of many.¹³ The fascination with intimacy as private, sacred, and uncommodifiable—a viewpoint that pervades anti-sex-work or abolitionist feminist thought—does the work of capital. While I will argue that there are points at which it is important to distinguish between paid and unpaid sex (such as in the context of policy debates regarding occupational health in pornography), I follow those scholars who have troubled the idea of a boundary between the two. Laura Agustín, for example, reminds us of the ways in which sex within the context of unpaid romantic relationships often feels like work and that paid and unpaid sex alike are reproductive in the way Marxist feminists have understood the term.¹⁴ It is, of course, also clear that the distinction between what becomes understood as sex work and those myriad forms of activity that involve elements of the sexual is socially constructed, shifting, and often untethered to how those involved actually see their labor (or the absence thereof).

12. See Cristina Morini, “The Feminization of Labour in Cognitive Capitalism,” *Feminist Review* 87, no. 1 (2007): 46.

13. See Fortunati, *The Arcane of Reproduction*, 33.

14. Laura María Agustín, “Sex as Work and Sex Work,” *Jacobin* (May 16, 2012), <http://jacobinmag.com/2012/05/sex-as-work-and-sex-work>.

Agustín suggests that we use as a metric how those involved understand their work (or nonwork): “If someone tells me they experience selling sex as a job, I take their word for it. If, on the contrary, they say that it doesn’t feel like a job but something else, then I accept that.”¹⁵ As a general rule, I think this makes sense, and feminist ethical commitments would encourage us to respect how subjects self-identify. It poses a difficulty here, however, insofar as I am interested in labor policy, and it operates within a context in which whether or not we call something “work” — or “contracting,” a “hobby,” an “apprenticeship,” a “marriage” — has material impacts on one’s relationship to the state. These questions are not simply semantic, but determine access to worker protection, benefits, and the right and ability to organize, among other things, a reality made strikingly clear by capital’s (often successful) efforts to recast workers as contractors or interns and subsequently disown any responsibility for their well-being. I place the questions I ask precisely within the context of the current political economy, in which capital has made the employer-employee relationship so abstract that the paradigmatic worker appears not to be working at all. So, while I am much more interested in radical critiques of labor and the family than in the limited prospects of liberal reform, making employers and the state accountable to marginalized workers is an important component of a politics of the meantime.

Sex-work scholarship has become increasingly focused on questions of labor and economy, often connecting these themes to shifting public and legal perceptions of appropriate sexuality.¹⁶ Much of this work has, through ethnography, delivered nuanced portraits of workers’ complex experiences and shifting identifications. While absorbing the important lessons of that tradition, I also want to explore the productive tensions that emerge when we put personal narrative in conversation with policy and recognize both the feminist methodological commitment to take subjects at their word and Joan Scott’s concerns regarding “the evidence of experience” and its tendency to obscure how identities get produced.¹⁷

15. Ibid. (emphasis in original).

16. Susan Dewey, “The Feminized Labor of Sex Work: Two Decades of Feminist Historical and Ethnographic Research,” *Labor: Studies in Working-Class History of the Americas* 9, no. 2 (2012): 114.

17. Scott, “The Evidence of Experience.”

This project may be smoother for some policy questions than others, and I have chosen to focus on those more riven points here.

Following Eileen Boris and Rhacel Parreñas, I view sex work as one of many forms of “intimate labor” — forms of work in which interpersonal labor plays a constitutive role.¹⁸ Some forms of sexual labor — such as erotic dance and acting in pornography — also incorporate key aspects of creative and performance work. In both cases, scholarship on intimate and creative labors outside of sex work offers generative points of comparison and reminds us of the theoretical, policy, and affective concerns implicated in discussions of sexual labor. Like below-the-line workers in the mainstream entertainment industry, for example, pornography performers have seen the shift to digital production affect their work’s content, pay, and spatial character. Like egg donors, escorts face pressure to define motivations for their work in altruistic, rather than economic, terms. And like childcare workers, sex workers have felt it necessary to challenge conceptions of their work as unskilled and dispensable. Significantly, childcare and other care workers’ organizing bids have often rested on claims of social necessity very similar to those I critique in this article.¹⁹

Finally, theorists of constrained agency advocate “[taking] agency seriously precisely in order to understand how power works.”²⁰ A focus on constrained agency allows scholars (Agustín, Susan Dewey, Jo Doezema, Patty Kelly, Kamala Kempadoo, and Mireille Miller-Young, for example) to examine those factors that support or constrain workers’ agency (labor and immigration policies, global economic trends, and access to social services, for example) rather than to fixate on the impossible task of grouping workers into the fixed categories of “agent” or “victim” (with low-income women of color and from the global South almost always falling into the latter category). Crucially, such an approach requires

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18. Eileen Boris and Rhacel Salazar Parreñas, *Intimate Labors: Cultures, Technologies, and the Politics of Care* (Stanford, CA: Stanford Social Sciences, 2010). See also Arlie Russell Hochschild, *The Managed Heart: Commercialization of Human Feeling* (Berkeley: University of California, 2003); and Carol Wolkowitz et al., eds., *Body/sex/work: Intimate, Embodied and Sexualized Labour* (Hampshire; New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013).
 19. See Dorothy Sue Cobble, “More Intimate Unions,” in *Intimate Labors*, 291; Evelyn Nakano Glenn, “Creating a Caring Society,” *Contemporary Sociology* 29, no. 1 (2000): 84–94.
 20. Clare Hemmings, *Why Stories Matter: The Political Grammar of Feminist Theory* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011), 206.

respectful recognition of workers' resilience and an understanding of resistance not limited to state-recognized organizing efforts. In this spirit, strands of Marxist analysis that conceive of workers as creative, agentic, and savvy give us the tools to articulate a critical narrative of sexual work as labor under capitalism that is precisely the opposite of deterministic.²¹

SITUATING SOURCES

In this article, I trace conservative work rhetoric in influential and much-cited sex-worker activist writing and theorize its costs. I analyze approaches to labor in four leading sex-worker anthologies — *Sex Work: Writings by Women in the Sex Industry* (first published in 1987, updated in 1998); *Whores and Other Feminists* (1997); *Working Sex: Sex Workers Write about a Changing Industry* (2007); and *Hos, Hookers, Call Girls, and Rent Boys: Professionals Writing on Life, Love, Money, and Sex* (2009). These works, published over a span of more than twenty years, provide a telling portrait of the state of the field of sex-worker activist writing. The first two, *Sex Work* and *Whores and Other Feminists*, feature writing from leaders in the US sex-worker rights movement and remain widely cited in academic literature (with 334 and 204 citations, respectively).²² Their formative effect on later work is evidenced in the remarkable continuity of argumentative thrust to be found when comparing these texts to the more contemporary *Working Sex* and *Hos, Hookers, Call Girls, and Rent Boys*, and their legacy is apparent in current organizing efforts.

Taken together, the four texts profiled here share a core group of frequent contributors who, like the other featured authors, represent diverse sectors of the sex industry and, to some extent, experiences of it. The anthologies are significantly over representative, however, of white, middle-class, cisgendered women, and their foci are unquestionably centered around the United States. These demographics suggest a parallel with what labor historians have dubbed the “labor aristocracy” — a privileged group of workers with the closest economic and affective ties to management. While some activist sex-worker writing grapples with the politics of race and ethnicity in productive ways — the interview between Sibohan Brooks and Gloria Lockett featured in *Working Sex* is

21. See Franco Berardi, *The Soul at Work: From Alienation to Autonomy* (Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 2009); and Morini, “The Feminization of Labour.”

22. According to Google Scholar citation tracker, <http://scholar.google.com>.

a fine example — race and nation remain largely absent presences in the texts.²³ This is particularly problematic given the significance of race and place in informing sex workers' experience as well as their (often unspoken) centrality in popular and legal discourses of sexual labor. It may also appear to be rather anachronistic given the vibrant sex-worker activist efforts both nationally and globally that address the intersections of sexual labor, class, race, and place in textured and exciting ways. But the problematics that emerge in the sex-worker activist texts I explore here cannot be simply passed over, and not only because the texts remain so widely cited in academic literature. The texts on which I focus here have a different intent from both academic work on sexual labor and grassroots organizing, advocacy, and harm reduction efforts — their target audience extends beyond workers and academics, and the rhetoric they deploy needs to be considered in this context. I will take up this thread in a later discussion of multiple consciousness, but for now suffice it to say that rhetoric performed by a group of workers who make a living being adept at performance — at locating and meeting often sublimated needs — tells us something crucial about the audience and the discursive atmosphere in which we operate. Here, the rhetoric workers deploy in the service of countering anti-sex-work stereotypes of abject victimhood and sexual depravity gives us invaluable information about the identity-inflected character of the agentive, dignified worker in US labor discourse. Recalling that prostitution has historically existed in the US imagination alongside slave and mercenary labor as a foil to dignified work makes apparent the loadedness of higher calling discourse in sex-worker activist writing.²⁴

My own content analysis shows that a minority — 32 out of 201 — of the essays included in the four anthologies integrated a critical analysis of labor, while a majority either avoided critique of labor under capital or treated it as tertiary to issues of affect and sexual identity. We see the first, for example, when Mirha-Soleil Ross claims that the “invisibility” of clients is “perhaps the political missing link to the obtainment of

23. Siobhan Brooks, “Interview with Gloria Lockett,” in *Working Sex: Sex Workers Write About a Changing Industry*, ed. Annie Oakley (Emeryville, CA: Seal Press, 2007).

24. See David Roediger, *The Wages of Whiteness: Race and the Making of the American Working Class* (London: Verso, 1999).

prostitutes' rights."²⁵ We see an instance of the latter when Cosi Fabian writes that she initially entered sex work because of unemployment and "disgust at the women's labor market, but [her] deeper motivation was the continuation of [her] quest for wholeness and meaning."²⁶ I will unpack these threads in the pages that follow, but here, I offer these examples by way of being explicit about the theoretical assumptions that guided my coding process. In the first example, I read an uncritical depiction of waged work in the suggestion that claims for the legitimacy or visibility of consumer entitlement to services may be the key to labor rights. In the second, Fabian's mobilization of higher calling discourse forecloses the possibility for a thoroughgoing critique of labor under capital. While I do not suggest that an anticapitalist labor focus must be divorced from discussions of affect or sexual expression, I do identify points in rhetoric and public policy—such as the case of condom use and occupational health in the pornography industry—in which these approaches are incompatible. I argue that it is precisely at those points that it becomes most important for us to push against conceptions of sex work as other-than-labor or of waged labor as other-than-exploitative. The stakes are both material as they affect sex workers' lived experience and discursive as they impact the rigor of our interventions in work, intimacy, and late capitalism. Maintaining a critical focus on labor in discussions of sex work, as some sex work(er) scholars and activists have shown, enables us to move past flattening dichotomies of choice versus exploitation; allows for scholarly and activist approaches that address the common needs of sex workers across sectors of the industry as well as geographic, socioeconomic, and racial locations; and makes space for a structural critique of capitalist political economy. It also—and this is crucial—makes it impossible to exceptionalize sex work, forcing those interested in sex workers' exploitation to engage with the ways in which we are all party (as both workers and consumers of labor) to systems of capitalist exploitation.

In her introduction to *Whores and Other Feminists*, Jill Nagle explores issues of voice and representation, and she acknowledges that while the "small counterculture" she and other activist sex-worker writers

25. Mirha-Soleil Ross, "Dear John," in *Working Sex*, 212.

26. Cosi Fabian, "The Holy Whore: A Woman's Gateway to Power," in *Whores and Other Feminists*, 44.

occupy does not transform material conditions of systemic violence and coercion, it does inform feminist and policy debates on sex work in ways that give human rights arguments a solid foundation and political traction.²⁷ I've termed the essays in *Whores and Other Feminists* and other anthologies of its ilk "activist writing" because of the power they have (and, as Nagle shows us, acknowledge) to shape debate and policy. Taking that power seriously drives me to push for reflexivity, foresight, and caution as we navigate the politics of linguistic, rhetorical, and narrative choices. Recognizing the possibility that activist sex-worker writing will inform policy means that we should pay close attention to the political application of the stories we tell.

As Nagle's point shows, one goal of activist writing is to shift the terms of feminist debates about sex work. In focusing on agency, pleasure, and destigmatizing commercial sexuality, the essays I analyze go far in pushing feminist discourses of sex work toward more layered (and less condescending) frameworks. Understanding activist sex-worker writing in the context of its ongoing conversation with anti-sex-work feminist thought helps us to understand the rhetorical choices activist writers make. Situating these conversations within the context of the highly conflicted relationship to sexuality in the United States and remembering the other voices at play—the religious right, public health officials, and helping professionals, among others—further helps us to understand sex-worker activist writers' rhetorical choices as deliberate, politically astute, and indicative of these particular workers' positionality. In the three sections that follow, I trace the vision of labor that emerges in US-based activist sex-worker writing; in the fourth, I connect it to contemporary debates regarding mandated condom use in the adult film industry.

AGENCY AND SOCIAL PRIVILEGE

The tendency in activist sex-worker writing to avoid engagement with those factors that constrain agency contributes to an artificially neat understanding of the relationship between social privilege and sex-worker subjectivity. Activist sex-worker writing reflects a broader trend in feminist thought that asks the author to disclose the social locations from which she writes. As such, a majority of contributors to the activist

27. Nagle, introduction to *Whores and Other Feminists*, 8.

sex-worker anthologies I analyze discussed social location, often describing aspects of their identities that contrast with anti-sex-work stereotypes of sex workers as young, uneducated, low-income women of color (both in the United States and globally). Of the multiple contributors to *Whores and Other Feminists*, Nagle writes, they “reflect a particular historical moment in U.S. culture and particular conditions, largely white and/or middle class, that *afford* the opportunity to forge feminisms directly from sex worker experience [emphasis added].”²⁸

I appreciate Nagle’s awareness of her race and class privilege. However, her disclaimer speaks to a tendency in activist sex-worker writing to make dangerous connections between privilege and self-awareness, on the one hand, and economic need and lack thereof, on the other. In a similar move, Carol Queen writes,

Just one factor stands out to distinguish those who live well, with no loss of self-esteem, from those who may find sex work a difficult or even damaging career choice. Most of the former have sufficient sex information and are sex-positive.... No one should ever, by economic constraint or any kind of interpersonal force, have to do sex work who does not like sex, who is not cut out for a life of sexual generosity (however attractive the fee charged for it).²⁹

Like Nagle’s, Queen’s comment makes sense when understood as being in conversation with abolitionists who view all sex work as *sexually* degrading and exploitative. The rhetorical move to establish a clear connection between situational factors that are relatively easy to affect (such as the availability of sex-positive sexual-health information) and characteristics that can be easily identified (such as social privilege) and sex-worker agency and well-being is effective if the sole goal is to give readers the conceptual tools to move past abolitionist frameworks that fail to make space for sex-worker agency. The implication that individual characteristics are responsible for human outcome — that one’s personal attitude toward sex determines their experience of sex work — is rhetorically effective as it fits neatly with a neoliberal belief in individual responsibility for social welfare. But here, as elsewhere in many narratives by

28. Ibid., 1.

29. Carol Queen, “Sex Radical Politics, Sex-Positive Feminist Thought, and Whore Stigma,” in *Whores and Other Feminists*, 129, 134.

activist sex-workers, the same rhetorical move that is effective in countering abolitionist arguments is counterproductive when late-capitalist attacks on working people are taken into account. An excerpt from Carol Leigh's poem "Cheap" provides a useful example of this point:

Cheap is when you want less than pleasure, a baby,
or a hundred dollars.
Cheap is when you do it for security
Cheap is what you are before you learn to say no.³⁰

Leigh's point, that there is a certain hypocrisy in an ideology that views sex exchanged for money, but not security, approval, or pleasure, as "cheap" is well taken. As with other sex-worker activist writing I analyze, however, Leigh's poem provides an alternative to anti-sex-work stereotypes, but does so by creating a division between agentive feminist sex workers and Others.

What definition of feminist self-consciousness makes it contingent on social privilege, and how does that definition interact with late-capitalist ideas of selfhood, agency, and labor? A discussion of depictions of sex work as higher-calling care work elucidates this point, as a narrator's ability to commercially exchange sex for reasons other than economic need gets coded as what gives her access to dignity and feminist consciousness. In her privileging of "sexual generosity," Queen reifies a historically raced and classed division between nurturing and economic motivations for care work. The same logic that prizes "homemaking" as it degrades paid domestic work affords sex work performed because of a desire to nurture lonely men a dignity denied to sex work performed in order to pay rent.

Trading in romanticized notions of noneconomically driven care work, some sex-worker activist writers characterize sex work as a higher calling, thereby positioning themselves not as workers, but as servants to a higher cause. In an essay titled, significantly, "The Holy Whore: A Woman's Gateway to Power," Fabian writes,

By using prepatriarchal models of female sexuality as a noble, even divine power, I have constructed a life that's extraordinarily sweet, to say nothing of confounding most of this culture's preconceptions

30. Eva Pendleton, "Love for Sale: Queering Heterosexuality," in *Whores and Other Feminists*, 78.

around both female and male sexuality.... Sacred prostitute stories reveal an understanding of women as gateways to transformation.³¹

Framing sex work as not only dignified, but privileged, provides a powerful antidote to an atmosphere steeped in images of sex workers as abject victims and/or degenerates who are a menace to the public good. Given our culture's fraught (to say the least) relationship to sexuality, there is certain value in Fabian's conjuring of a "prepatriarchal" sexuality. But we are not currently operating outside the reach of patriarchy (or advanced capitalism), and it is impossible, especially in the field of commerce, to temporarily distance oneself from the gendered political economy. As such, the "woman as gateway" (savior, martyr, or any other dehumanized avenue for male benefit) reinforces rather than challenges the status quo, as does the idea of gendered labor being "women's gateway to power." Fabian's choice to ignore economics (the only reference to payment in her essay is her mention that clients leave "offerings" on her alter) reinforces an erasure of labor that is central to consumer enjoyment of service work.

A focus on any form of work as a higher calling can have the effect of discouraging workers from making demands for improved labor conditions. From nonprofit organizations that ask workers to table labor concerns in the name of "the cause" to the expectation that workers in creative professions accept the conditions of precarious, unbenefited, and underpaid work in the name of art, we see that a focus on higher calling over labor has overwhelmingly negative effects on workers.³²

Ross's narrative shows a disinterest in structural change characteristic of evocations of higher calling:

There are times I feel like revolting against this system that is ready to condemn and even jail us for caressing, kissing and holding each other ... when I feel like there was, indeed, a higher calling for me to sacrifice my personal reputation, comfort, safety, social status, and even my freedom for a greater good.³³

31. Fabian, "The Holy Whore," 44, 48.

32. Chuck Kleinhans, "'Creative Industries,' Neo-Liberal Fantasies, and the Cold, Hard Facts of Global Recession: Some Basic Lessons," *Jump Cut: A Review of Contemporary Media* 53 (Summer, 2011), <http://www.ejumpcut.org/archive/jc53.2011/kleinhans-creatIndus>.

33. Ross, "Dear John," 218.

Ross's suggestion of revolt is undermined by her treatment of labor and human rights abuses as static, and her self-martyrdom works against any push for structural change her essay might otherwise provoke. As with other activist sex-worker writers who trade in the trope of care work as higher calling, not wage labor, the rhetoric she employs supports the idea that women are predisposed to nurture and self-sacrifice. In addition, Ross's narrative reinforces the belief that violations of comfort, safety, and social status are natural occupational hazards of sex work while it simultaneously elides labor in its attention to "kissing and holding," not economic exchange.

Like Fabian and Ross, Ann Renee views her sex work as an avenue to greater good. She writes, "I willingly offer myself as an instrument for the dissolution of systems of shame."³⁴ As with Fabian's evocation of sex workers as "gateways," Renee's sex-worker-as-instrument arrangement positions (feminized) workers as objects through which (masculinized) consumers and culture may advance. While there is indeed radical potential in the "dissolution of systems of shame," we should be wary of the implications of placing the onus on women workers to get us there.

Activist sex-worker writers' focus on reducing sexual shame is important to building respect for their work as well as to creating a saner sexual culture. Queen's point that "when sexual pleasure is seen as a positive and honorable goal, much of the negative fruit of the sex industry is deprived of the soil in which to grow" is apt.³⁵ However, understanding sex work as labor encourages us to remember that workers across a range of industries, including those whose products are not associated with shame, experience assaults on their labor rights. For the same reason that a struggle for farm workers' rights might involve, but should not center on, food politics alone, it is inappropriate to reduce the struggle for sex workers' rights to a question of sexual politics. To the extent that sexual labor has been popularly constructed as an exceptionally *low* calling, we can recognize that there is more reputationally at stake for sex workers than for those in the nonprofit or mainstream creative sectors, for example. But the basic tenets of wage work under capitalism and the deteriorating status of work in general suggest that we cannot assume a

34. Ann Renee, "A Sex Protector/Pervert Speaks Out," in *Whores and Other Feminists*, 56.

35. Queen, "Sex Radical Politics," 130.

direct link between stigma based on a form of labor's content and labor conditions. Capitalism is as contemptuous of workers as it is dependent on them; the status of work's content is incidental to this relationship.

**"EXHIBITIONIST WITH A CAUSE": SEX WORK AS SEXUAL
IDENTITY IN ACTIVIST SEX-WORKER NARRATIVES³⁶**

This work can be oppression or freedom; just another assembly line job; an artistic act that also pays well; comic relief from street realities; healing social work from an alienated culture. What is at work within each woman that lets her accommodate this situation? Intense denial, infallible sense of humor, codependency, incredible strength, a liquid sense of self? The only safe thing to say is that we're all in it for the money.³⁷

In the anthologies I analyzed, sex-worker activist writing that is critical of labor under capital sits alongside those essays that conspicuously avoid such critique.³⁸ This speaks to the diversity of the anthologies — in some essays, these elements even coexist. Debi Sundahl addresses erotic dance as feminized labor and attends to the low pay and poor working conditions that so often characterize women's labor. She identifies a distinction between unpaid and paid sexual encounters, but allows slip-page where the question of identity comes into play: "I'm a stripper not because I'm looking for other lovers but because it's my job. For the first time I could express my sexuality in a safe environment."³⁹ We see at once a rejection of the conflation of clients and lovers and an embrace of the idea of sex work as unmediated expression of the innate self. This complexity means that it is both impossible and unproductive to classify sex-worker activist writers as on one side of a labor-versus-sexual-identity dichotomy. As with my discussion of narratives of feminist

36. "Exhibitionist with a cause" is borrowed from Nina Hartley, "Confessions of a Feminist Porn Star," in *Sex Work: Writings by Women in the Sex Industry*, ed. Frédérique Delacoste and Patricia Alexander (San Francisco: Cleis Press, 1998), 142.

37. Vicky Funari, "Naked, Naughty, Nasty," in *Whores and Other Feminists*, 28.

38. See, for example, Rev. Kellie Everts, "Triple Treat," in *Sex Work*, 38; Debi Sundahl, "Stripper," in *Sex Work*, 178; Janelle Galazia, "Staged," in *Working Sex*, 88; and Funari, "Naked, Naughty, Nasty," 28.

39. Sundahl, "Stripper," 177.

sex-worker consciousness and sex work as a higher calling, my interest is in the applications of these rhetorical choices for discourse and public policy, not in questioning the validity of activists' self-identification.

Intimate labor involves delicate affective negotiations for both workers and consumers.⁴⁰ For sex workers, this means the interpersonal work of managing perceptions of closeness, pleasure, and desire, as well as the intrapersonal work of negotiating self-understanding.⁴¹ Peggy Morgan writes,

A prostitute can't very well tell a trick the truth: "I really just want your money—I don't want to touch you or have you touch me".... But she also knows that what she does for money is not an expression of her own sexuality. It may look like sex but it sure doesn't feel like anything she does with lovers.⁴²

Likewise, Vicki Funari notes, "I know perfectly well that I exist inside this decorated body, but I also know that I'm acting as if I don't exist."⁴³ Part of the sex worker's job is to create the illusion that she is not working. Annie Oakley has made the cogent point that this is core to service work in general, where the visibility of the person behind the product is incompatible with consumer enjoyment of it.⁴⁴

Activist sex-worker writers' efforts to introduce diverse motivations for entering sex work are an important intervention in a discursive atmosphere dominated by flattened portrayals of sex workers as exclusively motivated by pathology or force. Taking sex work as labor seriously involves understanding that, as with other forms of labor, workers enter sex industries for a variety of reasons. How do evocations of sex work as "an affirmation of [workers'] sexual power," or where "feeling like a commodity [is] kind of fun" affect our ability to argue for sex workers' labor rights?⁴⁵ Is it possible to describe clients as "friends ... an endless supply of very nice men whose company I enjoyed" and also take seriously the

40. Boris and Parreñas, introduction to *Intimate Labors*, 3.

41. Elizabeth Bernstein, "Bounded Authenticity and the Commerce of Sex," in *Intimate Labors*, 153.

42. Peggy Morgan, "Living on the Edge," in *Sex Work*, 26.

43. Funari, "Naked, Naughty, Nasty," 28.

44. Annie Oakley, introduction to *Working Sex*, 9–10.

45. Judy Helfand, "Silence Again," in *Sex Work*, 101; Jennifer Blowdryer, "My First Porn Film," in *Working Sex*, 209.

fundamental class conflict between workers and employer/consumers (here, clients play both roles)?⁴⁶ What does Renee's claim "I want to fuck the world" do for activist efforts to insist that sex workers are not available for the taking, but provide specific services on terms they negotiate with clients they choose?⁴⁷

As with other forms of intimate labor, marketing for sexual services and products frequently presents sex workers as possessing insatiable sexual appetites. The image of the woman on the other end of the phone-sex line as a horny-housewife-hungry-for-attention is of course an easier sell than that of a bored woman working out of a cubicle. Hartley's "exhibitionist with a cause" is sexier than "a mother of two with rent on her mind slugging through another day on the set." But when callers are encouraged to conceive of themselves as doing the horny housewife a favor, they may be less moved by her entreaty for health benefits. When viewers and policymakers (again, recognizing that these categories overlap) imagine that the woman on screen just happens to be filmed while participating in her usual daily activity of acrobatic sex with a lover, they may find it difficult to understand her efforts to form a union. A police officer or judge who agrees with Susie Bright that "whores are adventurous and dare to live dangerously" may be (and historically, have been) less concerned when one is raped or denied payment.⁴⁸

Of course, I do not suggest that activist sex workers are responsible for these outcomes. Policy makers and law enforcement have a long history of willful disinterest in sex workers' voices and well-being. At the core of the capitalist consumption contract is the promise that purchasing a thing or service entitles the consumer to ignore the labor required to produce it—this is central to Marx's "reification" and is not at all unique to sex work.⁴⁹ I do contend, though, that it is a mistake for activist sex-worker writers to reinforce their own reification. This matters to the extent that we hope that some consumers and policy makers will be

46. Sunny Carter, "A Most Useful Tool," in *Sex Work*, 164.

47. Renee, "A Sex Protector/Pervert Speaks Out," 56.

48. Annie Sprinkle, "40 Reasons Why Whores Are My Heroes," *Hos, Hookers, Call Girls, and Rent Boys: Professionals Writing on Life, Love, Money, and Sex*, ed. David Sterry and R. Martin Martin (Berkeley: Soft Skull Press, 2009), 10.

49. See Karl Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy*, vol. 3, trans. David Fernbach (New York: Penguin, 1993), 384–5.

exposed to activist sex-worker perspectives, but also because the identity rhetoric around which a movement is organized affects what priorities can be legible and what battles can be waged. We need to think critically about what it means for an activist agenda to ask of workers the very same sorts of labor — here, the performance of nonwork — their jobs require them to perform. As long as sex-worker activist discourse continues to reinforce rhetoric such as “my husband could not match my sexual appetite.... I began turning tricks, not so much to make money, but to avoid giving away sex,” workers are unlikely to be inspired toward radical action.⁵⁰ Indeed, we have seen this in myriad other labor struggles, as when academics find it difficult to reconcile the perception of teaching and knowledge production as labors of love and the need to resist our increasing precaritization.

Sex-worker activist writing that presents workers as possessing a unique sexual identity helps us to understand many anti-sex-work arguments as rooted in the same sexual conservatism that motivates heterosexism and other policing of nonprocreative sexual behavior. Situating debates over sex work within the context of those over sexual politics more generally, Queen writes,

The politics of being a whore do not differ markedly from the politics of any other sexually despised group. We must include radical sexual politics in our agenda, becoming defenders of sex itself...many of the abuses committed within the sex industry have little to do, in fact, with sexuality.... We are not *selling* ourselves or our bodies (a reprehensible turn of phrase repeated, often as not, by feminists who ought to have more concern for the power of language to shape reality) any more than does any worker under capitalism.⁵¹

Queen’s last point, that sex work does not involve selling oneself any more than other forms of labor, gets straight to the core of my argument. Defending sex itself does little to improve the situation of workers vis-à-vis capital; in some ways, it leaves workers more vulnerable by reinforcing the idea that labor rights are necessarily tied to the ostensible social value of services rendered. But the point is not that there is an antipathy

50. Cecelia Wardlaw, “Dream Turned Nightmare,” in *Sex Work*, 109.

51. Queen, “Sex Radical Politics,” 134–5.

between radical sexual and radical anticapitalist politics—the battles are the same: capital despises both workers and sexual minorities who refuse to assimilate to the nuclear family it requires in order to reproduce labor.⁵² Instead, the key is to articulate an activist rhetoric that does not undermine one liberatory project while posing short-term support to another. A call for the expansion of what counts as acceptable sexual expression reinforces the reification process. Activist sex-worker attempts to “defend sex” make sense within the context of the sex wars, but only if we fail to understand that those struggles are inextricably linked to questions of political economy. A critical understanding of sex work as labor does not require that we abandon issues of sexuality. The nuclear family, against which all other intimate relations are measured, is as central to capital’s maintenance as is the workday, which is fused with all other areas of life and so has no end.

INDUSTRIES UNDER CAPITAL

This is not a feminist enterprise. We’re here to provide a service to our customers.⁵³

A fundamental assumption in some activist sex-worker writing is that payment equalizes power dynamics otherwise inherent in heterosexual sex exchange. Eva Pendleton writes,

The act of making men pay is, in fact, quite subversive. It reverses the terms under which men feel entitled to unlimited access to women’s bodies...sex workers provide a powerful indictment of gender roles by demanding payment for playing them.⁵⁴

Pendleton, like other activist sex-worker writers, is in conversation with anti-sex-work feminists who claim that sex work reinforces a patriarchal

52. Silvia Federici, “Precarious Labor: A Feminist Viewpoint” (lecture, Blue-stockings Radical Bookstore, New York City, October 28, 2006), available at <http://inthemiddleofthewhirlwind.wordpress.com/precarius-labor-a-feminist-viewpoint>.

53. Manager of the Lusty Lady Peep Show, quoted in Funari, “Naked, Naughty, Nasty,” 34.

54. Pendleton, “Love for Sale,” 79, 81.

view of male sexual entitlement.⁵⁵ Her point is an important intervention in that context — compensating women for performing gender roles does work to denaturalize those roles. But it is a fundamentally pro-capitalist stance to assume that commercial is somehow less exploitative than noncommercial power exchange — that commerce equalizes power inequality. In a political economy founded on extreme unevenness in wealth distribution, introducing payment does not at all reverse the terms under which those with wealth and power feel entitled to the bodies and labors of those without.

Likewise, the forms of sex work in which workers are more or less self-employed differ on the surface from traditional (industrial) labor under capitalism, but they do not radically modify its terms. Liz Highleyman's (a.k.a. Mistress Veronika Frost) claim that "from an anticapitalist perspective, sex work is perhaps the ultimate expression of worker ownership of the means of production" represents a trend in activist sex-worker writing to equate self-employment with distance from the problematics of labor exploitation.⁵⁶ I am in full agreement with Highleyman when she reminds us that

A thoroughgoing critique of the global economic system would have to encompass not only men who exploit poor women for sex but also residents of wealthy nations who benefit from the cheap factory and agricultural labor of poor residents of developing countries — exactly the types of labor that are often proposed as worthy alternatives to sex work.⁵⁷

The singular focus on interpersonal exploitation in anti-sex-work rhetoric obfuscates structures of domination, but so does an understanding of capitalism that depicts exploitation as occurring only when a business

55. See, for example, Andrea Dworkin, "Prostitution and Male Supremacy," speech given at the "Prostitution: From Academia to Activism" symposium, sponsored by the *Michigan Journal of Gender and Law*, University of Michigan Law School, Ann Arbor, MI, October 31, 1992, <http://www.nostatusquo.com/ACLU/dworkin/MichLawJourI.html>.

56. Liz Highleyman, "Professional Dominance," in *Whores and Other Feminists*, 148. See also Jean-Luc Hennig, *The Little Black Book of Grisélidis Real: Days and Nights of an Anarchist Whore*, trans. Ariana Reines (Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 2009); Tre Vasquez, "Pimp," in *Working Sex*; and Eva Pendleton, "Love for Sale."

57. Highleyman, "Professional Dominance," 148.

or individual employer extracts surplus labor from workers. It is particularly crucial in this late-capitalist moment that we refuse to be seduced by the idea that independent contracting represents a liberating alternative to wage work.⁵⁸ Following Nina Power's analysis of the centrality of itinerant contract work to advanced capitalism, we can understand sex work not as a privileged form of labor existing outside the problematics of capitalism, but as a site from which mainstream industries might cull strategies for structuring a "flexible" workforce for those whose health and well-being neither employers nor the state are responsible.⁵⁹ The following case study and discussion surrounding occupational health and safer sex in the adult film industry illustrates this point and marks a convergence of the discourses of unencumbered choice, intimate labor as nonwork, and sex work as outside of capitalism that occur in what I have identified as activist sex-worker texts.

CONDOM MANDATES IN PORNOGRAPHY: A CASE STUDY

What is lost in higher calling, sexuality-focused sex-worker activist rhetoric is an acknowledgement that the discussions we are having are about more than sexual freedom: human well-being and cold, hard, unevenly distributed cash are at stake, too. The effects of this erasure on how public policy is developed, debated, and implemented are evident in the trajectory of Los Angeles County's recently passed condom-use mandate for the adult film industry, titled *Safer Sex in the Adult Film Industry Act* and dubbed "Measure B."⁶⁰ Space does not allow for a full inquiry into the political, legal, and industry-specific issues surrounding the policy; instead, I focus on a pointed discussion of the ways in which its trajectory and reception make clear the stakes of a critical labor analysis in discussions of sex work. Key issues here are the mandate's framing as a public, rather than an occupational, health intervention and the framing of the mandate by the adult film industry as an unwanted incursion

58. Nina Power, *One Dimensional Woman* (Ropley, UK: Zero Books, 2009), 18.

59. Fortunati, *The Arcane of Reproduction*; Power, "One Dimensional Woman," 18.

60. The Los Angeles County Safer Sex in the Adult Film Industry Act is currently being contested in US District Court. Condom use has long been mandated by federal OSHA laws governing blood-borne pathogens but historically has not been enforced. See Corita R. Grudzen and Peter R. Kerndt, "The Adult Film Industry: Time to Regulate?" *Public Library of Science Medicine* 4, no. 6 (2007), 995.

into private sexual life, rather than a poorly designed and hostile labor regulation.

In 2009, after an adult film actor's HIV diagnosis, the Los Angeles-based AIDS Healthcare Foundation (AHF) filed and lost a lawsuit against Los Angeles County's Department of Public Health. In an appeal of the ruling, Michael Weinstein, president of AHF, asked, "in any other job, we require companies to protect their workers... why should the porn industry be any different?"⁶¹ Three years later, AHF's continued efforts resulted in the Los Angeles City Council's passage of a law mandating condom use in adult films. In the wake of significant pushback from the adult film industry and mounting concerns regarding the cost and feasibility of enforcing the law, AHF gathered the signatures necessary to have a version of the law — Measure B — placed on LA County's November 6, 2012, ballot.

At first glance, this appears to be a win for workers, but the law fits within a hundred-year history of policy approaches to sex work that treat workers as vectors of disease and moral turpitude and are designed to eradicate rather than improve the labor conditions in commercial sex industries.⁶² The text of Measure B betrays its commitments — it begins with a discussion of the AIDS epidemic and states that its intent is to "minimize the spread of sexually transmitted infections resulting from the production of adult films... which have caused a negative impact on public health and the quality of life of citizens living in Los Angeles."⁶³ The act goes on to define "adult film" and "producer," but nowhere identifies what constitutes a worker.⁶⁴ Indeed, work emerges as a nonissue in both the law and proponents' defenses of it. Tellingly, Weinstein has repeatedly compared the condom mandate to health regulations imposed on nail salons and tattoo parlors — both of which are designed to protect consumers, not workers — even as he has championed it as a workplace health measure. That this inconsistency appears to be literally

61. Michael Weinstein, quoted in Tatiana Kumeh, "Condoms, Porn, and HIV," *Mother Jones*, October 18, 2010, <http://motherjones.com/blue-marble/2010/10/condoms-porn-and-hiv>.

62. Jennifer Brier, *Infectious Ideas: U.S. Political Responses to the AIDS Crisis* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2009), 138.

63. *County of Los Angeles Safer Sex in the Adult Film Industry Act*, L.A. County, Cal., Health & Safety § 11.39 (2014).

64. *Ibid.*, section 4.

unremarkable — even opponents to the measure have failed to identify it — speaks to the pervasive invisibility of labor and class in today's political context.

This invisibility is not unique to sex work, of course. The irony of Weinstein's call to treat adult film performance like "any other job" is that workplace health regulation across a range of industries has long been in a state of deterioration. Treating pornography performance like other jobs, in this case, brings us precisely the sort of intervention AHF has advocated for — policy neutered of class analysis and workers' voices. It brings us workplace health regulations that, like this one, fail to recognize a distinction between market and nonmarket activity and invite a discourse of individual risk behavior rather than an interrogation of the particular dynamics of waged work. Speaking to this collapse, opponents of the Safer Sex in the Adult Film Industry Act have identified as a key flaw of the law, its designers' misconception that the sexual activity involved in producing an adult film is indistinguishable from that between individuals outside that context.⁶⁵

It is particularly striking, then, that the condom mandate's opponents have framed their objections in terms that replicate precisely the same conflation of work and nonwork they problematize, echoing the terms by which AHF and the state have characterized actors' health as something other than a labor issue.⁶⁶ Speaking out against a condom mandate, one performer invoked the rhetoric of sexual freedom and deployed the classic feminist rallying cry "keep your laws off my body," while another protested, "we are fucking, something almost everyone does."⁶⁷ Feminist pornography actor Madison Young called condom mandates "just as confining and disempowering as eliminating condoms

65. See, for example, Chauntelle Anne Tibbals, "'Anything That Forces Itself into my Vagina Is by Definition Raping Me...' — Adult Performers and Occupational Safety and Health," *Stanford Law and Policy Review* 23, no. 1 (2012): 248.

66. See Michael Hiltzik, "Regulators on Collision Course with Porn Industry over Condoms," *Los Angeles Times*, November 2, 2011, <http://articles.latimes.com/2011/nov/02/business/la-fi-hiltzik-20111102>; Titania Kumeh, "Condoms, Porn, and HIV."

67. Ryan Keely and Lily Cade, quoted in Dennis Romero, "Porn Stars Speak Out Against Mandatory Condoms in Adult Film," *LA Weekly*, June 9, 2011.

as an option for performers ... there needs to be an element of choice.”⁶⁸ Such arguments ignore that “choice” and “freedom” necessarily take on very different meanings once mediated by capital.

In an article titled, “Anything That Forces Itself into My Vagina Is by Definition Raping Me...’ — Adult Film Performers and Occupational Safety and Health,” adult industry scholar Chauntelle Tibbals provides a convincing critique of the condom mandate informed by an effort to convey workers’ perspectives to an academic and legal audience. Tibbals cites one interviewee’s framing of mandated condom use as a form of sexual violence and the general focus among performer respondents on the right to choose whether or not to use a condom.⁶⁹ In concluding her piece, Tibbals recenters the condom mandate as an issue of “performers’ bodily autonomy” and asks, “how does the state, an employer, or an occasional contract partner regulate a workplace that involves the most intimate parts of a person’s body?”⁷⁰ This question resonates with historical debates surrounding sex work — these conversations have long been inflected with anxieties about what happens when the intimate meets the market. But where anti-sex-work thinkers have opposed commercial sex based on an assumption of the fundamental incommensurability of intimacy and economics — what Viviana Zelizer calls the “hostile worlds view” — we see here a different take.⁷¹ The hostile worlds in this frame are not intimacy and capital, but intimacy and state regulation. It is (I think appropriately) taken at face value that sexual performance is as much a commodity as time spent on the shop floor; what emerges as untenable is the entry of the regulatory state.

It is possible that this frame is simply a tactical one — opponents of the condom mandate clearly recognize the political currency of neoliberal rhetorics of privacy, free choice, and bodily autonomy. Nevertheless, it raises pressing questions about how sex workers and their allies will narrate the relationship between the body, intimacy, capital, and the state and the intended and unintended consequences of those choices.

68. Kellee Terrell, “Why the Porn Industry’s HIV Problem Is Our Problem Too,” *Huffington Post*, October 26, 2010, http://www.huffingtonpost.com/kellee-terrell/why-the-porn-industrys-hi_b_774075.html.

69. Tibbals, “Anything That Forces Itself into My Vagina.”

70. *Ibid.*, 251.

71. Viviana A. Zelizer, *The Purchase of Intimacy* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2005), 20.

In the case of the condom mandate, it becomes impossible to take seriously pornography performance as labor, critique public policies for failing to do so, *and* resist state intervention based on rhetorics of separate spheres and bodily sovereignty.

Versions of this problematic emerge throughout the activist sex-worker texts I have explored in this article, and this underscores both the enduring importance of addressing the conservative attitudes toward labor I identified in canonical sex-worker activist texts and the usefulness of the condom mandate as a case study. The global state of sex-work activism has in many ways moved beyond what anthologies inclusive of a predominantly white, economically privileged, US authorship have offered, but the discourses mobilized in debates over the condom mandate suggest a stasis that requires continued attention.

This continuity can be attributed in part to the enduring homogeneity of the sex-worker voices that become audible in political discourse. The adult film performers whose opposition to a condom mandate has been profiled in both popular and industry media and scholarship belong to the adult film industry's overwhelmingly white, highly paid minority. This is in line with what I described earlier as sex work's "labor aristocracy." As performers struggling to make a living in a rapidly changing (and some say shrinking) industry, those at the top increasingly take on multiple roles, and many also operate as producers and directors, a reality that further destabilizes the traditionally clear boundary between workers and those who benefit from their exploitation. That most pornography performers are independent contractors further complicates this picture and pushes us to consider what "self-employment" means for the type of Marxist labor analysis I have attempted here.

The embattled status of the pornography industry has contributed to a situation in which traditional lines of opposition between workers and employers have been disrupted; and again, this is a dynamic shared with commercial sex industries more broadly. The stunning ease with which groups — including labor and feminist organizations — who have traditionally allied with workers disregard pornography actors in discussions of their labor means that performers must take allies as they can find them. When the radical magazine *Mother Jones* assumes that Michael Weinstein, who has neither medical training nor experience in the pornography industry, knows better than workers what is best for their health, workers' involvement with an employer-funded trade

organization in the anti-Measure B lobby No on Government Waste comes to make sense.⁷² When widely publicized feminist Gail Dines mobilizes an adult film performer's recent syphilis infection as yet more evidence for the industry's exceptionalism, the Hustler Corporation may not be as peculiar an ally as it seems.

Where differentiating between occupational health regulation and government surveillance of individual behavior is concerned, the distinction between "consenting adults [going] about their business in front of cameras" and *performing sexual labor* is crucial.⁷³ But that distinction may be illegible in a discursive atmosphere dominated by social hygiene panic and the widespread refusal to take sex workers seriously as *workers*. It may be illegible, too, in a political economy in which all workers are assailed by capital's vampirism and the state's contempt for working people. We need a sex-worker activist movement equipped to resist sex work's erasure as *work*, but as part of a broader anticapitalist project, not an end in itself.

CONCLUSION

In her introduction to *Whores and Other Feminists*, Nagle writes, "feminist activism and discourse has done an excellent (though unfinished) job of clearing space, creating support for, and theorizing women's stories of victimization around commercial sex. In the process, it has silenced feminist whores."⁷⁴ Nagle offers the essays in *Whores and Other Feminists* as a forum in which that silencing might begin to be corrected. The anthology, like others in its genre, performs that task beautifully. Close readings of over two hundred essays in *Sex Work*; *Whores and Other Feminists: Working Sex*; and *Hos, Hookers, Call Girls, and Rent Boys* left this reader with a deep respect for the breadth of experience, insight, and political will circulating in the activist sex-worker community. To borrow Nagle's phrasing, I suggest that activist sex-worker writing has done an "excellent (though unfinished) job of ... creating support for, and theorizing women's stories of [pleasure, personalism, and agency] around

72. Kumeh, "Condoms, Porn, and HIV."

73. Kent Sepkowitz, "That's a Wrap: The Case for Bringing Condoms to Adult Films," *Slate Magazine*, April 7, 2010, http://www.slate.com/articles/health_and_science/medical_examiner/2010/04/thats_a_wrap.html.

74. Nagle, introduction to *Whores and Other Feminists*, 4.

commercial sex,” but has largely avoided critical engagement with capital in the process.

I have shown that key sex-worker activist anthologies advance a largely uncritical vision of labor under capitalism. The essays I analyze present powerful critiques of anti-sex-work logic, but often do so by constructing versions of agency that are dependent on social privilege, reinforcing the dominant notion of intimate labor as unmediated performance of the self and ignoring the violence inherent in wage work. Discussions surrounding a condom-use mandate in California’s pornography industry reveal the public policy consequences of treating sex work as other-than-labor or of treating labor as other-than-problematic.

I have argued against sex-work exceptionalism, forms of which we see in public policy, sex-worker activist rhetoric, and anti-sex-work thought. I have called, too, for a reinvigorated activism that refuses to fight capital on its own terms. Rhetoric that argues for sex workers’ labor and human rights based on the “social necessity” of their work reinforces the tethering of personhood to one’s contribution to systems of value extraction that has proven so devastatingly central to the functioning of neoliberal capitalism. It fuels a work ethic discourse that pushes workers to identify with the interests of capital and consumers and not one another. It takes our attention away from political economy and directs it toward dead-end discussions of product quality and consumer benefit (dead end in part because both of these measures are totally irrelevant to capital). While the stakes of a project that counters these trends are especially high for workers whose labor is attached to products and services that are particularly reviled, all workers have an interest in pushing against the idea that their worth need be tied to that of the products of their labor. Without that push, we become complicit in an economic and ethical system in which capital extracts both moral responsibility *and* labor from workers. What I am calling for, instead, is a radical defense of socially unnecessary labor, a proud demand for honest wages for a dishonest day’s work.

Acknowledgments

I would like to thank Eileen Boris, Lauren Clark, Mireille Miller-Young, Todd Ramlow, Rachel Riedner, Kit Smemo, Carly Thomsen, and Margaret Waller, as well as the *Feminist Studies* editorial collective and reviewers, for their thoughtful feedback at various stages of this project. Special thanks to Leila Rupp, without whose labors this would not have been possible. Finally, thank you to the sex-worker activist community, of which I am proud to be a part.