I keep trying to accept the fact
That all my days wear a “for sale” sign.
I’m too poor to save much time for myself,
And I’ll do almost anything for money.
I keep trying to accept the fact
That people expect to pay for what they need.
If they try to make you feel bad about your wares,
It’s just because they have nothing to barter.

I would rather be a whore
Than be ignorant about that.
Don’t let it go too cheap,
My dears.
Money’s dirty but your hands stay clean.
You can never hang onto it long enough
To be stained.
You always have to hurry to
Put bread on your table.
It doesn’t mean you are a thing,
An object, a doll, a dummy.
It means
You are like Midas,
Because anything you sit on, wear, or step on
Turns to gold.
There is no base metal in you.

Pat Califia
from “Golden Showers”
In the 1970s, a new understanding of prostitution began to emerge which repositioned the prostitute not as a "social deviant" or a "sexual slave" but as a "sex worker" engaged in legitimate service work. This project of "making it work," to use Valerie Jenness' fortuitous phrase, involved the efforts of both those directly performing sexual labor as well as advocates outside of the trade. In 1975, legal scholars Jennifer James, Jan Withers, Marilyn Haft, and Sara Theiss advanced the position that feminists should offer critical support to workers in the sex trade:

Whether a woman chooses prostitution at a dollar a minute or a clerk-typist at two dollars an hour, feminists eventually recognize that our response to a woman's choice must be essentially the same. We can legitimately explain to a woman how we believe her situation is discriminatory. We can write, lobby for, and pass laws which open better options for women and which make their current situation more tolerable. But when a woman decides, "If you've ever been a clerk-typist, you'd rather be a prostitute," we cannot annul her choice. 

Similarly, in 1977, the U.S. prostitutes' rights group COYOTE asserted, "To make a great distinction between being paid for an hour's sexual services, or an hour's typing, or an hour's acting on a stage is to make a distinction that is not there." Immediately on the heels of efforts to redefine prostitution as work came challenges to that project. These challenges have taken three forms. The first rests on the notion that consent in the context of prostitution is impossible, or at least meaningless. Prostitution, therefore, should be defined as slavery, not as work. The second argument relies on the belief that prostitutes are "only doing what comes naturally" and thus cannot be said really to be "working." Santa Cruz Sheriff Al Noren remarks:

Calling it a "profession," that's just a bunch of crap, you know. I think most people define it professional where study and effort are put forth. Having sex is no great accomplishment. It's like saying when you have breakfast that you are a professional breakfast eater.

A similar objection is raised by some Radical Feminists who dismiss the comparison of sex work to other forms of physical labor such as massage, arguing that in massage "the commodity being offered and paid for is technical expertise" whereas "the mechanics of sexual stimulation are so basic and uncomplex, particularly in the male, that no enormous lore or expertise is required." The third objection to conferring the status of work on commercial sexual practices is the insistence that, because sexuality cannot be separated from the person of the prostitute, the sale of sexuality involves a fundamental sale of self. "Sexual services" related to prostitution, it is argued, can no more be considered work than "gestational services" related to pregnancy. Anti-prostitution activists thus argue that payment for prostitution services is not merely inadequate but mystifying, serving to disguise abuse as work. Prostitution, then, is understood to involve fundamentally "self-estranging process" as a woman develops an instrumental relationship to her sex and hence to herself. Norwegian researchers Cecilie Hoigard and Liv Finstad assert:

[In order to] trade her sexuality in the marketplace ... she must treat it as an object that can be relinquished and made use of as the possession of a stranger.... She must have learned to split herself into an object and a subject. Her own sexuality must be an object that she can manipulate and transfer.

Of course, the process of alienation described by Hoigard and Finstad is not unique to sexual labor. Karl Marx has argued that alienation is a fundamental dynamic in all productive labor under conditions of capitalism. As the worker loses control over the work, the product of that labor becomes an object with a power of its own, hostile and alien. Such labor is not voluntary, but coerced; it is forced labor. It is therefore not the satisfaction of a need, it is merely a means to satisfy needs external to it. Its alien character emerges clearly in the fact that as soon as no physical or other compulsion exists, labour is shunned like the plague.
External labor, labor in which man alienates himself, is a labor of self-sacrifice, of mortification. 20

Anti-prostitution feminists such as Carole Pateman insist, however, that prostitution can and must be distinguished from other forms of labor because the trade in sex involves a more profound sale of the self: Prostitution differs from wage slavery. No form of labor power can be separated from the body, but only through the prostitution contract does the buyer obtain unilateral right of direct sexual use of a woman's body. 21

From Pateman's perspective, what is "unique" (and thus uniquely abusive) in the commercial sexual exchange is not the use of the human body, but the very particular sexual use of a woman's body. According to Pateman:

In modern patriarchy, sale of women's bodies in the capitalist market involves sale of self in a different manner, and in a more profound sense than sale of the body of a male baseball player or sale of command over the use of the labor (body) of a wage slave. 22

Thus, for Pateman, prostitution must be distinguished from work because only in prostitution does a woman sell her essential self:

When a prostitute contracts out use of her body, she is thus selling herself in a very real sense. Women's selves are involved in prostitution in a very different manner from the involvement of the self in other occupations. Workers of all kinds may be more or less "bound up in their work," but the integral connection between sexuality and sense of self means that, for self-protection, a prostitute must distance herself from her sexual use. 23

As Pateman suggests, in physically and emotionally intimate work such as prostitution, boundary maintenance is essential. Whether this is necessarily problematic or even uniquely true of prostitution is much less clear.

Since the mid 1970s, a body of work has developed exploring the "sociology of emotion." 24 By applying a sociological perspective to emotion and emotional expression, researchers have uncovered how "exogenous macro factors, such as organizations, occupational structures, and broad cultural ideologies" help to shape emotion both as

inwardly felt and as expressed. 25 One important advantage of this perspective is the possibility of "denaturalizing" emotion by depriving it of its special status as innate and thus pre-social. 26 Emotion, then, is not viewed as an unmediated communication from the soul to the socialized self but rather as itself a product of socialization. The insight that emotion is always already social—and thus can be performed, created, objectified, and exchanged—challenges its characterization as uniquely unalienable.

This radical insight can be usefully applied to the specific set of emotions comprising "sexual desire" and expression. As we have seen, sex is often understood to be the "most intimate" of emotional connections and, therefore, a marker for the authentic self. 27 In her influential piece "The Uses of the Erotic; the Erotic as Power," Audre Lorde distinguishes between "the erotic" which is noninstrumental and "true," and "the pornographic" which is its conceptual opposite: "pornography is a direct denial of the power of the erotic, for it represents the suppression of true feeling." The erotic, on the other hand, is that which is "deepest, strongest and richest within each of us ..." 28 For Lorde, the erotic is "our deepest feelings," that which is most our own, that which is "within" rather than an "external directive." To tap into the erotic, then, is to access "internal knowledge and needs." Non-intimate sex (pornography specifically, but clearly also prostitution) is not only condemned as objectified—"using another's feelings as we would use a kleenex"—but is also described as "an abuse of feeling." 29 From this perspective, selling sex—which, in a telling elision, becomes "selling oneself"—alienates the unalienable. Some critics, such as Hoigard and Finstad, assume that sexual feeling is not merely transformed but destroyed in the process: "... it's not just feelings connected with sexuality that are destroyed. One's entire emotional life is attacked." 30

The idea that feeling is a true and vulnerable part of the self in danger of destruction through commodification is directly examined in one of the early, and still exemplary, studies of emotional labor, The Managed Heart, by Arlie Russell Hochschild. Hochschild's exploration of the effects of the "commercialization of human feeling"
among flight attendants can be usefully applied to the sale of sexual services. In investigating the possible costs and benefits of emotional labor (both to the worker and to society as a whole), Hochschild first must establish what “emotion” is, and what its relationship to the “self” might be. To this end, she begins by examining the notion that emotion is something pre-social, perhaps even biological. For those who subscribe to this view, emotion acts as a messenger from the pre-social to the conscious self-in-the-world. Hochschild finds something compelling in this designation of emotion as serving a signal function: “Many emotions signal the secret hopes, fears, and expectations with which we actively greet any news, any occupancy.”22 The hopes, fears, and expectations are, in other words, secret even to the conscious self. “It is this signal function that is impaired when the private management of feeling is socially engineered and transformed into emotional labor for a wage.”22

If emotion is a messenger from the self to the conscious mind, overriding that “authentic” feeling in favor of a commercially appropriate one could be assumed to impair that critical function: “... the worker can become estranged or alienated from an aspect of self—either the body or the margins of the soul—that is used to do the work.”23 While Hochschild acknowledges “the poetic accuracy”24 of describing emotion as the authentic voice of the inner self, she concludes that this actually impedes our understanding of how emotion works and how we work with emotion. Hochschild thus rejects attempts to create a protected status for emotion as a natural and endangered resource. Instead she notes that, by using techniques of “deep acting,” we actually can create or summon emotions that are experienced as real both to the audience and to the self. “In surface acting we deceive others about what we really feel, but we do not deceive ourselves.... In deep acting, we make feigning easy by making it unnecessary.”25 Sex worker Annie Sprinkle confirms that in managing her emotions through the commercial sexual exchange, she is able to create real compassion for a client for whom she otherwise would have no interest:

 forget it, don’t want you in the same room with me. It’s so weird. What is that? What is it that the money provides? Maybe it’s just a clear exchange, especially when you are with someone that you don’t like that much, somehow if they give to you, you can give to them. You’ve been compensated in a clear, clean way. I mean I can actually like a person if they pay me that I wouldn’t if they didn’t.26

From this perspective, then, emotion is not something that exists independent of its social expression and management. Hochschild concludes that feelings “are not stored ‘inside’ us, and they are not independent of acts of management ... In managing feeling, we contribute to the creation of it.”27 Hochschild thus abandons the rigid distinction between emotion in its “natural” state and “objectified” or commodified emotion. Indeed, she suggests that the awareness and expression of feeling is necessarily a form of objectification: “Feeling—whether at the time, or as it is recalled, or as it is later evoked in action—is an object. It may be a valuable object in a worthy pursuit, but it is an object nonetheless.”28 Hochschild does not romanticize the transformation of the relationship between emotion and the self which occurs in the performance of emotional labor, but neither does she reduce it to an inevitably destructive process. Significantly, while the majority of the flight attendants in Hochschild’s study believed that they had been changed by the demands of performing emotional labor, they most often described that transformation as a positive one, of gaining greater control. Emotion was no longer something that simply happened to them, they felt practiced in also creating and controlling it.

For sex workers, too, the ability to summon and contain emotion within the commercial transaction may be experienced as a useful tool in boundary maintenance rather than as a loss of self. Amsterdam sex worker Jo Doezema reports:

Now it is true that there are parts of myself that I don’t want to share with my clients. But drawing boundaries in my work doesn’t mean that I am in danger of being destroyed by it. The way you deal with clients is different than the way you deal with friends or sweethearts.29

For these workers, at least, the performance of emotional labor cannot be reduced to an “abuse of feeling”, it is experienced in more
complex terms contributing to a sense of a multiply-positioned self. Hochschild notes that among the population that she studied:

Some workers conclude that only one self (usually the nonwork self) is the “real” self. Others, and they are in the majority, will decide that each self is meaningful and real in its own different way and time… [for such workers] the idea of a separation between the two selves (commodified and private) is not only acceptable but welcome to them… They talk of their feelings not as spontaneous, natural occurrences but as objects they have learned to govern and control.

An, who worked behind the windows in the Amsterdam Red Light district, describes the ways in which she consciously utilized an aspect of herself in her work:

Normally, I wouldn’t have had anything to do with those guys, and I didn’t really care about the stuff they wanted to talk about. But while I was there, in my blonde wig and lingerie, it was okay. I was really able to give them my attention. I felt like they weren’t really talking to me, they were talking to the woman they saw in front of them. No, that’s not quite right; it was part of me, of course. The wig didn’t create it. But it was useful that I looked totally different when I was working, otherwise I would have felt much more naked. I don’t think that any whore totally reveals herself in her work. You just show a part of yourself, the part they can have sex with, but you keep the rest for yourself.

Once sex and emotion have been stripped of their presumed unique relationship to nature and the self, it no longer automatically follows that their alienation or commodification is simply and necessarily destructive. As Hochschild points out “… many experienced workers develop a healthy estrangement, a clear separation of self from role. They clearly define for themselves when they are acting and when they are not…” One San Francisco call girl, Lupe, describes the creation of a work persona that provides her with a sense of control and professionalism:

I have this persona that I really like; the word that comes to mind is “professional.” She’s a pro. I tend to be rather sloppy, you know my house isn’t particularly clean and I don’t care. But when this woman kicks in, things get done. When she answers the phone, her voice is business-like and her house is in order … there are condoms by the bed, the lube bottle is open and I’m in control. I feel one of the things that prostitution really gave me was this tight sense of professionalism.

Anti-prostitution activists dispute this notion of control, arguing instead that the commodification of sex destroys the ability of sex workers to experience real sexual intimacy even outside of the marketplace. Again Hoigard and Finstad strongly articulate this position: sex workers are “forced to protect themselves against a massive invasion of strange men. They will be left with an impoverished sexual and emotional life.” In selling the illusion of sexual desire, they argue, the prostitute loses her ability to experience sex in a non-instrumental way:

When sexuality becomes a commodity for exchange, it assumes the character of an object. You have to be ready to hand it over and let a stranger use it as his own property. When this occurs, sexuality as a part of the woman’s own unfolding is destroyed… When sexuality becomes the means to an end, when sexuality is calculated, then its potential for personal unfolding is undermined.

But many sex workers insist that techniques of boundary maintenance are often successful in protecting both worker and client. San Francisco sex worker Carol Queen argues:

We create sexual situations with very clear boundaries, for ourselves and for our clients. In fact, one of the things that people are paying us for is clear boundaries. It’s like the person going to the massage therapist; you’re paying to be touched without having to worry about intimacy, reciprocity, and long-term consequences. We can argue about whether that is a good model for human relationships, but the fact of the matter is that there are plenty of people happy to have access to a massage therapist. Same thing with seeing a psychotherapist; there you are paying someone to tell your secrets to, someone you can trust will not judge you and who at least won’t interrupt you in the middle and start telling you their secrets. Instead you are getting focused attention.
Lupe conceives of her boundaries in architectural terms:
I think of my sexuality like a house. My clients come in
the front door and they can rumpus around that room all
they want. And then they walk out that front door and I
lock the door behind them. They don’t get to go in the
rest of my house. I have this feeling that I’ll give the image
of sex, I’ll give the body of sex, but I’m not going to give
you my sex.37

One Dutch researcher, Ine Vanwesenbeek, suggests that this ability
to create boundaries within the work through emotional distancing
is considered a positive sign of professionalism by many sex workers:
“It appears that a certain ability to separate feelings is required to
continue to do the work well. In that sense, disassociative ability
means professionalism for the prostitute.”38 Hochschild agrees that
boundary maintenance through emotional control does not need to
be seen as a pathology. Rather, it simply may be evidence of the plasticity of emotion:
If we conceive of feeling not as a periodic abdication to
biology but as something we do by attending to inner
sensation in a given way, by defining situations in a given
way, by managing in given ways, then it becomes plainer
just how plastic ... feeling can be.39

Using the tools provided by Hochschild, it is possible to rethink
the assumption that sex work inevitably destroys the emotional life of
the worker. Sex work is no more a pact with the devil (in which the
“soul” is exchanged for worldly fortune) than any other form of emo-
tional labor. Sex workers may be assumed to run the same risks as
others involved in emotional labor. Clearly, performing emotional labor, including sex work, can negatively effect the emotional life of
the worker.40 But there is no more reason to expect that the effect is
necessarily and simply destructive. Hochschild outlines three possible stances for emotion laborers to take toward their work. The first is
complete identification with the demands of the job which, she warns, leads to burn-out. The second is a conscious but guilty sepa-
ration of aspects of the self from the emotional demands of the work,
producing guilt arising from the belief that such a division represents
insincerity. And lastly, there can be a positive separation of aspects of

the self from role: “the worker distinguishes herself from her act,
does not blame herself for this, and sees the job as positively requiring
the capacity to act.”41 In other words, Hochschild suggests that the
danger lies not in the separation from role but in too close an
identification with it.

The conceptualization of sex as inalienable pathologizes sex workers
who have successfully distanced themselves from their work, and
thereby deprives them of professional pride in what Hochschild
describes as the most effective strategy they can adopt on the job.
California sex worker Cheyenne expresses her frustration over this
lack of acknowledgment of her hard-learned skills:
Sex work hasn’t all been a bed of roses and I’ve learned
some painful things. But I also feel strong in what I do.
I’m good at it and I know how to maintain my emotional
stance. Just like if you are a fire fighter or a brain sur-
geon or a psychiatrist, you have to deal with some heavy
stuff and that means divorcing yourself from your feel-
ings on a certain level. You just have to be able to do that
to do your job. But if you’re a prostitute who can separate
herself from her emotions while you’re working
everybody condemns you for it. I don’t get it.42

As Cheyenne suggests, the assumption that a separation of feeling
and face is necessarily destructive is challenged when we look at less
stigmatized areas of emotional labor. Hochschild presents several
examples where such labor is socially rewarded and personally grati-
yfying: “We do not think twice about the use of feeling in the theater,
or in psychotherapy, or in forms of group life that we admire.”43
Here it is understood to be “an honorable act to make maximum use
of the resources of memory and feeling ...”44 But in other less exalted
forms of labor, we begin to “look at these otherwise helpful separ-
ations of ‘me’ from my face and my feeling as potentially estrang-
ing.”45 The respect given to emotional labor in the theater, a psy-
chotherapist’s office, or a day care center rarely extends to the broth-
el.46 Just as day care workers or psychotherapists who sell nurturing
and empathy may still be able to summon similar feelings for a loved
one outside of the workplace, Hochschild suggests that flight attend-
ants who put on a smile along with the uniform are still able to
express genuine delight off the job. In the same way, sex workers who sell sexual services may be fully capable of accessing those feelings for non-instrumental ends. The common assumption that this is otherwise is partly due to the special status assigned sexual feeling, especially in women’s lives.

Nonetheless, some emotion workers, including those performing erotic labor, do report feeling damaged as a result of their work. If the commodification of emotion itself does not necessarily lead to these negative effects, what does? Hochschild suggests it may have to do with such mundane concerns as intensity of labor, level of maturity in entering the profession, customer attitudes and cultural biases toward the work and the workers, and control over the conditions and terms of the exploitation of one’s emotional resources. In the performance of emotional labor, Hochschild argues that potential harm could be reduced “if workers could feel a greater sense of control over the conditions of their work lives.”

A number of factors can serve to reduce workers’ control over their labor. For instance, when emotions have not been merely commodified, but sold to an employer for a wage, control over when, how, and to what ends those emotional resources will be used passes, in large part, from the worker to a boss. Hochschild notes that among flight attendants, their sense of exploitation was intensified by the fact that they were “not making an independent profit from their emotional labor, they are working for a fixed wage. They are not selling themselves, they are selling the company.”

Wage labor transforms the work experience regardless of the commodity sold. However, when the commodity is emotional labor—especially erotic labor—its exploitation by a third party is often considered uniquely egregious. Santa Cruz District Attorney, Art Danner, who generally upholds the right of employers to the profits produced by their workers, condemns the same dynamic between massage parlor owners and prostitutes:

My view of the business is that the women are exploited for financial gain. It is organized such that money is syphoned off by operators. It’s an exploitation kind of activity and the community doesn’t need this.

When control over the conditions of labor pass from worker to employer, workers in all trades are subject to speed ups, increased duties (with no necessary increase in pay), and supervision intended to reinforce their position as ever-compliant servants. Hochschild notes that, for airline flight attendants for instance, in the 1950s and ’60s, they were “asked to take pride in making an instrument of feeling,” and generally did. However with cost-cutting and speed-ups resulting from deregulation in the 1970s, “... workers came to see that instrument as overused, underappreciated, and susceptible to damage.” A similar dynamic can be found in the sex trades, when control moves from the worker to a brothel owner, a pimp, or the state.

Other factors, too, may diminish the power of a worker relative to the client. For instance, structural inequalities often exist between those likely to perform and those likely to receive emotional labor. Not surprisingly, women are found in far greater numbers than men in jobs requiring emotional work. Hochschild estimates that only a quarter of all jobs performed by men—but over half of all jobs held by women—involve emotional labor.

Women are expected to do emotional labor and to do it willingly:

The deferential behavior of servants and women ... come to seem normal, even built into personality rather than inherent in the kinds of exchanges that low-status people commonly enter into.

Male customers thus come equipped with an ideological justification for believing that female workers “owe” them respectful service independent of their own behavior: It can seem only “natural” that women are servicing their emotional needs.

In sex work, where the vast majority of prostitutes are women and the vast majority of clients are men, men’s negative attitudes toward women (and toward whores) contribute to negative experiences in the work. Maryann, who worked as a call girl in California, reports:

I often got the feeling that the men felt they had a right to whatever they were getting, and I did resent that. The most difficult moments were when I had to deal with a guy who had the attitude of “I'm a man. I have the power. You do this for me.”
Terez, who worked as a "hostess" in a club, describes the fundamental power difference between male clients and women workers:

Some of the men like to wear women's clothing under their suits. This one time, I had a customer who kept saying "make me feel like a woman." So after a couple of drinks, I finally said to him "Oh, baby, you just give me all your money; that's the first step to feeling like a woman." 54

In other words, mundane concerns like status differences between worker and client, employee/employer relations, and negative cultural attitudes toward the work performed, may be at the root of the distress and damage experienced by some workers. This is less grand, less poetic, than the image of a soul in necessary and mortal danger through the commodification of its most intimate aspects. Such a formulation, however, has the advantage of pointing critics in the direction of practical interventions such as workplace organizing and broader political campaigns to increase the status and respect accorded to those performing the labor.

Maryann, nurse and former prostitute
Santa Cruz, CA, 1995

When I worked as a prostitute, I saw it the way I've seen many of the jobs I've held in my life: as a means of getting to someplace else. At the time, what I wanted was to go to nursing school and I needed to find a way to make some money. A friend who was doing it made it sound like something I could do.

The thing is, it's really hard work. In fact, it turned out to be some of the most emotionally draining work I've ever done. I found that I didn't have the emotional stamina to do it more than a day or two a week during the two years of outcall and parlor work. And I couldn't do it again because it's just so much work. So much.

I took it all a little bit too much to heart probably, but I sometimes found it kind of sad. There is so much shit around sex that we can't just go out there and get what we need or want. And that's really all that people were trying to do. Sometimes they needed way more than anybody could give them in a one-hour session.

I'm sure part of the problem is who I am as a worker. It's typical of me that in any job I want to do the best I possibly can. I'm always trying to figure out what people need or want and then it's my desire to fulfill that. Look at me: I'm a nurse now. It's that caretaking kind of stuff that I tend to take on with people.

With prostitution, not unlike other jobs I guess, you have to be who they want you to be. At least in most jobs, your roles are defined. You get a job description that says "this is what we expect out of you." In sex work, you have to use a bunch of intuition because most people are so bad at saying what they want when it comes to sex. I mean the men have an image of what they want when you arrive at their door, and maybe they'll be able to communicate that to you. But more likely, they'll expect you will be able to just figure it out. That was really difficult. There you are doing your job and you want to do a good job, but you have to figure out what it is that means for this particular client. Sometimes they wanted the typical trashy, sexy kind of woman, and other times they wanted a much more innocent young girl. Sometimes they wanted you to be more
dominating; sometimes they wanted you to be really passive. I'd think "Shit, just tell me what you want. I can do this. But I can't fucking always figure it out."

That was the hard part of the job; the sex itself wasn't a big deal. Maybe that's because I've never valued sex the way that society suggests that a woman should. I don't know if that's a result of "free love" or what, but I never felt that sex was something I should "save" for somebody. From about the time I was sixteen, I remember thinking that virginity was this thing used to keep men and women unequal. The last thing I wanted to be was a virgin. I felt like it put me in a role I didn't want. I decided that sex was something I should do if I wanted to and not do if I didn't. I could never figure out the big price put on sex for girls. In fact, when I got older and got into sex work I was actually kind of amazed that you really could make money off of it. What an incredible thing.

I suppose I should also say that I have a history of sexual abuse as a child. I'm kind of reluctant to mention the abuse because it seems like people assume that's all they need to know about me: I was abused as a child and I worked as a prostitute. Then they can dismiss anything else I might say about sex. That really brings the dragons out in me; the experience of abuse no more defines my sexuality or who I am than does the experience in prostitution or the kind of sex I have with someone I care about. It seems to me that the attempt to see it otherwise is all part of cubbyholing women into those who have a "good" view of sex and those who don't, those who are sexual victims and those who aren't. It's like sex can only mean one thing for women.

I think that the assumption that being a prostitute ruins a woman’s experience of sex is part of that. Men need to think that women can’t have sex without intimacy, and that if they do that it’s bad for them. Like a woman only has sex with a man because he and he alone has something she can’t live without. In fact, an important part of prostitution for me was realizing that sex didn’t have to be about intimacy. There is great power in the realization that you are, in fact, in control.

In sex work, there's this real issue around having orgasms on the job. One of the things that I realized was that those orgasms were mine. They didn't belong to anybody else. It was up to me to let them be known or not. But they were really mine in that I was the one creating them. It had nothing to do with who I was with; it wasn't about being so turned on by this guy instead of that one. It was about me. It really challenged the idea that orgasms are something a man "gives" you. That's part of the traditional belief that women aren't supposed to be in control of sex. Instead, you're supposed to be passive and accept whatever happens. But, as a prostitute, you really do determine what goes on, you guide the entire experience. There was a tremendous power in that for me; not only was I able to say "I can make this go whatever direction I want it to" but I also got to experiment in all these different roles and see where I fit in, which ones I liked. I didn't have to be just one thing. I could be this straight-A student going to nursing school and at the same time be a prostitute. Go figure: Florence Nightingale or the Whore? Which one are we? I was both of them, all of that.

The problem is, there is still this real virgin/whore thing for most people. I was very aware when I got into prostitution that I couldn't tell certain people about it. If they saw me as a sex worker, that would be all they would see. It wasn't that I minded if people found out; if they knew, they knew. But I didn't want to be defined by it.

On the other hand, I used my real name at work. It was really funny because sex workers generally use professional names so the guys would always go: "Well, what's your real name?" And I'd tell them "It's Maryann." "No, really, what's your real name?" "No, really, it's Maryann." Even if you are being real with them, that's not what they see. They're always going to make you into whoever they need you to be.

And, you know, while it was exhausting to have to reinvent myself for each new client, the work I do now requires similar skills in a lot of ways. Part of my job as a nurse is to walk into a room and assess the situation and figure out what is needed. Since I work with women who are in labor, those aren't just physical needs but emotional
needs, too. The big difference for me is that I’m working with women so it’s much more of a two-way street.

When I worked as a prostitute, I often got the feeling that the men felt they had a right to whatever they were getting, and I did resent that. The most difficult moments were when I had to deal with a guy who had the attitude of “I’m a man. I have the power. You do this for me.” Sometimes that was an attitude they walked in with, sometimes it was what they left with. I used to wonder if it wasn’t because I was too clearly in control. It was the attitude, not the sex, that was abusive because I can tell you I see a lot of the same thing from doctors: you’re there to serve them and whatever they need they should have. Nurses are there to carry out doctors’ orders and to intuit their needs. It’s something we’re always battling.

The truth is, your best skill can be your worst enemy. I am intuitive; I’m good at figuring out people’s needs. It can really work against me, but it can also work for me. Nursing is a good place to put those skills to use; you certainly get more respect doing this than sex work. My point is, don’t battle prostitution, go deeper than that. Abuse is about power and the intentions behind it. It’s that attitude we have to battle wherever it appears.

Vision and Annie Sprinkle, *Sluts and Goddesses*

*Amsterdam, 1993*

Vision: I have a degree in sociology and spent a few years working for a major corporation doing that whole game. But at the same time, I was involved in a lot of personal growth work. I got tired of my job not really reflecting my heart and then it happened that I got laid off. So instead of looking for another nine-to-five, I decided to go to bodywork school and get into deep tissue massage. I loved it; I was doing this great thing for people but still keeping a lot of flexibility in my life. I’d work for six months and then take off and travel. And when I came back my clients were thrilled to see me. They loved my work. Doing massage allowed me to stay in the alternative community, it was legitimate and I made decent money for someone who didn’t have a straight job.

Because I was working out of a chiropractic office, it was very clear that what I was doing was therapeutic massage; the issue of sex never came up. But I did have some girlfriends who were doing sensuous massage and, at first, I had a lot of judgments about it. It was this kind of taboo thing that I thought was basically bad. In any case, I was pretty sure I wasn’t comfortable dealing with that kind of sexual energy. Then I got into doing a lot of tantra in my private life, and as I did, I became more comfortable being sensual. At the same time, I realized I had gotten to the point with massage where the amount of energy I was putting out to earn enough to just keep my survival needs handled was starting to drain my battery. At $25 an hour in a chiropractor’s office, I needed to do five or six massages a day and it was clear that I didn’t have that kind of juice anymore. And there were my friends, girls who had no training, making $120 an hour with “sensuous massage.” A couple of the girls said, “The guys would love you because you work deep and most of them need that. And you’re totally sensuous.” I saw that I could basically quadruple my income for the energy output: I could do one massage and make the same kind of money that had taken five.

It also gave me time and space to meditate and exercise and skin brush and do all those things that are part of keeping the temple in good shape, so to speak. And I was just not having that kind of space in my life. In the beginning I worked for a girlfriend who had done this kind of work for a long time. She really holds the work as sacred and has created the kind of context around sensuous massage that made it safe for me to step into. It was important to me that it wasn’t just sex for money. It wasn’t really even about sex: it was about healing and giving men the opportunity to be in the presence of goddess energy. My friend really initiated me; she held my hand through the whole thing. I remember the first client I did, I was totally scared. My biggest fear was “what if I can’t make him come?” She just laughed, “That’s the last thing you need to worry about.”

She was very clear that the men were to be in a receptive mode. It was not about them touching us, getting us off. It was an hour for them to receive and to be given to. And it was very clearly a hand release only, no blow jobs or fucking. I’ve found that most of the men
are willing to be in that receptive posture. They know the routine: they come in, they take their clothes off, they lay down on the table, they receive and sometimes at the end, there’ll be some touching. I don’t mind some exchange if its respectful and sensitive and honoring, but I still don’t let them get into my genitals. Skin-to-skin contact is nice, though. I really think that if everyone had skin-to-skin and breath-to-breath contact with another human being once a day, the planet would be a very different place. And I am very happy to provide that space in the world. For me its mostly about affection and nurturing and love, not so much a heavy sex vibe. It really helps that they come to my environment, so the energetic is set up by me. They are walking into my game. I’m the priestess and its my temple.

I’ve never had a bad session in the year and a half I’ve been working. A lot of it is screening clients. Energy is real clear on the phone. If they call up and say, “How big are your nipples and are your legs apart right now?” then I know I don’t want to deal with their energy. I just say, “Listen, this isn’t what is available here” and I hang up. Although one of the things that I have experienced shifting in myself since having had this Annie Sprinkle encounter over the past few months, is a lot less judgment about the work, about what is good and bad, spiritual and not spiritual in sex. I’ve noticed, for instance, if somebody calls up now and says “Will you wear high heels and lingerie for me?” I may not choose to do that but I’m more inclined to say “No. But who do I know who you could call? I’m very happy to do the referral.” I try to be clear that whatever he wants is okay. My immediate response has shifted from “It’s wrong for you to want that” to just “I can’t provide what you want, but who do I know that could?”

And I must admit that I’ve gotten more playful in exploring my own boundaries. I’m starting to feel more comfortable with not necessarily staying within the rigid format of a great massage and a quick hand release at the end. I’m not so afraid that if I let the sexual energy come up a little bit more, they are going to want to fuck me and then I’m going to have to play gesticulo. One of the things I’ve always liked about bodywork is that I know I’m giving something valuable to my clients. There have been periods in my life when I’ve taken a few months off and sometimes I’ll get into that space of the Big Doubt: Who am I, and what am I doing in the world, and what is my value? And, man, I do one massage and I totally come back into that place of knowing that I am a valuable human being with things to contribute. My work is valuable. But I have to say it is great to not be in the factory massage clinic, cranking out six of them a day. Now I only do five to ten sensuous massages in a week; five being an okay week, ten being a great week. If I do one a day I feel happy.

Living in Marin [California] makes it easier for me to do this kind of work. There’s probably more tantra being taught here than anywhere on the planet right now. So within that context, within this community, what I do isn’t even called “prostitution.” You can call it “private tantra session.” So you recontextualize it and within that context what I do is legitimate. That’s important to me.

Annie: Hearing her story, it strikes me that we started off on such different roads but ended up on the same path. What’s really interesting is that in my community of prostitutes, people in pornography, sexual radicals, the really hard thing has been for me to come out as spiritual. That was the Big Taboo. A lot of my friends just do not want to know about tantra, they still think it’s a passing phase. These are people who are really out there sexually, totally out there. And yet they think tantra and meditation and yoga are just ridiculous.

Vision: One of the things I realized when we first got together and did this “Sluts and Goddess Workshop,” was that some people have “slut shame” and some people have “goddess shame.” And Annie had goddess shame.

Annie: Yeah, I still do.

Vision: If the energy would get too spiritual, too powerful in that way, she would flip into little girl mode and blow it off. Whereas for me, if the energy would get too sexual, I tried to blow it off. We’ve been a great mirror for each other that way, embracing those really different aspects.

Annie: The “Sluts and Goddesses Workshop” that we just did in San Francisco was amazing. It was really sluts meet goddesses. The people who attended because they’ve been following my work came from this new generation of young sex workers. Jwala, who I co-led
the workshop with, lives in Mill Valley and she brought all these tantra goddesses who have never really explored their slutty side. It was amazing, that kind of integration, tearing down our prejudices toward each other. When I made up the name “Sluts and Goddesses” I thought it was kind of funny, but now I am becoming more and more convinced of the power of that symbology, those archetypes. It allows you to give a persona to those different parts of yourself and it’s about embracing both.

I was a full-time prostitute for ten or twelve years, four or five days a week. I did three tricks a day, sometimes five or six, in the biggest massage parlor in New York. They used to call them “leisure spas” because they had showers and a sauna in addition to twelve women working there. You wore a uniform and the rooms all had massage tables in them and red flocked wall paper. Nevertheless, it was “massage work.” And I did give a lot of massages, actually. In fact, I used to give a great massage when I was 18, 19, 20. Then I lost it. I also used to give the best blow job; every guy I gave a blow job to said “that was the best blow job I ever had.” And then at a certain point I never heard another guy say that again. I lost it. It has to do with where my interest lies. I just burned out on it, I guess.

Vision: For me, the burn out comes from being out of integrity with yourself. Even in doing straight massage, the burn out came when I was doing six massages a day when the truth for me was that I only wanted to do three. To continue past that point creates that burn-out factor. I haven’t experienced that yet in sensuous massage work. Admittedly, I’ve only been doing it a year and a half; I don’t have that experience of doing it for ten years full time. So I am still very turned on to the work; I don’t find it jading me to my own personal sexual expression. I think if anything it juices that place for me. But I am also really staying within my own personal boundaries in the work.

Annie: But a lot of times, to find out where boundaries are, where your integrity lies, you have to make some mistakes and go over your limits. Maybe even on a regular basis. Working in prostitution was that kind of challenge for me. I still like to keep my finger in the pie; it’s like I have to remember my roots or something. So I still turn an occasional trick with my friend, Karen, who lives downstairs. She’s a male-to-female transsexual and a born whore. She loves being a whore. The tricks I turn with her are the most basic, average Joe-Shmo tricks in the world. There is nothing spiritual or tantric about these guys. And I can’t tell you what a kick and thrill I get out of it.

Just putting on my gear, getting dressed up as your average whore, going down, getting the money and doing the most dumb, stupid, adolescent sexuality. It’s all totally safe sex, of course, so there is all this saran wrap and gloves. It almost feels like arts and crafts. But turning a trick every so often with Karen is totally different than working full time. I could never do now what I did then. Never. Even with Karen, I tell her, if the guy is a creep, I’m just leaving. I can’t handle it. She does. She deals with six creeps a day. I mean, some of them are nice guys, but she sees a lot of clients. She is saving up for a sex change, so she’s working her cock off.

Ninety percent of what I do with Karen is just fuck her clients in the ass. They come to Karen because she’s a transsexual, and most guys that go to transsexuals want to get fucked in the ass. So I fuck them, and I spank them and I call them a few names. And I feel great afterwards. I’ll feel totally rebalanced, like I can find myself again. Because most of the time I’m upstairs doing all this mental and creative work, being an artist who explores the outer edges of sexuality. That’s a lot harder than turning those totally predictable tricks. I mean, creating new visions of sexuality for the future can be pretty heavy stuff and it’s scary sometimes.

What’s happening right now is that, at some level, I really feel like I’ve acquired some power. In my performances, I talk about how sexuality empowers you, and I have these young girls come up to me after my show and tell me how much it means to them. It’s great but it’s also kind of strange. The thing is, it’s real for me. I talk about reaching states of total bliss and ecstasy. And that’s real. I talk about getting enlightened through sexual ecstasy, and that’s real. But then I think, “You’re getting such a fucking big ego, what is this? Get off it, you’re full of shit.” Because I have met people who are on ego trips and I don’t want to be like that. I don’t want to be one of those spiritual types that walks around really believing they are enlightened but you look at them and know they’re not.

So I like my fantasy of being both this down-and-dirty whore who is also an enlightened being who can heal people with her touch.
Because being that down-and-dirty whore sometimes is very grounding, it's who I am, too. On the other hand, I really feel that what Vision is doing, is paving the way for the future. I so much honor that. I wonder, though, how does it feel if I call you a "prostitute"?

Vision: It's hard. If you even say "sacred prostitute," it helps me hold it in a different way than if you just say "prostitute." I had this one client who I had seen kind of personally, and then he came back in a professional sense. It got to the point of the money, and it was like should I ask him for it, is he going to pay me? There was this awkwardness which forced me to confront the fact that I was a prostitute. I was doing it for the money. If the money wasn't there, I wouldn't be doing it. I really came up against some judgment in myself, some bad girl stuff. There are certain words that trigger that for me, and the word "prostitute" is absolutely one of them.

Annie: We had an interesting conversation about all this the other night. The money is important. And it's not because we are desperate for it, like we're on drugs and need the money, 'cause we aren't, or that we are money hungry, because neither of us is. But somehow when the money is there we can have a fabulous time with these people, really give and be loving and totally be of service. And if the money isn't there, forget it, don't want you in the same room with me. It's so weird. What is that? What is it that the money provides? Maybe it's just a clear exchange, especially when you are with someone that you don't like that much, somehow if they give to you, you can give to them. You've been compensated in a clear, clean way. I mean I can actually like a person if they pay me that I wouldn't if they didn't. It's amazing.

Vision: Or for me, it's that I can be with them in a different way than if they didn't pay me. If I related to this man on a personal level, I felt a need to guard my own emotional space, to be concerned and have attention to his emotional well-being. Is he going to fall in love with me? Is he going to want something I don't want to give? In the context of a professional relationship, I have none of that. I can totally be there, completely be his lover for the one hour and provide that energetic space that I wouldn't on a personal level.

Annie: I think prostitutes are so compassionate and giving. And that's harder and harder for me. I feel like I paid my dues, I gave so much to a lot of guys. I'm a very generous person. I gave and gave. And then I couldn't give anymore. And it does make me sad that I can't do that anymore. [crying]

I don't want to start thinking that I'm better than someone else. Women who are still giving. Clients. Bad tricks. A porn star who's still playing some empty-handed role. It's an emotional thing for me, obviously. But there are things I just can't do anymore. And some of them are things that I wish I could.

I don't want to be hurt physically anymore. I mean, I used to really put my body through some heavy shit. And not just because I "had to." Because I liked it. I really liked it. I like really intense hard sex and I wish I could still do that. I miss it. The masochist in me is disappearing and I miss it. Isn't that weird? I'm a weird girl.

Vision: When I'm with you, I can feel that edge. It feels like a place that you have been abused in the past, and one of the things that I want to bring to loving you is just that space of honoring the sacredness that it is, too, the sweetness, and a place of never hurting you or never treating you in a way that is dishonoring ...  

Annie: But I like that part of me.

Susanne, "high class" call girl
Helsinki, 1995

I used to just work evenings and weekends as a part-time prostitute. During the day, I had a completely different life as a respectable secretary in a company doing foreign trade. Prostitution was only a secret hobby. But the company moved, so now I'm doing this full time and I have to lie to everybody. My family is already suspicious. My mother knows something is going on. I suppose someday they'll find out about it. Maybe we'll get arrested. Now that I work together with my friend, Anna, I worry more about that. We're making lots of money and we have big plans for a studio here in Helsinki with a special room for sadomasochism. We're doing everything very
professionally. If the police find out that we're running a business, they might decide to arrest us. It's a frightening thought that my family, my friends, even my ex-colleagues, everyone, could find out about all this. The magazines would love a story like this: two high-class hookers with all these powerful clients get arrested.

I've been covering my identity for years now. I don't even carry my ID with me, just in case I have to go to the bathroom and my client opens my purse to check out who I am. I have a secret phone number, and I always watch behind me when I'm coming home to make sure no one is following me. But working with Anna, I have to give up some of that security. She's getting us clients every day. I have no idea who they are; they could even be people who know me. But that risk is just part of the price you have to pay. At least I'm getting paid very well for it.

I do have a lot of professional pride. I set standards for myself and I protect myself in many ways. First of all, I choose my company. I don't want to date anyone who uses drugs, for example. And I charge a lot, so I only see middle-class men, businessmen, husbands, fathers, people who are afraid of getting caught and are concerned about their health. I'm careful about even ordinary germs. I don't like the guys to touch themselves before they touch me. I don't mind kissing but I don't do it much because of the germs. If we do fellatio, it's always with a condom. Besides, the thought of doing it without is so disgusting. It's important to maintain boundaries.

I put a lot of my real self into some parts of my work, for instance, when I'm creating the atmosphere by talking to them about themselves. Most of the men like to talk a little and have a cup of coffee. They don't want to go straight to bed. And I use a lot of the real me for that part of the work. I don't want to have to do that too often every day. It would be easier to work in a window or a brothel, because you don't have to socialize. You just have to say your rates, take the money, and fuck. Of course there's no such thing as "easy money" in this business. I hate it when people say, "Oh it's so easy, you don't have to do anything." They know nothing about this business.

I do a lot of disgusting things every day. Not all days are bad days, but there are those bad days, too. The act itself, intercourse, is very easy. At least it is as long as the client is okay. But sometimes, fortunately not every day, I meet a man I don't like. And then I have to force myself to smile, show a positive attitude and act like a high-class hooker. We have to look eager to please and appear sexually excited because that's what they expect. With some men, I have to close my eyes and think of the money, otherwise I would get up and run out of the room yelling, "Keep your money and get out of here. I don't want to see you, don't touch my face." Those are the bad times.

Some parts of the work are harder than others. A lot of what Anna and I are going to be doing together, is this sadism business. I already know it's something I'm not going to like. It's not going to be easy. There will be nights when I'll hate myself, hate what I see in the mirror. I remember after one spanking session, I caught a look at my face. It was a familiar face, it was my face, but the eyes weren't mine.

But a trick only lasts an hour or two and then the only thing that's left is the money. Last night I had a client and already I can't remember his face. I make myself forget. Ideally, I'd like to see only a couple of clients a day. But since I don't plan on doing this for long, I want to grab everything I can get. We want our club to specialize in services you can't get anywhere else in Helsinki. Anyone can tie a man to the bed and fuck him, but we plan to offer services men have to go to Amsterdam for right now, like really working with pain. That part of our business scares me. But Anna's an expert and she's going to teach me.

I protect myself: it's "Susanne" who's doing those tricks. After a trick, I'm always very excited, full of adrenaline, talking like a gangster in the streets. I'm finding something very tough in me: "Shut up, I'm the Queen." But I worry it's starting to be the only part of me that I show, I'm just working so much. Maybe it would be good for me to get away for a few days and try to forget the world I'm stepping into, because this is nothing yet. The future will be much worse. Then there will be hardly any time for a normal life. We plan on spending all our time at the club. We are tough businesswomen. We have a plan and whatever it takes, we'll do it.

I don't go out much because I don't want my face to be known, but I've heard that in the nightclubs and places like that there's so much
competition between the girls now that the rates have gone down a lot. On the streets, it's as cheap as 100 marks for ten minutes in a car. For me, I charge a minimum of 2,000 marks for a two-hour session. That gives us time to have coffee or drinks, and then do it. The client feels he has all the time he needs. Actually they don't need much time. But I don't want to do fifteen-minute tricks. When new clients call about my rates and I tell them it's 2,000 for two hours, they sometimes ask, "What about if I just pop in for ten minutes?" They've gotten used to doing business with those street girls. Some of them can't understand the difference between a quick fuck in a car and going somewhere where you get a smile and good service and all the time you need. That's the fault of those cheap girls. They're something quite new here in Finland. There have always been street prostitutes, but they have been alcoholics and drug addicts and lower-class people. But now, suddenly, there are all those foreign girls, too.

A hundred marks is a huge amount for them, while for me it's nothing. I'm not going to lower my rates though. We can't compete in price but we can compete with service. There are men who want that service and are willing to pay more for a girl who is healthy, decent, and sober. A nice girl who can shut up and keep their secrets. The fact is that I charge a lot. I don't sell myself, my services cheap. That's not any excuse for being in this profession, but I pretend it is. I try to convince myself that I'm not so bad because I charge so much. I have to find something positive in this. I'm afraid of getting caught, but if I do, at least I can say, "Look at how much money I made. Don't you think this is a very high-class activity?"

Anna and I are businesswomen. We both have a little bit of education and we're not going to stop here. Maybe we'll get married and quit this business or something. But there is no limit to what we can do. We're businesswomen and we have a plan. I'm not a sad story. I've succeeded.