



Review: [Untitled]

Reviewed Work(s):

Making Work, Making Trouble: Prostitution as a Social Problem by Deborah R. Brock

Prostitution, Power, and Freedom by Julia O'Connell Davidson

Sex Work and Sex Workers by Barry M. Dank; Roberto Refinetti

Sex for Sale: Prostitution, Pornography, and the Sex Industry by Ronald Weitzer

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Making Work, Making Trouble: Prostitution as a Social Problem. By Deborah R. Brock. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1998.

Prostitution, Power, and Freedom. By Julia O'Connell Davidson. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1998.

Sex Work and Sex Workers. Edited by Barry M. Dank and Roberto Refinetti. Piscataway, N.J.: Transaction, 1998.

Sex for Sale: Prostitution, Pornography, and the Sex Industry. Edited by Ronald Weitzer. New York: Routledge, 2000.

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The study of sex work intersects with, and certainly interests the scholars of, a wide variety of disciplines. It proves to be, as Priscilla Alexander has noted, "a difficult issue for feminists."¹ These four volumes illuminate the discourses, dynamics, and conditions of sex work (and its "solutions") over time and across cultures while only occasionally falling into the predictable traps I outline below. To the varying extents that they do fall into these dangerous traps, they also provide fodder for *studying the study of sex work*, which is as important to sex workers and allies of sex workers as studying sex work in the first place.

The first trap is the failure to contextualize how the attack on non-reproductive white sexualities (such as "prostitute") coincides with the religious right's targeting, in general, of perceived homosexuals, the white poor and working class, people of color, women who have abortions, and users of birth control. In other words, to fall into this trap is to ignore how sexist, heterosexist, antiabortion, and anti-sex-as-pleasure interests further a white supremacist agenda and thus indirectly to further that agenda.² The second trap is lapsing into unnamed ontologies of sex—that is, building theories on insufficiently examined axioms about what sex is or what it ought to consist of, particularly for women who sell sexual services. This second trap feeds and maintains the first one.

The third trap is framing nonacademician sex workers as inherently unique among other laborers, as objects of study and objects of outside

¹ Priscilla Alexander, "Prostitution: Still a Difficult Issue for Feminists," in *Sex Work: Writings by Women in the Sex Industry*, ed. Frederique Delacoste and Priscilla Alexander, 2d ed. (San Francisco: Cleis, 1998), 184–230.

² For a relevant discussion, see <http://www.people.ku.edu/~jyounger/SXL/gayrace.html>, especially my entry from April 6, 1995.

forces rather than as producers of knowledge and producers of counter-cultural meanings. This trap is enabled by having fallen into the second one; that is, if one treats sexual labor as uniquely problematic, oppressive, or able to rob its practitioners of selfhood, one may be more likely to treat sex workers themselves as less than full human subjects.

The fourth trap is to fail (as do many inquiries into other social hierarchies) to examine the position of the inquirers (in this case, academics) who, by virtue of, among other things, their means to promulgate information about the inquired-on (in this case, sex workers), occupy a relatively more powerful social position. In roughly analogous dualisms, just as students of race have begun to theorize whiteness and students of gender to theorize maleness, so can students of sex work theorize the construction, interests, and social realities of the nonwhore, the nonclient, the non-sex worker academic (or the closeted sex worker/academic), and the abolitionist vis-à-vis the sex industry.³ As more light is shed on these hidden, privileged sides of this sex work inquiry dualism, it will produce a more complex, dynamic view of sex work in its myriad cultural contexts. In the meantime, with the exception of Barry M. Dank and Roberto Refinetti's *Sex Work and Sex Workers*, these texts more or less reproduce unexamined the standard "us-them" construct, with, as Carol Queen put it, whores being the bugs and scholars being the scientists.⁴ Though this dynamic is by no means unique to the study of sex work, its recent history and consequences affect current research.

The number of academic, trade, and crossover books on sex work has grown substantially in the last two decades. Sociologists (and this includes Deborah R. Brock, author of *Making Work, Making Trouble: Prostitution as a Social Problem*, and Julia O'Connell Davidson, author of *Prostitution, Power, and Freedom*) do most of the academic studies of sex work. Ronald Weitzer and Dank are also sociologists, as are the authors of five of the seven main essays in *Sex Work and Sex Workers* and thirteen of nineteen contributors to *Sex for Sale*, which also has two essays by criminologists.

Davidson's volume, *Prostitution, Power, and Freedom*, works best when viewed as two projects: one describing a wide range of global circumstances involving the exchange of sex for money, the other theorizing the meanings of the exchange. In the first project, she offers windows into a variety of prostitution situations, from the oppressive *genelev* brothel system in Turkey to an independent call girl in Britain, as well as conditions

³ Those who advocate the end of the sex industry, e.g., Kathleen Barry, are often referred to as abolitionists.

⁴ Queen, personal communication.

in different parts of Asia and Latin America. She engages deeply with her interviewees, looks critically at abolitionist discourse, and takes great care in documenting divergent forms of prostitution. However, her assessment of prostitute-client encounters is fraught with leaps, assumptions, and more than one use of the word *bizarre* in assessing how anyone could enjoy sex with a prostitute, someone constructed as “socially dead” (134), making the client a “social necrophiliac” (209). She dreams of a day when people do not have to “resort to prostitution” (209; emphasis added). She refers throughout to the “use” of prostitutes and prostitute “users,” and she places the terms *sex work* and *sex workers* in quotation marks. This language denigrates self-defined sex workers who do not find their work demeaning.

Though her arguments supporting the trope of social necrophilia compel further discussion, they also limit the possibilities for a sex worker-defined trope of prostitution. And though her research suggests many nuances to prostitute-client interactions, Davidson in the end posits only two possibilities: prostitution as social death and a *reductio ad absurdum* world in which commodified sex is the prevailing norm. This hardly exhausts the complexity of sex worker-client relationships. In “Clients and Call Girls: Seeking Sex and Intimacy” (in the Weitzer volume), Janet Lever and Deanne Dolnick directly contradict some of Davidson’s findings, discovering instances of reciprocity and authenticity in prostitute-client relationships. The findings of her sociologist colleagues notwithstanding, might Davidson admit of at least the possibility of multiple meanings of paid sex, specifically, those created by whores themselves?

Though both Davidson and Weitzer ignore, or dismiss as “celebratory,” Shannon Bell’s *Whore Carnival* and other sex-industry-positive feminist writings, including my own, it is just such writing that both reflects and creates a counterculture of alternate meanings in which feminist whores can trade sex for money, develop ongoing relationships with clients, and maintain their social aliveness and health.⁵ To deny the power of this whore counterculture—and the power of the clients who literally and figuratively buy into it—is to implicitly deny the power of, for example, queer-, Afro-, and Judeocentric countercultures to generate self-love and healing and to fashion new meanings within oppressive circumstances.

Academics correctly suspect sex worker intellectuals (for want of a better term) of speaking for a small minority of sex workers, but it is also academics, mostly sociologists, who have lumped all prostitution together, unifying it with an unexamined ontology of sex-as-a-special-case, with the

⁵ Shannon Bell, *Whore Carnival* (Brooklyn, N.Y.: Autonomedia, 1995).

power to reveal a deep truth that all prostitutes have in common. As a counterexample, rarely if ever are the politics of fashion designers examined alongside sweatshops in developing countries with the idea that, because they are all making clothes, they have sufficient commonalities to address in the same book or article.

By contrast, and in a wholly different enterprise, in *Making Work, Making Trouble*, Brock uses a Foucauldian approach to chronicle the power of public discourse to produce, frame, and regulate prostitution as a social problem. She traces the impact of two major Canadian legal documents, *Pornography and Prostitution in Canada* (known as the Fraser Report) and *Sexual Offences against Children and Youth* (known as the Badgley Report).⁶ Such documents function under a veneer of public service-oriented democracy and objectivity that, she argues, actually serve hegemonic mandates that manufacture popular consent in order to wield state power. For example, the *Badgley Report* reframed youth prostitution as “the sexual abuse of children” (117), an incendiary phrase used for political manipulation. This effectively precluded young people from getting needed help in some cases; it also turned discussion away from the material (as opposed to psychological) reasons for young people’s turning to prostitution in the first place. In a similar vein, Jo Doezema’s review of *Trafficking in Women, Forced Labour and Slavery-Like Practices in Marriage, Domestic Labour and Prostitution* by Marjan Wijers and Lin Lap-Chew, in the volume by Dank and Refinetti, unpacks and recontextualizes *trafficking*, another incendiary term.⁷

Brock situates the targeting of prostitution in the 1970s as a backlash against 1960s sexual permissiveness, among other things. I would like to have seen a parallel analysis of the history of recent race relations to round out this picture. Instructors might assign such a text alongside this one to help situate the regulation of prostitution as one example among many of the policing of nonreproductive white sexuality and disproportionate targeting of women of color. Brock does deal with race issues in this volume, including “white slavery” (another incendiary phrase), deconstructing the stereotype of the pimp of color who exploits young white women. Brock’s text pairs well with Kari Lerum’s lead article in the Dank

⁶ Special Committee on Pornography and Prostitution, *Pornography and Prostitution in Canada* (Ottawa: Ministry of Supply and Services, 1985); Special Committee on Sexual Offences against Children and Youths, *Sexual Offences against Children and Youth* (Ottawa: Ministry of Supply and Services, 1984).

⁷ Marjan Wijers and Lin Lap-Chew, *Trafficking in Women, Forced Labour and Slavery-Like Practices in Marriage, Domestic Labour and Prostitution* (Utrecht: Foundation against Trafficking in Women [STV], 1997).

and Refinetti volume, titled "Twelve-Step Feminism Makes Sex Workers Sick," in which Lerum more crisply traces similar processes in the United States. As science displaced religion, Lerum argues, the language used to marginalize sex workers changed: they became diseased and in need of recovery rather than sinners in need of redemption, a charge reinforced by feminists and conservatives alike.

Highlighted or implied throughout each of these volumes are the differing views of feminists on the sex industry. In "Theorizing Prostitution: The Question of Agency" in the Dank and Refinetti collection, Melanie Simmons outlines points of contention and agreement between what she calls the Prostitutes Rights (PR) and the Feminists against Systems of Prostitution (FASP) movements, using two charts that cover thirteen issues. In the "Product for Sale" category, she characterizes the FASP viewpoint as holding that prostitution essentially commodifies the whole person by reducing her to a sexual object, which damages the "self," whereas the PR viewpoint sees a sexual service, not a vulnerable body, for sale. This one difference merits much greater exploration, for it reflects, without elaborating, the different ontologies of sex, women, and sexual exchange deployed by each movement.

In the introduction to *Sex for Sale: Prostitution, Pornography, and the Sex Industry*, Ronald Weitzer aims "to provide a fuller understanding of sex work and the sex industry" (3), and, for the most part, his volume succeeds. His chapter "The Politics of Prostitution in America," along with Wendy Chapkis's article immediately following it and the Simmons article mentioned above, provides an excellent introduction to prostitution in the United States. However, in his introduction, Weitzer dismisses the "sex wars" as having generated more "heat than light" (3) and then goes on to synthesize and summarize many of the issues illuminated by said "wars," most of which were put forth by women. Compared with the book's overall contribution, though, this is a minor quibble. The rest of the book includes a chapter on vice squads in Britain; one on street prostitution variations by ethnicity, location, and substance use (for HIV prevention outreach); a comparative study of prostitution in Spain and England; a fascinating look into the history and present of the Nevada brothels; an analysis of the practices, language, and politics of a successful prostitute reform organization; and articles on phone sex, pornography, and more.

While *Sex Work and Sex Workers*, with its sex worker-friendly tone, compelled me the most of the four volumes, the conditions of this text's existence ironically include reportedly disrespectful, even cruel, treatment of sex workers by the academic co-organizers of the 1998 International

Conference on Prostitution (ICOP) from which many of these essays were taken. Having attended the conference, I witnessed some of this treatment directly. Some of the authors declined to have their work included in the volume *Prostitution: On Whores, Hustlers, and Johns*,⁸ the “official” proceedings of the conference, because the non-sex worker academics broke agreements with the sex worker participants, many of whom took great risks in crossing national borders to attend the conference, only to find themselves denied the protection, translations, reimbursements, and presentation time they were promised. So, after the promise to create a sex worker-inclusive volume coedited by at least one sex worker was also broken, a good number of the sex worker and sex worker-positive academics wound up in this volume instead. Editor Barry M. Dank, whom I interviewed on the telephone, said he attended the conference and knew nothing of these circumstances.

Furthermore, the other three volumes in this review (and also *Prostitution: On Whores, Hustlers, and Johns*) make use of sexually evocative images of women on the cover. Again, the bodies, images, and titillation of sex workers are used to sell academics’ work, while academics’ own personal fascinations (or repulsions) go unmentioned or grossly undertheorized. At the ICOP conference, the academic organizers prevented the art exhibitors of the International Sex Worker Foundation for Art, Culture, and Education from using the word *whore* in their exhibit. Now it graces the cover of the book of academic studies of sex work from which sex workers themselves were excluded.

Even Brock, in *Making Work, Making Trouble*, wants to “include” the points of view of prostitutes within mainstream feminism, even as mainstream feminism seeks to position itself as a “moral regulatory force” to influence state-imposed laws. Saying that “sex-trade workers have sought out feminists as potential allies” (23) assumes that no sex trade workers identify as feminists, that no feminists are sex trade workers, and that writing by sex trade workers themselves does not count in the broader body of literature considered to be feminist. This cleavage is revealed by looking at how non-sex worker feminists have excluded sex workers and their allies from discussions, conferences, and anthologies, even and sometimes especially when the topic is sex work itself. Such actions reproduce separations between feminist and sex worker identities, voices, and literature.

The *Sex Work and Sex Workers* volume shines through in its candor, immediacy, and inclusion of sex workers themselves, including an auto-

⁸ James E. Elias, ed., *Prostitution: On Whores, Hustlers, and Johns* (Amherst, N.Y.: Prometheus, 1998).

biographical essay by a bride-cum-stripper (who uses her wedding garments as fetish wear onstage), a review (one of eleven!) of a book on relationship triads by longtime feminist porn star and health advocate Nina Hartley, and an article on female sex tourism in the Caribbean by the late Klaus de Albuquerque. The Simmons article in this volume, the one with the chart of the two camps, concludes by reiterating the common ground between the two camps, a "mutual concern for the welfare of prostitutes and their vision of a changed state" (146). Similarly, Wendy Chapkis's sex worker surveys from "Power and Control in the Commercial Sex Trade" in *Sex for Sale* "suggest that all who are concerned with women's rights and well-being might unite around proposals to enhance women's power within the trade and to increase their options beyond it" (201). I hope such collaborative visions inspire and guide sex workers and their allies in academia and beyond. Those compelled to study the sex industry should take more care to theorize their own positions, interrogate their ontologies of sex, and avoid the other traps so common to those outside the industry who must resort to sociology, ethnography, and statistics to make sense of whores. ■

Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment. By Patricia Hill Collins. New York and London: Routledge, 2000.

Shadowboxing: Representations of Black Feminist Politics. By Joy James. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1999.

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Black feminist thought and legal-political scholarship that examine the lives of black women are gaining ground in the academy, largely due to the quality of works such as the ones reviewed here: the revised tenth anniversary edition of *Black Feminist Thought* by Patricia Hill Collins and *Shadowboxing: Representations of Black Feminist Politics* by Joy James. These works offer glimpses into political futures that will place the struggle of black women, some of whose experiences illustrate the suffocating bind of multiple oppressions, at the center of social justice projects. Both books are intensely personal; both ground their work in the real-life experiences of black women. The latter work is a powerful contribution to the growing