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### Title

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### Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/0zc1d2xh>

### Journal

Journal of Lesbian Studies, ahead-of-print(ahead-of-print)

### ISSN

1089-4160

### Authors

Yiu, Wei Si Nic

Levitt, Lauren

Ye, Kim

et al.

### Publication Date

2023-12-22

### DOI

10.1080/10894160.2023.2294557

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Peer reviewed

**Challenging Dominant Narratives, Interrupting Objectification, and Queer Creativity:  
Queer Sex Worker Art in Los Angeles**

**Author Information:**

Wei Si Nic Yiu, MA (ORCID ID: 0000-0002-5665-6477)

Department of Gender Studies, University of California-Los Angeles, CA, USA

Lauren Levitt, PhD (ORCID ID: 0000-0002-5490-1678)

Department of Media and Cultural Studies, University of California, Riverside, CA, USA

Kim Ye, MFA (ORCID ID: 0000-0001-7085-072X)

Department of Photo & Media, California Institute of the Arts, Valencia, CA, USA

Kimberly Fuentes, MSW (ORCID ID: 0000-0003-4826-4980)

Department of Social Welfare, University of California-Los Angeles, CA, USA

Ashley Madness, JD

Sex Worker Outreach Project Los Angeles, CA, USA

**Relevant IRB Information:**

IRB# 20-001517 and UPIRB#: UP-18-00058

**Main Author Contact Information:**

Kimberly Fuentes, MSW

1506 S. Sycamore Ave., Los Angeles, CA 90019

Contact: [kfuentes17@g.ucla.edu](mailto:kfuentes17@g.ucla.edu)

### **Abstract**

Drawing on queer of color critique, this paper uses mixed methods including participant observation, interviews, visual and textual analysis, and photovoice to interrogate sex workers' queer creative practices. Building upon the larger oeuvre of sex working artists, contemporary sex working artists in Los Angeles utilizes queer creativity to thwart hegemonic readings of sex work. Performances at two activist fundraisers drew on the themes and aesthetics of sex work to counter mainstream narratives about sex work and workers, and to interrupt their objectification. The cover and graphics of a sex worker zine push back against dominant narratives about sex workers and the power structures that suppress sex worker self-representation. Photovoice methodology allowed sex workers to counteract objectification by telling their own stories. In their creative products, sex workers show how “queer” is a praxis of sex and gender disruption, rather than a simple identity category signaling non-heterosexuality, challenging homonormativity in addition to heteronormativity.

Keywords: sex work, queer of color critique, photovoice, participant observation, participatory research

**Challenging Dominant Narratives, Interrupting Objectification, and Queer Creativity:  
Queer Sex Worker Art in Los Angeles**

Non-sex workers in the United States popularly imagine sex workers in terms of their physical appearance and their practice of accumulating capital through erotic and intimate services. They describe and understand people who perform sexual labor only as sex workers, which neglects and makes invisible the multiple forms of care, knowledge, and critique that sex workers offer as community members. Furthermore, they persistently characterize anyone who performs sexual labor as sexually immoral according to the logic of respectability politics. This overdetermination in non-sex workers' cultural imagining of sex workers is one way that whorephobia within hegemonic discourses pathologizes sex work, while justifying the policing of sexuality more broadly.

Sex worker art constitutes an archive of complex objects to challenge the pathologization of sex work and present creative ways to think about queerness, sexuality, and labor outside of heteronormative orders. Sex workers radically challenge respectability politics by imbuing their creative works with an intimacy that exceeds the normative expectations of relationality. Sex workers queer creative practices hold the potential to disrupt damaging hegemonic structures by prompting questions surrounding queerness, gender, race, and sexuality. Moreover, sex working artists are central to the history of contemporary queer art practices.

In this article, drawing on queer of color critique, we employ mixed methods including participant observation, interviews, visual analysis, and photovoice to interrogate sex workers' queer creative practices in contemporary Los Angeles. Following a brief overview of sex worker art, we analyze sex worker performances at two activist fundraisers, *The Art of the Act: A Sex Worker Art Showcase* and *The Whore Wagon*, images from the *Sex Workers Outreach Project Los*

*Angeles (SWOPLA) Zine*, and sex worker photography from a photovoice project. We conclude that sex workers employ queer creativity to question dominant narratives about sex work and interrupt the objectification of sex workers.

### ***Queer of Color Critique***

In her foundational essay for queer theory, “Thinking Sex: Notes for a Radical Theory of the Politics of Sexuality,” anthropologist Gayle Rubin (1984) places sex workers at the bottom of her erotic pyramid of sexual value, which visualizes the relationship between valued and devalued sexual practices, along with other sex and gender “deviants” such as transgender people, sadomasochists, and those who practice intergenerational sex. More recently, however, scholars have questioned whether sex work is inherently queer. For example, political economist Nicola Smith (2015) maintains that “commercial sex can disrupt social norms about gender and heterosexuality while simultaneously enforcing them” (p. 15). Still, she does concede that sex work can be considered queer in that it challenges the gendered separation of public and private spheres. Indeed, sociologist Viviana Zelizer’s (2005) investigation of the relationship between intimacy and economics illustrates how sexual exchange blurs the boundaries between the public sphere of work and the private sphere of intimacy. Yet, sex work also queers hegemonic sex and gender norms in ways other than resisting the privatization of intimacy (Stardust, 2015). For example, sex workers may engage in paid same-sex sexual activity even though they identify as straight, disrupting the neat alignment between sexual practices and identity. Further, sex work defies the imperative—particularly for women—to engage in serial monogamy, and only in the context of a committed romantic relationship. Following this logic, sex worker art may be considered queer as well, in the sense of anti-normative rather than non-heterosexual (Warner, 1999).

We define “queer” as a methodology, a heuristic, and an analytic of art produced by sex working artists. Queer of color critique demonstrates the stakes of understanding “queer” as “anti-normative” rather than “non-heterosexual.” In *Aberrations in Black*, women’s, gender, and sexuality and American studies scholar Roderick Ferguson (2003) defines queer of color critique as “a heterogeneous enterprise made up of women of color feminism, materialist analysis, poststructuralist theory, and queer critique” that “interrogat[es] social formations at the intersections of race, gender, sexuality, and class, with a particular interest in how those formations correspond with and diverge from nationalist ideals and practices” (p. 149). Ferguson’s work shows the essentiality of understanding queerness alongside liberal capitalism’s structuring of race and gender. Ferguson’s genealogy, which explicitly challenges reductive notions of queerness and heteronormativity, can be traced back to political scientist Cathy Cohen’s (1997) influential article “Punks, Bulldaggers, and Welfare Queens.”<sup>1</sup>

Following other Black and women of color scholars who have long critiqued the policing of sexuality to uphold white supremacist narratives of respectability, Cohen (1997) shows how, during the fall of the welfare state, U.S. politicians constructed the figure of the welfare queen by writing Black families as sexually deviant and exploitative of the welfare system. Cohen’s work illuminates the need for queer politics to challenge racism, patriarchy, and classism alongside heteronormativity. Moving beyond what Cohen (1997) calls a “simple dichotomy between those deemed queer and those deemed heterosexual,” we conceptualize “queer” as not limited to sexuality and as an “encompassing challenge to systems of domination and oppression, especially those normalizing processes embedded in heteronormativity” (p. 440). For this reason, we center art by sex working artists that challenge systems of oppression based on gender, race,

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<sup>1</sup> Rooted in the genealogy of Black feminist knowledge production, Cathy Cohen draws on the works of Audre Lorde and Kimberlé Crenshaw, as well as other Black feminist intellectuals such as the Combahee River Collective, Frances Beal, Deborah King, and more.

class, sexuality, and labor. While recognizing the fluidity of sexuality and the danger of identity politics that assumes stable identity categories, sex worker art also demonstrates the interconnectedness of identity categories. These works of art are queer in the sense that they challenge the “dominant state-sanctioned white middle-upper class heterosexuality” (ibid, p. 441).

Focusing on marginal artists, we examine how they through performance, visual art, and writing unsettle assumptions of sex work and sex workers. Drawing on the work of ethnic studies scholar Martin Manalansan (2015), we show that these works of art are queer by illustrating how they orchestrate a refusal of the “teleological narrative of material, moral and aesthetic value” by “exfoliating the layers of normative expectations, values, [and] desires” (p. 568). Manalansan’s work attends to queer Filipino migrants’ practices of mess and hoarding as urban world-making and offers us a lens with which to analyze these works of art as practices of queer worlding that show complex understandings of capitalism, sexuality, and politics. Turning to sex worker practices of creative expression and self-representation, we make visible the often silenced and critical intellectual labor that they offer. Following other political advocates of sex workers, we resist the erasure of sex worker voices.

### *Contextualizing Sex Worker Art*

Sex worker art queers the limited cultural imagining of sex workers by responding to temporal and site-specific threats to their survival; complicating madonna/whore and client/sex worker binaries; and flattening hierarchies of high/low culture, public/private space, and mainstream/pornographic film through the “carnavalesque” aesthetic of sex work (Bell, 1994). As articulated by literary critic Mikhail Bakhtin (1941), the carnivalesque subverts hierarchical categories through humor and chaos. Often made with a sex worker audience in mind, and

traversing across disciplines of visual art/performing art/media art, sex worker art challenges respectability politics by employing strategies to deliberately alienate or exclude civilian viewers (E. Dayton, personal communication, September 13, 2022). With intimate ties to queer activism, as illustrated by the substantial folders devoted to “prostitution” and “hustling” at the ONE National Gay & Lesbian Archives, sex worker art practices utilize the relational nature of art viewing to organize and reify the community (Heller, n.d.).

Queer sex worker art practices counter Modernist narratives that divide the feminine into madonna/whore binaries and erase the agency of female desire by defining sex workers primarily in terms of male desire (Bell, 1994). According to performance philosopher Shannon Bell, modernity, beginning with the Enlightenment, has produced an understanding of the prostitute as “the other of the other: the other within the categorical other ‘woman’” (Bell, 1994, p. 2). By this process of othering, the prostitute comes to function as a mutable figure onto which changing “cultural anxieties are projected, reflected, and amplified to the detriment of sex workers” (Starr & Francis, 2018, p. 585). The art of sex workers refutes this de-historicization by telling stories rooted in specific places, times, and traditions (Starr & Francis, 2018).

Queer sex worker art collective Veil Machine’s 2020 curation project *E-viction* provided a virtual platform for sex worker art in the context of COVID-19 in a post-FOSTA/SESTA landscape.<sup>2</sup> Drawing parallels between Giuliani’s “clean up” of New York City, which eliminated Times Square as a cruising space for sex workers and queer people, *E-viction* responds to the erasure of sex workers from the public square of the Internet as a form of digital gentrification during a time when the only gathering space available was online (M.J. Tom, personal

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<sup>2</sup> The Stop Enabling Sex Traffickers Act (SESTA) and the Allow States and Victims to Fight Online Sex Trafficking Act (FOSTA), was a bill package passed by the U.S. Congress in 2018 to make websites liable for sex trafficking for content posted by users. However, by conflating sex work with sex trafficking, it made everyone in the sex trades more vulnerable to violence and exploitation by shutting down advertising sites and other resources workers used to screen clients.



communication, September 10, 2022). The virtual exhibition appropriates the form of a sex work advertising website to place viewers in the position of the client seeking erotic services. Learning about the exhibition through social media, online platforms, and Eyebeam Residency, which funded the project, visitors clicked on suggestively worded—if sometimes misleading—hyperlinks to view different works. As they selected their own path through the virtual space, new posts appear and older ones disappear, presenting an ever-changing body of work that included mediums like text, video, photography, and live performance. The curation process leveraged the members of Veil Machine’s “informal trust networks” to bring together the work of sex working artists of various ages, genders, and geographic locations, with different levels of experience within particular areas of the sex industry. An example of how sex worker art queers objectification by fragmenting gaze and viewership, the *E-viction* website self-destructed at the end of twelve hours, leaving no archive behind (M.J. Tom, personal communication, September 10, 2022).

Sex working artists also appropriate institutional structures of the dominant culture in order to challenge them. For example, the three members of Veil Machine created a “prenup” that binds them contractually lest they pay monetary fines to disband. The group is currently writing a manifesto, and if any of the members decide to leave the organization before its completion, due to the “prenup,” they would have to pay “ten thousand dollars plus a certain amount of interest every year since the organization has started.” (M.J. Tom, personal communication, September 10, 2022). Applying legal structures created to preserve the nuclear family to chosen family is one example of the multiple modes of queer creativity evident in how sex worker art is produced, exhibited, and viewed. Queer sex worker art proposes what Starr and Francis (2018) call a “whore gaze” (p. 585). Like the writing of the *flaneuse*, (Stathopoulos,

2023), the whore gaze is a method of self-representation that is oppositional, divergent, and based on community. It asserts that the prostitute body has no fixed symbolism, and that artwork about sex work cannot be considered independently from the ethics and methods of production used to create it (Bell, 1994). In the lineage of sex worker art, the work we examine here undermines binaries and challenges hegemonic structures related to gender and sexuality.

### ***Methods***

This article uses ethnographic methods as well as in-depth visual analysis to explore sex workers' creative practices. SWOPLA is a sex worker peer support organization in Los Angeles. Levitt conducted participant observation at two SWOPLA events as part of a broader ethnographic project on sex worker organizing, and she conducted structured interviews with three sex working artists about their performances. Madness and Ye conducted a visual analysis of a sex worker zine. Fuentes engaged in a participatory photovoice study with thirteen Los Angeles-based sex workers as part of a broader research project on sex worker resiliency and community protective factors (Fuentes, 2023), and she performed a visual analysis of the photographs workers produced.

Our methods are informed by queer scholarship, which emphasizes the importance of archiving marginalized art and critical interpretation that extends beyond hegemonic notions of art. As such, we are invested in archiving and engaging with the creative self-representation of marginalized workers and committed to centering sex working artists as cultural producers. Building off the work of queer scholars who have suggested a reimagination of the archive as a site for marginalized subjects, this article is not only an analysis of the queer creative practices of sex workers but also an attempt to archive their ephemeral works (Manalansan 2014). Through interviews and photovoice, we center sex workers' own perception of their art and creative

practices and prioritize their voices in our archive of queer art created by sex workers. As members of the sex worker political organizing community, we also draw on our collective memories and ethnographic fieldnotes conducted during fundraising events.

Scholars have demonstrated the effectiveness of ethnographic methods as a mode of inquiry for qualitative research (Davis and Craven 2011). Invested personally in the political liberation of sex workers, we rely on interviews, participant observation, and photovoice as a way to connect the personal and the political (Ghosh 2016). Feminist approaches to ethnography offer us a reflexive position to consider the nuanced power relations involved in discussing queer sex working artists' creative practices (Davis and Craven 2011; Ghosh 2016). Yiu is a 30-year-old, queer, Asian, non-binary, working-class migrant from Hong Kong. Levitt is 39 years old, non-binary, bisexual, white, and middle-class. Ye is a 38-year-old, queer, middle-class, first-generation, Chinese American, cis woman. Fuentes (she/her) is a 26-year-old, queer, Latinx, first-generation immigrant, and working-class sex worker. Madness (she/her) is a 31-year-old, white, working-class, bisexual, and transgender sex worker who graduated from NYU School of Law with a J.D. Although we were intimately involved in the artistic productions we describe, as researchers and scholars, we occupy a position of power in relation to the sex working artists we study and have an ethical obligation to minimize the harm caused by increased visibility. Therefore, even though all performances analyzed in this article occurred at public events across Los Angeles—and the zine is available online—to protect the privacy of artists, we use their professional names or a pseudonym they have assigned themselves.

### ***Queer Performance at SWOPLA Fundraisers***

SWOPLA throws fundraising parties as part of its grassroots fundraising and community-building efforts (Guilloud & Cordery, 2007). These events are open to both sex

workers and allies, and funds are raised through entrance fees and raffles and by soliciting donations, although no one is turned away for lack of money. This section analyzes sex workers' queer self-representation practices in performances at two SWOPLA fundraisers in 2018: *The Art of the Act: A Sex Worker Art Showcase* and *The Whore Wagon*. *The Art of the Act* took place on June 13, 2018, at a gallery in Echo Park. This event featured “performance and visual art created by local sex workers from all facets of the industry,” including a musical performance by dancer and escort Elena and a reading by dominatrix Lucy Khan (Sex Workers Outreach Project – Los Angeles, n.d.). *The Whore Wagon* occurred on September 16, 2018, at a gay bar in Silverlake and featured a musical performance by dancer and escort Elena (figure 1) and a burlesque performance by porn performer/director, dominatrix, and escort Bella Bathory. These performances drew on themes of sex work and its carnivalesque aesthetics to subvert sex and gender norms (Bell, 1994). Because these events highlighted creative expression by and for sex workers, they also facilitated the “whore gaze” (Starr & Francis, 2018).

Some of the performances at these events countered hegemonic narratives about sex work and sex workers. For example, at *The Art of the Act*, Khan read “Paying for it: My first time,” an essay about being a female sex work client of a male sex worker for the first time in Vietnam that complicated heteronormative assumptions about sex workers and their clients. According to Khan, this piece explored, “my own internalized (condescending) attitudes towards femme sex workers—in my over-concern for their well-being/enjoyment in performing their work.” Here “femme” refers to anyone who exhibits traits culturally defined as “feminine” such as talkativeness, emotionality, and an interest in aesthetics (Serano, 2009). In describing her experience as a consumer of commercial sex, Khan questioned the idea that sex workers need to enjoy their work for it to be recognized *as* work. This “happy hooker” narrative, which sex

workers often employ to counter the mainstream trope of sex worker as victims, glorifies work as it delegitimizes non-pleasurable sex work (Mac & Smith, 2018, p. 35). Likewise, Khan's reading queered the expectation that sex work clients are exclusively male, which represses female sexuality by imagining it as exclusively for male pleasure (Bell, 1994).

Additionally, by narrating this interaction between a Chinese American woman/client and a Vietnamese man/sex worker, Khan destabilized the association of sex tourism with the exploitation of Asian women by white men, painting a more nuanced picture of Asian sex workers and their international clients. As sociologist Kimberly Hoang (2010) reveals in her ethnography of Vietnamese sex workers, Asian sex tourism can be intraracial as well as interracial. In her reading, Khan not only reversed the perceived gender dynamics of sex work, but also disrupted the assumption that clients are white and sex workers non-white, interrupting racial objectification in representations of sex work. This consideration of race in tandem with sexuality is a hallmark of queer of color critique (Ferguson, 2003).

Other performers complicated the "sex radical" feminist proposition that sex work is empowering for women (Chapkis, 1997). In her musical performances at *The Art of the Act* and *The Whore Wagon*, Elena examined the contradictions of sex work. According to Elena, sex work "liberates us from sex and gender expectations while simultaneously reinforcing them."

She continued:

You can escape the 9-5 hustle, compulsory monogamy/heterosexuality, and marriage, but in this society, you can never really escape capitalism or patriarchy. What's more, sex work allows people to experience a unique kind of freedom that many people in our society can't access, but also limits our access to resources and relationships. Sex work

casts a harsh light on societal sex and gender constructs that I feel like you can't unsee unless you engage in a heavy dose of self-deception.

Through lyrics to her songs, Elena contested a binary conception of sex work as either “good” or “bad,” instead revealing her more ambivalent personal experience with sex work. For instance, in “Sígueme,” addressed to a sex work client, Elena contrasts the devaluation of sex workers and their labor with the financial freedom that sex work affords, comparing her own body to a temple:

One plus one it equals two  
What makes you think I belong to you  
One plus one plus one is three  
Nobody likes to work for free  
One plus one plus two is four  
I'm not your girl I'm just your whore  
One plus two plus two, five  
Do I make you feel alive  
One plus two plus three is six  
Call me up come get your fix  
Three plus three plus one, seven  
Oil me up and stick it in  
Three plus four plus one is eight  
Who do you depreciate  
Four plus three plus two, nine  
Skip the unemployment line

Fuck me all the way to ten

Insert coin to ride again

Know there's something that you want

Hear you serenading from afar

Your song it's back alley foreplay

Keep callin' out dale, dale

Start chanting like hare, hare

'Cause my body's a temple baby

Elena also connected the messiness of her performances to an anarchic and amorphous queerness (Manalansan, 2014):

I was naked and writhing on the floor, but still sweet and vulnerable. I would sit on people's laps, hug people, flirt with people, people of all genders. [...] I think this speaks to the queerness and the anarchy of the performance. [...] It was just disorganized, raw self-expression, and that was the point. It was queer in the sense that you couldn't just neatly box it into a genre or category.

Performers such as Bathory and Elena drew on the carnivalesque aesthetics of sex work, especially burlesque dancing, to intervene in the objectification of sex workers (Bell, 1994). Not necessarily *about* sex work in terms of content, their performances reappropriated *forms* of erotic entertainment from mainstream culture to assert their performative agency, in contrast to the *flaneuse* who embraces her passivity (Stathopoulos, 2023). By self-consciously embodying allegedly objectifying tropes, sex worker artists transform these gestures into deliberate acts affirming their subjectivity (Cruz, 2016; Miller-Young, 2014; Rodríguez, 2014). For instance, at

*The Whore Wagon*, Bathory, who proudly identifies as lesbian, performed a fan dance and angle grinding act, two traditional carnival sideshow performance genres, to a classic rock soundtrack. She first performed a striptease with two large, white ostrich feather fans, before shooting sparks off a metal plate located on her crotch. Bathory's adoption of these forms cannot be disarticulated from her performer persona of "Barbie Daddy." Although in BDSM age play "daddy" typically refers to an older, dominant, masculine role, as "Barbie Daddy" Bathory employs the trappings of high-femme gender expression—bleach blond hair, heavy makeup, and frilly pink lingerie—to assert her dominance over men, women, and everyone else. Like lesbian butch-femme role-playing, Bathory's burlesque/sideshow performance, as well as her sex work persona, parasitically draws on heteronormative sex and gender roles to unsettle them through overt performativity (Nestle, 1984).

### ***More than Sexy: The SWOPLA Zine***

The *SWOPLA Zine* was created by SWOPLA to celebrate International Whore's Day in June 2021. As Lisa Damon et al. (2022) argue, zines queer form by contesting "patriarchal norms of individual authorship" (p. 418). SWOPLA used a special license to pay contributors for the rights to publish their work in the zine, without asking for rights to commercial distribution or to exclusivity, evidencing the nuanced approaches criminalized communities use to navigate legal systems under a fundamentally anti-institutionalist framework. The contributors of the *SWOPLA Zine* interrupt the objectification of sex workers through the whore gaze, pushing back against narratives and power structures imposed on sex workers by a whorephobic, heterosexist, racist, capitalist mainstream culture (Starr & Francis, 2018). This aligns with queer of color critique's insistence on the imbrication of sexuality, race, and class (Ferguson, 2003).



The zine's cover (figure 2) features the boldly painted *Stripper on a Half Shell* by *Celestina Pearl*, wherein the figure of the artist, clad only in high heels, hoop earrings, and red acrylic nails, grinds on a stripper pole emerging from the soft insides of a clam against a deep red wash. Pearl depicts herself in profile, looking over her left shoulder towards the viewer, with one leg extended at 45 degrees and the other bent in a low squat to support her weight. Her hands grip the pole above her, but her elbows appear loose like her entire weight is supported on the leg that is planted on the ground. There is an oversized pearl in the open clamshell, a reference to the name of the artist. The pole, the pearl, the dancer, and the dancer's features are generally outlined and painted in solid colors, while the clamshell, its insides, and the background are more varied in tone and feature visible brush strokes, making them appear less well-defined. The soft, biological and *consumable* insides of the clam contrast with the hard, artificial, aesthetic tools in the composition—the heels, nails, and earrings. This contrast situates the pole (and its implication of sex work) alongside the other aesthetic tools and the pearl as symbols of, identity, glamour, and wealth, rather than the consumable insides of the clam. Likewise, the aesthetic of the dancer, who has bright red lips, long black hair, and bold, well-defined black eyebrows that taper to a narrow point, in addition to hoop earrings and red acrylic nails, suggests that the artist connects their sex worker identity to their Latina pride. Through this self portrait, Pearl complicates the notion that sex workers are consumable and that sex work should be a source of shame in a way that highlights the artists' personal perspective, while nonetheless referring back to the broader community.

Several of the images in the zine are sexually suggestive, highly stylized, and gesturally rendered. These images resist the passivity often projected onto sex workers as models or muses for artistic inspiration. Sometimes resisting legible representation altogether, many of the images

embody the grotesque and carnivalesque through the amorphous rendering of body parts that appear to be severed, recombined, or mutating. In *Art 2* by Kat, twin green humps folding in on themselves can be read simultaneously as shapely green legs, buttocks, or intestines, and appear to morph into lizard-like appendages that emerge from a colorful cosmic swirl of gemstones, gold chains, green-blue bills, and a winking pussy cat. A portion of a blue and purple mottled torso appears behind a separate and disconnected red and orange arm. Other figures with curves that could indicate joints, buttocks, and cleavage also appear in the same blue and purple and red and orange combinations. These are less clearly identifiable limbs or body parts, although one blue and purple mottled figure has a large breast, including an areola and nipple outlined in black. The background is white paper, with solid black ribbons, spirals, and blobs defining the figures and filling spaces between them. Nearby, the artist has painted a white pearl necklace and three gemstones, three yellow stars with white bowties, eyes, and smiles in a wobbly style, as if they are melting. Kat has also depicted two high-heeled boots in a purple, pink, and blue wash, near the amorphous green blobs. One boot emerges from behind the clawed green arm to step on a green-grey figure reminiscent of a dollar bill.

Like many of the corporeally centered pieces in the *SWOPLA Zine*, *Art 2* exhibits a tension between figure and ground. In *Art 2*, the foreground and background bleed into and become entangled with one another, and the amorphous shapes and colors of some of the figures effectively become the background for the figures in front or on top of them. At other times, the subject exceeds the boundaries of the page and leaves the viewer with a fragmented view, denying their gaze any sense of objectivity. A red and orange mottled blob, which could be a part of a torso associated with the red and orange arm, disappears off of the page at one end and becomes obscured by a green arm with webbed fingers and claws and a blue and purple mottled

blob. The disconnected figures reminiscent of body parts and figures which are cut off by the frame subvert the body's visual unity and create portions of composition where body becomes both subject and landscape. The amorphousness and disconnection of the bodily imagery visually exemplify the notion of the whore gaze, portraying multiple disjointed subjects, each open to multiple interpretations.

Even representations of naked bodies in the zine challenge the objectification of sex workers. Several works by Shania Person depict nude figures containing contrasting elements, such as three scantily clad figures covering their breasts, buttocks, and crotch with medieval-style weaponry under the phrase "Arm Black Trans Women + SWers." This work challenges the respectability politics that cordon off sexuality and bodily realities from the pursuit of political and social change. The caption alludes to the fact that Black trans women and sex workers experience increased levels of systemic and interpersonal violence, situating the "prostitute" in the contemporary social context of criminalization, structural racism, stigma, and transphobia (Starr & Francis, 2018).

*Arm Black Trans Women + SWers* is a greyscale drawing, with three figures in suggestive poses. One sits with her knees bent so her heels are beside her hips. She wears thigh-high fishnets, two thin bracelets, and an armband, and she drapes a flail around her neck so it covers her breasts. One squats down, turned away from the viewer but looking back over her shoulder. She wears a black leather glove on her left arm connected to a half-harness; thigh-high, leather, platform boots with high heels; a headband; and a lip ring in the middle of her lower lip; and she covers her buttocks with a battleaxe. Finally, one kneels and arches backwards, with her right arm grabbing her ankle and her left arm holding a sword in front of her crotch as if to imitate a phallus. She wears a leather ring around her flat chest, with five massive gray spikes coming out

of it. The rest of her visible outfit consists of a matching spiked anklet on each ankle, thin flats, a thin band on her right leg, and a spike earring on her right ear. This piece highlights how Black trans women use sex work to navigate the violence they face, and it suggests an ethos of collective care and self defense, tying the drawing to its political and community context.

Lastly, Mary Miller's mixed-media portrait *Love of WAP* invites the viewer's exhalation. The artist has drawn two busts of Cardi B from different perspectives, positioned back-to-back with their hair interwoven like serpents. One face turns in full profile while the other turns in partial profile, imbuing the Cardi B figure with a superhuman capacity to perceive in 360 degrees. As Cardi B is an Afro-Latina sex worker who has crossed over to mainstream entertainment, this portrait of her invites a sense of collective identification, portraying her as an icon of the community, rather than an individual. Moreover, the two mirrored images of Cardi B disturb the notion of a unitary subject.

Both figures have their eyes closed and mouths open with distorted, longer-than-life tongues sticking out. They also wear gold earrings reading "WAP," featuring apparent droplets of gold. The earrings reference Cardi B's hit single "Wet Ass Pussy," celebrating the titular subject and the power of female sexuality, and the elongated tongues and dripping gold of the earrings visually evoke elements of lesbian sex. This positions Cardi B as not just appreciating her own sexuality, but also as appreciating—including through cunnilingus—the sexuality of other women. One can read the piece *Love of WAP* as a full-throated celebration of homo-erotic and auto-erotic desire because it depicts a world where Cardi B can consummate her love of female sexuality through lesbian sex with herself. Publication of this image in the context of a sex worker zine lauds the self-possessed sexuality of femme sex workers of color, through a whore gaze (Starr & Francis, 2018).

*Objects of Their Desire: Sex Worker Photography*

While only two of the thirteen research community members self-identified as artists, the photovoice section of this study placed all participants behind the lens to tell stories from their perspective. This enacts Indigenous scholar Linda Tuhiwai Smith's practice of "righting and re-writing" by engaging in narrative telling that runs counter to the stories that sex workers are often told about themselves (Smith, 2007). Often when sex workers describe their experiences, especially in research settings, they are acutely aware of the pressures of having their experience essentialized and meshed into a singular sex worker narrative. The practice of taking photos helped workers express the nuance of their experiences because they had creative control over the visual narrative. Retaining their anonymity gave space for study participants to represent a more honest portrayal of their experiences. The complex ways the research community told their stories intervened in the objectification of sex workers, demonstrating the unique contributions of photovoice for this project. Moreover, participants in Fuentes' photovoice study were compensated for their time and creative efforts in stark contrast to the usual economic relationships attending media representation of sex workers, which typically involve the theft or appropriation of sex worker narratives and iconography without any citation, compensation, and/or consultation.

Grace, a queer, Asian trans woman, shared a photo of a pair of gold butterfly earrings on a black record disk (figure 3). This black circular disk serves as a way for Grace to put her narrative "on the record." Grace found these Forever21 earrings in an airport after one of her first tours in New York that was completely funded by the profits she made on the trip. Here the fake gold earrings represent a performance of femininity aimed at the client, while concurrently carrying an internal meaning for Grace, centered on her relationship with sex work and agency.

Grace described the earrings as a visual representation of the growth, freedom, and complexity of her journey as a transgender sex worker:

To me, I feel that it's a twofold thing. I think the butterfly has always been pretty associated with trans people in general, in terms of the metamorphosis. Butterflies are just very much about freedom and autonomy and it just represented my whole trip to New York and doing it for myself. I think it also represents the delicate nature of sex work and everything in general and the dangerous side too. Because it's a kind of freedom as well. I feel butterflies just really represent me as a sex worker.

According to Grace, the freedom to fly to new heights was not possible for her without sex work. In vocalizing the way that freedom and autonomy are intertwined with being trans and a sex worker, Grace highlighted the vulnerable position of sex workers straddling the line between liberation and marginalization, a balance as delicate as butterfly wings.

Grace also disrupts the objectification of sex workers through her overall composition choices. Instead of documenting sex work through a focus on sex-working bodies, Grace offers an incomplete image that elicits further inquiry. Focusing on objects of her desire, Grace creatively displaces and interrupts the hegemonic desire to render sex-working bodies visible. Instead, she focuses on quotidian objects that link her desire for freedom to the butterfly motif, an emblem often employed to display resilience and transition. This image also connects Grace's sex work (described as delicate) as an Asian transwoman in the United States to the factory work that women do in China vis-à-vis the Forever21 earrings. By eliciting the stereotype of Asian women as nimble-fingered, Grace's image encourages us to connect these two seemingly unrelated groups of women, critiquing the capitalist exploitation of Asian women transnationally.

Talia is a dancer and escort who describes herself as a storyteller who presents a counter message to the stereotype of sex work as a last stop on a desolate road. While she recounted that becoming a sex worker was a childhood aspiration, she does not glamorize her occupation and engages the carnivalesque by altering found objects to give form to lived sex worker narratives. As part of this project, Talia shared photo documentation of an altered DIY stripper “Operation” game that she and her coworkers made at the club (figure 4). In the photograph, what normally is a male patient on the games operating table, is replaced with a stripper clad in red lingerie. Talia and her coworkers went to great lengths to manipulate not only the physical appearance of the operation patient such as the clothing, but the hair, eyelashes, and nails of the figure to make it more in line with conventionally feminine traits. The patient also features common physical ailments after a long shift as a stripper such as “stripper paw,” “coke drip,” “mystery bruise,” and “hearing loss.”

Like Grace, Talia felt that there was excessive glamorizing of stripping. Moreover, although her creative practices of self-representation affirmed that she loved her job as a sex worker, they also acknowledged and framed its drawbacks. By representing her experience with sex work in a carnivalesque way that celebrates the joy found in sex work and makes ordinary its frequently sensationalized occupational hazards, Talia interrupted narratives that objectify erotic dancers by placing them on a pedestal or casting them as tragic victims.

### ***Conclusion: Toward a Queer Political Economy***

Using ethnographic methods as well as visual and textual analysis, we reveal how, building upon the larger oeuvre of sex working artists, contemporary sex working artists in Los Angeles utilize queer creativity to thwart hegemonic readings of sex work. Performances at two SWOPLA fundraising events drew on the themes and carnivalesque aesthetics of sex work to

counter mainstream narratives about sex work and workers and to interrupt their objectification. The cover and graphics of the *SWOPLA Zine* employed the whore gaze to push back against dominant narratives about sex workers, and the power structures that suppress sex worker self-representation. Photovoice methodology allowed workers to counteract objectification by telling their own stories. In their creative products, sex workers show how “queer” is a praxis of sex and gender disruption, rather than a simple identity category signaling non-heterosexuality, undermining both homonormativity and heteronormativity (Duggan, 2003). By challenging interlocking systems of oppression based on gender, race, class, sexuality, and labor, these works echo queer of color critique’s refusal to isolate interconnected struggles.

Although this article carefully attends to the representational practices of contemporary sex workers, additional consideration should be given to the political economy of sex workers’ art-making practices. For example, the performances at SWOPLA fundraisers and the *SWOPLA Zine* were not only by and for sex workers, but they also raised money from within the community to fund direct services, political advocacy, community building, and creative practice, and to pay for sex worker leadership in this work. Such research would deepen our understanding of the ways gender and sexuality intersect with systems of symbolic production and consumption.

**Disclosure Statement:** The authors report there are no competing interests to declare.

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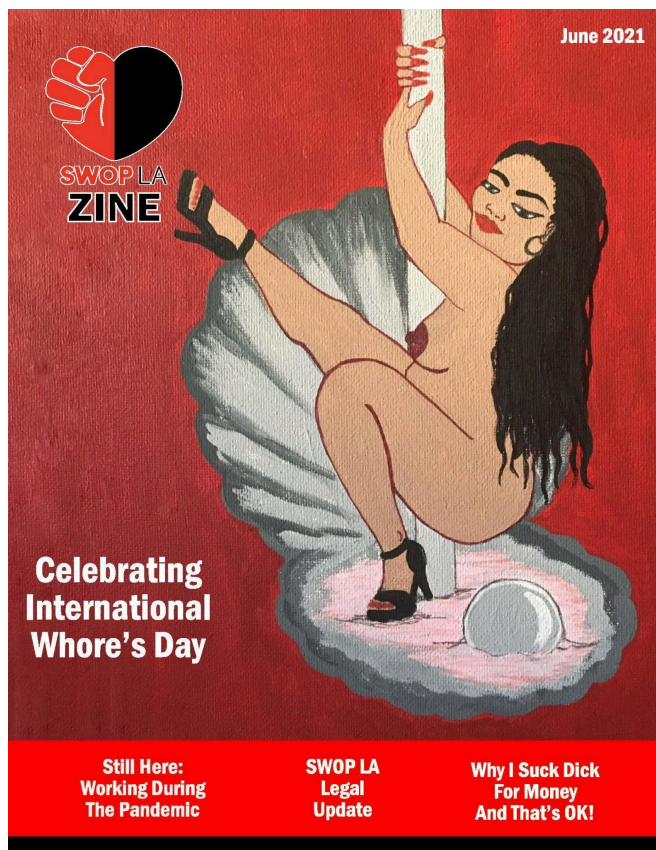
### ***Figure 1***

Elena Rayne Performs at The Art of the Act



*Figure 2*

SWOPLA Zine Cover



*Figure 3*

Grace’s Photograph of Gold Butterfly Earrings on a Record



Figure 4. Talia’s Photograph of “Stripper” Operation

