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Let Us Survive: Sex Working and Trading Community Relationality and Resilience through Art, Media, and Cultural Production

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LetUsSurvive:

Sex Working and Trading Community Relationality and Resilience through Art, Media, and Cultural Production

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the

requirements for the degree Doctor of Philosophy

in Gender Studies

by

Elizabeth Carey Williams Dayton

2023

ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

Let Us Survive:

Sex Working and Trading Community Relationality and Resilience

through Art, Media, and Cultural Production

by

Elizabeth Dayton

Doctor of Philosophy in Gender Studies

University of California, Los Angeles, 2023

Professor Kathryn Norberg, Chair

This project examines the significance of art produced by and within sex working/trading communities, focusing on art from in the San Francisco Bay Area, Seattle, and New York City. By examining the visual and performative art, artist practices, art shows, and festivals that fund, curate, and celebrate sex worker art, this dissertation explores how sex worker cultural production functions as activism among those in sex working/trading communities, not only in its ability to disrupt harmful/incomplete narratives of the sex industry for non-sex working publics, but also its ability to cultivate relationality among sex working/trading subjects as a political project of survival, resilience, and community building. The project begins with a genealogy of the historical connection of erotic labor and art, the development of "sex worker art" as a category of artistic production emergent in the 1970s and 1980s, and its subsequent proliferation as a vital arm of contemporary transnational sex worker rights movements. Working with film short *Lucid Noon,*

Sunset Blush, off-Broadway musical, *TRINKETS* and *But I Am Here* New York City street-mural and digital zine, I demonstrate the visual and thematic representations of relationality and community formation in significant cases of cultural production of sex working and trading communities. I contextualize these depictions of relationality among sex working and trading communities as both situated knowledges of sex working and trading communities, as well as situated imaginaries of utopian world-building. I then examine how sex worker cultural production cultivates relationality and community formation in praxis amongst sex working and trading artists, organizers, and attendees, considering in-person events, exhibitions, and festival spaces. I consider sex worker community formation through art and content sharing across digital platforms during the global COVID- 19 crisis, and heightened surveillance and policing of sex workers online post-FOSTA-SESTA, foregrounding the nature of sex worker's art and presence in digital space as ephemeral performance art.

The dissertation of Elizabeth Carey Williams Dayton is approved.

Samantha Majic

Uri McMillian

Aparna Sharma

Kathryn Norberg, Committee Chair

University of California, Los Angeles

2023

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List of Acronyms

BIPOC - Black, Indigenous, (and) People of Color

COVID-19 - Coronavirus Disease 2019

COYOTE-RI - Call Off Your Old Tired Ethics- Rhode Island

D17- December 17

EARN IT - Eliminating Abusive and Rampant Neglect of Interactive Technologies Act of 2020

FOSTA-SESTA - Allow States and Victims to Fight Online Sex Trafficking and Stop Enabling Sex Traffickers Act of 2018

GLITZ - Gays and Lesbians Living in a Transgender Society

HALA - Hooker's Army of Los Angeles

IDEVASW - International Day to End Violence Against Sex Workers

LGBTQ+ - Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer" and "+" to recognize the limitless sexual orientations and gender identities used by members of the community.

LGBTQAI - Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer, Intersex, and Asexual

LAHS - Low Art/High Standards

NSFW- Not Safe for Work

POC – person of color

SWAG – Sex Workers Advocacy Group

SWOP- Sex Workers' Outreach Project

SWFF - The San Francisco Bay Area Sex Worker Film and Arts Festival

WCIIA - Whose Corner is it Anyway?

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I would like to express my sincerest gratitude to the many people who supported me and this project over the years, without which this work would not have been possible. First, I would like to thank my committee Professor Samantha Majic, Professor Uri McMillan and Professor Aparna Sharma for lending their brilliance and collective wealth of knowledge to this work. Your guidance, feedback, and patience throughout the development of this project has been indispensable. I would also like to thank my advisor and committee chair Professor Kathryn Norberg. I am deeply grateful for your insightful knowledge, expertise, and commitment to this project. I am especially grateful for your mentorship over the years, and particular guidance that you offered at the beginning of my graduate career: to choose a project that elicited inspiration and hopefulness, a project that could endure the inevitabilities of academia. This has been a guiding principle of my work, and I am deeply grateful to my entire committee for fostering the hopelessness and hope of this work.

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I would also like to offer my deepest thanks to the late Carol Leigh and the many sex worker artists who appear in the pages of this dissertation. Carol, thank you the many laughs and zoom calls spent ‘fan-girling’ over community artists, and for trusting me with the legacy of your film festival. My entire career, both within and outside of academia, is indebted to your tireless activism, compassionate commitment to community, and belief this work is worth doing.

Elizabeth Carey Williams Dayton
Vita

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2018 Presenter, "*Lucid Noon, Sunset Blush:* Femme Supremacist Aesthetic and The Politics of Wandering." National Women's Studies Association (NWSA), 2018.

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Sex Worker Outreach Project, Los Angeles (SWOP-LA) (2017- 2018)

About-Face Activist, San Francisco (2014- 2015)

Community Link: Fresno Rainbow Pride, Fresno (2004-2013)

Imperial Dove Court, Fresno/Madera Counties (1996- 2009)

MEDIA COVERAGE

The Space Between Us with Jovelyn Richards (KPFA.org 94.1, Berkeley) guest appearance with Erica Berman to discuss The San Francisco Sex Worker Film & Arts Festival, the legacy of Carol Leigh, and sex worker community care practices, April 17 2023.

PROFESSIONAL AFFILIATIONS

College Art Association of America (CAA)

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National Women's Studies Association (NWSA)

Introduction:

In their performance art piece "Fierce Solid Gold Warrior Diva," Cinnamon Maxxine, black femme, non-binary, burlesque performer, stripper, and artist, takes stage as the final performer of the 10th biennial San Francisco Bay Area Sex Worker Film & Art Festival's opening night. [1] Florence + The Machine's *Dog Days Are Over* begins to play as Maxxine, appearing with soft rose gold curls and wrapped entirely in emerald shipping wrap, inquisitively caresses the green wrap to investigate the nature of what is encapsulating their body. Maxxine's hands trace the wrapping around their upper arm, and then begins to scratch, pick, and pull around its edges, disrupting the wrap's hold. Slowly pulling a dislodged edge, Maxxine rips through multiple layers of the film to completely tear it from their body. Maxxine brings the destroyed remains of their arm's cellulose closer for further inspection before tossing it into the air, to be forgotten in lieu of the wonder in their newly freed appendage. In the excitement of bodily freedom, Maxxine repeats the unbinding process of their remaining limbs, pausing to tenderly massage each newly freed arm and leg as they are introduced to the world. Then turning to the last remaining encapsulation of their torso, Maxxine enthusiastically rips through the material, revealing themselves in a hot pink thong-teddy ensemble. *"The dog days are over."* They then begin to dance, leap, and twerk, reveling in a newfound appreciation for their emergent body. Maxxine enthusiastically saunters across the stage and into the audience, offering folded notes to several members often delivered with the intimacy of a warm smile and lingering eye contact. Unfolding my own note it read, "you are a fucking beast" (heart symbol) love, Cinnamon."

[1] *Fierce Solid Gold Warrior Diva*, performed by Cinnamon Maxxine, San Francisco Bay Area Sex Worker Film & Art Festival, Geoffrey's Inner Circle, Oakland, May 19, 2017.

Maxxine's performances on and off the porn set seek to reorient the viewer to see the beauty in bodies outside of white supremacist patriarchal beauty standards pervading both the sex industry and western culture more broadly. As an established presence within the Bay Area sex work community known for their steamy queer porn scenes and self-identification as a "naked, brown, fat, curvy, queer, big booty, space perv, fierce solid gold warrior diva," Maxxine renegotiates what is considered sexy in adult content. [2] "I'm tired of the fact that pale skin, blond hair, and straight bodies, are seen as the most desirable and therefore worth more than mine. It's bull-shit."[3] Further pushing back against white supremacist beauty standards, "Fierce Solid Gold Warrior Diva" asserts a black feminist and decolonial critique of socially constructed systems of power, that create oppressive structures which obscure how people relate to themselves and one another. By rendering the green cellulose of these oppressive systems both visible and removable, Maxxine reveals the *already existing* beauty in fatness, disabled-ness, queerness, and gender fluidity. Their performance manifests a future beyond such oppressive structures as they dance and revel in their newly freed form.

Following the performance of "Fierce Solid Gold Warrior Diva," Maxxine facilitated an artist talk-back to further mediate on the many wider issues of structural oppression in the sex industry. Maxxine's performance explicitly encourages the audience to consider our own beastly bindings, while refusing to erase the specificity of oppression experienced from their own specific location as fat, black, disabled, and gender non-conforming.[4] Maxxine offers

[2] "Fierce Solid Gold Warrior Diva, Cinnamon Maxxine," *10th Biennial San Francisco Bay Area Sex Worker Film & Art Festival Program*, May 19-28, 2017.

[3] Ibid.

[4] Ibid.

commentary on their specific struggles with agoraphobia, homelessness, the gentrification of Oakland, and racial disparities in the sex industry and sex worker communities. Maxxine explains their frustrations with white sex workers reaping all the benefits of the "trendiness of sex work" in the Bay Area, being hired as SF Weekly columnists or having their moving expenses to Oakland paid to help gentrify it. They discussed how they are often hired as token representation on panels, or as a replacement, and paid less than the person who had dropped out of an event. It is in these disparities Maxxine compels the community relate to one another through a politics of care and solidarity across difference by paying forward care and resources to others in the community who may lack access otherwise.[5]

Maxxine's performance and talk-back not only disrupts dominant narratives regarding the sex industry and erotic labor, but also tangibly renegotiates how individuals in the space relate to one another. "Fierce Solid Gold Warrior Diva" renegotiates the expected relationality between performer and audience by direct invitation to participate in their own unbinding. Breaking the contract of separation, Maxxine runs into the crowd, passing out notes to individual audience members. Taking my own note that I received as an example, the notes encourage the audience to consider the ways in which we have been labeled "a beast" and bound within our own green cellulose bindings, and simultaneously meets these considerations with a smile of acceptance and the direct eye as if to say, "I see you, I accept you." Maxxine's notes enact a "pay it forward" politic which obliges the individual to the community. Thus, having worked to accept their own beauty in what hegemonic beauty ideals consider beastly, Maxxine pays forward this acceptance

[5] Fieldnotes from Night One of *10th Biennial San Francisco Bay Area Sex Worker Film & Art Festival*, May 19, 2017.

to their audience by inviting them to establish new forms of relationality to each other and themselves.

As part of the opening night of the 10th biennial San Francisco Bay Area Sex Worker Film & Art Festival, Maxxine's performance was scheduled with stand-up comedy performances and storytelling from other Bay Area sex worker artists like Gina Gold and Carol Queen.[6] The evening of bodies, stories, humor, and "real talk" reflections served over dinner rang in the 2017 festival line up featuring ten days of short and feature film screenings, informational discussion panels, live performances, skills workshops, an anti-capitalist fashion show, and concluding with the infamous and "Whore's Bath" community care event exclusive to current and former sex workers. The San Francisco Bay Area Sex Worker Film and Arts Festival or *Sex Worker Fest* was founded in 1999 by the late sex workers' rights activist and artist Carol Leigh in order to celebrate sex worker artists as vital and integral members of arts communities in the Bay Area. Originating as a single-day event of film and video screenings, for and by Bay Area sex workers, the festival has grown into a 10-day long celebration of art, media, and cultural production from sex worker communities around the world.

Within the last fifty years there has been a proliferation sex worker art, arts shows, and multi-day festivals produced around the world, many directly inspired by the work and legacy of *Sex Worker Fest* as an established hallmark of the global sex worker rights organizing and arts community. In 2000 the festival was adapted in Tucson Arizona featuring 3-days of workshops, panels, and films set to educate and entertain.[7] In April of 2009, The International Committee on

[6] *Gina Gold's Sex Worker Confidential: Grab Your Pussy and Run & Other Stories of Survival and Community*, performed by Gina Gold, San Francisco Bay Area Sex Worker Film & Art Festival Program, May 19-28, 2017.

[7] "Our Background," Sex Workers Arts Festival, Tucson, accessed May 15,2023, https://www.sexworkartsfest.com.

Rights of Sex Workers in Europe (ICRSE) organized the first Sex Worker Open University in London where over 200 sex workers rights activists, allies, and visitors participated in workshops, discussion panels, pole dancing, zine-making, film screenings and art exhibitions.[8] Vixen, a sex worker peer led collective in Victoria, Australia partnered with The Scarlet Alliance and the Australian Sex Worker Association in 2012 to host a week-long *Festival of Sex Work* in Melbourne including public panels on sex work policy, public Q&As with sex workers, walking tours of the city's historical sex work sites, film screenings and workshops for current and former sex workers.[9] In 2015, Stroll in Portland, Oregon, and The Sex Worker Outreach Project- Seattle, Washington debuted their own respective multi-day sex worker film and arts festivals, each partnering with local sex work artists, community members and organizations. And in 2021, the transnational Black Sex Workers Collective organized their first virtual conference, film festival, and Miss Heaux World pageant amidst global COVID-19 lockdowns.

Despite struggles of increasing levels of criminalization, the COVD-19 pandemic, and open hostility to sex worker's presence online, sex workers continue to share their art, cultural production, and organizing efforts with their audiences and communities. The refusal to be silenced or disappeared from the public sphere demonstrated by the dedication of sex workers around the world to sharing their art urgently demands consideration.

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[8] Luca and Carrie, "Sex Worker Open University in London a Success!," Sex Work Europe, International Committee on the Rights of Sex Workers in Europe, March 7, 2009, https://www.sexworkeurope.org/fr/news/icrse-past-articles/sex-worker-open-university-london-success; "London Sex Worker Open University: Call for submissions!," NSWP, Global Network of Sex Work Projects, October 12, 2011, https://www.nswp.org/event/london-sex-worker-open-university.

[9] Kylie Northover, "Sex workers shine light on their trade with Q&A," The Age, May 30, 2012, https://www.theage.com.au/national/victoria/sex-workers-shine-light-on-their-trade-with-q-and-a-20120529-1zhqk.html.

This dissertation examines the cultural significance of art produced by and within sex working/trading communities, such a as Maxxine's "Fierce Solid Gold Warrior Diva," as well as the artist practices, art shows, and festivals that fund, curate, and celebrate sex worker artistic productions. Rather than strictly focusing on the ways sex worker cultural production disrupts harmful/incomplete narratives of the sex industry for non-sex working publics (which it does, and I will discuss this later), this project's research question focuses on the impact of art produced by and within sex working and trading communities *on* sex working and trading communities that produce. Said another way, how does sex worker art impact sex working and trading communities? What systems of meaning does sex worker art hold for the communities in which it belongs? I am interested in reorienting dominant frameworks of analysis away from a defensive perspective which focus on what cultural production works against rather than what it works towards.[10] From this perspective I ask, what is sex worker art working towards? Addressing these questions, the following pages will explore how sex worker cultural production functions as activism among sex working/trading communities as both a project of renarration and a political project of survival, resilience, and community building in its ability to tangibly cultivate relationality among sex working/trading subjects.

[10] Jennifer Doyle, *Hold It Against Me: Difficulty and Emotion in Contemporary Art* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2013), 14.

What is "Sex Worker Art?"

Prior to the 1980s research on "prostitution" or the sex industry was considered obscene with very few scholars considering the topic of any importance.[11] The then small body of research primarily focused on ideas, social movements, and campaigns to abolish prostitution in Anglo America.[12] Academic interest in research on sexual economies has grown substantially over the last 50 years, with an increasing number of academic works investigating the historical connection between erotic laborers and the arts.[13] Art historians and critics have demonstrated the influence of sex workers and the sex industry on the art world, focusing primarily on their depiction as model, muse, or as strategic vantage point in which an artist may offer some critique of society.[14] Further, sex workers themselves and contemporary scholars from sociology, cultural studies, and porn studies emphasize the nature of erotic labor as performance art itself, referencing the emotional labor of performing authenticity, pleasure, and/or strategic depictions of race, gender, and sexuality—what Mireille Miller-Young terms "illicit eroticism."[15] My work

[11] Timothy Gilfoyle, "Prostitutes in History: From Parables of Pornography to Metaphors of Modernity," *American Historical Review* 104, no. 1 (1999), 117-141.

[12] Gilfoyle, "Prostitutes in History," 118.

[13] Gilfoyle, "Prostitutes in History," 1999; Ine Vanwesenbeeck, "Another Decade of Social Scientific Work on Sex Work: A Review of Research 1990–2000," *Annual Review of Sex Research* 12, no 1 (2001): 242-489; Ronald Weitzer, "Sociology of Sex Work," *The Annual Review of Sociology* 35 (2009): 213-254; Judith R. Walkowitz, "The Politics of Prostitution and Sexual Labour," *History Workshop Journal* 82 (2016): 188-198; Kate D'Adamo, "Sex (Work) in the Classroom. How Academia Can Support the Sex Worker Rights Movement," In *Challenging Perspectives on Street- Based Sex Work,* ed. by Katie Hail-Jares, Corey S. Shdaimah and Chrysanthi S. Leon (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2017), 194.

[14] Charles Bernheimer, "Degas's Brothels: Voyeurism and Ideology," *Representations* No. 20 Special Issue: Misogyny, Misandry, and Misanthropy (1987): 158-186; Hollis Clayston, *Painted Love: Prostitution in French Art of the Impressionist Era (*Los Angeles: The Getty Research Institute Publications, 2003); Julia Bryan-Wilson, "Dirty Commerce: Art Work and Sex Work since the 1970s," *differences: A Journal of Feminist Cultural Studies 25, no. 3* (2012): 71-112.

[15] Frederique Delacoste and Priscilla Alexander, S*ex Work: Writings by Women in the Sex Industry (*San Francisco: Cleis Press, 1987); Wendy Chapkis, *Live Sex Acts: Women Performing Erotic Labor (*New York: Routledge, 1997); Carol Queen, Real Live Nude Girl: Chronicles of Sex-Positive Culture (San Francisco: Cleiss Press, 1997);

addresses the gap created at the intersection of these separate but connected fields, investigating the contributions of contemporary artists within sex working and trading communities to broader fields of art history, as producers of art and as bearers of artistic traditions.

In the field of art history and musicology*, The Courtesan's Arts: Cross-Cultural Perspectives* anthology takes up "courtesan cultures" as a serious scholarly inquiry within the archives, demonstrating how figures such as the courtesan, and their many historical and linguistic variations (the Greek *hetaera,* the Italian *cortigiana*, the Chinese *ji*, the Korean *gisaeng,* the Indian *taivaif, ganika, devadasi,* and *baiji),* are not only associated with the provision sexual favors and entertainment of an "exclusive" clientele, but understood as the keepers of artistic traditions and shapers of their respective culture.[16] Intellectual and artistic knowledges frequently functioned as interdependent with the courtesans' commerce in sex, specifically in the marketing toward particular clientele of leisure and pleasure classes.[17] Knowledge of the arts and music allowed courtesans to navigate many prescribed gender and

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Katherine Frank, *G-Strings and Sympathy: Strip Club Regulars and Male Desire. (*Durham: Duke University Press, 2002); Danielle Egan, Katherine Frank and Merri Lisa Johnson. *Flesh for Fantasy: Producing and Consuming Exotic Dance* (New York: Hachette Book Group, 2006); Elizabeth Bernstein, *Temporary Yours: Intimacy, Authenticity, and the Commerce of Sex (*Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007); Tristan Taormio, Celine Parreñas Shimizu, Constance Penley, and Mireille Miller-Young, *The Feminist Porn Book*, (New York: The Feminist Press, 2013); Mireille Miller-Young, *A Taste for Brown Sugar: Black Women in Pornography (*Barcelona: Duke University Press, 2014); Jenifer C Nash, *Black Bodies in Ecstasy: Reading Race, Reading Pornography (*Durham: Duke University Press, 2014); L. H. Stallings, *Funk the Erotic: Transaesthetics and Black Sexual Cultures* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2015); Juana Maria Rodriguez, "Pornographic encounters and interpretive interventions: Vanessa del Rio: Fifty Years of Slightly Slutty Behavior," *Women & Performance: a journal of feminist theory* 25, no. 3 (2016), 315-335; Angela Jones, *Camming: Money, Power, and Pleasure in the Sex Work Industry (*New York: New York University Press, 2020); Camille Waring, "Visual Activism and Marginalized Communities in Online Spaces." in *Feminist Art Activisms and Artivisms*, ed. by Katy Deepwell (Amsterdam: Valiz, 2020), 202-213; Heather Berg, *Porn Work: Sex, Labor, and Late Capitalism* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2021); Antonia Crane, "Dispatch from the California Stripper Strike," in *We Too: Essays on Sex Work and Survival,* ed Natalie West with Tina Horn (New York City: The Feminist Press, 2021), 119-124.

[16] Martha Feldman and Bonnie Gordon, *The Courtesan's Arts: Cross Cultural Perspectives (*New York: Oxford University Press, 2006).

[17] Feldman and Gordon, *The Courtesan's Arts,* 6.

class boundaries, gaining access to opportunities, wealth, access to civic spaces, and social privileges generally denied other women in their societies.[18]

In ancient Greece many women providing sexual services or entertainment utilized their knowledge of the arts and music to differentiate themselves from the *pornai*, frequently translated as "common prostitutes."[19] Though the *aulētrides,* "aulos-players" or "flute girls," were also of lower status and frequently slave background, they carried more social capital than the *pornai* due to their musical knowledge.[20] The *aulētrides* entertained their own patrons with music in addition to their provision of sexual services, and regularly performed at symposia, the ritualized drinking event for Greek men, to which no proper women could be present.[21] The *aulētrides'* music was said to possess an intoxicating power in which "men forgot themselves," so much so the music justified Greek logics of the mind body split which understood women and flute music as categorically separate from higher order thinking. [22] Due to their musical and

[18] Feldman and Gordon, *The Courtesan's Arts,* 10.

[19] This section will focus on the *aulētrides* of ancient Greece. Though the *hetaerae, translated as* "female companion(s)," of ancient Greece are also known throughout the modern world for their knowledge and command of the arts, contemporary scholars question the historical accuracy of the narratives that connect these women with the arts.

Leslie Kurke, "Inventing the Hetaira: Sex, Politics, and Discursive Conflict in Archaic Greece," *Classical Antiquity* 16, no. 1(1997): 106-155; James Davidson, "Making a Spectacle of Her(self): The Greek Courtesan and the Art of the Present," in *The Courtesan's Arts: Cross Cultural Perspectives,* ed. by Feldman, Martha, and Bonnie Gordon *(*New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), 40; Christopher A. Faraone, "The Masculine Arts of the Ancient Greek Courtesan," in *The Courtesan's Arts: Cross Cultural Perspectives,* ed. by Feldman, Martha, and Bonnie Gordon (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), 209-220.

[20] James Davidson, "Women and Boys," in *Courtesans and Fishcakes: The Consuming Passions of Classical Athens* (Glasgow: Fontana Press, 1998), 73-108, and Debra Harmel, *Trying Neaira: The True Story of a Courtesan's Scandalous Life in Ancient Greece (*New Have: Yale University Press, 2003).

[21] Davidson, "Women and Boys," 73-108; Harmel, *Trying Neaira, 2003.*

[22] Christine Tulley, "Exploring the "Flute Girls" of Ancient Greece through Multimodality," *Classics@* 17 (2019): 1-10.

entertainment capabilities, the *aulētrides* seem to have occupied a more complex or transitory role in ancient Greek society than merely a slave prostitute, falling somewhere between the *hetaerae,"* elite courtesans, and the *pornai*.[23] In fact it was possible that through their popularity the *aulētrides* could cultivate enough of a "fan club" to compel patrons to buy them their freedom from slavery and/or transition to higher classes of prostitution.[24]

Literature on the Zhou period of Ancient China further demonstrates the historical connection of erotic laborers and the arts.[25] Within legal documents from 513 BCE, historian Robert Van Gulick identifies tropes of *nüyue* 女樂, young women trained in music and dance, kept by princes and high officials to provide musical entertainment and sexual services to their masters, retinue, and guests during the Eastern Zhou Dynasty (770-256 BCE).[26] The historical literature traces the origins of Chinese courtesanship to the Spring and Autumn period (770-476 BCE) specifically, with the establishment of a Female Quarter (*nü lü* 女閭) housing seven hundred courtesans and archaeological discovery of Marquis Yi's (d. 433 BCE) tomb containing the remains of twenty young women with musical instruments.[27]

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[23] Tulley, 2019.

[24] Nils Johan Ringdal, "Greek Liberalism" in Love for Sale: A World History of Prostitution (Grove Press: New York, 2007), ebook 138-180.

[25] Ping Yao, "The Status of Pleasure: Courtesan and Literati Connections in T'ang China (618- 907)," *Journal of Women's History* 14, no. 2 (2002), 26-53; Robert Hans Van Gulik, *Sexual Life in Ancient China: A Preliminary Survey of Chinese Sex and Society from ca. 1500 B.C. till 1644 A.D*. (London: Brill, 2003), 27-28; Daria Berg, "Amazon, Artist, and Adventurer: A Courtesan in Late Imperial China." In *The Human Tradition in Modern China,* ed. by Kenneth J. Hammond, Kristin Stapleton. (Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield, 2008, 15-32; Jiani Chen, "Misty Flowers in a Floating World: Images of Courtesans in Ming Dynasty Nanjing." PhD thesis, Order Number 32800. SOAS University of London, 2018.

[26] Van Gulik, *Sexual Life in Ancient China*, 27; J. Chen, *Misty Flowers*, 16.

[27] Yao, *The Status of Pleasure,* 27; Ingrid Furniss, "Unearthing China's Informal Musicians: An Archaeological and Textual Study of the Shang to Tang Periods," *Yearbook for Traditional Music* 41 (2009), 23–41; J. Chen, *Misty Flowers*, 16.

The Chinese *ji,* despite the contemporary translation of "prostitute" from modern Chinese, were first and foremost performing artists in the Tang, Song, and Ming Dynasties.[28] More in line with the approximate translation of "courtesan" or even "entertainer," the *ji* of the Tang and Song dynasties were first and foremost performance artists, with their elevated gentility and mastery of the arts differentiating them from other erotic laborers of the time."[29] Even a *xiadeng jinü* 下等妓女 (low-ranking courtesan) was considered an "entertainer who approached a table without being invited, rather than someone who provided strictly sexual services."[30] Before the Manchu rulers of the Qing dynasty ended state patronage of official *ji* resulting in the decline Chinese courtesan culture, the *ji* had ascended to the center of elite culture the late Ming Dynasty, with many gaining notoriety as poets, calligraphers, and painters in their own right.[31]

Scholar Judith T. Zeitlin demonstrates in her research how performances of musical ability and dance were essential components to the *ji's* repertoire of skillsets.[32] Found in every

[28] Beverly Bossler, "Shifting Identities: Courtesans and Literati in Song China," *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies* 62, no. 1 (2002), 5-37; Beverly Bossler, "Vocabularies of Pleasure: Categorizing Female Entertainers in the Late Tang Dynasty," *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies* 72, no. 1 (2012), 71-99.

[29] Bossler, "Shifting Identities," 7; Jeanne Larsen, *Willow, Wine, Mirror, Moon: Women's Poems from Tang China*. (Rochester: BOA Editions, Ltd., 2005), 3; Bossler, "Vocabularies of Pleasure," 74; J. Chen, *Misty Flowers*, 18-20.

[30] Bossler, "Shifting Identities."

[31] Paul S. Ropp, "Ambiguous Images of Courtesan Culture in Late Imperial China," In *Writing Women in Late Imperial China*, ed. by Ellen Widmer and Kang-i Sun Chang (Palto Alto: Stanford University Press, 1997), 17-45; Bossler, 2002; Jean Wetzel, "Hidden Connections: Courtesans in the Art World of the Ming Dynasty," *Women's Studies* 31, no. 5 (2002), 645-669; Larson, *Willow, Wine, Mirror, Moon*, 2005; Judith T. Zeitlin, "Notes of Flesh" and the Courtesan's Song in Seventeenth-Century China," in *The Courtesan's Arts: Cross Cultural Perspectives,* ed. by Feldman, Martha and Bonnie Gordon (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), 75-100; D. Berg, "Amazon, Artist, and Adventurer," 17-20; Judith T. Zeitlin, "The Gift of Song: Courtesans and Patrons in Late Ming and Early Qing Cultural Production." *In Hsiang Lectures on Chinese Poetry 4 (*Montréal: McGill University, 2008), 1-46; Bossler, 2012; Lee, Sylvia, "Orchid Paintings by Seventeenth-Century Chinese Courtesans: Erotic Performances and Tokens of Seduction," *Harvard Asia Quarterly* 16, no. 3 (2014), 31-41; J. Chen, *Misty Flowers*, 2018.

[32] Zeitlin, "Notes of Flesh;" "The Gift of Song."

town and village during the Song Dynasty, the *ji* performed at a wide variety of social gatherings, from intimate meetings of friends for drinks in private residences, wineshops, and restaurants, to large state banquets at the imperial court.[33] The court even maintained its own school of performing arts to cultivate the skills of the courtesans who performed at state banquets. It was a common practice for elite men to keep a few household courtesans *(jia ji*), with some men hosting entire tropes, whose main function was to entertain their master's guests with song and dance, occasionally "serving" in more intimate ways.[34] A baseline of signing ability and knowledge of a few songs were required of most *ji*, but due to the erotic connotations of women's voices China due to Confucian epistemologies, many courtesans specifically specialized in singing in order to enhance their sexual allure.[35] Emphasizing vocal refinement, courtesans would train in the art of "pure singing" performing dramatic arias without the embellishments of a theater performance (lines of dialogue, make-up, costumes, dance steps), accompanied only by light instrumentals (e.g. flute) and minimal props (e.g. fan).[36] Zeitlan notes how the notable playwright and trainer of *ji*, Li Yu advocated for the courtesans to not only master the art of musical performance but also of composition, writing, "Nothing in the past thousand years beats the incomparable charm of listening to a woman sing a song she herself has

[33] Bossler, "Shifting Identities."

[34] Bossler, "Shifting Identities."

[35] Zeitlin, "The Gift of Song," 7.

[36] Zeitlin, 4.

composed, uniting scholar and beauty in one person."[37] Further, even in retirement ji might be hired to teach singing and dancing to subsequent generations of *ji* or within private households.[38]

Rather than strictly performing as a service, *mingji* (renowned ji) used musical composition as a form of gift-like payment and performance of reciprocity.[39] The gift-economy was important to the *mingji* as direct payment for services or objects of high value was considered "déclassé." It was not uncommon for *mingji* to be given literary or artist gifts (e.g painting, poems, lyrics to an aria), to which she would respond in kind (add to the painting, write a poem of her own, sing the song).[40]

Scholars of the Tang and Ming dynasties further demonstrate the significance of the *ji*'s mastery of poetry writing and recitation, in addition to their musical talents.[41] In 714 of the Tang Dynasty, courtesan entertainers became part of the Office of Music Instruction and began to share cultures with the literati, China's male elite.[42] Whereas Chinese gentry women were allowed to study with the literati in the inner chambers managed by familial line, the courtesans were the first women to be educated in a broader environment with non-familiar literati.[43] Daria Berg notes observes how ji were considered to "belong to the world of letters," being made public women by virtue of being written about by the literati, but also by being writers of poetry,

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[37] Zeitlin, 9.

[38] Zeitlin "Notes of Flesh," 77; J. Chen, *Misty Flowers*, 36.

[39] Zeitlin, "The Gift of Song," 2.

[40] Zeitlin, 3.

[41] Ropp, "Ambiguous Images;" Bossler, "Shifting Identities;" Larsen, *Willow, Wine, Mirror, Moon*; Zeitlin, "Notes of Flesh;" D. Berg, "Amazon, Artist, and Adventurer;" Zeitlin, "The Gift of Song;" J. Chen, *Misty Flowers*, 2018.

[42] D. Berg, "Amazon, Artist, and Adventurer," 16.

[43] J. Chen, *Misty Flowers*, 58.

calligraphy, literary works themselves. [44] Though very little of the poetry written by women of the Tang dynasty survives, a few historians have been able to compile what remains of what Jiani Chen terms "floating materials." Much like their social position and identities, the poetry of the *ji* "floated," as it was inscribed in *biji* (unofficial notebooks in art history), exchanged with clientele as gifts or within letters, or delivered in song and later inscribed.[45]

Despite lacking the established mechanisms of literary preservation available to the male literati, Chen demonstrates how the *ji* of the Ming dynasty were able to ensure the survival of their work through anthologization.[46] Women's poetry was treated as a niche addition to anthologies, to be published and viewed entirely separately from that of the male literati.[47] The general anthology *Guo ya* (Elegance of the State) of 1573 included an entire volume of women writers in *Gui ya* (The Elegance of the Boudoir) with the final section of the text dedicated to poems by courtesans.[48] Chen observes how many gentry women published anonymously, while Ming courtesans were able to publish their work in these anthologies by name, and thus make a name for themselves in the literary world.[49] Chen draws on two courtesans' poetry anthologies *Qinglou yunyu* 青樓韻語 (Enchanting Words from Green Tower, 1616) and *Gujin qinglou ji* 古今青樓集 (Collection from Green Tower: Ancient and Modern, 1623) to contextualize the ways

[44] J. Chen, 58; Yao, "The Status of Pleasure."

[45] Ropp, "Ambiguous Images;" Jeanne Larsen *Brocade River Poems: Selected Works by the Tang Dynasty Courtesan Xue Tao (*Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1987); Larsen, *Willow, Wine, Mirror, Moon*; J. Chen, *Misty Flowers*, 2018.

[46] Larsen, *Willow, Wine, Mirror, Moon*; J. Chen, *Misty Flowers*.

[47] J. Chen, 54.

[48] J. Chen, 54.

[49] J. Chen, 52.

ji were able to claim agency in the literary world and provides a diverse image for courtesan poetry, including the works of both famous and "mediocre" courtesans.[50]

In her work *Brocade River Poems: Selected Works by the Tang Dynasty Courtesan Xue Tao*, Jeanne Larsen attributes the success of *ji* Xue Tao to her ability to provide feminine intellectual companionship and skill in poetry. Tao's poetry dealt with complex emotion themes such as grief, erotic seduction, and longing for a lost utopia and revealed she entertained many important patrons.[51]

> "Larsen believes that critics have shortchanged Xue Tao by reading her as a poetess (or even more narrowly, as a "love-lorn" woman) when, to the contrary, Xue's use of Tang conventions in a broad range of topics and skill in assuming perspectives that were not identifiably female proved her a self-aware, articulate member of the larger literary community."[52]

Larsen demonstrates how Tao's poetic verses often contain dual themes that intend contradiction, offering social commentary and an affirmation of individuality through poetic composition.[53]

As the *ji* took up the writing pursuits of the literati, many *ji* also took up the arts of painting and calligraphy, occupying an intermediary position in the arts of painting, as both subject of male painters and painters in their own right.[54] The courtesans would host gatherings

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[50] J. Chen, 52.

[51] Larsen, *Brocade River Poems.*

[52] Cynthia Chennault, "Reviewed Work(s): Brocade River Poems: Selected Works by the Tang Dynasty Courtesan Xue Tao by Jeanne Larsen," *Chinese Literature: Essays, Articles, Reviews (CLEAR)* 9, no. 1/2 (1987), 148-151.

[53] Chennault, 150.

[54] Wetzel, "Hidden Connections;" D. Berg, "Amazon, Artist, and Adventurer;" Sylvia Lee, "Orchid Paintings by Seventeenth-Century Chinese Courtesans: Erotic Performances and Tokens of Seduction," *Harvard Asia Quarterly* 16.3 (2014), 31-41.

of literati patrons where they would paint for their audience as a form of entertainment and performance of their artistic talent to enhance their sensual allure.[55] Orchids were a favorite of many *ji*, for their symbolism (as representation of the painter's physical beauty, secluded beauty waiting to be saved, or as hermit) and as relatively easy to paint. [56] The paintings would sometimes be exchanged between the *ji* and their patrons as tokens of courtship and seduction or sold to literati collectors.[57]

Courtesans were able to enjoy a relative amount of freedom and status in society through their beauty but even more in their ability to construct a public representation of the self-grounded in the mastery of the literary and visual arts.[58] Though "there seems to simply have been too many celebrated courtesans to list and catalog them all," two notable Chinese courtesans of the late Ming dynasty Ma Shouzhen and Xue Susu were able to achieve notable social prominence from their talent as painters and calligraphers.[59] Ma Shouzshen was extremely successful as a courtesan-artist, and by the time she was eighteen respected literati were frequently requesting her works and entire envoys would travel as from as far as Siam to purchase one of her painted fans.[60] Despite the orchid's reputation of being "easy" to paint, Shouzhen's catalog of work, specifically the painting *Orchid and Rock* (1572) demonstrates mastery of literati-style calligraphy that rendered the entire scene of orchid plants, complete with

[55] Lee, 31.

[56] Wetzel, "Hidden Connections," 660; D. Berg, "Amazon, Artist, and Adventurer," 20; Lee, 31.

[57] Lee, 2014; Wetzel, 656.

[58] Lee, 2014; Wetzel, 656.

[59] D. Berg, "Amazon, Artist, and Adventurer," 20.

[60] Wetzel, "Hidden Connections," 656.

flowers and leaves, and small complimentary bamboo plant (with leaves) in a single brush stroke.[61] Like Shouzhen, Xue Susu garnering a reputation on par with members of the male literati for her talent in painting and calligraphy, in addition to her skills in conversation and on horseback.[62] At age fifteen, Susu's work was discovered by a prominent art critic which gained her access to training under three acclaimed mentos of her time. [63] Her work became known for it's quickness in brushstroke, intricacy, and variety (painting orchids, bamboo, plum blossoms, landscapes, and figures), distinguishing itself from other works at the time.[64] Male writers and painters frequently depicted courtesans as images of their own fantasies and desires intheir works, but Susu used her art to imagine herself outside of her publicity, as a hermit- "a solitary poet and artist who has found fulfilment in life."[65]

Much like the Chinese *ji*, knowledge of the arts was and is foundational to the roles of the *devadāsī* in Southern India. Dating back to the third century B.C., the *devadāsī,* or "servant of god," existed as a distinct class of women, who through a series of ceremonies dedicated themselves to Hindu temple deities as their "mortal wives."[66] Since the orientalist Western epistemologies of colonialism in India could not understand the cultural system of the *devadāsī*'s religiosity, sexuality, and artistic subjectivity outside of the binary "prostitute" or "chaste nun,"

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[61] Wetzel, 656.

[62] Wetzel, 2002; D. Berg, "Amazon, Artist, and Adventurer," Lee, "Amazon, Artist, and Adventurer."

[63] D. Berg, 20-21.

[64] Wetzel, "Hidden Connections," 660. D. Berg, "Amazon, Artist, and Adventurer," 20-21.

[65] D. Berg, 30; Lee, "Orchid Paintings," 32.

[66] Amrit Srinivasan, "Reform and Revival: The Devadasi and Her Dance," *Economic and Political Weekly* 20, no. 44 (1985), 1869-1876; Doris, M. Srinivasan, "Royalty's Courtesans and God's Mortal Wives: Keepers of Culture in Precolonial India," in *The Courtesan's Arts: Cross Cultural Perspectives,* ed. Martha Feldman and Bonnie Gordon (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), 161-181.

the *devadāsī'* are frequently referred to as "temple prostitutes" in colonial archives and many subsequent historical literatures. Once young *devadāsī* women completed their dedication ceremonies to the temple deities, they were no longer able to marry and were legally considered "celibate," however they were not prevented from leading "normal" lives involving economic activity, sex, and childbearing.[67] In fact, in their dedication to the temple the *devadāsī* were encouraged to cultivate their knowledge in the performing arts, which would attract patronage the temples.[68]

Serving as one of the oldest records of the "roles" of the *devadāsī,* Vatsyayana's *Kāmasūtra (*fourth century A.D.) details sixty-four arts the *devadāsī* should master.[69] Demonstrating the devadāsī's position as the feminine "keepers of culture," Vatsyayana's list includes: singing, playing on musical instruments, dancing, writing, drawing, picture-making, trimming, and decorating, as well as some "unexpected skills" including knowledge of magic, tailoring, carpentry, architecture, languages, chemistry, minerology, cock-, quail-, and ram-fighting, rules of society, and how to pay respects and compliments to others.[70] In the Madras Province of Southern India the *devadāsī* were the sole dancers of *sadir,* (a solo, feminine, classical dance as part of the allied arts of Tamil Bhakti worship) under the tutelage of an

[67] A. Srinivasan, "Reform and Revival," 1869.

[68] A. Srinivasan, "Reform and Revival;" Avanthi Meduri, "Nation, Woman, Representation: The Sutured History of the Devadasi and Her Dance," PhD diss, Order No. 9621819, New York University, 1996; D. Srinivasan, "Royalty's Courtesans;" Davesh Soneji, *Unfinished Gestures: Devadasis, Memory, and Modernity in South India* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012).

[69] D. Srinivasen, 162.

[70] D. Srinivasen, 162; Meduri, "Nation, Woman, Representation," xviii.

nattuvanar (male dance guru).[71] Notable *devadāsī* Muddupalani mastered multiple languages in addition to Sanskrit, authored the much-acclaimed epic poem entitled Radhika Santwanamu in 1887.[72] Despite the translation, huge portions of the work were excised due to the publisher's fear the work might include sexually explicit materials, including her concluding couplets in which she traced her female lineage and claimed her positionality as a woman artist.[73]

Predating the *Kāmasūtra* is the *Arthaśāstra*, a text of Indian polity from the first or second century A.D, discusses the *devadāsī* as well as the roles of the *ganikā*, Indian courtesans of exceptional and proficient training in the arts, differentiating them from the *veśyā or rupafivd,* courtesans or "prostitutes" lacking in artistic talents.[74] The *Arthaśāstra* details not only how the *ganikās, dādsīs,* and actresses should be trained in the arts (singing, reading, writing, and recitation in Sanskrit, painting, acting, playing instruments such as the vīnā, pipe, and drum, and the art of attracting the minds of others), but how the state should bear the fiscal responsibility for such training.[75] Under this arrangement the *ganikā* turn over all of their earnings to the state in exchange for a monthly salary from the kings treasury and lavish accoutrements, including living arrangements.[76]

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[71] Due to the connection of the *sadir* to the *devādāsi,* the dance was reimagined as a secular dance practice of Bharata Natyam due to the vigorous anti-nautch campaigns and subsequent passage of the Madras Devadāsīs Prevention of Dedication Act of 1947.

Meduri, xxiii; A. Srinivasan, "Reform and Revival," 1869.

[72] Meduri, xviii-xix.

[73] Meduri, xviii-xix.

[74] D. Srinivasan, "Royalty's Courtesans."

[75] D. Srinivasan, 162-164.

[76] D. Srinivasan, 162-164.

Similarly to the *ganikā,* the t*awa'if*, elite courtesans who performed predominantly for the rich nobility of Northern India during the Mughal rule in the mid-18th century, were trained in the performing arts: Kathak and Hindustani classical music, dancing, singing, and recitation of poetry.[77] Early accounts of the *tawa'if* connect them with the performance of poetry: they sang, mimed, and danced poems of ghazal verses as well as their own repertory of classical, contemporary, and improvisational poems in Hindi.[78]

One of the most prominent *tawa'if* was "Bibi" Moran Sakar who married Ranjit Singh shortly after being crowned Maharaja in 1802.[79] Moran earing herself the nickname "bibi" as she "danced like a peacock," captivated the Maharaja who went on to mint coins in her image, and name, bestow her with revenue-free grants, building gardens and a mosque in her name ('Mai Moran Masjid' at Lahore). Moran most notably convinced Singh to build a muti-purpose bridge structure in her name, the *Pul Kanjarī* or *Tawāi'fpul* (the Bridge of the Courtesan) which included a water well, tank, garden, *dharamsala* (public shelter) and *sarai* (caravan station for travelers to rest).[80] Their marriage and subsequent public actions was seen to have radically challenged the status quo of their time.[81]

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[77] Navaneeth, S. Krishnan, "A Short History of Tawa'ifs in India." *Academica.edu*. University of Hyderabad. Accessed May 2023.

[78] Regula Burckhardt Qureshi, "Female Agency and Patrilineal Constraints," in *The Courtesan's Arts: Cross Cultural Perspectives,* ed. Martha Feldman and Bonnie Gordon (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), 321.

[79] Qureshi, "Female Agency, 321; Radha Kapuria, "Of Music and the Maharaja: Gender, Affect and Power in Ranjit Singh's Lahore," *Modern Asian Studies (2019),* 1-26.

[80] Kapuria, 10.

[81] Kapuria, 10.

Though none of the historical sources available provide a wholly objective historical account of the lives and roles of the *devadāsī, ganikā*, and t*awa'if*, they do document the socio-cultural roles of these women as practitioners of the arts. Recent scholarship documenting the survival of the cultural practice of *devadāsī and the* t*awa'if*, brings these communities of women back into the present after so frequently being written out of modernity as figures of the pre-colonial past.[82] The *devadāsī and tawa'if's* singing and dancing were at the center of elite entertainment from at least 1800 until Indian Independence (1947), performing in private salons and the courts of Princely States in India until they were abolished in 1952. [83] Contemporary accounts show courtesans held court and performed for "private salons" in their own residences, in pop-up-like urban salons, and tents (for t*awa'if* joining military patrons), with many of the courtesans managing or even owning their *kotha*. (villa).[84] While the *devadāsī and tawa'if's* accommodated their patron's performance preferences, they maintained control over the proceedings of the salon and who was permitted to attend (frequently only admitting 1-2 patrons at a time).[85] It was these quasi-domestic private salons and the prevalence of the courtesan's music on the radio and presence in Indian culture that fueled the 'anti-nautch' reformation movements in India.[86] Ultimately this purity movement impacted the *devadāsī in the South, in the passage of the* Madras Devadāsīs Prevention of Dedication Act of 1947, and the t*awa'if in the North,* banning of 1) "all (women) performers whose private life is a public scandal" from

[82] Qureshi, "Female Agency," 312; Soneji, *Unfinished Gestures*.

[83] Qureshi, 312; Soneji, *Unfinished Gestures*.

[84] A. Srinivasan, "Reform and Revival;" Qureshi, 312; Soneji, *Unfinished Gestures*.

[85] Qureshi, 319.

[86] Qureshi, 319; Soneji, *Unfinished Gestures*.

All India Radio' and 2) banning all private salon performances, which would be enforced by police raids.[87] As a result, the *devadāsī and tawa'if,* as well as their multifaceted art had overwhelmingly ceded from the cultural scene as it once was, apart from nostalgic representations in film and literature.[88]

Much like the Chinese *ji* or India's *devadāsī and tawa'if,* the Korean *kisaeng* (traditional courtesans*)* have frequently been inadequately described as prostitutes under colonial classifications systems that fail to understand the centrality of the performing arts and entertainment to the *kisaeng's* role in society.[89] The *kisaeng* can be traced to the Koryo Dynasty (918-1392), and due to their skills in poetry and the performing arts the *kisaeng* grew to be the favored entertainers in the courts of the Choso ̆n Dynasty (1392–1910). [90] The *kisaeng* were either born into the lowest caste *ch'ŏnmin*, sharing the status of slaves and butchers, or they were sold into it.[91] The *kisaeng* were the only women to receive a formal education or permitted to share public

[87] A. Srinivasan, "Reform and Revival;" Meduri, "Nation, Woman, Representation;" Qureshi, 319; Soneji, *Unfinished Gestures*; Krishnan, "Short History of Tawa'ifs," 8.

[88] Qureshi, 312-313.

[89] Hwang Jini et al., *Songs of the Kisaeng: Courtesan Poetry of the Last Korean Dynasty,* trans. Constantine Contogenis and Wolhee Choe (Seoul: Literature Translation Institute of Korea, 1997); Lee Insuk, "Convention and Innovation: The Lives and Cultural Legacy of the *Kisaeng* in Colonial Korea (1910-1945)," *Seoul Journal of Korean Studies* 23, no. 1 (2010), 71-93; Ruth Barraclough, "The Courtesan's Journal: *Kisaeng* and the Sex Labour Market in Colonial Korea," *Intersections: Gender and Sexuality in Asia and the Pacific* 29 (2012), http://intersections.anu.edu.au/issue29/barraclough.htm; Christine Mok, "Memoirs of a Kisaeng: Choreographing Performance Historiography." *Theatre Survey* 54, no. 1 (2013), 107-130; Ruth Barraclough, "A History of Sex Work in Modern Korea," in *Routledge Handbook of Sexuality Studies in East Asia,* ed. Mark McLelland, Vera Mackie (New York: Routledge, 2015), 294-305.

[90] Barraclough, "Courtesan's Journal," "Sex Work in Modern Korea;" Insuk, "Lives and Legacy;" Mok, "Memoirs of a Kisaeng."

[91] The caste system was officially disbanded in 1894, though the kisaeng remained a socially marginalized group in society.

Barraclough, "Courtesan's Journal."

space with elite men, being highly educated in music, dance, poetry, calligraphy, and textile crafts in addition to erotic labor served as a way to be an engaging companion.[92] The *kisaeng* had their own internal hierarchies (yegi, *ilp'ae kisaeng, ip'ae, and the samp'ae)* with designated repertoires of music each category could perform and only those of the highest level (*yegi*) were both accomplished performers and composers of *kagok* (Korean classical song).[93] The elite or "first grade" *kisaeng* (yegi and *ilp'ae kisaeng)* performed traditional *kagok* songs and dances to courts for banquets, royal marriages, welcoming ceremonies for foreign envoys, and semi-annual sacrifices to Confucius.[94] It was these *kisaeng* who were responsible for the transmission for courtly music beyond the palace to the general public and wider culture.[95]

As Japanese colonial rule eliminated the state-sponsored institution of the kisaeng, enacting the Kisaeng Regulation Order of 1908 that required the kisaeng to register with the police as "prostitutes."[96] Despite their shifting positions under a new system of licensed prostitution, the *Kisaeng* maintained their traditional practices of performance though it was no longer legally mandated, hosting "kisaeng parties" houses into the 1940-60s to maintain expectations of their clientele.[97] The poetry of the kisaeng were both political and self-expressive, illustrating the "interrelations between selfhood and creativity."[98] These dances and

[92] Mok, "Memoirs of a Kisaeng," 113.

[93] Barraclough, "Courtesan's Journal;" Mok, 76.

[94] Mok, 75.

[95] Insuk, "Lives and Legacy," 72.

[96] Barraclough, "Sex Work in Modern Korea," 296.

[97] Insuk, "Lives and Legacy," 71; Barraclough, 296; Mok, "Memoirs of a Kisaeng," 113.

[98] Barraclough, "Sex Work in Modern Korea;" Jini, Hwang et al., *Songs of the Kisaeng*; Mok, 113.

songs performed by the *kisaeng* are considered traditional Korean art forms, and their poetry came to epitomize the traditional genre of *sijo* poetry in Korean Literature.[99] The last generation of kisaeng trained in *kagok* at the official *kisaeng* schools have mostly disappeared, died or gone into hiding, with only a few of them teaching music or dance.[100]

Official red-light districts have existed in Japan since the early seventeenth century, but courtesans and erotic laborers specializing in musical and performing arts can be traced back to the Heian period (794-1185).[101] Systems of prostitution entered Japanese high society of the Heian period as a form of entertainment for the elite, with courtesans likened to the *hetaerae* of Ancient Greece by historians for their talents in music, dance, singing, and poetry (poems of Heian courtesans were printed in imperial poetry anthologies).[102] During the late Heian period in its transition to the Kamukura period, emerged the *shirabyōshi*, professional dancers who blurred the line between entertainers and "prostitutes."[103] The *shirabyōshi* were courtesans admired for their skills in the performing arts as well as their beauty, who sought the patronage of the upper class with a few famous *shirabyōshi* becoming concubines to elite men.[104] Due to their talents in the arts courtesans were able to gain favor and social position among the elites in Japanese society, such as a courtesan trio Akomaru, Kane, and Otomae who were so well versed in

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[99] Mok, 113.

[100] Insuk, "Lives and Legacy," 72; Mok, 113.

[101] Cecilia Segawa Seigle, *Yoshiwara: The Glittering World of the Japanese Courtesan (*Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1993); Lesley Downer, *Women of the Pleasure Quarters: The Secret History of the Geisha (*New York: Broadway Books, 2002); Kelly M. Foreman, *The Gei of Geisha: Music, Identity and Meaning (*New York: Routledge, 2008).

[102] Seigle, 5.

[103] Seigle, 5.

[104] Seigle, 5-7.

singing and chanting they were sought after by the retired emperor Goshirakawa to work on his archival project of Japanese music.[105] The Ryōjin hishō anthology is composed of traditional and contemporary Japanese songs remembered, performed, and archived by the trio and other *shirabyōshi* and prositutes.[106]

Prostitute-dancer Izumo no Okuni (c. 1578-1613) is credited as the original kabuki dancer; her performances of *yayako* (children's dance), *nebutsu odori* (prayer dance), and other folk dances made her name as renowned as the shogun's. Okuni incorporated fashion statements into her dance routines, making her quite successful as an entertainer: donning monk's robes and/or a Christian cross (at a time Christians were being crucified by order of the Hideyoshi), other times a white ceremonial robes of Shinto priests, a feminine kimono, or the brocade trousers of the *daimyo* as a mean to play with ideologies of gender and religion.[107] Okuni and her troupe would perform on the riverbeds of Kyoto and their success prompted other like dance troupes to emerge, though none with elaborate or strange costumes.[108] The art of kabuki theater was led by prostitute-dancers who would leave the pleasure districts to perform, functioning inadvertently or intentionally as self-promotion. The women continued to be the predominant performers of Kabuki theater until the relocation of their pleasure district from a short walk to Kyoto to a day's long trip and eventual ban on female kabuki players.[109]

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[105] Seigle, 5-7.

[106] Seigle, 5-7.

[107] Seigle, 17; Sophia Clare Eichelburger, "Adult-Female Fashion of the Yoshiwara and the Theaters: Gender, Space, and Clothing of the Early Edo (1615-1750) *Akusho,"* Master's Thesis. University of North Chapel Hill, 2023, 20-12.

[108] Seigle, 17; Eichelburger,20-12.

[109] Eichelburger, 16.

Systems of prostitution and sexual entertainment steadily proliferated throughout Japan, eventually leading to the "containment of excess and corruption" and the development of walled-in pleasure districts.[110] The most famous of these pleasure districts was Edo's Yoshiwara. In its early years, Yoshiwara looked to adopt the traditions of *shirabyōshi* as well as the manners and customs of other established pleasure districts, over the years developing its own traditions and lineage of celebrated courtesans.[111] Existing as a floating world unto itself, Yoshiwara was home to bordellos, teahouses, catering shops, restaurants, and any other shops necessary for the pleasure district's internal sustainability.[112] This district hosted a heterogenous a breadth of entertainers, with the elite *shirabyōshi* and *tayū* courteseans, *hashi* (lower cost and status brothels), and the *geisha* performers.[113] The term breaks down into "art" and "person," with the Japanese term *gei* corresponding to fine and performing arts.[114] The first *geisha* were men who entertained patrons in the teahouses of Yoshiwara, with women only entering the profession in the mid-eighteenth century.[115] Though the term was applied loosely to entertainers with a minimal levels of artistic accomplishments, many geisha understand the mastery of performing arts as central to definitions of their professional and personal identities.[116] The *geisha* engaged in erotic labor to varying degrees, with many providing erotic allure or selling sex, only

[110] Eichelburger, 18.

[111] Seigle, *The Glittering World,* 24.

[112] Seigle, 24.

[113] Seigle, *The Glittering World*; Amy Stanley, "Enlightenment Geisha: The Sex Trade, Education, and Feminine Ideals in Early Meiji Japan," *Journal of Asian Studies* 72, no. 3 (2013), 539-562.

[114] Stanley, 540; Foreman, *The Gei of Geisha,* ix*, 1.*

[115] Stanley, 540; Foreman, ix.

[116] Foreman, 3.

sporadically or infrequently.[117] By the nineteenth century much of Yoshiwara had lost its artistic allure, and in 1945 an American Air attack destroyed the city, burning alive nearly 400 erotic laborers who lived in the district with many more drowning as they attempted to escape the air strike.[118]

Prior to the Edo period of Japan, the courtesans of the Italian Renaissance, *cortigiana or cortigiana honesta,* strategically cultivated artistic repertoires to enhance their erotic capital and assert their own subjectivity within established literary traditions. Understanding their voice as a key tool of seduction, by the end of the sixteenth century most of the famous *cortigiana* in Venice were well versed in the musical arts.[119] Scholars contextualize the seductive power of the *cortigiana's* singing and instrumental ability (frequently playing the lute or harpsichord) within sixteenth century Italian expectations of gender which valorized the silence, obedience, domestic confinement, and chastity of women. [120] These expectations of chastity mandated women to remain "untouched by intercourse, desire, or all manners of pollution from sex to dancing, eating

[117] Stanley, "Enlightenment Geisha," 540.

[118] Seigle, *The Glittering World,* 11.

[119] Eric Arthur Nicholson, "Stages of Travesty: The sexual politics of early modern comedy." PhD thesis. Yale University, 1990; Nina Kathleen Treadwell, "Restaging the Siren: Musical Women in the Performance of Sixteenth-Century Italian Theater." PhD thesis, Order Number 3041538. University of Southern California, 2000; Dre Edward Davies, "On Music Fit for a Courtesan: Representation of the Courtesan and Her Music in Sixteenth Century Italy," in *The Courtesan's Arts: Cross Cultural Perspectives,* ed. Feldman, Martha and Bonnie Gordon, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), 144- 158; Dawn De Rycke, "On Hearing the Courtesan in a Gift of Song: The Venetian Case of Gaspara Stampa." in *The Courtesan's Arts: Cross Cultural Perspectives,* ed. Feldman, Martha and Bonnie Gordon, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), 124- 132; Martha Feldman, "The Courtesan's Voice: Petrarchan Lovers, Pop Philosophy and Oral Traditions." in *The Courtesan's Arts: Cross Cultural Perspectives,* ed. Feldman, Martha and Bonnie Gordon, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), 105- 123; Bonnie Gordon, "The Courtesan's Singing Body as Cultural Capital in Seventeenth-Century Italy." in *The Courtesan's Arts: Cross Cultural Perspectives,* ed. Feldman, Martha and Bonnie Gordon, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), 182-198.

[120] Feldman, 106; Gordon, 184-188; Nicholson, 41; Treadwell, 5.

spicy food, reading lascivious books, and cultivating excessive skill."[121] The *cortigiana* turned their lack of chastity into an erotic asset, deriving cultural and sexual capital in the active demonstration of their "excessive" artistic and intellectual talents."[122] Scholar Fiora A. Bassanese describes how it was precisely the courtesan's "openness" from gendered expectations of chastity that constructed her as "a true goddess of love," whose aesthetic, artistic, and intellectual charms "not only beckoned but satiated all cravings."[123] Strategically drawing on the seductive charm of singing, the *cortigiana* are frequently spoken of as sirens in the archives, for their ability to entice their listener to "abandon reason" and "suffer the destructive pangs of love."[124] By the mid sixteenth century, the association of song with the *cortigiana's* repertoires of seduction was so strong the act of singing itself became a watchword for impropriety.[125]

Accomplished Italian courtesans of the time utilized their musical repertories to complement their literary talents, often using melodic verse to perform their own poetic compositions.[126] Poetic composition functioned as a key site of bounded agency for the *cortigiana,* as courtesan-poets strategically reappropriated popular Petrarchanian poetic forms to meet their own needs of self-promotion, expression, and identity formation.[127] Accomplished

[121] Feldman, 106; Gordon, 184-188; Nicholson, 41; Treadwell, 5.

[122] Gordon, 188.

[123] Fiora A. Bassanese, "Private Lives and Public Lies: Texts by Courtesans of the Italian Renaissance," Texas Studies in Literature and Language 30, no. 3 (1988), 297.

[124] Feldman, "The Courtesan's Voice," 105; Gordon, "Courtesan's Singing Body," 185-189; Treadwell, "Restaging the Siren."

[125] Feldman, 105.

[126] De Rycke, "Courtesan in a Gift of Song," 124-132; Feldman, 108.

[127] Bassanese, "Private Lives and Public Lies;" Justin Flosi, "On Locating the Courtesan in Italian Lyric: Distance and Madrigal Texts of Costanzo Festa." in *The Courtesan's Arts: Cross Cultural Perspectives,* ed. Feldman, Martha and Bonnie Gordon, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), 133- 143; Patricia Phillippy, 'Altera Dido': The

lutenist, singer, and courtesan-poet, Tullia d'Aragona (1501/1505-1556) utilized her poetry as a political instrument to solidify her intellectual and social standing. D'Aragona's *Rime* appropriates Petrarchan poetic conventions which position the subject of the poem as muse, idol, or goddess; often idealized, distant, and unattainable.[128] Her *Rime* praises the upper ruling class of Florence as pagan deities to be worshiped, stressing her own inferiority in comparison to the virtues and grace of Duke Cosimo I and the duchess, but hopes to be excused by her art.[129] D'Aragona goes on to praise the wider Medici clan, a collection of affluent men of letters, close friends, and lovers, all to whom d'Aragona dedicates praise and admiration.[130] While acclaiming the worthiness of others, d'Aragona carefully notes that she as well has been the subject of praise and verse of other famous writers.[131] Further d'Aragona deliberately praises men with the capacity and inclination to return the favor, manipulating the Petrachan tradition in a game of mirrors, and ultimately casting herself as both poet and lyrical subject.[132]

Unlike the many courtesans who deployed strategies of Petrarchan imitation, *cortigiana honesta* and poet Veronica Franco (1546-1591) challenged the traditions of Petrarchan poetry more explicitly in her work, both form and poetic subjectivity. Franco's work breaks from the

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Model of Ovid's Heroides in the Poems of Gaspara Stampa and Veronica Franco." *Italica* 69, no. 1 (1992), 1-18; Janet L. Smarr, "A Dialogue of Dialogues: Tullia d'Aragona and Sperone Speroni*." MLN by John Hopkins University Press* 113, no. 1 (1998), 204-212; Dolora Chapelle Wojciehowski, "Veronica Franco vs. Maffio Venier: Sex, Death, and Poetry in Cinquecento Venice." *Italica* 86, no. 3/4 (2006), 367-390

[128] Bassanese, 309; Flossi, 134.

[129] Bassanese, 309; Flossi, 134.

[130] Bassanese, 309; Flossi, 134.

[131] Bassanese, 309; Flossi, 134.

[132] Bassanese, 309; Smarr, "A Dialogue of Dialogues," 204; Flossi, 134.

sonnets conventionally used in sixteenth century Petrarchan models, adopting a *terza rime* or *capitolo* meter.[133] While retaining the Petrarchan mode of correspondence and praise, Franco's poetry does not cast a singular speaker into role of love's victim. [134] Rather Franco's *Terze Rime* celebrates feminine beauty as heaven-sent, but also reimagines the feminine position in her work by bringing her "down to earth" and into direct conversation with the male poetic subject to play out narratives of erotic and social exchange.[135] Utilizing a conversational tone and meter (*capitolo*), Franco is able to assert her own voice and directly address correspondents, friends, and enemies.[136] Further, Franco explicitly praised herself as both an artist and a servant of Venus, breaking from the Petrarchan traditions which sought to integrate the *cortigiana* poet into a façade of respectability and relied on roundabout compliments.[137] Franco utilized her poetic voice as a strategy of self-making, refusing all imposed judgments on her character and foregrounding her own interpretations of her life, work, and art.

The *cortigiana's* expertise in the arts transcended court life, influencing the development of the theatrical arts in sixteenth century Italy. The archives show the Zardinieri Compagnie featured dance troupes of "twelve ill-living women of the city, immodestly dressed in silk" in their performances on the Isle of Murano in 1512 and 1514.[138] Letters written by Nicolo Machiavelli in 1526, document the presence of courtesan performers in the theater and the

[133] Bassanese, 311.

[134] Bassanese, 302; Phillippy, "Altera Dido," 3; Flossi, "Locating the Courtesan in Lyric," 137.

[135] Bassanese, 302; Phillippy, "Altera Dido," 3; Flossi, "Locating the Courtesan in Lyric," 137.

[136] Bassanese, 314.

[137] Bassanese, 313.

[138] Nicholson, "Stages of Travesty," 136.

influence of his courtesan lover, Barbara Salutati ("La Barbara" or Barbara Fiorentina) on his own work,

> "I have dined these [past] evenings with La Barbara and discussed the comedy, so that she offered to come with her singers to provide the chorus between the acts; and I offered to write canzone suitable for the acts.
>
> "She has certain lovers who could be in the way . . . [but I] assure you that she and I have made up our minds to come: we have written five new canzone suitable for the comedy, and they are set to music to be sung between the acts."[139]

The musical arrangement written by Machiavelli with La Barbara, was later composed by Phillippe Verdelot.[140] Scholars believe the surviving madrigals by Verdelot are likely those sung by La Barbara on at least more than one occasion.[141]

Additionally, scholarship on the emergence of professional Italian Theater companies demonstrates a number of the early Italian actresses were members of the *cortigiana honesta* class.[142] In 1564, the first theater company statute to officially document a women as a member of their troupe lists the names of six men and Lucrezia of Siena.[143] The lack of a surname and prefix of 'domina,' note the likelihood of Lucrezia's background as part of the *cortigiana honesta* class.[144] Further documenting the *cortigiana's* presence in Italian theater, a letter from a

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[139] Treadwell, "Restaging the Siren," 32-34; Davies, "On Music Fit for a Courtesan," 144.

[140] Treadwell, 32-34; D. Davies, 144.

[141] Treadwell, 32-34; D. Davies, 144.

[142] Jane Tylus, "Women at the Windows: "Commedia dell'arte" and Theatrical Practice in Early Modern Italy." *Theatre Journal* 49, no. 3 (1997), 331; Treadwell, "Restaging the Siren;" D. Davies, 144; Virginia Scott, "*La Virtu et la volupte.* Models for the Actress in Early Modern Italy and France," *Theatre Research International* 23, no. 2 (2009), 152; Margaret Rose, "The First Italian Actresses, Isabella Andreini and the Commedia dell'Arte," in *The Palgrave Handbook of the History of Women in Stage*, ed. by Jan Sewell and Clare Smout (Switzerland: Springer, 2019), 107-126.

[143] Scott, 152; Rose, 110.

[144] Scott, 152; Rose, 110.

Mantua court official describes his meeting with the well-known actress Vittoria Piissimi as she laments her replacement as director of the Uniti troupe by her patron Prince Vinvenzo Gonzoga,

> "I went to see Signora Vittoria to say good day, and found her in such a deep depression that it almost made me cry… she says she does not know why the Prince wishes to dismember her company, not ever having neglected to serve him, either by day or night, or at any hour, and then to be reward like this, to have merited such an insult."[145]

Signora Vittoria seems to describe her role as both lover and professional actress at the Gonzaga court to the court official, serving the prince "day and night," noting the presence and influence of courtesans in the theater, as well as the fickle nature of their benefactors over which they had no control.[146]

Due to the associations of eroticism with women's musical performances, actresses who performed on stage were immediately regarded with suspicion and 'guilty until proven innocent,' regardless of social standing. [147] Though professional actresses would later be subject to censorship efforts as "harlots," this only served to drive the public's fascination with their performances.[148] And while many actresses were not *cortigiana*, they were expected to encourage 'gifts' of money and clothing from amorous followers, subsequently rewarding the giver and sharing with members of their troupe.[149] Termed the 'Gaillarde model,' scholar Virginia Scott describes the prevailing stereotypes of actresses in the first half of the sixteenth century as married (typically to another actor), but not faithful, and whose value to the troupe

[145] Scott, 152; Rose, 110.

[146] Scott, 152; Rose, 110.

[147] Nicholson, "Stages of Travesty," 42; Tylus, "Women at the Windows," 331; Treadwell, "Restaging the Siren," 13, 22.

[148] Nicholson, 42.

[149] Scott, "*La Virtu et la volupte,"* 153.

was determined by her ability to seduce male spectators on and off the stage.[150] Another model appeared with the Italian actresses of the late sixteenth century, spearheaded by actress Isabella Andreini and her husband Francesco who wanted to emphasize Andreini's intellect, respectability, fidelity, and piety, along with her theatrical talents.[151] In France, the Gaillarde model remained dominant until the theater reforms of the 1630s, where it was replaced by a 'courtesan model."[152] The courtesan model presented an illusion of respectability by encouraging married actresses' to engage in strategic liaisons with aristocratic or upper-class men to the benefit of the theater.[153]

Art and Erotic Labor in the Twentieth and Twenty-First centuries

Despite the growing academic interest in the connection between erotic laborers and the arts, much of that research remains grounded in the historical past with limited projects investigating these connections in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. The research that has been produced demonstrates how erotic laborers utilize their artistic and performative talents as political projects of survival, renarration, and identity formation.[154]

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[150] Scott, 154.

[151] Scott, 154.

[152] Scott, 154.

[153] Scott, 154.

[154] Shannon Bell, *Reading, Writing and Rewriting the Prostitute Body* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994); Shannon Bell, *Whore Carnival* (Brooklyn: Autonomedia, 1995); Joshua D Pilzer, *Hearts of Pine: Songs in the Lives of Three Korean Survivors of the Japanese "Comfort Women." (*Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011); Joshua D Pilzer, "Music and Dance in the Japanese Military "Comfort Women" System: A Case Study in the Performing Arts, War, and Sexual Violence," *Women and Music* 18 (2014), 1-23; Christina Han, "Early Modern Korean Feminist Activism: The Art and Life of O Gwisuk (1906–1996)." *Visual Culture and Gender Vol. 11*, ed. Karen Keifer-Boyd & Deborah Smith-Shank (London: Hyphen-UnPress, 2016), 28-31; Waring, "Visual Activism," 2020; Annie Sprinkle and Elizabeth Stephens, *Assuming the Ecosexual Position: The Earth as Lover*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2021; Lena Chen, "Objects of Desire**:** Curating Sex Worker Art in the 21st Century,"

In his book *Hearts of Pine: Songs in the Lives of Three Korean Survivors of the Japanese "Comfort Women,"* Joshua D. Pilzer investigates the significance of traditional Korean musical performance and song to women in the prison-brothel camps as a project of survival. One of Pilzer's interviewees, Mun Okju details how she was abducted by the Japanese, escaped, and conscripted into sexual slavery again, describing how as an accomplished singer and *kisaeng* in training, she was often required to sing at officer's banquets and farewell parties alongside Japanese *geisha*.[155] When the war was over, Okju was able to resume her *kisaeng* in training and become celebrated traditional entertainer of Korea.[156] Though these interviews of survivors, Pilzer observes how sites of musical performance and dance served as a site for the enactment of colonial dominance, sexual violence, and war in Asia, as well as a means of survival for women in the comfort stations as they "made do" with the tools at their disposal (skills in music and dance) amidst highly constrained wartime conditions of enslavement.[157] After the war, Pilzer's interviewees explain they sang because it allowed them space to confront the taboo topic of their experiences during the war, which had been deemed "unspeakable" by the state and society, as well as by many families and friends of the survivors.[158]

Erotic laborers throughout the twentieth and twenty-first centuries have been strategically utilizing their image to make narrative interventions and subvert dominant discourses of gender

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in *Curating as Feminist Organizing,* ed. by Elke Krasny and Lara Perry (London: Routledge, 2022), 253-264; Jooyeon Rhee, "Beyond the Sexualized Colonial Narrative: Undoing the Visual History of Kisaeng in Colonial Korea," *Journal of Korean Studies* 27, no. 1 (2022), 37-64.

[155] Pilzer, "Music and Dance in 'Comfort Women' System," 2-4.

[156] Pilzer, 3-4.

[157] Pilzer, 6.

[158] Pilzer, 6.

and sexuality. In her work on the visual representations of *kisaeng,* Jooyeon Rhee documents how collaborators of *Changhan*, a *kisaeng* magazine from 1927, engaged in projects of visual renarration by actively producing images of themselves as politically conscious subjects.[159] In additional to self-reflective essays, folktales, poetry, and political commentary frequently pointing to colonial capitalism and patriarchy on their social positions, *Changha* published their articles with discerning self-portraits of the writers.[160] As most of the images produced of *kisaeng* were produced by Japanese entrepreneurs (e.g., colonial cards and photographs), Rhee notes the difference in how the kisaeng represent themselves, "What sets these photos apart from commonly circulated *kisaeng* images are the women's serious faces and the books they hold, expressing their literary sensibility rather than their status as entertainers."[161] Through the kisaeng's self-representation they are able to establish their own identities as thinking subjects, and subvert discourses which would render them helpless victims of colonial capitalism or merely objects of desire.[162] A similarly Camille Waring goes on to trace the discursive interventions of twenty-first century sex workers online as visual activism.[163] Independent sex workers are now one of the major image makers in the digital sphere, with their self-portraits (especially if "face-out") functioning as a tool of political protest and powerful statement about the right to exist in online spaces post- FOSTA-SESTA.[164]

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[159] Rhee, "Beyond the Sexualized Colonial Narrative," 37-64.

[160] Rhee, 53.

[161] Rhee, 53.

[162] Rhee, 40-53.

[163] Waring, "Visual Activism," 202-205.

[164] Waring, 205-209.

In the 1970s and 80s "sex worker art" emerged as a category of artistic production and explicit strategy of sex worker activists utilizing art to intervene into dominant societal discourses regarding the sex industry.[165] In her work *Writing and Rewriting the Prostitute Body,* academic Shannon Bell situates the performance art of sex workers as a subset of post-modern feminist art and posits the "prostitute performer" as simultaneously deconstructing and embracing the categorization of the female body as spectacle.[166]

> "In prostitute performance art there is a conscious crossing and recrossing of the line between the sacred and profane until one slides and dissolves into the other… prostitute performance art is about the refusal to fit into predetermined categorizations; prostitute artists use their bodies as sites of resistance to reunify "what patriarchy has pulled apart."[167]

Centering the work of six prominent North American sex working performance artists (Candida Royalle, Annie Sprinkle, Veronica Vera, Gwendolyn, Janet Feindel, and Scarlet Harlot), Bell demonstrates how the performers invite audiences to engage with a sex worker subjectivity through art and performance, reasserting the voice and experiences of sex workers ignored in the cultural debates of the time on pornography and the sex industry.[168] Bell describes how these "prostitute performances" of the 70s and 80s offer an alternative perspective on sex workers' position within the industry of pornography as more than "bimbettes or victims," and create new social identities of sex workers as sexual healers, goddesses, teachers, political activists, and feminists.[169]

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[165] Bell, *Reading, Writing and Rewriting,* 137.

[166] Bell, 141.

[167] Bell, 142.

[168] Bell, 143.

[169] Bell, 184.

The next year Bell expanded on the work of her first book with *Whore Carnival*, a self-proclaimed genealogy of North American Sex workers comprised of 13 interviews with sex worker performance artists and one thirty-year client, erotic writings, poetry, performance, and art.[170] *Whore Carnival* chronicles the "emergent" contemporary sex worker performance art of the 80s and 90s and contextualizes said "CARNivAL" within a historical tradition of erotic laborers in the arts, dating back to the hetaerae in ancient Greece.[171] Bell's text presents an "unusual" kaleidoscope of sex workers' experiences, stories, and perspectives as a means of expanding the public's knowledge of sex workers and their lives, only to point out "that you don't know whores, that all you know about whores is the category 'whore."[172] Bell and other sex worker performance artists utilize their art to deconstruct binary classifications of "whoredom," frequently by occupying both locations of said binaries simultaneously (existing as the known and unknown, in both private and public spaces, the "CARNAL" and the "CARNivAL).

Academics Annie Sprinkle and Beth Stephens document their use of art and performance as a pathway to express new ways of identifying and relating to Earth in their book *Assuming the Ecosexual Position: The Earth as Lover*. The book detailed how Sprinkle, a porn performer and performance artist, and Stephens, a sculptor, performance artist and photographer, fell in love and immediately began making art together about their relationship, radical constructions of love, pleasure, and embodied affect.[173] They elaborate how their home in the Redwoods of

[170] Bell, *Whore Carnival*.

[171] Bell, 11.

[172] Bell, 12.

[173] Sprinkle and Stephens, *Assuming the Ecosexual Position*, 1-6.

California shifted their work to the engagement with environmental causes and a love for the environment.[174] In 2008 they held their first wedding ritual performance where they married the Earth in their *Green Wedding*, pledging "to love honor and cherish the Earth until death brings us closer together forever."[175] Sprinkle and Stephens document how this ritual performance created space for them to access their own identities as ecosexual,

> "We felt a more universal, enormous love for each other and for the Earth and even the cosmos. Engaging in an ecosexual vision of the world expanded our notion of sex and eroticism way beyond genital contact, beyond corporeal sex, and even beyond erotic energy exchange... We came to see ecosex as a conceptual art practice and a way of thinking beyond individual identity, and even beyond human beings, to envision a larger system—an ecology of relationships."[176]

Sprinkle and Stephens understand the *Green Wedding* and their identities as ecosexual as an access point to new ways of being in relation with Earth for primarily non-indigenous peoples, understanding Indigenous and Aboriginal peoples have their own ontological ways of being with Earth, which do not inflict the harms of settler colonialism and racial capitalism.[177] Sprinkle and

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[174] Sprinkle and Stephens, 6-8.

[175] Sprinkle and Stephens, 7.

[176] Sprinkle and Stephens, 7.

[177] Sprinkle and Stephens explain how their theories of ecosexuality have been informed by careful conversations with Indigenous scholar Kim TallBear, which "make it clear that for Indigenous populations ecosexuality is a hard sell," and cautions against the appropriations of Native American knowledges and motifs into ecosexual ceremonial and artistic repertoires as there is no "easy, literal translations between indigenous ontologies and ecosexuality." Through these "careful conversations" informed by Indigenous scholars, Sprinkle and Stephens ground their work in an anti-colonial perspective eschewing the settler colonial position of hippie or New Age strategies. Rather, Sprinkle and Stephens align their work with TallBear's Keynote address at UCSC's Environmentalism Outside the Box—An Ecosex Symposium event, where TallBear discussed Native American concepts of "all our relations" and the urgent need to decolonialize settler sexuality in relation to "making kin."

Sprinkle and Stephens, 20-21.

Stephens understand ecosexuality as a way to radically renegotiaty relationality with Earth, respectfully embracing the Earth as a lover, rather than strictly as mother figure.[178]

> To be someone's lover is more open-ended than being their mother. The lover assumes a relationship based on romance, sexual attraction, and sensual pleasure. The lover's relationship does not assume identities that conform to the gender binary and power dynamics of male and female. The category of the lover is more slippery than that of parent and avoids heteronormative family ideology… A lover is someone we want to get to know better, treat well, pamper, romance, and pleasure. Most to the point, if one does not treat a lover well, the lover can leave for someone else who will treat them better. While the Earth can't actually leave us, it can become so inhospitable that we have to live in radically different ways on it—or leave it."[179]

Sprinkle, Stephens, and a growing global community of ecosexual activists understand their work as part of wider repertoire of environmental activist strategies for Earth Justice and global peace, embracing a renegotiating relationality with Earth as lover through radical practices of art, performance, music, humor and sex.[180]

Further challenging binaries, of "art workers performing sex" and "erotic laborers performing art" within the contemporary art world, sex worker academic Lena Chen challenges the "uncomfortable" ways themes of erotic labor are used as a mechanism for social critique or

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[178] Sprinkle and Stephens ground their pivot toward understanding Earth as lover in an acknowledgement of how Western ideologies of gendered motherhood may not be adequate for encouraging a dynamic of radical care with Earth. Explaining, Mothers (including Mother Earth) have not been treated terribly well in popular culture, which tends to construct the ideal mother as either asexual or heterosexual, self-sacrificing, white, and Christian." As aging queer women themselves, they seek to expand traditional environmental activism that promoted the idea of "Earth as Mother" through an understanding of the materiality of bodies and sex-positive feminism that does not understand the aging body as desexualized. Sprinkle and Stephens imagine Earth as a MILF (Mother I'd Like to Fuck), which allows for the eroticization of women over a certain age (rather than promoting incest) and facilitates a new relationality with the Earth as an erotic partner and lover.

Sprinkle and Stephens, 16-17.

[179] Sprinkle and Stephens, 16.

[180] Sprinkle and Stephens, 15.

as a metaphor for labor exploitation. [181] Referencing Marina Abramovic's *Role Exchange* (1975) and Andrea Fraser's *Untitled* (2003), Chen problematizes how these and many other artists have found erotic labor to be a fitting metaphor to interrogate their own experiences of labor and the commodification of emotion, imagination, and desire, or simply "dip their toe" into erotic labor for the sake of art.[182]

> "Though I can relate to Abramović's curiosity about erotic labour as a profession and respect Fraser's commitment to going through with a paid sexual encounter, I am deeply uncomfortable with the use of prostitution as a metaphoric device in work by artists who are not otherwise erotic labourers and are subject to a different set of risks and social perception."[183]

In Julia Bryan-Wilson's article *Dirty Commerce: Art Work and Sex Work since the 1970s*, Annie Sprinkle similarly problematizes this phenomenon as a sex worker artist herself.[184] Despite whatever similarity the actions may take, Sprinkle differentiates performance art and sex work as separate forms of labor, where the commodification of performance art in no way matches the objectification of the body in the sex industry and the explicitly transactional nature of prostitution.[185]

Chen identifies the practices of non-sex worker artists performing erotic labor as appropriative, lacking in authenticity and sensitivity to the increased risks of violence, persecution, and stigmatization experienced by actual sex workers for similar actions.[186] "When

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[181] L. Chen, "Objects of Desire," 253-264.

[182] L. Chen, 255.

[183] L. Chen, 255.

[184] Bryan-Wilson, "*Dirty Commerce,"* 97.

[185] Bryan-Wilson, 97.

[186] L. Chen, "Objects of Desire," 256-262.

performed in the name of art, a one-off exchange of money for sexual services is more an act of mimicry than proof of the art worker's solidarity with erotic laborers and sex workers."[187] Chen points to four sex worker led artistic and curatorial projects (*Objects of Desire*, 2016, 2019., *No Human Involved,* 2019., *E-Viction*, 2020., and *Play4UsNow,* 2020.) as a radical approach to activism that eschews appropriation and creates platforms for sex worker self -representation, community building, and public education.[188] Much like Maura Reilly's call for widespread curatorial activism to address issues of discrimination and exclusion in the art world, Chen calls for art-making and curatorial work that puts art workers in meaningful solidarity with erotic laborers by focusing on collaboration with community organizations, highlighting of diverse sets of experiences and political issues, and allocation of funding directly to erotic laborers through commissions or mutual aid distributions.[189]

Chen's work supports the claims of this research project, demonstrating the capacity for artmaking and curation to strengthen existing relationships among erotic laborers beyond the art world as colleagues and political advocates.[190] My project is in harmony with Chen's and the aforementioned scholars of the growing literature on sex workers' art, expanding on a much-needed exploration of the art and cultural production of sex working and trading communities in the twenty first century. My research builds on the existing scholarship presented above which demonstrates how erotic laborers utilize their artistic and performative talents as political projects of survival, renarration, and identity formation. My work pushes the literature forward

[187] L. Chen, 262.

[188] L. Chen, 262.

[189] L. Chen, 262.

[190] L. Chen, 262.

by further considering the cultural significance of art, performance, and cultural production in sex working and trading communities? What is the relationship between the production of sex worker community art and its audiences? How does the art align with (if at all) with existing sex workers' rights activist projects?

Understanding Art of Sex Working and Trading Communities

Social movements literature which focuses on sex workers' activism and organizing efforts has documented the various methods of collective action used to facilitate both formal and informal movement goals. Though most of the literature on sex workers' social movements focuses on North America and Western Europe, emergent research documents the ways in which sex workers around the world have been organizing since the nineteenth century against stigmatization, discriminatory laws, and political injustice.[191] Originally termed "repertories of contention" by sociologist Charles Tilly, modern repertoires of collective action refer to the entire set of means at a group or individual's disposal to oppose public actions or sentiments they consider unjust or threatening.[192] Many of the repertoires of social action that emerged during the French Revolution remain popular today: boycotts, barricades, petitions, and demonstrations all still used. The expansion of communication technology (trains, printing press/newspapers, internet, and social media) has allowed for wider dissemination of grievances and more general,

[191] Kamala Kempadoo and Jo Doezema, *Global Sex Workers: Rights, Resistance and Redefinition* (New York: Routledge, 1998), 21; Kate Hardy, "Incorporating Sex Workers into the Argentine Labor Movement," *International Labor and Working-lass History* 77, no. 1 (2010), 91; A. L. Cabezas, "Latin American and Caribbean Sex Workers: Gains and challenges in the movement," *Anti-Trafficking Review,* issue 12 (2019), 44.

[192] Donatella della Porta, and Marion Diani, *Social Movements: An Introduction (*Maine: Blackwell Publishing, 2006), 163-192.

flexible, and indirect repertoires of modern social movements.[193] The growing literature on social movements takes seriously the contributions of sex workers to social moments around the world, documenting the rich history of sex workers' activism using traditional repertories of collective action (boycotts, occupations, civil disobedience, rioting) and more "modern" actions (discursive interventions, movement framing, media work, policy intervention and analysis, service provision, and community building).[194]

Despite the growth in the field, comparatively little attention has been paid to sex workers utilizing art and political performances to intervene in dominant discourses regarding

[193] della Porta and Diani, 170.

[194] Valerie Jenness, *Making it Work: The Prostitutes Rights Movement in Perspective, New* York: Alidine De gruyter, 1993; Kempadoo and Doezema, *Global Sex Workers*; Carol Leigh, "Inventing Sex Work," in *Whores and other Feminists,* ed. Jill Nagle (New York: Routledge, 1997) , 224-231; Julia O'Connell Davidson, "Sleeping with the enemy?" Some Problems with Feminist Abolition Calls to Penalize those who Buy Commercial Sex," *Social Policy & Society* 2, no. 1 (2003), 55-63; Danielle Antoinette Hildalgo, "Sex workers' rights movements," in *Handbook of the New Sexuality Studies* (New York: Routledge, 2006), 499- 503. Hardy, "Sex Workers in Argentine Labor Movement;" Stephanie A. Limoncelli, *The Politics of Trafficking: The First International Movement to Combat The Sexual Exploitation of Women* (Stanford: University of Stanford Press, 2010); Melinda Chateauvert, *Sex Workers Unite: A History of the Movement from Stonewall to Slutwalk* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2013); Samantha Majic, *Sex Work Politics: From Protest to Service Provision* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2014); Carisa R. Showden, and Samantha Majic, *Negotiating Sex Work: The Unintended Consequences of Policy and Activism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2014); Mzilikazi Koné, "Transnational Sex Worker Organizing in Latin America: RadTraSex, Labour, and Human Rights," *Social and Economic Studies* 65, no. 4 (2016), 87-108; Alexandra Lutnick, *Domestic Minor Sex Trafficking Beyond Victims and Villains* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2016); Meg Panichelli, Stephanie Wahab, Penelope Saunders and Mooshoula Capous-Desyllas. "Queering Whiteness: Unpacking Privilege Within the US Sex Worker Rights Movement," in *Queer Sex Work, ed.* Mary Laing, Katy Pilcher, Nicola Smith (New York: Routledge, 2016), 234-242; Thaddeus Blanchette and Ana Paula da Silva, "Classy Whores: Intersections of Class, Gender, and Sex Work in the Ideologies of the Putafeminista Movement in Brazil," *Contexto Internacional 40,* no. 3 (2018), 549-571; Laura LeMoon. "Trafficking Survivors Don't Want SESTA, We Want to not be Dying in Poverty," medium.com. March 19th, 2018, https://medium.com/@lauralemoon/trafficking-survivors-dont-want-sesta-we-want-to-not-be-dying-in-poverty-35fa80623f00; Juno Mac and Molly Smith*, Revolting Prostitutes: The Fight for Sex Workers' Rights (*Brooklyn: Verso, 2018); Cabezas, "Latin American and Caribbean Sex Workers;" Danielle Blunt, Ariel Wolf, and Naomi Laren, "Erased: The Impact of FOSTA-SESTA & the Removal of Backpage," *Hacking//Hustling*, 2019*;* A. Tigchelaar, "Sex Worker Resistance in the Neoliberal Creative City: An auto/ethnography," *Anti-Trafficking Review* 12 (2019), 15-36; Eurydice Aroney, "The 1975 French sex workers' revolt: A narrative of Influence" *Sexualities* 23, no. 1- 2 (2020), 64-80; Chi Adanna Mgbako, "The Mainstreaming of Sex Workers' Rights as Human Rights," *Harvard Journal of Law and Gender* 43, no. 1 (Winter 2020), 91-136.

the sex industry.[195] Sex worker activists theorize their use of art as a creative strategy of activism, where placing of sex workers at the center of their own narratives is the best way to ensure to sex worker justice.[196] My work locates sex workers' cultural production as a creative strategy of protest, survival, and futurity for sex working and trading communities within a larger repertoire of a transnational sex workers' rights activism and social movements.

In order to take seriously the cultural significance of art within sex working and trading communities, we must orient our analyses to consider both what sex workers' cultural production works against as well as what it works towards. In her work on the difficulty of contemporary art, Jennifer Doyle encourages a redirection of focus away from a "defensive" or outward-focusing analytic that would lead us to focus on processes of re-narration or discursive intervention for its own sake. Doyle cautions that when we allow our thinking and analysis to be oriented in a defensive position or by the terms of controversy, we suppress the core audience of such material.[197] "While this kind of work is often about racism, sexism, homophobia, it is not aimed at the racists, sexists and homophobes: it is directed at the people who struggle against these discourses of power and hate."[198]

Sex worker cultural production does intervene in dominant narratives about sex workers that would position them as vectors of disease, fallen women, criminals, or within the happy hooker/prostituted women binary. However, by looking toward principal audiences, curators, and

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[195] Bell, *Reading, Writing and Rewriting*, 138-184; Bell, *Whore Carnival*; L. Chen, "Objects of Desire."

[196] Maxine Holloway and Javier Luis Hurtado. "We're Still Working: The Art of Sex Work," January 27– February 25." SOMArts. Accessed March 2017. https://somarts.org/event/stillworking/.

[197] Jennifer Doyle, *Hold It Against Me: Difficulty and Emotion in Contemporary Art* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2013), 13.

[198] Doyle, 13.

funders of the works, I argue that disrupting the belief systems held by non-sex working publics is not the primary intention of sex worker cultural production. The primary consumers of sex workers' cultural production are frequently other sex workers, rather than the non-sex working publics (though they are present in the audience as well). [199] Much of the art and promotional materials are typically circulated through personal networks (online and in-person), produced with community funds, and celebrated in less-mainstream venues or queer spaces, and therefore demonstrates a need for an analytic de-centered from an outward-focused perspective. Instead of an outwardly focused framework of renarration or re-framing, I draw on the understanding of sex worker cultural production as imaginary sites of situated knowledges of queer subjects.

Amidst rising criminalization and rampant stigmatization of erotic labor, many sex workers understand their social and political location through a lens of queered subjectivity. This queer subjectivity exists both in the context of gender and sexual identity markers (with many LBGTQ people working and trading in sexual economies), as well as queered subjects, through Cathy Cohen's coalitional politic of queerness.[200] Cohen suggests we reframe queer politics through an understanding of intersectional relationships of sexuality to power, the state, and structures of heteronormativity, rather than merely a single axis framework, where one's relationship to heterosexuality is framed as the best way to disentangle structures of power.[201]

> "For instance, how would queer activists understand politically the lives of women- in particular women of color- whose sexual choices are not perceived as normal, moral, or worthy of state support? Further, how do queer activists understand and relate politically to those whose same sex sexual identities based on class, race and/or gender categories

[199] *Celluloid Bordello*, dir. Juliana Piccillo. 2020. Screened 12/09/2020 at "Digital Sex Worker's Festival," International Committee on the Rights of Sex Workers in Europe.

[200] Cathy J. Cohen, "Punks, Bulldaggers and Welfare Queens: The Radical Potential of Queer Politics?" *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* Vol. 3 (1997), 437-465.

[201] Cohen, 442.

> which provide them with membership in and the resources of dominant institutions and groups?"[202]

Cohen calls for a "leftist" approach to political maneuvering and advocacy that recognizes how struggles for race, class, and sexuality interlock and sustain hierarchies of oppression while inflicting concrete, state-sanctioned violence and exploitation of subjects categorized as 'deviant' and/or 'criminal.' This framework of queerness allows for an analysis of state sanctioned violence and the disposability of sex workers, focusing specifically on how this material violence disproportionately impacts sex workers with other intersecting marginalized identities, especially black, indigenous, and trans sex workers. By understanding the location of sex workers as queer and queered subjects, to whom disposability is not only collateral damage to an alleged "safe" society, but systematically approved through policies such as FOSTA-SESTA (Allow States and Victims to Fight Online Sex Trafficking and Stop Enabling Sex Traffickers Act of 2018), the frequent targeting by serial killers because "no one would miss them," and police reports regarding their existence labeled "no human involved." Under these conditions the quotidian acts of survival, such as earning a living, existing in online spaces, and fostering community amongst other sex workers function as radical praxis of survival and futurity.

It is from within the sociopolitical conditions of criminalization and disposability sex workers produce art as sites of situated knowledge. Developed as a way to contest western scientific understandings of a singular objective truth, the concept of situated knowledges renders "every acquisition or production of knowledge" as occurring within a "dynamic apparatus of bodily production," and therefore it is vital to account for the social position of the

[202] Cohen, 442.

knowledge producer.[203] Situated knowledges posits that the production and circulation of knowledge systems cannot be separated from the political and economic realities of particular social locations that shape said epistemologies.[204] Drawing on the situated experiences of Black women, Patricia Hill Collins writes,

> "Because U.S. Black women have access to the experiences that accrue to being both black and female, an alternative epistemology used to rearticulate a Black woman's standpoint should reflect the convergence of both sets of experiences. Race and gender may be analytically distinct, but in Black women's' everyday lives they work together."[205]

Collins goes on to emphasize how the 'situated knowledges' produced by Black women provide one specific social location to examine points of connection among multiple epistemologies, that does not seek comparisons with other groups but rather shares their own partial truths.[206] Tracing the histories of exclusion of Black women from Western institutions of knowledge (lacking access to basic literacy, quality educational experiences, faculty and administrative positions), Collins notes how Black women and other subordinate groups have established legacies of utilizing alternative mediums for theorizing their experiences and knowledge of the world.[207] Arts-based research challenges these historical exclusions of subjugated groups from Western systems of knowledge production and dominant research

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[203] Donna Haraway, "Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective," *Feminist Studies* 14, no. 3 (1988), 575-599; Marcel Stoetzler and Nira Yuval-Davis, "Standpoint Theory, Situated Knowledge and the Situated Imagination," *Feminist Theory* 3, no. 3 (2002), 315-333.

[204] Patricia Hill Collins, "Black Feminist Epistemology," in *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment* (New York: Routledge, Taylor & Francis, 199), 251-258; Stoetzler and Yuval-Davis, 2002.

[205] Collins, 258.

[206] Collins, 258.

[207] Collins, 252-253.

paradigms of scientific positivism, by taking seriously the use of creative production among marginalized groups as worthy of scholarly inquiry (e.g. art, poetry, music).[208]

Complimentary to the situated knowledges that render systems of power visible and the systems themselves socially constructed, 'situated imaginaries' refers to the creative imaginative strategies required for emancipation.[209] Arts-based research methods understand art and creative cultural productions as both a site of situated knowledge and a facilitator of relational knowledge production.

> "The relational aspect of art is not limited to discursive networks of signs and symbols, but is active on a much more essential level. Artworks involve affective intensities, they engage us 'bodily.' Art reaffirms the body as a key instrument of knowledge: 'a knowledge that embraces the totality of our sensual perception and experience rather than intellectual activity alone' (Schneider and Wright 2006: 16). Artistic encounters reunite mind and body such that the 'experience' can become 'knowledge'. Artworks are not passive intermediaries transmitting knowledge between artists, viewers/audiences and the world but rather should be seen as active 'mediators', in the sense of actor-network theory.[210]

The understanding of art as both site of situated knowledge production and active mediator of knowledge formed among the art, artist, and viewers informs the research of this project, looking not only directly at the artwork, considering its depictions and themes, but away from it and around to what it *does*.[211] By orienting my analysis toward what sex workers' art and cultural production *does,* this dissertation explores how sex worker art functions as a demonstration of situated knowledges for sex worker communities, and as practice of situated imaginaries in its

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[208] Susan Finley, "Arts-based Research," in *Handbook of the Arts in Qualitative Research,* ed. Gary Knowles, Ardra L. Cole (Los Angeles: Sage Publications, 2008), 71-82.

[209] Stoetzler and Yuval-Davis, "Situated Knowledge and the Situated Imagination," 324.

[210] Ian Sutherland and Sophia Krzys Acord, "Thinking with art: from situated knowledge to experiential knowing," *Journal of Visual Art Practice* 6, no. 2 (2007), 125-141.

[211] Sutherland and Acord, 135; Doyle, *Hold It Against Me,* 13.

ability to cultivate *queer relationality*-- a means to create, foster, and care for community amidst societal conditions that seek their eradication and enable their disposability.[212]

A Note on Terms and the "Messiness of *Us*"[213]

By describing the art produced, celebrated, and shaped by those with experience working or trading in sexual economies as "sex worker art", I draw from the language frequently utilized by the artists and the spaces in which the cultural production is made, gathered, curated. "Sex work(er)" is complex as a term, and even more so as an identity, and requires a dialectic understanding contradiction as a resource, "rather than a wrinkle in which to be smoothed over" (a simultaneous "both/and" as well as "neither").[214] Developed in the late 1970s by activist Carol Leigh, "sex work(er)" serves as a destigmatized umbrella term for the many manifestations of erotic labor (stripping, phone sex, porn performance, camming, erotic modelling, BDSM work, escorting, full-service sex work (FSSW), etc.) to cultivate solidarity across varying degrees of stigmatization and criminalization.[215] Tracy Quan, activist and author of *The Diary of a Manhattan Call Girl*, notes how the term "sex work(er)" has taken on a life of its own since the 1980s in its mass adoption by non-profits, academics, and bureaucrats, seeking more "politically elegant" language.[216]

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[212] José Esteban Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity (Sexual Cultures).* New York: New York University Press, 2009.

[213] H. Berg, *Porn Work*, 24.

[214] H. Berg, 4-5.

[215] Leigh, "Inventing Sex Work," 224-231.

[216] Quan, Tracey. "The Name of the Pose: A Sex Worker by Any Other Name?" In *Prostitution and Pornography: Philosophical Debate About the Sex Industry*, Edited by Jessica Spector, 341-348. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2006; femi babylon, *heauxthots: On Terminology, and Other [Un]Important Things (*Chicago: Babydoll Press, 2019).

> "As a former sex worker myself, I am skeptical of a trend that that puts more picturesque language on our business. During my career in the New York sex trade, the prostitutes I worked with used words like *working girl, call girl, hooker, hustler, pro.* We spoke about "the life" when feeling clannish, sentimental, or philosophical – "the business" when we were being practical. (In Britain where I briefly worked, we were "on the game") Rarely was the word prostitute employed -- perhaps because it sounds clinical or formal-- and I've only heard *sex worker* and activist and media circles never on the job we routinely called each other "girls… As I get farther away from actually turning tricks, I hear myself calling it *sex work* more often. That's because I'm talking not only to my fellow prostitutes but also the public into the press. To always speak to the vernacular of the trade using inside or slang would be precious or awkward. It's necessary to find words that fit my new situation and sex work fits."[217]

Erotic laborer and theorist femi babylon is likewise critical of the term's capacity to play into respectability politics, where the use of "sex work" is most frequently applied to persons already power (white, cis-gender), excluding and effectively failing Black women and women of color.[218]

Further requiring a dialectic approach is the framework in which "sex work" shapes not only identity, but also experience, ideology, and advocacy regarding sexual economies. Epitomized in sex worker ideology and protest chant, "sex work is work," the term "sex work(er) emphasizes the labor aspect of the sex industry, speaking back against anti-pornography and anti-prostitution feminists who continue to speak of the "sex use industry" and the "false consciousness" of "prostituted women." The rhetorical framings of "sex work as work" to emphasize the nature of the sex industry as an economy, of laborers performing erotic labor became a useful way to organize for labor rights and better working conditions.[219]

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[217] Quan, 343-344.

[218] babylon, *heauxthots*.

[219] Blunt, Wolf, and Laren, *Erased,* 1.

However, a framework of "labor rights" can naturalize policies of industry standardization, reinforce respectability politics of "work" as an inherent good, and/or condone outsider regulation that serves to control workers rather than advocate for them (legalization over decriminalization). Urging an analytic that pushes beyond "sex work is work," babylon suggests the framework of "sex work as (anti)work" acknowledging it is not the "sex" in "sex work" that makes it terrible, but rather the compulsory "work" under capitalism.[220] Similarly, Heather Berg, in her ethnography *Porn Work: Sex, Labor, and Late Capitalism,* interviewed porn workers and managers, who conveyed critiques of capitalism and labor similar to babylon's. While many porn workers espoused a "sex work as work" rhetoric, viewing their labor in pornography from an entrepreneurial or business ethic, many also understand their labor as anti-work, being drawn to porn because it allowed more freedom (time, money, etc.) than "straight" work.[221]

These critiques of "sex work(er)" encourage a critical dialectic framework, which holds space open for the term's complexity and allows for the careful consideration of speaker and audience and observes who gets to use what words/knowledges in what spaces. Quan notes that when asked why her book was titled *Unrepentant Whore* rather than "unrepentant sex worker," Carol Leigh responded that (sex worker) was never imagined to be the only word *we* could use to talk about prostitutes (emphasis on "we" is my own).[222]

Some activists prefer to reclaim slurs, like "whore" and "puta" as an explicit rejection of stigmatization. Claudia Colimoro, the president and founder of Mexico City's La Únion Unica

[220] babylon, *heauxthots*, 15.

[221] H. Berg, *Porn Work*.

[222] Quan, "The Name of The Pose," 342.

regularly appeared on radio, television, newspapers, university campuses and academic conferences to advocate for the dignity and rights of erotic laborers in Mexico, calling herself *La Mega-Puta de Mexico* (Mexico's Mega-Whore) as a discursive reclamation of *puta* as a slur.[223] In a strategy of both reclamation and coalition building, research on the *putafeminsista* movement in Brazil demonstrates how activists utilize reclamation of the term *puta* as a coalitional bridge to question understandings of gender, sexuality, race/ethnicity, and work that oppress both women who sell sex and women who work outside of the home.[224]

While some advocates utilize strategies reclamation of slurs to breakdown stigma, other advocates would prefer to keep certain terms primarily for community use. In the above quote from Quan, she addresses how insider language may not be appropriate in certain settings, not from a perspective of respectability but rather a protective view on insider language. Not all words or knowledges are meant for everyone. HALA or Hooker's Army of Los Angeles considered such debates around language in their decision to reclaim "hooker" in their organization's name.[225] The self-defense group was founded by and exclusively serves people with experience in sexual economies. HALA members use the acronym title when engaging with "outsiders" thus keeping the reclamation of hooker close to the vest among its community members.[226] And while the term "sex work(er)" is an imperfect and complexly contentious term, it functions as a political moniker "of the meantime" in which any reconsideration of the term

[223] Kempadoo and Doezema, *Global Sex Workers*, 169.

[224] Blanchette, Thaddeus and Ana Paula da Silva, "Putafeminista Movement in Brazil," 2018.

[225] Vanessa Carlisle, "How to Build a Hooker's Army," in *We Too: Essays on Sex Work and Survival,* ed. Natalie West and Tina Horn (New York City: The Feminist Press, 2021), 291-302.

[226] Carlisle, 302.

must be led by those in the sexual economies.[227] As this project is being written in the meantime, as stated above I will refer to the art and cultural production as both an identity moniker, using "sex worker art" and "art of erotic laborers," as well as a relational orientation "art of sex working and trading communities." The use of both identity and relational monikers is a dialectic strategy that attempts to hold the "messiness" of diverse identity affiliations as well as Leigh's commitment to political solidarity.

Methods

In her review of historical research regarding prostitution, historian Judith Walkowitz identifies three distinct criterions to produce "feminist" scholarship or research on prostitution.[228] First, the work must understand prostitution as labor, contextualizing erotic labor within a larger history of the working poor as participants of a makeshift economy.[229] Second, the research must understand that increased levels of policing will negatively impact the welfare of individuals in sexual economies. And third, the research must cast doubt on political or social campaigns that would categorize sexual labor as distinct from other forms of labor, and/or take a carceral approach, calling for legislative or police actions. Walkowitz further advocates for the involvement of sex workers and individuals with lived experiences in sexual economies to be involved in research, discourse, and policy formation- all of which directly impacts their lives. Unfortunately, this criterion is frequently not met in research dealing with erotic labor or sexual

[227] babylon, 29.

[228] Walkowitz, "The Politics of Prostitution," 189.

[229] Walkowitz, 189.

economies. [230] In 2014, a library study found over 66,000 articles published on sex work in peer reviewed journals/publications alone, with only a small proportion of them directly incorporating sex workers or stemming from community-based initiatives.[231] As more and more academic work is being produced regarding sex work and the sex industry, Sex worker community organizer Kate D'Adamo recommends researchers collaborate with sex working and trading community members, rather than study them, acknowledging they are experts in their own right.[232]

As "the world's oldest profession has become academia's latest hot topic," this project is dedicated to the understanding of sex workers as experts on their own lives and experiences which must be centered in research, and does not cause additional harm or risk.[233] FOSTA-SESTA's increased criminalization of the sex industry has made it dangerous for sex workers to even speak to other sex workers, let alone researchers. As I have discussed elsewhere, ethical research is more than what questions you ask and/or to whom you ask the questions; it is reflecting on if the act of *asking* itself is an ethical one.[234] This project takes seriously the additional risks attached to the participation in academic research for sex workers, especially for those who are not already speaking out publicly due to existing stigmas and rising

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[230] Walkowitz, 189; Kate D'Adamo, "Sex (Work) in the Classroom. How Academia Can Support the Sex Worker Rights Movement," in *Challenging Perspectives on Street- Based Sex Work,* ed. Katie Hail-Jares, Corey S. Shdaimah and Chrysanthi S. Leon (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2017), 194.

[231] D'Adamo, 194.

[232] Walkowitz, "The Politics of Prostitution," 196; D'Adamo, 194.

[233] D'Adamo, 194.

[234] Elizabeth Dayton, "Learning to Read the Room: A Call to Review Feminist Research Methods Post FOSTA-SESTA," *UCLA Center for the Study of Women* (blog), November 20, 2020, https://csw.ucla.edu/2020/11/09/learning-to-read-the-room-a-call-to-review-feminist-research-methods-post-fosta-sesta/.

criminalization of erotic labor post-FOSTA-SESTA. This project seeks to mitigate additional risks for sex working and trading communities by focusing on the ways in which they are already speaking in public forums. By investigating the importance of art and cultural production produced, curated, and enjoyed by sex working and trading communities, this project seeks to center the perspectives and meaning making of those in sexual economies rather than treat either as an object of study. While interviews would no doubtable enrich this project, currently all quotes or conversations used in this project are from secondary sources, public performances, and/or from public artists and organizers.

This project examines the significance of art produced by and within sex working/trading communities through a selection of case studies. I conducted seven years of research investigating the cultural significance of art produced, curated, and enjoyed by sex working and trading communities, I applied a strategy of snowball sampling to my search for art "cases" or "samples." I first traveled to New Orleans for the Desiree Alliance conference in 2016. Attending the conference's "Arts & Media" events, I was introduced to the work of community artists and filmmakers such as Cinnamon Maxxine, Kaytlin Bailey, Akynos, Eurydice Aroney, Juliana Piccolo, Matilda Bickers, and the Butterfly: Asian and Migrant Sex Worker Support Network. I networked with artists and festival organizers, in-person and online, who introduced me to their work, future projects, and recommended other artists and events. I would then follow the artist or organizers' social media accounts where I was able to keep up to date with their latest work(s), but also find new art and community projects as they cross-promoted each other's

work.[235] I compiled these accounts through "snowball following" over a period of seven years, not all at once.

From these "snowballed" connections, I attended as many in-person shows as I possibly could, compiling ethnographic field notes after the events (taking pictures when allowed) on the content of the art/cultural production and the environment. I was able to attend individual art shows and performances in Los Angeles, San Francisco, and New York, and sex worker art festivals in San Francisco, Seattle, and Portland.[236] However, my sample of artwork is bounded by scheduling limitations, availability of travel funds, reliability of airlines, and accessibility to art/films/ post-exhibition/screening. The limitations caused me to miss out on many shows or

[235] On My personal Instagram, I followed: 52 individual artists/filmmakers, 37 sex worker community organizations, 10 community academics, 5 podcasts, 4 arts festivals, 4 sex worker art collectives, 3 art shows, and 2 sex worker led zines/comic books. On my personal Twitter account, I followed: 62 individual artist/filmmakers, 108 sex worker community organizations, 5 podcasts, 3 arts festivals, 10 sex worker collectives (arts and community), 8 art shows/events, 8 sex worker led zines/comics, 25 individual activists, 43 academics with work on sexual economies. After becoming the Festival Director of The San Francisco Sex Worker Film and Arts Festival in 2021, I then gained access to their social media networks, following 171 accounts on Instagram and 273 accounts on Twitter. Many accounts are followed both on Instagram and Twitter.

[236] List of attended in-person shows (non-organizational involvement)
Cuntagious, Kaytlin Bailey, Desiree Alliance Conference, July 10, 2016.,
Cuntagious, Kaytlin Bailey, New York, September 19, 2016.,
TRINKETS, Paul E. Alexander, New York, September 13, 2017.
The Third Annual Seattle Annual Sex Work Symposium-SASS, SWOP Seattle, Seattle, March 2-5, 2017.
San Francisco Bay Area Sex Workers' Film and Arts Festival, Carol Leigh, Erica Berman, and Laure McElroy, San Francisco Bay Area, May 19-28, 2017.
Portland Sex Worker Film and Arts Festival, Portland, June 15- 17, 2017.
Your Hooker Jokes Are Lazy, hosted by Vee Chattie, Seattle, June 18, 2017
Sex Worker Stand Up Comedy, Vee Chattie and Kaitlyn Bailey, Seattle, June 20, 2017
TRINKETS, Paul E. Alexander, New York, Jan 20, 2018.,
Art of the Act, SWOP-LA, Los Angeles, June 14th, 2018.
Venus Fly Trap presents: The Classy Show, Jacqueline Frances and Rachel Green, Los Angeles, September 8, 2018.
Monday Moment SWOPLA SOIREE, SWOP-LA, Los Angeles, Apr 8, 2019.
San Francisco Bay Area Sex Workers' Film and Arts Festival, Carol Leigh and Erica Berman, San Francisco Bay Area, May 22-26, 2019.
Nobody Promised You Tomorrow: Art 50 Years After Stonewall, Elizabeth A. Sackler Center for Feminist Art, Brooklyn Art Museum, May 3–December 8, 2019.
Body of Work, Jaqueline Frances, Sohotel Gallery, New York, September 30-Oct 3, 2021.
On Our Backs: The Revolutionary Art of Queer Sex Work, Handwerker Gallery Ithaca College, Feb 3- March 2022.
International Whore's Day at Geffen Contemporary, MOCA, Los Angeles, June 2, 2022.
Whore's Eye View, Kaytlin Bailey, Los Angeles, July 22, 2022.

exhibitions that would otherwise be considered, or adequately discuss wonderful works I could not access again. Fortunately, due to social media and the online sharing of events, I was able to access videos, photographs, and audio recordings of art exhibitions and shows I would have otherwise missed due to being unable to travel. Some of these virtual materials are still online, but many discussed in Chapter Three are not, either by design or censorship. While these online materials do not provide the same viewing experience as being in-person, they do not necessarily provide one of lesser quality. Existing as ephemera, the social media evidence of the exhibitions, art, and performances provides increased accessibility to the works and occasionally post-production editing, both altering the way viewers engage with it. The alterations often make the work more and less itself (honing in on particular aspects of a work that could have been missed, adding a desired gaze, adding music or alteration of video speed or 'frames per second,' etc.). When relevant these alterations are discussed. Each work was then I screened/viewed, taking extensive notes with attention to sex worker positionality: 1) textual analysis (audio, lighting, visual, aesthetic composition), 2) narrative and plot analysis, 3) historical and political references, and 4) screening/viewing practices, 5) ethnography of the audience (when available from my ethnographic notes), and 6) availability of any secondary materials (artist/curatorial statements, peer interviews, etc).

Due to the limitations in scope of this project, this work focuses primarily on work in San Francisco and New York, excluding many worthwhile works of sex worker cultural production which would also demonstrate political projects of community relationally, survival, and futurity. This project was limited further by the COVID-19 pandemic, the outbreak causing me to cancel my flight to New York for the Sex Workers' Pop-Up art show and impacting the overall production of in-person art shows from 2020-2021. At this time both sex worker community

organizers and arts community members had to shut down art shows, initiate hiatuses, or pivot to online exhibitions and performance art shows, my research reflexively pivoting alongside sex worker art communities.[237] During this period my research focused primarily on online art exhibitions and online 'ephemera,' as well as fostering connections with the late community organizer Carol Leigh (editing services, discussions of art, festival assistance). The research in this project hopes to serve as bridge to further examination on the situated knowledges of cultural production by erotic laborers.

I was able to strengthen my commitment to the sex worker's art community in the Bay Area in 2021, when I took over the role of Festival Director of the San Francisco Bay Area Sex Worker Arts Festival for the most recent festival of 2023.[238] I worked with previous co-directors Leigh and Erica Berman during the transition (prior to Leigh's passing), gaining first-hand knowledge of the logistics of festival production, access to internal and archived materials, as well as the experience of attending discussed in chapter two. However, all my artistic sites of analysis had already been determined prior to my involvement in curation for the festival.

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[237] List of online art shows, exhibitions, and festivals attended during and after COVID-19 lockdowns:
E-Viction, Veil Machine, online from New York, Aug 21, 2020.
International Committee on the Rights of Sex Workers in Europe (ICRSE) Digital Arts Festival, ICRSE, Livestream on Zoom from the European Union, Dec 7-11, 2020.
Resistance & Resilience: Intl' Day to End Violence Against Sex Workers, Maggie's Toronto Sex Workers Action Project, Live-streamed from Toronto, December 17, 2020.
But I Am Here Zine and Mural Launch, Live-streamed on Zoom from New York, Jan 25, 2021.
Poetry Workshop Series, Support Ho(s)e Collective, Live-streamed from Chicago, May 1 &19, 2021.
1st Annual Black Sex Workers Conference, Black Sex Workers Collective, Live-streamed from New York and Berlin, June 17-19, 2021.
High Art/Low Standards, Kink Out x Veil Machine, Live-streamed from New York, Feb 20th, 2021.
Whore's Eye View, Kaytlin Bailey, Livestream from New York, Jun 27, 2021.

[238] This role was/is unpaid.

This project defines "art" of sex working and trading communities broadly to include the diverse mediums of cultural production utilized and celebrated in sex worker art spaces (painting, photography, graphic/comics, internet memes, graphic-oriented social media posts, protest signage, contemporary performance art, burlesque, stand-up comedy, film, and documentary). In my selection process, I first align my criteria for case selection with Leigh's festival submission guidelines; the work must 1) be directed or produced by someone with lived experience in sexual economies, or 2) be about any aspect of sex work that challenges stigmatizing stereotypes regarding prostitution or other forms of sex work in some way. Due to the criminalization and stigmatization of erotic labor, the second category creates a necessary opacity for artists to produce work that does not demand they out themselves as erotic laborers, a category Leigh insisted on to protect vulnerable community members.

Further, all of the artistic sites of analysis or sample of this dissertation demonstrated as *a case of substantive significance.*[239] Meaning the artwork, artist, exhibition, or festival had an observed significance to the sex worker art community. The markers of significance include but are not limited to duration of existence (how long it has been around), multiple reiterations, circulated widely through online sex worker networks, and/or supported by one or more sex worker community networks.

After cases demonstrated *substantive significance*, I applied a strategy of progressive stacking to my final selection. Utilized by sociologist Angela Jones in her work *Camming: Money, Power, and Pleasure in the Sex Work Industry*, progressive stacking is a way of

[239] Kendra L. Koivu and Annika Marlen Hinze, "Cases of Convenience? The Divergence of Theory from Practice in Case Selection in Qualitative and Mixed-Methods Research," *American Political Science Association* (2017), 1023-1027.

structuring case and data selection that accounts for historical exclusions within systems of capitalism, white supremacy, cissexism, and heterosexism.[240] In the classroom, progressive stacking looks like allowing marginalized students to speak before non-marginalized students.[241] Jones asks researchers to consider how intersecting systems and socio-political conditions shape people's positions and experiences, and to thoughtfully account for these conditions in the structuring and presentation of research.[242] In my application of progressive stacking I prioritized the art and cultural production of queer, trans, Black and Brown, incarcerated, and otherly marginalized community members. This does not mean there are not samples of cultural production by cisgender or white members of the sex working and trading communities, it simply means these artists are not centered.

Chapter Breakdown

By examining the visual and performative art, artist practices, art shows, and festivals that fund, curate, and celebrate sex worker art, my project explores how sex worker cultural production functions as activism among those in sex working/trading communities, not only in its ability to disrupt harmful/incomplete narratives of the sex industry for non-sex working publics, but also its ability to cultivate relationality among sex working/trading subjects as a political project of survival, resilience, and community building.

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[240] A. Jones, *Camming*, 10-11.

[241] Jake Wright, "In Defense of The Progressive Stack: A Strategy for Prioritizing Marginalized Voices During In-Class Discussion," *Teaching Philosophy* 41, no. 4 (2018), 407-428.

[242] A. Jones, *Camming*, 11.

Chapter One turns to the visual and thematic representations of relationality and community formation of sex working/trading subjects, working with film short *Lucid Noon, Sunset Blush,* off-Broadway musical, *TRINKETS* and "But I Am Here" New York City street-mural and digital zine. I argue these works function as situated knowledges of the sex working and trading communities and function as a creative strategy of activism, not only disrupting harmful and incomplete narratives of the sex industry for non-sex working publics, but in their capacity to function as situated imaginaries of community survival and relationality in praxis. I draw on sex worker theorists to demonstrate how the depictions of community relationality in the cultural production of sex working and trading communities function as utopian practices of world building by imagining a future less "poisonous and insolvent" than the current moment.

In *Chapter Two*, I address the cultural significance of sex worker art shows, exhibitions, and festivals, emphasizing how sex working and trading communities utilize these spaces to not only disrupt, renegotiate, and refuse harmful narratives surrounding the sex industry, but also as intentional spaces of renegotiated relationality between sex working and trading communities with non-sex working publics, other sex workers, and with sex working artists themselves. I argue these sex worker art shows, exhibitions and festivals foster community relationality and facilitate community formation amongst sex working/trading artists, organizers, and attendees in praxis, as a utopian project of survival and futurity.

In *Chapter Three*, I consider sex worker community formation through art and content sharing across digital platforms during the global COVID- 19 crisis and heightened surveillance and policing of sex workers online post-FOSTA-SESTA. I discuss Vee Chattie's performance for International Day to End Violence Against Sex Workers and two virtual shows produced by sex worker art collective Veil Machine: *E-Viction* and *Low Art/High Standards*. Through these

selected works, I demonstrate how sex workers continue to adapt creative strategies of art and performance, rejecting their socio-political hegemonic disposability as a project of community relationality and survival. Further, due to increasing online hostility, censorship, and surveillance of sex workers online, as well the increasing criminalization of their lives and livelihoods, I demonstrate how sex workers' art is de facto ephemeral performance art and profoundly queer.

Finally, this project closes by considering how despite rising hostility, socio-political disposability, and precarity, sex working and trading communities continue to make and celebrate their art as a practice of community relationality.

Chapter One: "Beautiful, Carefree, and as Young as the Night:" Visual and Thematic Depictions of Relationality in Cultural Production of Sexual Economies

To meaningfully consider the cultural significance of art, media, and cultural production of sex working and trading communities is to take seriously the value systems and understanding of said works to the sex working and trading communities in which they are created. I attended sex worker art shows both online and in-person over the course of eight years, where sex worker artists and curators demonstrated the cultural significance of their art as a creative strategy of community activism. The Empower Foundation of Thailand describes their understanding of art as a mechanism for maintaining a strong community through "holding space" in society wherever they can, in books, artwork, film and performances.[1] Academics PJ Starr and Sonyka Francis unpack the "mélange" of communication strategies individual sex workers and organizations like Empower use to represent themselves, observing sex workers' self-representation frequently focuses on the intimacy of the quotidian aspects of their lives: sharing meals, documenting memorials, conducting condom outreach to protect the health of their community.[2] These depictions undoubtably disrupt dominant understandings of sex workers as vectors of disease, moral malaise, or as victims in need of rescue, transgressing and giving new meaning to "who a whore is."[3] However, as Starr and Francis note "sex worker representation

[1] P.J. Starr and Sonyka Francis, "I need $5 million:' What sex workers making media tell you that no one else can," in *The Routledge International Handbook of Social Work and Sexualities*, ed. SJ Dodd (New York: Routledge, 2023), 591.

[2] Starr and Francis, 593.

[3] Helga Kristin Hallgrimsdottir, Rachel Phillips and Ceclia Benoit, "Fallen Women and Rescued Girls: Social Stigma and Media Narratives of the Sex Industry in Victoria, B.C., from 1980 to 2005," *Canadian Review of Sociology* Volume 43, Issue 3 (2006), 265–280; Star and Francis, 592.

has value in and of itself" and does not simply function as a "counter-weight" to mainstream depictions of erotic labor and sexual economies.[4]

Many sex worker artists and activists understand the cultural significance of art from sex working and trading communities in line with Starr and Francis's assessment, which holds the disruption of dominant understandings of sexual economies as only one function of sex worker art among many. The longest running sex worker art and film festival, The San Francisco Bay Area Sex Worker Film and Arts Festival (SWFF or *Sexworkerfest*) understands the celebration of sex worker narratives in art and media as a two-fold form of activism. *Sexworkerfest* utilizes the art, performance, and cultural production produced by people with lived experiences in sexual economies to disrupt harmful and/or incomplete narratives of the sex industry. However, the festival understands the importance of sex worker self-representation as a mechanism of fostering relationality and community building among sex workers, an activist goal which exists both independently and alongside the art's capacity to disrupt or transgress dominant ideologies.

Similarly, community organizer, curator, and sex working academic Brit Schulte articulates the radical capacity of cultural production of sex workers and their co-conspirators.[5]

> "We change ourselves and the spaces we take up when we create, especially collectively. When our creations, be they artistic, technological, or work-safety focused, are created to undermine systems seeking to ostracize, oppress, and kill, they hold such power. Part of organizing a community is tapping into collective power, decision making, and political education, and wildly imagining together."[6]

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[4] Star and Francis, 594.

[5] Brit Shulte, "Cultural Resistance to SESTA/FOSTA: Reflecting on Community Curation," *Kernal Magazine*, 2022, https://www.kernelmag.io/2/cultural-resistance-sesta-fosta.

[6] Red Shulte, JB Brager, Mistress Velvet, Ariel Wolf, and Empress Wu, (2020, June 3) *DIY Resistance: Sex Workers + Organizers Talk Artmaking and Mutual Aid for International Whores' Day* [Virtual Panel]. International Whores' Day, Hacking//Hustling and Kink Out Events, MomA PS1.

Moderated by Schulte and featuring community organizers and artists Mistress Velvet, JB Brager, Empress Wu, Arielle Wolfe, the *DIY RESISTANCE: Sex Workers + Organizers Talk Artmaking and Mutual Aid for International Whores' Day* virtual panel theorized the importance of sex workers telling their own stories as a radical strategy of both resistance (what it fights against) and liberation (what it works towards).[7] The late artist, zinester, and dominatrix Mistress Velvet Mistress Velvet explained how sex worker self-representation functions as a "powerful tool and weapon" for sex workers, especially queer and gender non-conforming and trans sex workers of color, "because it counters, and negates, and adds to the art that exists in the mainstream media that tends to erase people based on their race and their body."[8] Further, Mistress Velvet elaborated on the radical capacity of art and self-expression for sex worker artists and audiences to "tap into ourselves and culture,"

> "It took a while to get into my feelings on what to produce and what to convey, and I think that as being a SW we are so rarely given a platform to speak and show experience in a judgement free and empowering way, and it almost felt like too much of a responsibility- even if we start to do it often, its overwhelming sometimes because there's so much history we need to put down, so much planning for the future we need to put down and disseminate. So much of art is emotional- had to censor myself to one point and one moment and articulate how do I convey that. Art can be healing and soothing for me, but it can be where I do a lot of unpacking of my feelings, of my trauma, of my PTSD- so overall it's a great thing to do but it's a journey. I'm glad but don't want to romanticize it. It's such a long process and takes a long time to make art."[9]

[7] Shulte, Brager, Velvet, Wolf, and Wu, *DIY Resistance.*

[8] Velvet, *DIY Resistance.*

[9] Velvet, *DIY Resistance.*

Mistress Velvet explicitly connected the emotional labor of "tapping into oneself and culture" of sex worker artists and their audiences as a radical strategy for community building and liberation through the experience of sharing sex worker narratives.[10]

DIY Panelist JB Brager further discussed the radical practice of creating art, zines and speculative fiction,

> "Art as method of utopian imagining where we use the tools that we have to imagine what the world we want will look like. People say, oh we can't have a world without cops- where no, we absolutely can. Here let's sketch out what we want that to look like, lets write this story. Now let's live it. I think that's a really powerful tool."[11]

Schulte, Velvet, and Brager all demonstrate how the situates knowledges of sex worker artistic production function as "situated imaginaries," a creative or imaginative strategy required to envision and access emancipation.

This chapter will examine three works of artistic production from sex working and trading communities, as case studies of substantive significance within sex working and trading communities. First, I will discuss the film short *Lucid Noon, Sunset Blush,* directed by Ali Logout. *Lucid Noon, Sunset Blush* tells the story of Micha, a seventeen-year-old "baby queer" who has just been kicked out of her house for watching lesbian movies on Netflix. Micha is welcomed into The Palace, a basement full of queer femme sex workers of color, lovers, and misfits.[12] Logout's film was featured in the *We're Still Working: The Art of Sex Work exhibition in San Francisco* and screened at the 10th biennial San Francisco Bay Area Sex Worker Film and

[10] Velvet, *DIY Resistance.*

[11] Brager, *DIY Resistance.*

[12] *Lucid Noon, Sunset Blush,* directed by A. Logout, screened May 21st, 2017, at The 10th biennial San Francisco Film and Arts Festival.

Arts Festival in 2017.[13] Following my discussion of *Lucid Noon Sunset Blush,* I will discuss the off-Broadway musical, *TRINKETS*. Directed by Paul E. Alexander, *TRINKETS* tells the story of a group of drag queens and trans women of color working on the streets and hustling erotic labor in the New York City meatpacking district in the 1990s.[14] The musical was circulated widely among online sex workers' networks, brought back for a second off-Broadway run due to the musical's popularity, and attended by renowned New York sex worker rights activist and founded of GLITZ. Inc, Ceyenne Dorshow. Lastly, I will discuss the *But I Am Here* New York City street-mural and digital zine which partnered with organizers from Red Canary Song, the Brooklyn Liberation Collective for Black Trans Lives, Sex Worker Liberation Project with the Urban Justice Center, the *Still We Rise* New York protest of 2019, and the International Whores' Day virtual event of 2020. The *But I Am Here* mural and zine is a coalitional project that brings together the art, poetry, portraiture, speeches, and voices of a diverse and intergenerational movement for sex workers' rights in New York. [15]

Applying an anti-defensive framework of analysis to the selected works, the following discussion centers what these artistic sites are oriented towards, rather than merely against. What is being imagined? How do they resist? I will explore how each of these sites of sex worker cultural production employ radical strategies of situated knowledges and situated imaginaries through the visual and thematic representations of relationality among erotic laborers. I suggest the depiction of sex workers in community with one another "counter, and negate, and add" to

[13] Prior to this, *Lucid Noon, Sunset Blush* was featured at the Scottish Queer International Film Fest in 2016, where the film won an award for 'Best Feminist Short.'

[14] *TRINKETS*, written and dir. Paul E. Alexander, Gene Frankel Theatre, New York City, 2017, 2018.

[15] Kate Zen and T.D. Tso, *But I Am Here: Speeches, Writing & Art from the Sex Worker Movement in NYC* (New York City: Red Light Reader, 2012), 5.

harmful/incomplete narratives of the sex industry, but also function as a creative and imaginary strategy of foster community survival, and futurity.

"This Ain't Charity…" *Lucid Noon, Sunset Blush* at The San Francisco Sex Worker Film and Arts Festival

Day three of 2017 The San Francisco Sex Worker Film and Arts Festival attendees fill the seats of the New Parkway Theater in Oakland, California for the "Magic of Queer Shorts" screening event. In an environment reminiscent of someone's eclectic living room (with mismatched side tables, an assortment of large comfortable chairs and small couches for two, rather than standard theater seats) attendees sit ready to receive the magic of the event, promising a "varied collection of personal, intersectional and controversial portraits of the divergent experiences of being a sex working queer in a marginalized world."[16] The event of film screenings comes to a closing finale with the film short *Lucid Noon, Sunset Blush,* directed by Ali Logout. *Lucid Noon, Sunset Blush* tells the story of Micha, a seventeen-year-old "baby queer" who has just been kicked out of her house for watching lesbian movies on Netflix. Micha is welcomed into The Palace, a basement full of queer femme sex workers of color, lovers, and misfits.[17] Offering characters "beautiful, carefree, and as young as the night," *Lucid Noon, Sunset Blush* lavishes their audience with an alternative narrative of those who engage in erotic labor, distinct from the dominant tropes of mainstream discourse. Logout crafts a cinematic experience

[16] "Magic in Queer Shorts," *10th Biennial Sex Worker Film and Arts Festival Program*, produced by Erica Fabulous, Carol Leigh, Laure McElroy, Miki Mosmen, Kalash Ka, Gina Gold, & St. James Speakers Bureau, San Francisco and Oakland, May 21, 2017.

[17] Logout, *Lucid Noon, Sunset Blush*.

that holds space for the complexities of sex work and invokes a strong appreciation of femme queerness and the femme relationships that form in the spaces society has disavowed.[18]

The film opens with Dolly (played by Logout) leading Micha through their neighborhood and past an overly enthusiastic young white cowboy (presumably a client) to whom Dolly yells at to get back into his truck and wait, as they make their way to The Palace. Once inside, we meet Heart Throb, the black femme house mother, sitting on her futon throne surrounded by signs reading "Femme Supremacy" "Black Trans Lives Matter" and "Black Women Matter", while two other house mates count money around her. "Look baby I'm going to be real with you, come here… Baby gays just like you are always coming up in here 'house me', feed me', 'fuck me', 'please Throb'- it's exhausting! This ain't a charity, you feel me."[19] Micha nods as Heart Throb welcomes her with tough love matched with a promise of community and compassion.[20] *Lucid Noon* begins with an emphasis on the strong femme relationships that emerge among queer communities that are marginalized in society and demonstrates the frequent overlap of many such communities (communities of color, queer, trans, sex working/trading, hustling, etc.).

In an interview on *Lucid Noon*, Logout describes how the common "coming out" trajectory for those in the South includes moving to the nearest big city in hopes of finding more inclusive space and cautions that these big cities are frequently not experienced as the queer havens many people of color are looking for as racism is still rampant. The experience of queer people navigating intersecting experiences of racism, homophobia, transphobia, and/or

[18] Logout's *Lucid Noon Sunset Blush* was featured in stills displayed in the "We're Still Working" sex worker art event in San Francisco (2018) and won the 2016 award of 'Best Feminist Short' at the Scottish Queer International Film Fest.

[19] Logout, *Lucid Noon, Sunset Blush.*

[20] Logout, *Lucid Noon, Sunset Blush.*

femmephobia, results in the formation of small enclaves of all over the South as shown in Lucid Noon. Micha being able to find and join such a collective of queer femmes of color was such an important moment for Logout as a writer, being able to show on screen "the feeling that you aren't going to die anymore" as finding these queer enclaves can be a matter of life and death.[21] *Lucid Noon* not only makes interventions in the fields of queer representation, offering an alternative to mainstream representations that center white-cis members of the LGBTQ+ community whom frequently ascribe to neoliberal heteronormativity, but also puts to visuality the affective, exhalative moment of queer survival outside of such structures under capitalism. Logout both represents and manifests the possibility of survival for folks outside of the "charmed circle" of queerness but centering *Lucid Noon* on queer hustling femmes of color.

By focusing on the supportive relationships of the femme hustlers of The Palace, *Lucid Noon* rejects dominant tropes of sex workers and hustlers as hapless victims and/or without substantial supportive community in mainstream media. Prominent representations of sex workers frequently depict them as lone pariahs in society, detached from family, children, or anyone other than their clientele. Even when in relation to one another, relationships among sex workers are depicted as being untrustworthy of even each other, with examples of this distrust depicted in award winning films such as *Pretty Woman (1990)* and *Moulin Rouge (2001)*, as well as many other popular media representations of the sex industry. The trope of sex workers as societal pariahs is so predominant in mainstream media representation that there is an outpouring of commendation when the media depicts its alternative: sex workers within community and in relation to one another. The television show POSE (2018-2021) and the film *Hustlers* (2019)

[21] Genesis Martinez-Crespo, "Alli Logout's Lucid, Noon Sunset Blush," *Spark Magazine.* April 4th, 2016.

were commended by sex workers and erotic laborers not only for their seemingly more accurate portrayal of work in the sex industries, but for the ways in which these media texts demonstrate how communities form in the sex industry as a means of survival.

The erotic laborers of *Lucid Noon* may be social pariahs, but they are far from without community, as the film focuses on both the social disenfranchisement of queer of color and/or gender non-conforming sex workers of color, but also depicts (and foregrounds) the queer familial companionship that arises within these spaces. Thus, Logout's film disrupts both dominant queer representation as well as mainstream representations of sex work. Emphasizing not only the importance of finding queer communities of color, *Lucid Noon* also specifically privileges the formation queer femme relationships addressing the rampant femme-phobia in queer and sex working/trading communities, as well as society in general. Logout wanted to make a film that was unapologetically feminine and powerful, stating "there is not enough fem4fem, this film is hard femme for hard femme."[22] This decision to make the film "hard femme" can be seen both narratively and aesthetically (discussed in latter sections).

Logout further chooses to highlight not only the familial companionship among these queer femme sex workers, but also their sexual and romantic relationships with each other. *Lucid Noon, Sunset Blush* includes a sex scene between housemates Nova and V, both black queer fat femme sex workers. Their sex worker status is established in the periphery of the postcoital plot line as Nova laughs with V as they discuss their clients' obsessions with press on nails, as Nova searches for her press on that came off in V's vagina. This sex scene is significant as it gives visibility to bodies typically deemed undesirable and asexual in the mainstream media, and thus

[22] Martinez-Crespo, "Logout's Lucid, Noon Sunset Blush."

allows people to see themselves as sexual and attractive in their viewership of the film. It was important to Logout to include a sex scene that gives the audience a more realistic depiction of sex rather than the usual hyper-choreographed sex scenes typically served to audiences by Hollywood, with nothing short of perfectly toned bodies and mind-blowing orgasms. Logout was responding to Hollywood sex scenes, "I don't see bodies like my own being fucked on screen" and how they wanted "to show the reality of sex and our sex and the sex that I have, and the bodies I fuck."[23] Martinez-Crespo articulates their experience of the film,

> "Growing up a thick, curvy brown person, I was stripped of expressing what I felt passionate about, especially having desire for other women. Undoing body shame only began when I was able to define society's efforts to associate fat bodies with undesirability, and to strip fat people of their desires…As a film directed toward the experience of budding queers, this scene alone has dulled fears of undesirability and the ghosts of body shame that I've carried from my late teens."[24]

Furthermore, *Lucid Noon*'s sex scene offers an alternative depiction of the sex had by sex workers from what is usually shown by more mainstream sources. First, it depicts the sex as mutually pleasurable and intimate, showing both Nova and V kissing and pleasuring each other as well as the humorous exchange of conversation after the sex. Most depictions of sex workers having sex in the mainstream media show a sex worker (typically a cis-woman) getting on her knees and providing oral sex to her client, often in an attempt to emphasize an exploitative and distant nature of being a sex worker. Taking the aforementioned *Pretty Woman* as an example, the first time Vivian Ward has sex with her client, Edward, she is shown crawling towards him, while he reclines in a chair with his pelvis pointed towards her. Vivian then unbuckles his pants and tell him she does everything but kiss on the mouth. As she begins kissing down his neck and

[23] Martinez-Crespo, "Logout's Lucid, Noon Sunset Blush."

[24] Martinez-Crespo, "Logout's Lucid, Noon Sunset Blush."

chest, the camera then pans to an old black and white episode of *I Love Lucy* where Lucy has pie thrown in her face- to suggest the popular ending of oral sex in pornography: the cum shot. Even in the more contemporary release of *Hustlers*, the blow job is used as narrative tool in which to mark the character's degradation, drawing on heteropatriarchal and radical feminist tropes rendering this particular sex act as exploitative or demeaning.

Nova and V's sex scene deviates from mainstream portrayals of sex workers' sexual relationships in their decision to portray the sex had by sex workers as mutually pleasurable (rather than one-sided or exploitative), but also in that it does not center a client/provider sexual relationship at all. The scene features two sex workers engaged in sex— with each other and not for pay— which is extremely rare in films that involve sex workers. Logout allows V and Nova to exist outside of the confines of the client/provider relationship that so frequently defines sex worker identity. While the presence of the client does indeed make their way into the sex-capades of the characters, it is only tangential. The client is only relevant in that their aesthetic preferences (femme press on nails) are not necessarily easily compatible with V and Nova's queer sex life. The film does not erase the client, but rather decenters them as the primary focus or marker of sex workers' sexuality and identity. By doing so, the film renegotiates not only the cinematic depictions of sex workers, but also the dominant constructions of a "sex worker" identity politics, as well as how sex workers relate to their sexuality and each other. *Lucid Noon* encourages a theorization of erotic labor, specifically for queer femmes of color, less as a fixed identity marker or the singular issue driving their lives, but instead, as one of many mundane, but nonetheless integral, facets of sex workers' lives and sexualities.

Though The Palace is the material site of residence, where they sleep, fuck, and count their money, the queer femmes of *Lucid Noon, Sunset Blush* have found a definition of home as a

psychic space of belonging that they carry with each other, offering a theorization of home from the realities of political and societal dispossession. These conceptualizations of home, as not a longing for the supposed queer havens of New York City or San Francisco, but the creation of their own queer femme enclave of The Palace in Texas, allows for resistance of traditional spacial geographies that would have them separated and dispossessed. Logout's creation of the mobile home-space of The Palace invokes cultural theorist Kellie Jones' articulation of theorist Michel de Certeau's figure of the walker:

> "one who rearticulates, reinscribes the city/state in their own image, a "migrational" force all but invisible to the city plan, outside the "panoptic power" of the grid… The walker exits from the proscribed geographic plan, and in doing so reconfigures it, improvising, inventing something new."[25]

Jones pushes Certeau's understanding of *the walker* forward, from a "pedestrian speech act" to understanding the walker as a dreamer of new social relations that are not yet possible or "unexpected in the dominant cartographic imagination."[26] *Lucid Noon*, traces the quotidian acts of walking, wandering, and cruising of The Palace members, as they move though public spaces eschewing "typical" queer migratory trajectories and. Heart Throb, Dolly, Nova, V and Micha cruise around town with each other in the bed of a pickup truck, walking the streets and canals of their southern neighborhoods, demonstrating a refusal to be isolated or dispossessed through anti-black racism, transphobia, and the criminalization and stigmatization of sex work. Logout's film constructs The Palace community within the frame of Certeau's "walker," demonstrating new pathways to selfhood and reconfiguring enfranchisement through the mutual support of each

[25] Michel de Certeau, "Walking in the City," *The Practice of Everyday Life,* Berkeley: University of California Press, 1980, 91-110; Kellie Jones, *South of Pico (*Durham: Duke University Press, 2017), 6.

[26] K. Jones, 7.

other, rather than enfranchisement via the state. By centering relationships over hustling (stealing bikes, trading/selling sex, etc.) during social ostracization under capitalism where resources are survival, *Lucid Noon* offers a narrative queer survival through relationality and community formation. Further, The Palace's mobile refusal to be contained to a specific area and to claim space confers a resistance to state and social regulations out of public space that would otherwise eliminate "undesirable" communities (queer, POC, sex workers, etc.) by means of segregation and policing.

Logout's group of queer femmes not only refuse to be contained or disappear, but also blissfully occupy spaces of necessity for the city/state. They occupy the public spaces of the roads, necessary for the communities' daily commute, in the most visible way possible: piled in the back of a bright red truck. They walk through the canals which, while absent of other people, are filled with the life necessity of water. Though they have been dispossessed by their families and/or the state, they refuse to disappear and continue to stroll and manifest their own home space with each other. Not only do the characters of *Lucid Noon* refuse to be contained and/or zoned into social exclusion, disappeared, or isolated from society or each other, their survival is one of happiness and joy- established through the depiction of loving and caring relationships. Laughing while joking about how their pussies taste like mangos or laughing while passing around a bag of wine on the tailgate of a truck, Logout depicts the complexity of survival for queer subjects as simultaneously strenuous and joyful, structurally stressful but relationally beautiful.

True to Logout's intention to privilege an aesthetic of femme-ness, *Lucid Noon, Sunset Blush* subsumes the audience with the "limitlessness of femininity" through the consistent rose and coral filters, floral femme apparel of the cast and the fierceness of The Palace community.

The scenes showcase the rituals of the day for these queer femmes including donning dresses/skirts, heels, press-on nails, and make-up. As a group, they leave The Palace and make their way through the suburban streets and abandoned canals, stopping for mangos at a nearby liquor store and then piling into the bed of a truck after sundown to cruise through the city with each other. In each of these scenes there is not anything extremely climactic occurring, with the entirety of the film's plot building from the everyday quotidian practices of finding your people (Micha and The Palace). The femmes talk about their crushes and romantic interests, their entrepreneurial engagements (stealing bikes from wealthy neighborhoods to paint and resell) and what their pussies taste like. Despite the comedic nature of the conversation(ss), nothing extremely out of the ordinary is happening, but as a member of the audience you feel a nearly overwhelming sense of belonging and emotion while watching these queer femme sex workers engage in the everyday relationships of supportive friendship.

In her work *Listening to Images*, scholar Tina Campt proposes an attunement to the ways in which photography, visual images, and sound convey meaning through embodied processes that register on multiple levels of the human sensorium, not needing to be heard to be felt. [27] Campt understands quiet not as the absence of sound or visuality, but as a haptic modality that surrounds and infuses sound with impact, creating the affective possibility for both to register as meaningful.[28] Logout's film utilizes a visuality of femme aesthetics and depictions of quotidian relationality among the queer Black and Brown sex workers to imdue *Lucid Noon*'s quiet moments with a heightened sense of meaning. As we watch the femmes pass around a communal

[27] Tina M. Campt, *Listening to Images* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2017).

[28] Campt, 4.

bag of wine and mangos in the bed of a driving truck, enjoying the hot summer night, the audience feels the sense of home, belonging and relief that The Palace brings to the otherwise dispossessed queer femmes that reside there.

Logout reminds us that queer community in the South is a dire need, and thus people need to know the possibility of finding it exists. They explain,

> "I've been a child that no one cares about… There was little things that I've always known but didn't have words for, nor encouraged to have the words for… "I'm trying to talk to Southern baby gays. I'm trying to reach anybody who has ever felt that feeling of finally finding your people. That's is who I'm trying to talk to… I'm just happy to be alive and be able to share my story right now. I just came out of a really intense depression as a kid, growing up in my small town and nobody understanding anything about me. Coming from a place of having to hide who I am and being scared all the time for my life. I mean, I still feel it. I'm always on edge since I'm still in the South. I'm still nervous all the time. But when I'm with my people, I feel so chill and so free."[29]

Logout's intentions are achieved through her strategic depiction of seemingly mundane acts of femme friendship and compassion, that register on a deeply affective level for those that have similar experiences and may still search for "home."

It is through the cultivation of listening practices which listen past what is being depicted on screen and are attuned to the importance of quotidian rituals of femme-ness in *Lucid Noon*, that Logout provides an affective hope of utopian survival for queer femmes of color and those engaged in erotic labor. *Lucid Noon* functions as an altar of sorts, paying homage to the aesthetic of unapologetic femme-ness and sensuality in the film. Logout's femme aesthetic runs from the through the pink/orange lighting and moody florals, to the narrative emphasis of femme rituals of getting ready: donning heels, long press-on or painted nails, applying lipstick and talking about how their pussies taste of mangos. The listening to the affective register created by Logout in

[29] Martinez-Crespo, "Logout's Lucid, Noon Sunset Blush."

their work draws on the space of the in-between, of possibility, the simultaneous already and not yet. It is through watching these rituals of femme community (and their femme visuality) that Logout establishes an affect of belonging for the audience, the promise of a communal future by simultaneously depicting what is (better representation of community formation amongst erotic laborers and racially disenfranchised peoples), what has been lost (social and political exclusion through policy, social practices, etc.), and what could be (visualizing a future in which quotidian practices of care and survival of queer, femme sex workers and hustlers of color are not necessarily radical but expected).

"*Come Together to do the Right Thing*:" off-Broadway play *TRINKETS*

Further creating the stories communities want to see as a means of envisioning futures, New York City performer, nightlife icon, and playwright Paul E. Alexander produced the off-Broadway show *TRINKETS,* based on of his experiences living in New York city during the 80s and 90s.[30] *TRINKETS* is the story of a group of drag queens and trans women of color working on the streets and hustling erotic labor in the New York City meatpacking district in the 1990s, and how they foster loving relationships among each other during the highs and lows of their work.[31] *TRINKETS* brings together an ensemble of distinctly femme/queer cast members to take up themes of gendered and racialized disenfranchisement through the cultivation of fierce femme relationships and anti-capitalist politics.[32]

[30] Alexander, *TRINKETS,* (film description).

[31] Alexander, *TRINKETS,* (film description).

[32] Alexander, *TRINKETS,* (film description).

TRINKETS puts an emphasis on the formation and support of community care and relationality, even when the plot includes instances of violence and transphobia. Alexander introduces the audience to Strawberry, newly minted to the strolls of the Meat Packing District as she is taken under the wing of Diva, a more experienced trans woman of color and sex worker. Diva cautions Strawberry on the dangers of working the strolls, a few strategies on how to be as safe as possible while hustling, and introduces her to Janet and Blondie, two other trans women of color who work the same area.

Alexander's work takes up the realities that many trans women, especially trans women of color, navigate in working the strolls out of necessity, but also treats their work as a strategic decision of survival made by each of the characters. Wanting to depict a time and experience frequently overlooked in queer/LGBTQ+ (as well as sex working/trading) communities,

> "*TRINKETS* is set during a time when acceptance of a fringe group by the straight world was often little to none; as such, many drag and transsexual females were given no opportunity for real employment. In order for them to make a living, sex work was a common choice. The audience is introduced to a moment in the lives of an ensemble of characters in a story highlighting the tragedies and hardship faced by these brave defying individuals. And we witness them coming together as a small community to do the right thing."[33]

While Alexander makes clear that working the strolls is dangerous and not always the first choice of labor for his characters, he does not write them as victims of circumstance nor as coerced into "the life" by a villainous other(s). In one of the scenes, Janet is confronted on the stroll by her mother, hell-bent on convincing her "son" to return home, leaving the dangerous work of the strolls, as well as their gender. Janet refuses, affirming her mother's love and concern, but also her own choices in her gender identify and presentation, and her performance

[33] Sam Rudy Media Relations, "*TRINKETS* a musical play by Paul E Alexander produced by Gail Thacker/24 Bond Arts Center," Event Press Release, 2018, https://www.brownpapertickets.com/event/3202688#comments.

of erotic labor as a valid means of an income. Though a difficult conversation many of the queer community know too well, Janet is supported by her community (Diva, Blondie, and now Strawberry), demonstrating how these chosen support networks are often essential to both material and emotional well-being of queer subjects.

TRINKETS' narrative foregrounds the importance of chosen family networks in communities of queer people, especially queer people of color and those engaged in erotic labor, whilst refusing to skirt a discussion of transphobia and the rampant violence committed against transwomen providing erotic labor. Alexander does not avoid facing the conversation of the realities of the dangers of outdoor street sex work, and how these instances of violence disproportionally impact transwomen of color providing erotic labor. As Strawberry is being introduced to working the strolls, the group (Diva, Janet, Blondie, etc.) finds out one of the women who worked the strolls with them was killed by a violent client. Diva immediately goes to work brainstorming how they as a community need to start pooling funds and fundraising for end-of-life costs, knowing their friend did not have any supporting blood family members. Working with Trinket, a former working girl and now owner of *Trinkets,* the popular local nightclub frequented by the group, Diva hosts a fundraising drag event, rallying their community for their friend. This moment of violence confronts the realities of street sex work being more and differently dangerous than other forms of erotic labor, and that transwomen are disproportionally targeted with such violence. However, rather than making the violence the primary emphasis of the play or turning a moment of transphobic and whoraphobic violence into a spectacle, *TRINKETS'* narrative centers how the people working the strolls (past and present) come together in community to take care of one another.

Placing community at the center of the plot, rather than the spectacularization of violence against marginalized individuals/communities, specifically queer, trans, and sex working and trading communities (frequently with much overlap), *TRINKETS* offers a significantly different emphasis than other representations of erotic labor in much of mainstream media. Covering a not so distant or dissimilar period as *TRINKETS*, HBO's popular series *The Deuce* delves into the formation of contemporary Manhattan and the political project of "cleaning up" of Times Square (the forced transition of street sexual economies into indoor spaces and increasing targeted criminalization). The season one finale *The Deuce* ends with the audience starring into the open eyes of Ruby ("Thunder Thighs"), a Black working girl after she was pushed through a window to her death by a white client.[34] The scene transitions from the Ruby struggling in self-defense with the client, to him pushing her out of the window, and concludes with the camera (and ergo the audience) holding eye-contact with the Ruby's life-less eyes. Rather than used as opportunity to engage in the very legitimate critique of the sex industry where women of color experience higher levels of violence, *The Deuces* uses Ruby's murder, the death of a Black sex worker, as their cliff-hanger finale. Such finale status renders the spectaculaization of Ruby's disposability the central tenant of the season, with no consideration of how her death would/could impact her family, friends, others working the strolls. The finale settling on the visuality of the camera staring into Ruby's eyes is the last moment the viewers share with Ruby. In her death, Ruby is treated as socially excluded from friends, family, and community- an idea reinforced by the lack of considerable inclusion of Ruby or her death in following episodes. By making this the spectacle of Ruby's death the finale, we are left with nothing in terms of Ruby's significance to

[34] *The Deuce*, season 1, episode 8, My Name is Ruby," directed by Michelle MacLauren, written by George Pelecanos and David Simon, featuring Maggie Gyllenhaal and James Franco. Aired October 29, 2017. HBO.

the other characters working the stroll, her involvement with family or community. In the break between season one and season two, audience members are left to ask how the other characters reacted to Ruby's death, if they cared at all. The lack of narration of the afterlife care (burial, funeral services, etc.) or community obligation reaffirms notions of sex workers, especially black women, women of color, and trans women providing erotic labor. This spectacle of violence against a Black sex worker affirms and perpetuates racist and gendered power structures of racism and gendered violence, rather than critiquing them.

Alexander's *TRINKETS* further expands not only the representation of the importance of community to people within sexual economies, it also reconstructs the "we" of community members within sexual economies. *TRINKETS* introduces Candyman, a black man who is established as a drug dealer and pimp within the play. While Candyman's character is absconded by the group of working women, Diva, Blondie and Janet, who are not interested in the alleged protection he is offering, he is nonetheless treated as part of the fabric of survival under racial capitalism. Candyman is constructed as a complex figure, rather than villain, likewise navigating the structural disenfranchisement of racial capitalism and hustling to make ends meet. *TRINKETS* depicts a community "coming together to do the right thing" and includes Candyman in this narrative and the play's understanding of community. Candyman ends up making a sizable donation to the funds for the afterlife care of the murdered woman, under the logic of "we take care of our own." Candyman as a character and *TRINKETS* as a body of work reconsiders understandings of who constitutes members of communities within the sexual economies, understanding pimps as imperfect community members.

TRINKETS' narrative of the pimp-character Candyman complicates existing dominant discourses of pimps within sexual economies and broader sex working and trading communities.

The depiction of Candyman as a contributing community member (making a sizable donation to afterlife care of the murdered worker) and likewise hustler within the landscape of sexual economies, disrupts "straight" (contemporary) definitions of sex working and trading communities which understand pimps or "third party procurers" as intrinsically and diametrically opposed to the welfare of those in sexual economies. Dominant tropes of pimps are presented within a victim/villain binary narrative which understand pimps as wholly exploitative villains and facilitators of trafficking of innocent victims. These victim/villain narratives are typically read through the lens of white supremacy, leading to implicit (and often not so implicit) racially coded understandings which construct the villainous figure of exploitative pimp as men of color, typically with dark skin, and the victim as white women and children. Such iconography can be seen in dominant anti-trafficking visuals and discourses, as well as many narrative representations of the sex industry (*The Deuce, Pretty Woman*, etc.). Many sex workers' rights discourses and activism posit a reactionary standpoint to narratives of pimping as an inherent form of exploitation in the sex industry, frequently arguing that many erotic laborers do not work with pimps and/or break apart the legal definitions of "third parties" as deliberately vague and unhelpful to the betterment of sex workers. While these perspectives of sex workers' rights activism can be helpful, the deliberate distancing of performers of erotic labor from pimps and third parties, either through disavowal or denial of existence, is unhelp for communities in which these folks continue to exist. This is not to say all pimps are good or even that some may have the capacity to be "good" (though they may be, I am unqualified to make either or any of those claims). Rather all of this to say, that pimps do in fact exist as part of the fabric of informal sexual economies, as depicted in *TRINKETS*, made up of folks hustling racial capitalism.

The theorization of community within sexual economies offered through in narrative of *TRINKETS* demands a dialectic approach, and the consideration of what academic Heather Berg articulates as "the messiness of us." In her own ethnographic work with porn performers and their ongoing labor struggles, as both workers and anti-workers in their industry, Berg draws on the conceptual tool of dialectic thinking.[35] A dialectic approach understands contradiction as a resource for theorization and the meat of our stories, rather than a limitation. Such an analysis "allows for a sharper anti-capitalist feminist critique" of labor and sexual economies, "not just a more inclusive one."[36] Berg grounds her work as a project of sex worker activists' demands for their perspectives to be centered in the theorization of their own work/labor, drawing from the activist slogan "Nothing About Us, Without Us" to posit a deeper question of what can we do when the "us" is messy?[37] How can we begin to understand or construct theories of erotic labor, grounded in the perspectives of people with lived experiences in sexual economies, when those very testimonies (frequently) do not necessarily align or may be fundamentally opposed to one another?

This question of the "messiness of us" permeates all theorizations of sexual economies, from the contradictory theorizations of sex industry labor as both work and anti-work taken up by Berg and other scholars such as femi babylon, to the very considerations of belonging in sex working and trading communities.[38] Who exactly constitutes sex working and trading communities? *TRINKETS*, born out of Alexander's lived experiences in racialized queer

[35] H. Berg, *Porn Work*, 4-5.

[36] H. Berg, 3.

[37] H. Berg, 3-4.

[38] babylon, *heauxthots*; babylon, "What I Have to Do," in *Wetoo: Essays on Sex Work and Survival,* ed. Natalie West and Tina Horn (New York: Feminist Press, 2021), 158; H. Berg, *Porn Work.*

communities in NYC, demonstrates the need for the sharper analysis of the "us" of sex working, trading, and hustling communities of informal sexual economies. The need for "sharper analysis" does not to argue for the blanket inclusion of pimps into the sex worker/trading communities or that they should necessarily be embraced into sex worker activist spaces, but rather to allow for the situational acknowledgment of pimps' existence within sexual economies as more complex than the stereotypes allotted to them as (frequently racialized) villainous exploiters of young women and girls. Pimps in fact exist, though not in all iterations of sexual economies, and they do participate and sustain relationships in community with erotic laborers to varying degrees (the impact of such relationships is not the topic of this dissertation nor is it in my capacity to comment on). However, *TRINKETS* advances the need for a dialectic approach to understanding communities of informal sexual economies, where we must consider pimps as both contentious and often harmful to many of erotic laborers, as well as members (to varying degrees) of those very sexual economies in which they may or may not be causing harm for the utilization of their own survival strategies under racial capitalism.[39]

Additionally, this is explicitly not an argument for the more inclusive or expansive definition of the term "sex worker" or its various counterparts (erotic laborers, providers, etc.). Sex worker theorist and pro-heaux womanist scholar femi babylon points out the pitfalls of stretching the term sex worker to include academics, smut writers, photographers, and various others laboring in proximity to sex work(ers) and sexual economies.[40] Pushing the term to its

[39] Further, the argument made in this dissertation to consider the reality of pimps's complex existence outside of a binary of 'good" or 'bad," does not seek to absolve pimps from accountability of any harms done to members of the sex working and trading communities.

[40] babylon, *heaxthots*, 29.

limits of inclusion threatens to decenter and obscure the specific needs and perspectives of prostitutes, strippers, erotic porn performers, etc.[41]

> "I feel like the constant attempt to push the term to its limits to accommodate those who feel "left out" does not accomplish anything materially- nor do I think we should water down the term to include academics who write about sex- academic writing about pornography differs greatly from erotica which is designed to titillate. Though I am skeptical of certain aspect of identity-based politics (the weaponization of identity to avoid accountability or using identity to defame someone as part of a personal grudge), I believe that any reconsideration of the term should be led by sex workers, and the rest should follow."[42]

Again, this reading of *TRINKETS* (nor *TRINKETS* itself) is not demanding a more expansive definition or inclusivity of the identity of "sex worker", but rather a reconsideration of the make-up of sex working and trading communities as existing beyond singular axes identities. Using a dialectic framework to read *TRINKETS* allows for the sharper focus on the ways in which formation of sex working and trading communities function as coalitional strategy of survival for its members for members of disenfranchised overlapping communities and how they relate to one another. While the term "sex worker" may remain, as it should, reserved for those providing or exchanging erotic services, the theorization of sex worker community might consider analyses of community which consider coalitional formations united by a commitment to "take care of our own." Community is frequently not constituted by singular identities nor mere proximity, in this case to erotic labor(ers). To be in community is an experience, an alliance of loyalty and obligation, and a set of dedicated care practices, as illustrated in *TRINKETS*.

[41] babylon, 29.

[42] babylon, 29.

"Honor the Dead, fight like Hell for the Living:" *But I Am Here* mural and digital zine.

January 25th of 2021, New York City sex workers' rights organizers partnered with the #OldProProject to launch the *But I Am Here* mural and digital zine. On the 103rd anniversary of the first sex worker march and protest of 1917 in San Francisco, *But I Am Here: Speeches, Writing & Art from the Sex Worker Movement in NYC* was launched amongst sex workers' rights organizers, community members, allies and friends in an online zoom release party. As both brick and mortar street mural and material art exhibition, and digital e-zine *But I Am Here* honors and amplifies the voices of New York's past and present sex worker advocates and community members. The project brings together the art, poetry, portraiture, speeches, and voices of a diverse, coalitional, and intergenerational movement for sex workers' rights in New York.[43] Through the use of the visual, the written, and the practical, *But I Am Here* emphasizes and celebrates the ongoing collective struggles and resilience of sex workers as a means to elevate the voices of sex workers' on topics affecting their lives, as well as a creative strategy to continue the work of fostering community relationality and care amongst sex worker communities.

But I Am Here meets us at a nexus moment of precarity for the sex working and trading communities, as they navigate increasing criminalization of erotic labor, rising racial tensions of anti-black and anti-Asian violence and police brutality in the United States, during the COVID-19 global pandemic. The outdoor mural functions as a creative strategy of display in an increasingly digital world, one that many sex workers find themselves censored, surveilled or policed out due to policies such as FOSTA- SESTA.

[43] Zen and Tso, *But I Am Here*, 5.

The *But I Am Here* mural and brick-and-mortar exhibition depicts sex workers' resilience and survival as connected to a collective community in relation with one another. Designed and painted by sex worker activist, artist and "slut mom" Andrea Acevedo, commonly known on social media as @butterflymush, the *But I Am Here* mural depicts prominent sex worker community members of New York City and was displayed in the windows of Brooklyn's Love Gallery for the two weeks following release party. [44] Acevedo's painting portraits New York's sex working activist foremothers (Mary Jones, Sylvia Rivera, and Marsha P. Johnson), and the fallen angels of the contemporary sex workers' rights movement (Layleen Polanco, Lorena Borjas and Yang Song), each experiencing the criminalization of erotic labor differently and in their own time, into visual relation with one another. Such a community bridges temporal and astral planes as well as differential experiences of the criminalization and stigmatization of sex industry labor, as well as anti-blackness, xenophobia, and transphobia. Through their difference but togetherness, the mural portraits visually attest to the necessity of a coalitional politic of relationality for sex workers' survival, resilience, and for sex workers' rights activism.

The *But I am Here* mural and its corresponding zine cover art understands the struggle of survival for sex working and trading communities as tied to issues of anti-blackness, anti-queerness, xenophobia, transphobia, and the violence of the US settler state. It is through this coalitional relationality as necessary for the survival, cultivation, and care of sex working and trading communities and their members, we gain an understanding out of community futurity outside of biological reproduction. In this, sex working and trading communities' conceptualization of community survival and futurity make interventions into queer theory and

[44] Avecedo's mural of Jones, Rivera, Johnson, Polanco, Borjas, and Song is also the cover to the *But I am Here* zine.

debates regarding the 'death drive' of queer peoples.[45] The "death drive" becomes not tied to an innate compulsion to cease reproduction of kinship, grounded in an identity, or antisociality, but rather as imposition of structural forms of oppression resulting in social, political, and material death of community. Thus, the cultivation of the non-heteronormative social, bringing together community and kin, biological or chosen, functions as a political project of survival. The production, curation, and exhibition of art is one of many creative strategies in which sex working and trading communities cultivate and sustain community. Visually, *But I am Here* works to contribute to this political project of survival and makes such theorizations of intergenerational, coalitional community available to Myrtle Avenue passersby.

The conceptualization of sex worker community survival through the necessity of a collective and relational coalitional politic of the mural and book cover is further reedified in the pages of the zine. The *But I Am Here* zine gathers the materials, writings, and art from thirty contributors involved in the fight for sex worker justice and strives to honor the dead while fighting like hell for the living. Available on Amazon for Kindle with proceeds going to community mutual aid and advocacy, the zine brings together a myriad of community voices in mixed mediums to further demonstrate the diverse sex worker community and the need for such a different community to function together, both in relation and relationally, with each other. The zine begins with a letter to the readers, contextualizing the work within the social and political atmosphere of precarity and violence for those in the sex industry, and dedicates this work to Layleen Polanco, Yang Song, Lorena Borjas, and all the other community members lost to state violence, COVID 19, HIV/AIDS and other plagues such as transphobia and whorephobia.[46] Like

[45] Lee Edelman, No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive (Durham: Duke University Press, 2014).
[46] Zen and Tso, *But I Am Here*, 5.

the mural, the letter explicitly connects the survival and resistance of sex working foremothers such as Mary Jones, Sylvia, Rivera and Marsh P. Johnson to the resilience of our present-day movement to decriminalize and destigmatize sex work.[47] The subsequent pages build a collective of diverse sex worker voices building an advocacy project of survival, not just in the diversity of contributors but also in the diversity of contributed mediums. Acevedo's portraits complement the historical pages of the aforementioned foremothers, reminding readers to whom community owes this movement and their collective project of survival. *But I Am Here* further grounds their project in advocacy, past and future through the inclusion of previous advocacy campaigns (demands the repeal of the Walking While Trans Ban and the decriminalization of sex work in New York). Calls to end police brutality and the police state are reedified in the inclusion of Julie Xu's speech from migrant labor organizing of "We Need to Create Space for Sex Workers to Come to the Table" with the organization Red Canary Song, Melania Brown's "I Am Here" speech, honoring her sister Layleen Polanco from the Brooklyn Liberation Action for Black Trans Lives, and Lorelei Lee's "There's No Sex Work Justice without Racial Justice" speech from International Whore's Day. These words are complemented by the photography of other actions such as Black Sex Worker Liberation March & Vigil and the *Still We Rise* peaceful protest outside of the Church of Incarnation.

The inclusion of these direct political actions is complemented by personal narratives, art, poetry, and calls to action, calling the reader (sex worker or not) into community- not through a common identity or experience with erotic labor, but through a coalitional politic of relationality. A poem entitled "NoName" contemplates the experience and political embodiment of anonymity

[47] Zen and Tso, 5, 8-10, 12-16.

as a state in which being desired is also being positioned as disposable.[48] The short story "Hard to Answer" navigates the seemingly innocuous question of "so, what do you do for a living" while dating as someone in the sex industry.[49] "Community Service" narrates the exhalative experience of finding just one other person to which you can share experiences of sex work, trauma, music and more without fear of judgment or shame.[50] "Homelessness and Sex Work" navigates poverty, sex work, and criminalization from experience, "I'm headed to jail because all I needed was a safe place to sleep and something to eat."[51]

Each written testimony is paired with the work of sex worker artists that enhance the affective nature of the words. "NoName" is paired with the painting "L'Origine du Monde," pairing anonymity with the visibility of masculine sexuality, depicting an image of a male client, abstracted to his buttocks, legs spread apart as he lies on his stomach. The "untested possibility" of "Hard to Answer" shares the page with "Untitled Journal page 1&2" comic panel, illustrating just another usually unusual experience of sex work that is illegible to many outside of the industry.[52] "Community Service" is partnered with a photographic face-out -portrait, which may or may not be the author. This face-out-portrait, as well as the photo portrait index of contributors at the beginning of the zine stands as a radical act of collective community disclosure as the last 20 years have demanded an increase in sex worker anonymity or masked

[48] Manuela Bremont, "No Name," *But I Am Here,* 32.

[49] Audrey West, "Hard to Answer," *But I Am Here,* 33.

[50] Blane, "Community Service," *But I Am Here,* 36.

[51] Janice Rodrigez, "Homelessness and Sex Work," *But I Am Here,* 37.

[52] Kayleigh Stovicek, "Untitled Journal page 1&2," *But I Am Here,* 33.

forms of identity as safety or "stigma coping" strategies.[53] Camile Waring writes on the proliferation of self-anonymization practices alongside the development of web based technologies along with the obscuration of sex worker's voices and identity in art history.[54]

> "As contemporary sex workers, they have moved on from the standard academic finding that men control the images of sex work and they are only passive victims, exposed, visible and vulnerable or workers doing nothing more than enthusiastically performing patriarchal stereotypes of sexual servility."[55]

Waring writes, the "sellers of sex" are no longer understood as passive female subjects for an active male image maker, subject to the "politics of pity" or "voyeuristic gaze structured by a binary narrative of voyeurs looking either at the unrepentant harlot upholding the structures of patriarchy or a hapless and deviant pitiful victim of circumstance."[56] By not only claiming their individual image(s), but their images as a collective community the contributors avoid the tendency of non-sex workers to forget that they are human beings, with faces, much like everyone else.[57] While anonymity is often a bounded and deliberate choice to avoid violence or the effects of stigmatization, the choice to display face-out photos of sex workers' functions as a powerful reclamation of humanity, space, and self-expression- especially is they identify as full service sex workers. The risk of being face out is understood within sex working and trading communities as a risk, to those who would inflict misogynistic violence as well as to those who would offer saviorism. The face-out self-portraits and images within the pages of the *But I am*

[53] Waring, "Visual Activism," 199.

[54] Waring, 199.

[55] Waring, 200.

[56] Waring, 200.

[57] Waring, 201.

Here zine utilizes a controversial political tool of reclamation as a form of visual activism. These photographs also function as a mechanism of trust building amongst community members, an acknowledgment and offering of humanity that is so frequently denied, with an affective hope for readers to orient themselves towards sex workers as a mechanism of community solidarity.

The *But I am Here* zine is an invitation of affective relation into the fold of advocacy, experience, and artistic expression of the sex working community. The zine invites you into the sexy and often not so sexy world of sex working and trading communities, but it simultaneously demands relational action in return. Part three of the zine calls the reader into community actions to abolish NYPD Vice, the police state, problematic sex trafficking polices, and the hyper-surveillance and digital death experienced by sex workers online and offers resources on where readers can learn more about sex worker community activism. The zine ends with a hope for their readers to not only be in relation with them, but to *act* relationally in tangible ways that matter (coalitional solidarity, tangible resources, etc.).

In this chapter I have demonstrated how sex worker art and cultural production functions as a form of situated knowledge, many of which offer alternative understandings of erotic labor and sexual economies that differ from what depicted in the mainstream media. By looking at the works of *Lucid Noon, Sunset Blush*, *TRINKETS*, and the *But I Am Here* mural and zine, I further demonstrate how the situated knowledges of relationality among sex working community members depicted in sex worker artistic production, have the capacity to function as situated imaginaries of community survival and relationality in praxis. It is in these moments of quotidian relationality among sex working and trading community members, their continued existence in each other's presence and the centering of "the here and now" of sex workers' community survival, that we can glimpse a future where sex workers live without shame,

stigmatization, and state-disenfranchisement.[58] As Brager notes, "These stories have such power in not only talking about what's going on right now, but also figuring out what the world will look like."[59] The visual and thematic representations of community care and relationality in sex working communities provides sex working communities something in which to focus, no longer needing to strain or squint so hard to catch a glimpse of a future outside of bounds of the "poisonous and insolvent" present.

[58] Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia,* 24.

[59] Brager, *DIY Resistance*.

Chapter Two: *A Whore's Bath*
Praxis of Relationality in Cultural Production of Sexual Economies

The previous chapter demonstrates how sex worker art functions as a practice of utopian future making, where the visual and thematic representation of community care and relationality in sex working communities allows space for artists to imagine the world in which they would like to live, as Bragger suggests.[1] This chapter considers the spaces in which these visual representations of sex workers are shown and celebrated. First, I will discuss the *We're Still Working* art exhibition, curated by Maxine Holloway and Javier Luis Hurtado in San Francisco (2017). The *We're Still Working* exhibition demonstrated substantive significance through its many community partnerships with prominent individual community members as well as community organizations such as St. James Infirmary, El/La Trans Latinas, and the LYRIC Youth Center. Next, I discuss the stand-up comedy show and competition *Your Hooker Jokes Are Lazy*, hosted by sex worker and comedian Vee Chattie in Seattle. Chattie hosted *Your Hooker Jokes Are Lazy* twice (May 7th and June 18th of 2017) inviting comedian contestants to try their hand at telling their best jokes about the sex industry to a panel of sex worker judges.[2] The next section will examine Jacqueline Frances' New York post-Covid exhibition *Body of Work*, where she said goodbye to the job she loved (stripping) to make way for a new career trajectory and artistic projects. Frances, also known as Jacq the Stripper, is a well-known public sex worker personality, known for her *Inquisitive Stripper* comic series and creation of the iconic "Tip Her/Them" hats and "Off-Duty" and "Retired Stripper" merchandise. The popularity of

[1] Brager, *DIY Resistance*, 2020.

[2] In addition to the demonstrated substantive significance of the *Your Hooker Jokes Are Lazy* show specifically, Chattie's wider body of work demonstrates a case of substantive significance, having performed in both iterations of *Your Hooker Jokes Are Lazy* as well as the *Portland Sex Worker Film and Arts Festival* (2017) and the *Sex Worker Stand Up Comedy show* in Seattle (2017*).*

Frances' work created a case of substantive significance for the *Body of Work* exhibition, having been circulated widely across virtual sex worker networks. Lastly, I will discuss the longest running sex worker art and film festival, The San Francisco Bay Area Sex Worker Film and Arts Festival (SWFF or *Sexworkerfest*) and their Whore's Bath event. Each of these events present an example of how sex workers foster and cultivate in the artistic spaces of sex working and trading communities. I will demonstrate how sex worker art shows, as part of a broader network of sex worker community organizing events, are intentional spaces of renegotiated structures of relationality between sex working communities with non-sex working publics, other sex workers, and with sex working artists themselves.

Understanding the Coalitional Care Politic of Sex Working and Trading Communities

In 2016 I attended the 6th annual Desiree Alliance conference *Addressing Justice* in New Orleans, Louisiana, which brought together an "eclectic array of people representing the sex workers' rights movement," all invested in understanding the intersections of sex work, allyship, and movement-building.[3] The conference hosted dedicated skill sharing professionalization events for attendees on client screening, safe(r) technologies, operating your businesses on a budget, filing taxes, workshopping ads, and female ejaculation. Activist and organizers hosted panels on the work done in the sex workers' rights movement, and how far they still need to go, with panels "Trans Rights, Sex Work, HIV, Resilience and Organizing, "Labor Organizing of

[3] The Desiree Alliance is a national coalition of current and former sex workers and erotic laborers, who support the improved understanding of human, social, and political impacts of the criminalization of sex work, and advocate for sex workers' human, health, labor, and civil rights.

Desiree Alliance, "Hello, From Desiree Alliance," *Desiree Alliance Addressing Justice Conference Program*, 2016, 2.

Exotic Dancers," and "Intro into Prison Abolition: Get Your Rights." Desiree further hosted events highlighting sex worker cultural production, screening the documentary *Major!*, on the life and advocacy of community activist and keynote speaker Miss Major, and one woman performances of Kaitlyn Bailey's of *Cuntagious* and Akynos's *Black Pussy*. The conference centered their events on their sex working attendees, while hosting events for non sex workers, allies, and academics such as "How to take a break from studying sex workers," "Nothing About Us Without Us: what you need to know before consenting to participate in someone's research project," and "The intersections of Race and Sex Work in the Era of Harm Reduction and #BlackLivesMatter," which have all fundamentally shaped my methodology of research within the academy.[4]

The Desiree Alliance conference created a dedicated space of community relationality for sex working community members, academics, activists, and artists through practices teaching, learning, and networking with one another. However, the non-scripted events that resulted from such an intentional community gathering illuminated what I would come to consistently observe during sex worker community events: a praxis of community care. When traveling for the conference from out of state, an airline damaged a vital and expensive mobility aid for one of the community organizers in attendance. Conference organizers announced the incident during one of the provided luncheons, and with very little hesitation much of the entire room reached for their purses, wallets, or what cash they had to fix the mobility aid. This act of care did not seem to operate out of guilt (e.g. the purse shuffle many perform out discomfort when faced the economic need of another, only to come up with nothing), nor as a performance of charity

[4] Desiree Alliance Conference: Addressing Justice, 2016.

(needing to be prompted by a justification of need, or seen giving). But rather the announcement of need and the existence of the need itself activated seemingly reflexive community gestures of care.

A similar dynamic of sex worker community gestures of care is discussed on the live streamed panel, *DIY RESISTANCE: Sex Workers + Organizers Talk Artmaking and Mutual Aid for International Whores' Day*, amidst discussions on the interconnectivity of community activism, art-making, and mutual aid. Panelist Empress Wu, dominatrix and zinester, noted

> "We are all so down for each other it makes me want to scream so much, so bad. The amount of unity I have experienced and the amount of belonging I have experienced - can be celebrated in a stunning way in sex work."[5]

Further, the late Mistress Velvet, a queer intersex dominatrix and activist, articulated similar experiences within sex worker community through her disappointment when said community does not show up,

> “This is our people; we are in this struggle together. It just hurts. I feel this also in other communities with shared identities. I am always going to be angry at white people, and cis men and these systems. And I don’t expect much from them, but I do expect a lot from other sex workers. And most of the time, about 99 percent of the time sex workers do not let me down. So, I really feel a lot of pain when you find the one who is embracing the whorearchy or being extremely racist, and I’m like damn.”[6]

For Velvet and fellow panelist J.D. Bragger, the political message of community, care, and mutual aid came before the art they create, where the art functions as an activist means of both communicating and creating said message for voyeurs as well as makers.[7] I suggest this community care oriented politic of sex worker organizing is not a static representation of a

[5] Wu, *DIY Resistance.*

[6] Velvet, *DIY Resistance.*

[7] Brager, *DIY Resistance.*

utopian ideal, but rather affectively radiates from the films, artwork, and performances, actively cultivating the relationality and community formation among sex working/trading artists, organizers, and attendees of in-person events, exhibitions, and festival spaces in which the DIY theorists imagine.

"A Monument to the Risen:" *We're Still Working: The Art of Sex Work*

Renegotiating established contracts of relationality between sex workers and non sex working publics, the *We're Still Working: The Art of Sex Work* multi-disciplinary group exhibition, curated by Maxine Holloway and Javier Luis Hurtado celebrated the contributions of sex workers to Bay Area history, art, and culture and encouraged viewers to challenge dominant narratives about the sex industry and erotic laborers.[8] The opening reception hosted January 26th, 2017, welcomed attendees to the exhibition with the performances from Arabelle Raphael, Joseph Liatela, and the LYRIC LGBTQ Youth Center as part of the SOMArts curatorial residency program. Running from January 27th through February 25th, *We're Still Working* showcased a spectrum of sex worker art mediums and artistic perspectives on erotic labor. The art show presented a showing of artist Logout's film *Lucid Noon Sunset Blush,* displaying panels of Jacq the Stripper's *Inquisitive Strippers* comic series, sex worker portraits series by photographer Rae Threat, and the immersive art installation *A Monument to the Risen* by Laurenn McCubbin, among many more. Threat's portrait art series *The Industry* photographs sex workers how they want to be seen or represented, giving control of their image back to sex workers as a form of activism against the ways they are typically photographed by journalists,

[8] SOMArts, "We're Still Working/ The Art of Sex Work," January 27–February 25 — SOMArts Events, *SOMAArts Cultural Center*, Jan 2017, https://somarts.org/event/stillworking/.

photographers, and other media producers.[9] Joseph Liatela's monotype print series PROXIMITY takes on complexities of identity, eroticism versus intimacy, and the human projection of fantasies onto other human bodies.[10] Liatela constructs black, white, and occasionally blue collagraphs of the garments worn by the artist before leaving sex work to medically transition, documenting the destruction and their own complicated attachments to the garments.[11] McClubbin's immersive art installation *A Monument to the Risen,* later showcased as *Observed/Intimate,* explored the performative eroticism, construction of identity, and typical working conditions of strip clubs*,* based on a series of interviews with performers from the Lusty Lady, a now closed sex worker-owned peep show in San Francisco. The first installment features a collage of Lusty Lady promotional materials: flyers with the images of performers in lingerie, event promotions for "Cowboys and Angels" night, and reproductions of neon signs "XXX," "PRIVATE PLEASURE BOOTHS," "24 HOUR PEEP SHOW," "GIRLS GIRLS GIRLS" and "LIVE NUDES." The "LIVE NUDES" neon sign in the shape of an arrow, directs the viewer to a baby pink locker surrounded by establishment dressing room signage: "DANCERS you must take your top OFF on your 2nd song IF NOT you will be sent home!!" "don't put your pussy on the pole this spreads disease," "DANCERS you must have hair, make up, and outfits approved by security b4 you go on stage," and "Please recycle."

The *We're Still Working* exhibition pushes back against the legacy of sex workers being excluded from the discourses of erotic labor by insisting sex workers voices be heard in the

[9] SOMArts, "We're Still Working/ The Art of Sex Work."

[10] Joseph Liatela, *PROXIMITY*, in *We're Still Working Art Show*, Winter 2015, San Francisco, SOMARTS Cultural Center.

[11] Liatela, *PROXIMITY*.

mediums in which they speak (e.g., art, film, performance). Holloway and Hurtado express their curatorial statement,

> "We are not outsiders examining the sex worker community, but insiders with art to share. We strongly believe that placing sex workers at the center of our own narrative is one of the best ways to fight for sex worker justice. Art is a form of activism, and we are committed to creating opportunities for sex workers to share our stories through artistic outlets."[12]

Each work featured in *We're Still Working* offered a unique and nuanced perspective on erotic labor from their respective artists, functioning together to express the differences and complexities of laboring within sexual economies. *We're Still Working* attempts to renegotiate relationality in among sex worker artists and organizers and both sex workers and non-sex worker attendees. The show "enthusiastically invites" anyone and everyone to attend, from the open-minded and curious to those who "know nothing about sex work yet seek to undermine or eliminate it."[13] The exhibition seeks to educate in good faith those who "know nothing" yet still advocate for harmful legislation and structural disenfranchisement of sex worker community members, as a practice of harm reduction and community cultivation. By foregrounding sex workers' (frequently forgotten) humanity and positioning them as key theorists in their own experiences within sexual economies, the show emphasizes that while experiences of erotic labor are complex, the concept of sex worker humanity is simple.

Though the emphasis on sex worker humanity in the *We're Still Working* has the capacity to generate empathy for sex workers' complex experiences, research demonstrates this may not be enough to disrupt harmful stereotypes and biases against sex workers. In their work on

[12] Holloway and Hurtado. "We're Still Working: The Art of Sex Work."

[13] Roula Seikaly, "Oft-Maligned Sex Workers Defy Judgment in 'We're Still Working,'" KQED.com, KQED Inc., Feb 1, 2017, https://www.kqed.org/thedolist.

harmful biases against American Indians in museums, Aleksandra Sherman, Lani Cupo, and Nancy Marie Mithlo observe that encouraging empathy through perspective taking or stereotype-suppression is frequently not enough to yield significant changes in stubbornly resistant cultural biases.[14]

"My Cat is my Pimp:" *Your Hooker Jokes are Lazy* with Vee Chattie

Breaking from the "good faith" or "perspective taking" models of educating non-sex working publics on problematic stereotypes, sex worker and comedian Vee Chattie directly renegotiates structures of relationality with non sex workers and sex workers alike, in their comedy show *Your Hooker Jokes are Lazy.* As a comedy competition, *Your Hooker Jokes are Lazy* invites eight comedian participants from across the United States to the Highline bar in Seattle, try to their hand at telling their best jokes about the sex industry.[15] Participants are given five minutes to tell their jokes, to not just a crowd of audience members but also to a staged panel of three sex worker judges where after each set, the judges offer feedback to comedian participants. The winner is determined by the panel with consultation from the audience and the winner leaves with cash, sexy gifts, and/or bragging rights depending on the night.

On a quest to find the best hooker jokes they can, Chattie explains, "The show is called '*Your Hooker Jokers are Lazy*,' because most of the time they are, referencing a certain familiarity between anti-sex work rhetoric and comedy, from Chris Rock's self-proclaimed failure as a father if his daughter ever ends up on a pole, or Ricky Gervais' quips on how to

[14] Sherman, Cupo, and Mithlo, "Perspective-taking increases emotionality and empathy but does not reduce harmful biases against American Indians: Converging evidence from the museum and lab," *PLOS ONE* (2020), 1-12.

[15] *Your Hooker Jokes Are Lazy*, hosted by Vee Chattie, May 7, 2017

become famous by "going out and killing a prostitute."[16] Even self-proclaimed feminist comedians like Tina Fey, in her SNL monolog claiming all of Hugh Hefner's "whore" girlfriends were sexually abused by family members, and Amy Schumer, joking about burying the body of a unconscious stripper after a friend choked her until she passed out in VIP, frequently make sex workers the butt of their jokes.[17] This not-so-veiled cultural ideology of sex worker disposability permeates much of what is found humorous within dominant media. In his work *Marked Women: Prostitutes and Prostitution in the Cinema*, Russell Campbell observes how the earliest depiction of sex workers on screen in *Scene of the Tenderloin* in 1897, comedically depicts a pair of women walking in the red-light district, chased, and then arrested by police. Most recently in 2014, many sex workers tweeted their disapproval of the film *A Rough Night* for the film's utilization of the death of a dancer/stripper as the major plot device of the film. The figure of the sex worker is frequently portrayed as in need of resolution in media, frequently delivered in her "recovery into the patriarchal system." [18] She marries or finds love, is rehabilitated by walking

[16] *Never Scared,* directed Joel Gallen, written by Chris Rock (2004; Burbank, CA, 2023), YouTube; "Gervais defends himself after prostitute joke," *The Irish Examiner*, January 17, 2027, Accessed February 1, 2023. https://www.irishexaminer.com/lifestyle/arid-30293864.html.

[17] Charlotte Shane, "Tina Fey Hates Sex Workers: Part 3 of Infinity," Tits and Sass (blog), May 18, 2011, https://titsandsass.com/tina-fey-hates-sex-workers-part-3-of-infinity/; *Inside Amy Schumer*, season 3, episode 2, "Cool With It," directed by Ryan McFaul, featuring Amy Schumer, Dennis Quaid, Connor Antico, aired April 28, 2015, https://www.cc.com/full-episodes/49m1ku/inside-amy-schumer-cool-with-it-season-3-ep-302; Shannon O'Hara, "Why sex workers are pissed at Amy Schumer, and what internet laws have to do with it," The Daily Californian, June 1, 2018, https://dailycal.org/2018/06/01/sex-workers-amy-schumer.

[18] Russell Campbell, "Sex trade in the Cinema," *Marked Women: Prostitutes and Prostitution in the Cinema* (Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 2006), 3-20.

away from "the life," or she dies.[19] In the videogame Grand Theft Auto, sex workers have fewer options as players are simply encouraged to run them over with their cars.[20]

Sex worker comedians and live story tellers have specifically tapped into the ways in which humor and comedy can be a vehicle to challenge problematic socio-political cultural norms, calling attention to the problematic ways the death, disposability, and stigmatization of sex workers are frequently used as major plot devices in film, media, and comedy. Through *Your Hooker Jokes are Lazy,* Chattie orchestrated a space for sex workers to use humor and play to disrupt, renegotiate, and refuse harmful narratives regarding the sex industry. Further, by challenging participants to rethink the positionality of sex workers from the butt of jokes to the intended audience and comedians themselves, *Your Hooker Jokes are Lazy* functions as a site of community formation and renegotiated relationality between sex workers organizers, panelists, comedians, and attendees and non-sex worker comedian participants and audience members.

The show's debut night, Chattie welcomed their audience asking, "Are there any hookers in the crowd?" The audience cheered and erupted in "wooooos." Pleased with a mild and potentially feigned surprise they replied, "Ohh shit, nice. Statistically, due to privacy issues we probably have twice as many, and we welcome those of you who cannot woo. You're in our hearts, we love you."[21] Chattie's hospitality toward a presumed sex worker audience, in addition to the panel of sex workers judges, functions three-fold. First, Chattie's explicit acknowledgment of sex workers in the audience, understands that the most consumers of media pertaining to the

[19] Campbell, 13.

[20] Users earn payment from using their car to run over sex workers in the game.

[21] *Your Hooker Jokes Are Lazy*, May 2017

sex industry or erotic labor are sex workers themselves.[22] Further, by explicitly recognizing an audience of sex workers Chattie intentionally declares a shift in audience paradigm, where sex workers will no longer merely be the butt of the joke, but rather the explicit audience of the show. The greeting serves as both a welcome to the sex workers in the audience, as well as a playful warning to the comedian participants of the paradigm shift of the 'conventional audience.' Much like the sex workers' rights slogan, "Someone you love is a sex worker," Chattie challenges the frequently made presumption that sex workers are not in the room and reminds people that not everyone is "out" due to safety or privacy reasons. Additionally, by referencing many sex workers' "need for privacy," Chattie playfully draws attention to the rampant stigmatization and ever-increasing criminalization of erotic labor that keeps many sex workers from being "out," a joke which presumes a primarily sex worker or allied audience. By rendering visible the probable silences of sex worker audience members and the frequent presumptions of their absence by comedians, Chattie disrupts such an environment that would enable harmful jokes at sex workers' expense.

"Your Hooker Jokers are Lazy" further shifts the established relationship of comedians and their audience during a comedy show by enlisting a panel of sex worker judges to provide in real-time feedback to comedian participants. In the second performance of the show, comedian participant Robert Pity joked, that in the video game Grand Theft auto you can either pay sex workers for sex or murder them in your car, but do not have the option to save them.[23] The joke got a few laughs from an otherwise quiet crowd, and rather than wait until the end of the bit the

[22] Piccillo, *Celluloid Bordello*.

[23] *Your Hooker Jokes Are Lazy*, June 18, 2017

panelists' shouted their criticism in direct response to the Pity, "We don't want to be saved!"[24] *Your Hooker Jokes are Lazy* embodies a "liminoid" space of performance that breaks with the current dominant social contract of the theater.

In his work *Horrible Prettiness*, Robert Allen discusses the transformation of the American theater in the 1800s from a liminal space of racial, gendered, and classed dynamics to the aristocratically structured format that we are familiar with today.[25]

> "Today when we buy a movie or theater ticket, we generally assume that all we have purchased is the right to occupy a particular seat for a given period of time. We generally assume that a range of (previously) allowable audience behavior beyond passive sitting, is severely circumscribed we will be asked to leave if we talk above a whisper, shout things at the actors, and so forth."[26]

Allen illustrates how the theatrical performances were previously structured by audience feedback: spontaneous outbursts of cheering and applause signaled enjoyment, and condemnation came in the form of hissing, shouted insults, the pelting of foodstuffs and occasionally rocks.[27] This feedback was racialized, gendered, and classed, and as such considered improper by the aristocratic classes. In a transformation of the theater into a "proper" social institution, theater managers eliminated any markers of class and gender solidarity: alcohol, prostitution, boisterous behavior, and audience control.[28] Comedy spaces themselves frequently occupy a more liminal space, where audience engagement of cheering, boo-ing, and

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[24] *Your Hooker Jokes Are Lazy*, June 18, 2017

[25] Robert C. Allen, "The Historical contents of Burlesque: The Transformation of American Theater," in *Horrible Prettiness: Burlesque and American Culture* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1991), 43-78.

[26] Allen, 55.

[27] Allen, 57.

[28] Allen, 65.

direct communication with the comedian is permissible. *Your Hooker Jokes are Lazy* brings back not only the audience feedback and alcohol associated with comedy clubs, but also the prostitutes, positioning sex workers as honored judges and welcome audience members, rather than barely tolerated patrons.

It is in these moments of direct feedback in *Your Hooker Jokes are Lazy*, Chattie's show intervenes not only in the now dominant classed experience of the theater by redistributing the power exchanged between the performer and audience, but also challenges historical power structures of sex industry discourse which frequently exclude sex workers from the theorization of their own working environment. Much of the historical archives documenting sexual economies survives in medical, police, and legal records- with very few sources including the direct voices of sex workers on their experiences. Even during the feminist movements, many strands of feminism focused their theorization on the "universal harms of pornography and prostitution" for all women, explicitly refusing to include sex workers' experiences into their theorizing and banning them from court proceedings on the legitimacy of pornography.[29] Historian Melinda Chateau explains this conundrum,

> "Gathered in self-selecting, homogenous conscious-raising groups, straight women and "political lesbians" struggled to analyze work that none admitted they had done. Instead, they talked about the times they "felt" they had prostituted themselves, stories about having sex for reasons other than for pleasure or love… where they now believed society had forced them to trade sex for gain… Feminists confused sexual coercion with sex work because they knew only the metaphor of prostitution… No wonder sex workers were hurt and reacted angrily to this self-righteous rhetoric."[30]

[29] Chateauvert, *Sex Workers Unite*, 21.

[30] Chateauvert, 21.

Sex worker activist Kate D'Adamo further critiques this particular brand of saviorist feminist activism that "attempts to give voice to the voiceless" and frequently perpetuates the "voiceless" communities' silence.[31] D'Adamo quotes another sex worker advocate, Ruth Jacobs, who said, "people are voiceless because no one is letting them talk or listening to them when they do."[32]

Your Hooker Jokes Are Lazy explicitly creates a dedicated space for sex workers not only speak regarding their own experiences, but to actively disrupt, challenge or refuse others speaking on their behalf or presumptions made about their experiences in sexual economies. In the first show, comedian participant Sasa performed a bit where they detailed their preparation for the show,

> "This kind of show is really so important because you hear all of these hack comedians tell these really shitty garbage jokes about violence against sex workers and that's why this is such an important thing because we've all heard those jokes but I've yet to hear a dead pimp joke."[33]

As the crowd laughs, Sasa goes on to tell us how he even googled "pimp jokes" looking for a pith one liner they could steal but found nothing.[34] After Sasa's routine ends, Chattie and panelist Maggie McMuffin use humor to disrupt commonly held understandings of a pimp,

> Chattie: "I just wanna make one correction because while I would love a dead pimp joke, but legally talking to another hooker about hooking is also considered pimping so just letting you guys know the word pimp doesn't always mean what you think it is."
> McMuffin: My cat is my pimp.
> *mass laughter from crowd*
> Chattie: "Technically its anyone who receives money from…, so yes Avery (cat) is for sure a pimp. Fat with cat food that he makes off of her lying on her back. Then he lies on

[31] D'Adamo, "Sex (Work) in the Classroom," 194.

[32] D'Adamo, 194.

[33] *Your Hookers Jokes Are Lazy,* May 2017.

[34] *Your Hookers Jokes Are Lazy,* May 2017.

> his back, and he shows you his tummy, and you forgive all his sins because he's so beautiful. [35]

Chattie and McMuffin use humor and play in a soft form of discourse regulation, clarifying what is understood in the public imaginary as "villainous pimps" or legally defined as "third-party procurers/profiteers" is very broadly interpreted to mean anyone benefiting from "illicit income." Historically, this broad definition of exploitation from pimps of traffickers has led to sex workers exchanging tips on how to work safely, each being charged with the felony trafficking of the other. The broadness of the legal code in the United States, and many places abroad, results in the children of sex workers and even their cats legally falling under the category of pimp or trafficker."

Chattie, McMuffin, and other panelists disrupt well-established "truths" regarding the sex industry, making *Your Hooker Jokes Are Lazy* an example of what Majiken Jul Søresen classifies as a "humorous political stunt,"

> "A performance/action carried out in public which attempts to undermine a dominant discourse. It either is so confrontational that it cannot be ignored or involves a deception that blurs the line between performers and audiences. It includes or comments on a political incongruity in a way that is perceived as amusing by at least some people who did not initiate it." [36]

And while political humor utilizes a framework of play and generates laughter or amusement, it should not be confused with not being serious.[37] Comedy allows for an entry point to be made

[35] *Your Hookers Jokes Are Lazy,* May 2017.

[36] Majken Jul Sørensen, *Humour in Political Activism: Creative Nonviolent Resistance*. (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), 11.

[37] Sørensen, 8.

into the process of thinking through complex relationships of power, agency, and oppression.[38] As such is a creative strategy frequently chosen within social movements to disrupt or challenge social ideologies that serve to stigmatize and alienate those who have been structurally oppressed within U.S. society.[39]

Moving on from his Grand Theft Auto material, Robert Pity goes on to humorously suggest that sex workers should try an approach to marketing similar to Costco by providing free samples.[40] When Pity's performance was through, the "free sample" comment was met with criticism from the panelists, "You look like a trick that doesn't want to be screened." However, before the judges delivered their feedback, Pity's joke was met with utter silence from the audience. The joke explicitly adopts the same framework as one of the cardinal sins in the sex industry that sex workers frequently deal with from academics, journalists, and clients: do not solicit free services or time from sex workers. The joke embodied something so egregious as to not warrant any audience feedback at all, but rather their silence and refusal. This silence operates as a mechanism of social regulation, but rather from the self, the state, or non-sex working peers, it comes from the frequently disregarded and ignored group: the sex workers in the audience. By channeling what bell hooks calls the oppositional gaze of marginalized subjects, in the space of live performance rather than cinema, the audience mobilizes silence as a means to challenge the ideology at hand (demanding free things from sex workers).[41]

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[38] Helen Davies and Sarah Ilott, "Mocking the Weak? Contexts, Theories, Politics," in *Comedy and Politics of Representation: Mocking the Weak*, ed. Helen Davies and Sarah Ilott (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), 5.

[39] H. Davies and Ilott, 6.

[40] *Your Hooker Jokes Are Lazy*, June 2017.

[41] bell hooks,"The Oppositional Gaze: Black Female Spectators," in *The Gender and Media Reader*, edited by Mary Celeste Kearney (New York: Routledge, 2012.), 600-609.

The silence functions as a social reprimand of the joke's impropriety, but also serves to remind everyone who exactly is occupying the audience at the show, sex workers and those sympathetic to their concerns. As mentioned earlier, the primary consumers of sex worker media content and cultural production are sex workers themselves, and this is partly because there is a pleasure in seeing oneself represented.[42] Representation matters, particularly in spaces where existing power relations are challenged, renegotiated, or undermined.[43] Much like there is pleasure in seeing oneself, there is a particular pleasure in the spectacle of watching the interrogation of existing power structures, felt by those who bear the brunt of subsequent marginalization. The show understands its audience demographic, with the comedy reflecting it.

Your Hooker Jokes Are Lazy positions sex workers not only as the audience, but also as comedians themselves. Opening the inaugural show, where the comedy participant is set to win a cash prize of $50. Chattie explains, "the envelope that the money comes from you will find by the sink in the bathroom it might be under a towel just look around, authentic hooker envelope of cash with a kiss from a genuine hooker."[44] They go to include a disclaimer, "Because it wouldn't be a hooker comedy show without a disclaimer. The entertainment that occurs tonight is just happenstance and does not constitute an act of comedy, but we'll see what happens."[45] In the delivery of these jokes Chattie assumes a sex worker audience, or at least an audience knowledgeable enough of the hilarity of these in-person session scenarios. Sex worker panelist

[42] Laura Mulvery, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," in *The Gender and Media Reader*, edited by Mary Celeste Kearney (New York: Routledge, 2012), 59-66.

[43] Davies and Ilott, "Mocking the Weak?," 2-24.

[44] *Your Hooker Jokes Are Lazy*, May 2017.

[45] *Your Hooker Jokes Are Lazy*, May 2017.

provide not just discursive criticism, but also tips of the composition of jokes. Comedian participant Eden Nault included the joke, "Edgar Allan Poe is getting a massage at massage parlor in the massage therapist asked if he would like a happy ending, and he says no."[46] The crowd laughs, but panelist Tanuki though appreciative of the joke observes the missed opportunity of saying "no" instead of "Nevermore."[47] Panelists offered coaching for participants on missed opportunities, where to change pacing, or alter emphasis on words to further lean into the illicit theme of the show. *Your Hooker Are Lazy* not only welcomes sex workers as audience members and judges but positions them as voices of authority on their own experiences as well as in the craft of comedic performance.

Your Hooker Jokes Are Lazy creates an intentional space to reclaim narratives of the sex industry by playfully weeding out the "lazy" jokes, that at worst perpetuates harm on a vulnerable community and facilitates sex worker disposability. The show explicitly changes the typical model of relationality of the audience and performer, non sex workers and sex workers, and the dynamic of sex work and comedy, positing sex workers themselves as judge comedian and intended audience, rather than the butt of the joke.

"Inquisitive Strippers & Dope Ass Cunts Who Like Money:" Jaqueline Frances' *Body of Work* exhibition

In Fall of 2021, Frances hosted the *Body of Work* art exhibition in Manhattan, which displayed interactive installations, sold original prints of *Inquisitive Strippers* and *Striptastic!* as

[46] *Your Hooker Jokes Are Lazy*, May 2017.

[47] *Your Hooker Jokes Are Lazy*, May 2017.

well as new COVID-era works.[48] Frances' held the exhibition to celebrate/mourn her retirement from the sex industry with her patrons, fans, and sex worker community;

> "I made these paintings to grieve leaving a career I loved. Dancing for large (and occasionally insultingly modest) sums of money showed me the importance of admiring myself and relishing in the privilege of looking. I hope you enjoy the show as much as I do."[49]

Frances' *Body of Work* drew attendees from all over the U.S. as cities began to open back up after COVID decimated New York City. Passersby would stop to peer into the widows of the gallery walls covered in brightly colored paintings of women's bodies, a few joked how despite their curiosity, "there's no way I'm going in there."[50] Hesitant couples trickled both in and past. Not everyone who expressed interest entered the art show, but those who did lingered.[51]

Body of Work created a celebratory environment that functioned as a locus for sex workers to support other sex worker artists, as well as facilitate community relationality among a wider community of sex workers.[52] The event was attended by groups of dancers, identified by their lingerie as outwear and pleaser heels, who enthusiastically took pictures with each other posing with the art as well as Frances. Some attendees were there with their moms, introducing their parents to the way Frances uses art to communicate how she understands her work as a stripper. Other sex workers used the event to expand their community networks over a shared consciousness cultivated though Frances' art, posting online invites for other sex workers to 'meet up' at the event. The last day of the show retained its celebratory air, but with a more

[48] *Body of Work*, Frances, September 30-Oct 3, 2021.

[49] *Body of Work*, 2021.

[50] Field notes.

[51] Field notes.

[52] Field notes.

intimate affect of quotidian community, that appeared to have been cultivated throughout Frances' career and persona as "Jacq the Stripper." Frances' friend and producer of the *Heaven is a Strip Club* photo series, Rachel Esterline photographed the event, while another friend did videography. A young girl, whose mother was also in attendance, danced through the exhibition, where Frances laughed and exclaimed, "oh my god that was me when I was little, but in overalls." Despite putting the persona of "Jacq" to rest for what Frances jokingly referred to as 'more serious" artistic endeavors, the concluding night of the exhibition contained an affective promise of community support extending beyond this "final" art show, as many folks fostered relationships among one another as well as and with many guests inquiring with their own variation of "what's next?" Frances' *Body of Work* demonstrated how artistic spaces of sex worker artists function as opportunities to foster community with existing community ties and/or cultivate members of their sex worker counter publics that withstands the finality of "retirement" or the transition into new life opportunities.

The ability of Frances' *Body of Work* exhibition to foster sex worker community is connected to Frances' use of art to cultivate of a virtual counter public of sex workers and allies whose views coincide with her own conflictual relationship with the dominant public's understanding of erotic labor. Frances' work has amassed a cult-like following of sex workers on social media platforms from the circulation of Frances' artwork as "posts," typically sent through a networked web of platform users to others (whom they know) forming an "sub-altern constituency" around the key sentiments of her artwork.[53] In arguably her most popular work, the

[53] Lyell Davies, "Not Only Projections in a Dark Room: Theorizing Activist Film Festivals in the Lives of Campaigns and Social Movements," *Frames Cinema Journal* (2021), ISSN 2053-8812.

Inquisitive Strippers comic series, Frances uses structures of humor to push back against dominant narratives of erotic labor. The *Inquisitive Strippers* comic series uses irony and sarcasm to more broadly interrogate comments and questions frequently fielded by strippers, asking "what if strippers were as entitled as you," by posing said questions to others working under structures of capitalism. One comic panel shows a stripper whispering to women, trapped by the nine-to-five hustle of their cubical, "You're so much better than this." The comic panel featured in the *We're Still Working* exhibition, "Not Like Other Guys," draws attention to the emotional labor of stripping which demands the reassurance of masculinity and the obfuscation of the client/provider nature of the relationship. Another panel shows a stripper eating at a diner counter, telling the server, "I bet you make so much money you don't even need me to tip you." A stripper gets a massage and whispers to the masseur, "what does your boyfriend think of your job? I'd never let my girlfriend use her body to make a living." Frances' *Inquisitive Strippers* series demonstrates the absurdity of asking these questions if other professionals, which are routinely asked of sex workers. Frances uses the question's "absurdity," 'why you would ask these questions of other professions," to reflect on how said questions are really not that absurd at all, operating under the understanding all labor can be exploitative under capitalism, including erotic labor.

By positing erotic labor alongside other forms of labor under capitalism (desk jobs, cashiers, construction, etc.), *Inquisitive Strippers* aligns with contemporary sex workers' rights advocacy to interrogate anti-sex work discourses which understand payment within the sex industry as uniquely exploitative. Sex worker authors and theorist Juno Mac and Molly Smith's seminal work*, Revolting Prostitutes: The Fight for Sex Workers' Rights* quotes Gloria Lockett, "I've heard some of my white friends say that they're in prostitution because of the power. Well,

for Black women it's for the money.*"*[54] Black women and many other sex workers across a wide spectrum of race, gender, and sexuality identify their labor as work, though many do not. Despite the varied perspectives on how erotic laborers understand their involvement in sexual economies as either work or as anti-work,[55] there is overwhelming historical evidence, contemporary academic research, and first-person testimony from sex workers that signals economic necessity as the main imperative for people becoming involved in performing erotic labor. This logic underscores the work of Frances' comics, stand-up comedy, and artwork, whether she is dancing for large or occasionally insultingly small amounts of money.[56] Frances' work, especially *Inquisitive Strippers,* embodies the sex worker logic systems articulated in *Revolting Prostitutes* which interrogate the "reasonable assumption" that "work" in general is a net good, referencing its valorization as a locus of identity and status.[57] Frances, Mac and Smith, and many other sex worker theorists and artists interrogate the capitalist myth that work is an extension of self, constantly being reinscribed as something so personally fulfilling you would pursue it for free (given the opportunity), rather than something you do to survive in a capitalist system.[58]

Additionally, Frances' body of work creates an opening in public discourses of erotic labor to include a more robust theorization of pleasure, one that includes the pleasure of getting paid. Frances articulates her own pleasure in the acts of getting paid whilst living within the confines of a capitalist system in her first book, *The Beaver Show* and in her elaboration of the

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[54] Mac and Smith, *Revolting Prostitutes*, 40.

[55] H. Berg, *Porn Work*; babylon, *heauxthots*.

[56] *Body of Work*, September 30-Oct 3, 2021.

[57] Mac and Smith, *Revolting Prostitutes*, 41.

[58] Mac and Smith, 42.

Inquisitive Stripper series into a book, *Striptastic: A Celebration of Dope Ass Cunts Who Like Money.* "Reaching a personal (earning) best is better than getting good oral."[59] "It's pretty fucked up how high I get off the idea of earning money. Money is what makes the world go 'round, and it seems to spin faster when you've got more of it."[60] Frances' understanding of pleasure complicates narratives of sexuality that strictly operate within a binary between pleasure (physical or emotional) and violence, where a lack of sensational or emotional pleasure from sex is considered negative, even if the experience itself was neutral or if pleasure was gained from pain or through access to capital. Sara Ahmed considers these moments where as individuals in relation to others, we do not act or feel appropriately, "where we cannot always close the gap between how you do feel and how you should feel."[61] Frances' theorization of the pleasure in getting paid complicates affective responses of erotic labor considered "inappropriate:" the not feeling or experiencing sensational pleasure during moments of sexual activity, having sex despite an "enthusiastic yes," or having that "yes" predicated on the exchange of capital.

Offering a more holistic pleasure paradigm of sexuality in her work *Sexual Futures, Queer Gestures, and Other Latina Longings (Sexual Cultures*), queer theorist Juana Maria Rodriguez understands queer sexual pleasure through phenomenological frames of relation.[62] Rodriquez's analysis of the relational dynamic of gesture asks us to think of sex (and dance) as more than their corporeal movements or affective experiences at risk of missing the dynamics

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[59] Jacqueline Frances, *The Beaver Show* (San Bernardino: CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform, 2015), 265.

[60] Frances, 265.
[61] Sara Ahmed, "Feminist Killjoys (And Other Willful Subjects)," *Polyphoic Feminisms: Acting in Concert* Issue 8, no. 3 (2010), 2.

[62] Juana Maria Rodriguez, "Gesture in Mambo Time." In *Sexual Futures, Queer Gestures, and Other Latina Longings (Sexual Cultures*) (New York: NYU Press, 2014), 99-138.

that occur in relation to others.[63] "Something else happens when baby calls you back."[64] "What happens when I talk dirty to you."[65] These questions demand the articulation of sexual experiences outside of individual sensational pleasure, but rather consider how sexual encounters operate in relation to another. Rodriquez reframes sexuality as a mutual experience of pleasure, even when one partner's pleasure takes precedence over the other and highlights the affective and sensational pleasure of giving and creating pleasure in another. Pushing back against mainstream feminist politics that understand service, especially within a heteronormative patriarchal order as inferior submission, Rodriquez draws from Spanish understandings of *servicial*.[66] These understandings do not dismiss acts of service as weak or inferior but consider them as a talented subjectivity on the behalf of the service provider to be attuned to the needs of others and willing to provide.[67] How might an understanding of sexuality as relational create space for non-sensational sex to exist that allows space for but does not automatically assume a violence or abuse? Rodriquez theorization of the capacity for pleasure in service allows us to articulate the moments and experiences of sex that do not create sensational or affective pleasure, but rather the pleasure in capital as Frances suggests. Further, If we approach the understanding of paid sex through a relational sexual politic rather than one of sexual exploitation, we shift our theorization of sex work as a potentially neutral experience with alternatives forms of pleasure, where certain sexual activities can be experienced neutrally (oral sex with a partner or client,

[63] Rodriguez, 102.

[64] Rodriguez, 102.

[65] Rodriguez, 125.

[66] Rodriguez, 127.

[67] Rodriguez, 127.

dancing or a customer), but pleasure is experienced in other ways (the pleasure of seeing ones partner experience pleasure, the pleasure of getting capital, or the pleasure in keeping your lights on).

It is through Frances' use of humor in *Inquisitive Strippers* to interrogate stigmatizing ideologies of erotic labor and ideologies of work in late-stage capitalism that she has been able to cultivate a broad online counter public, which allows for the fostering of community across shared understandings of erotic labor. The connectivity around Frances' work can been seen in an outing of mine. A friend and I were on our way to a Melrose nail salon in Los Angeles and stopped by a food truck, where I happened to be wearing my "Tip Her" hat from Frances' *Strippers Forever* merchandise collection. One of the people working inside the truck saw my hat and immediately broke into a grin, asked if they could take a picture to send to her friend back home in New York City who "would just love my hat." I obliged and asked if her friend was by chance Rachel Esterline, following a hunch that Esterline, photographer of the *Heaven is a Strip Club* photo series and friend of Frances, was based out of New York. Esterline was indeed the friend in question. In this moment the hat was read as a marker of belonging to a particular counter public around the sentiments of Frances' work and demonstrating the affective capacity of virtual arts-based counter publics to transcend virtual space into actions of in-person relationality and community building, as a friendly conversation or in-person attendance of and art exhibition stand-up comedy show.

"No Justice, No Piece:" The San Francisco Bay Area Sex Worker Film and Arts Festival

Since its founding in 1999 by the late Carol Leigh, The San Francisco Bay Area Sex Worker Film and Arts Festival (SWFF) or *Sex Worker Fest* has provided a vital venue for

showcasing sex worker made film and art, as well as fostering relationality and building community among sex working and trading persons. Leigh was inspired by her involvement with Annie Oakley's traveling Sex Worker Art Show and North American Tour, and founded SWFF to share sex worker issues and art with the public, demonstrating the agency and capacity for building culture within sex working and trading communities.[68] The festival began as a weekend of film screenings, featuring films such as *The Salt Mines* (1990), *Sacrifice* (1998), *Taipei Alliance of Legal Prostitutes* (1997-8), and a trailer for the at-the-time work in progress documentary *Live Girls Nude Unite! (2000)*.[69] Over the last few decades SWFF has established itself as a pilar in the Bay Area arts community and a larger social justice movement for sex workers' rights, using art and sex worker cultural production to advocate against structural discrimination based on racism, misogyny, classism, and transphobia, understanding these issues as interconnected with the struggle against the criminalization of sex work.[70]

The festival solicits films that are directed or produced by someone who has worked in the sex industries, and/or are about any aspect of sex work, explicitly noting the festival is

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[68] Carol Leigh, The San Francisco Bay Area Sex Worker Film and Arts Festival internal documents.

[69] *The Salt Mines* (1990), a documentary film about three Latina trans women surviving on the streets of Manhattan. We witness their daily lives, supporting themselves with prostitution and drug use. They made their temporary home in an abandoned garbage truck near where the Department of Sanitation keeps the salt deposits used by the city in the winter to melt the snow, until the place is closed and sealed by the city, forcing everyone to disperse. *Sacrifice* (1998), is the story of child prostitutes in Burma, examining the social, cultural, economic forces at work in the trafficking of Burmese girls into prostitution. *Taipei Alliance of Legal Prostitutes* (1997-8), this film documents the struggle for 128 licensed prostitutes whose licenses were revoked, and licensed prostitution abolished on September 6, 1997. The women demanded their right to work and asserting positions of leadership on policies concerning sex work, resulting in the reopening the brothels of licensed prostitution May 28, 1999, one week before the festival. *Live Girls Nude Unite! (2000)* documents the effort of dancers and support staff in the unionization of the Lusty Lady, a San Francisco peep show.

San Francisco Sex Worker Film and Video Festival, Festival Director Carol Leigh, San Francisco, May 7-9th 1999.

[70] "About SexWorkerFest," *San Francisco Sex Worker Film and Arts Festival*, accessed 2017. http://www.sexworkerfest.com/about.html

particularly interested in works that challenge stigmatizing stereotypes regarding prostitution and other forms of sex work.[71] SWFF's call for films does not require film submitters to "come out" by asking exclusively for films by sex workers, but rather relies on an internal panel of film curators, assigned each year to determine which of the submissions will be included in the festival program each year.

For many years the primary curator for the festival was community member Laure McElroy, a revolutionary poet, community advocate, self-proclaimed 'welfare Queen" at POOR magazine, and co-founder of The Homefulness Project.[72] McElroy, with the help of co-directors Leigh and Erica Berman, curated the festival film programs from the selection of submitted works, but the curatorial labor extended past the formal call for films. Curation for the festival frequently included the film curators and event producers actively keeping an eye out within their network of Bay Areas artists, filmmakers, and friends for films to screen.[73] For instance, *Lucid Noon Sunset Blush* was not originally submitted to the film festival in 2017, but popped up on the radar of Berman, who reached out to the director, Ali Logout to screen the film within the festival. Films selections were and are made based on both textual quality (lighting, sound, etc.) and narrative message, allowing for films that may be a little rough around the edges in production to still showcased with the festival. SWFF has celebrated the aesthetic value textual 'roughness' provides, and further understands that a screening out of textual roughness can also

[71] "San Francisco Bay Area Sex Worker Film and Arts Festival," Call for Films, *filmfreeway.com*, August 15, 2022.

[72] The Homefulness Project is a Poor & Indigenous people–led solution to homelessness. A sweat equity, permanent co-housing, education, arts, micro-business and social change project for landless/houseless and formerly houseless families and individuals.

"The Homefulness Project," *Poor Magazine* (online), https://www.poormagazine.org/homefulness

[73] Carol Leigh, Zoom conversation with author, Summer 2021.

screen out marginalized voices who may have not had formal filmmaking training or access to filmmaking resources.

While each year amazing films are submitted, many more are excluded from festival programing, such as films that do not meet community standards, reiterate untrue statements regarding the sex industry, or perpetuate harmful understandings of erotic labor. Ezra Winston and Svetla Turnin consider the police-like power festival management possess in structuring the overall framework and message(s) of the festival space in their work on activist film festivals. [74] Winston and Turnin demonstrate how activist film festivals have the power to curate film programs as either aligned with established structures of power (white supremacy, racial capitalism, settler colonialism, etc.) or to create a reconfigured space for radical dissent from established power structures.[75] The curation team and festival producers of *Sex Worker Fest* utilize the selection process and curation of films and art performances to dissent from established structures of powers and explicit shaping the festival space to reflect their intersection mission to showcase the work of a diverse sex working community.[76] As I collaborated with Leigh on the film curation for the 2023 festival, she warned me as we released the call for films that many submissions over the years have had nothing to do with sex work, and many films were simply bad.[77] When asked about her own selection process, long time

[74] Ezra Winston and Svetla Turnin, "The Revolution Will Not Be Festivalized: Documentary Film Festivals and Activism," in *Activist Film Festivals: Towards a Political Subject*, ed. by Sonia Tascón & Tyson Wils (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2017), 91-93.

[75] Winston and Turnin, 91-93.

[76] "About Sex Worker Fest."

[77] Leigh, Zoom conversation with author, Summer 2021.

festival event director and producer Erica Berman also explained, “I’ve said ‘no’ to a lot of films,” weeding out “bad” films.

This “badness” Leigh and Berman mention of some of the film submissions ranged from dull or having nothing to do with erotic labor, to reiterating harmful narratives around the sex industries, excluding sex workers voices, or utilizing problematic archetypes based in classism, racism, homophobia. Working with the film curation for the 2023 festival, many submissions simply did not meet the relevancy requirements of the festival. Other films reiterated untrue and harmful statistics on trafficking or espouse the successes of FOSTA – SESTA, claims which have been disproved by critical-trafficking research and vociferously critiqued by sex workers.[78] Further, a number of film submissions did not align with the SWFF’s explicit understanding of sex workers’ experience of injustice as inextricably linked to ideologies racism, classism, transphobia, homophobia, and sexism in their use of racist tropes of black women, appropriation of indigenous cultures in post-apocalyptic erotic fiction, or voyeuristic narratives of violence against sex workers who work the strolls. [79]

Balancing the necessary opaqueness of the call for films with the festival’s mission and values, Carol Leigh noted how in her experience it was the festival’s curation team that must be led by persons with direct experience with erotic labor(ers). In 2019, the festival persevered through the death of their beloved Laure McElroy, the resurgence of Leigh’s cancer, and issues regarding festival funds with their fiscal sponsor. Having to navigate these circumstances the festival worked with and paid an external panel of film curators. The opening event of the

[78] Lutnick, *Domestic Minor Sex Trafficking;* Showden and Majic, *Youth Who Trade Sex in the U.S.*

[79] Personal experience in 2023 festival film curation

festival screened films such as *Is friendship legal under SESTA? FOSTA? (*2019) and *No Democracy Here* (2018). [80] However, it was final film of that evening *Hello, Meet Kyoko for Phone Sex* (2018) that caused the evening of film screening to unfold into an audience discussion of a few of the problematic and stigmatizing tropes around erotic labor in the film.[81] Discussing the event with Leigh, I noted how wonderful it had been to see the community be able to give real time discursive feedback to the film that had clearly struck them the wrong way, and she informed me this had been an accident.[82] Leigh thanked the film curators for 2019 profusely for their work, stating the festival would not have gone on without them, and lauded the other fantastic evenings of films they had curated, but drew connections between the external panel and the noted film section, emphasizing the important role of film curators. [83]

Grounded within a by-us-for-us framework *Sex Worker Fest* uses the curation of festival films and performances to disrupt the typical viewing contract of many activist film festivals that would position the audience in relation to the distant suffering of an oppressed other, in what Sonia Tascón has referred to as the "humanitarian gaze."[84]

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[80] *Is friendship legal under SESTA? FOSTA? (*2019) depicts three friends, who happen to be sex workers, meeting in Vegas for fun shows, to create homemade porn, and discuss what is or what is not legal under SESTA/FOSTA and how that affects the supportive aspects of friendship. *No Democracy Here* (2018) deals with political domination of Liad, a lefty human rights defender dominatrix in Israel, as she re-educates her right-wing-leaning obedient and submissive slaves on morality, freedom of movement, and direct democracy.

[81] *Hello, Meet Kyoko for Phone Sex* (2018) introduces Kelly, a twenty-five-year-old phone sex operator. When at work, she steps into her alter ego Kyoko: a beautiful sexy Japanese girl. Clients call for a quick fix: an orgasm. Many regular clients also call her for intimacy and personal conversations they don't have with their wives. Kelly wants to stop with her phone sex job, but finds it complicated to do this.

[82] Leigh, Zoom conversation with author, Summer 2021.

[83] Leigh, Zoom conversation with author, Summer 2021.

[84] Sonia Tascón, "Watching Others Troubles: Revisiting 'The Film Act' and Spectatorship in Activist Film Festivals," in *Activist Film Festivals: Towards a Political Subject,* ed. by Sonia Tascón & Tyson Wils (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2017), 21-37.

> "The humanitarian gaze is a term I used to refer to a set of features that characterize humanitarian spectatorship. I call it a gaze because it is a powerful filter for watching others experiencing troubles, a set of pre-existing 'relations of looking' that position those who watch (and produce) the images as having greater authority (validity, agency, influence, so on) than those whose lives are portrayed on screen. This authority emanates from the very nature of watching, of being *able* to watch others, (and usually only certain others), and give entry into their moments of vulnerability… This position bestows upon the spectator of these images the possibility of remaining distant and detached while watching others suffering."[85]

The framework of a humanitarian gaze is frequently present in the production and subsequent viewing of films, especially documentary films, about sex workers and the sex industry. Elizabeth Bernstein identifies a "similarly rehearsed" narrative of "the abduction, transport, and forced sexual labor of women and girls whose poverty and desperation render them amenable to easy victimization in first- and third-world cities" in the screening events of anti-trafficking films *Call and Response* (2008) and *Very Young Girls* (2008).[86] Likewise Pooja Rangan critiques award winning film *Born into* Brothels (2004) as a pseudo-participatory embodiment of a humanitarian myth of saving brown children from the brothels of Calcutta.[87]

As an activist film festival, SWFF disrupts the "humanitarian gaze" by initiating an alternative viewing contract with its spectators by placing them into a different relationship to the images.[88] In the festival's conscious decision to platform both films made by people with lived

[85] Tascón, 21-37.

[86] Elizabeth Bernstein, "Militarized Humanitarianism Meets Carceral Feminism: The Politics of Sex, Rights and Freedom in Contemporary Anti-trafficking Campaigns," *Signs Journal of Women in Culture and Society 36*, no. 1 (2010), 45-71.

[87] Pooja Rangan, "Feral Innocence: The Humanitarian Aesthetic of Dematerialized Child Labor" in *Immediations: The Humanitarian Impulse in Documentary* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press), 38.

[88] Tascón, "Watching Others Troubles," 29.

experiences in the erotic economies and films that do not center a voyeuristic gaze of sex workers' suffering, SWFF decenters anti-sex worker narratives in media and absence-based viewing contracts, through what P.J. Starr and Sonyka Francis have termed a "whore gaze."[89] Developed from a psychoanalytic framework on feminist film theory spearheaded by Laura Mulvey and bell hooks, Starr and Francis situate the "whore gaze" as both the pleasure in looking at that which usurps whorephobic sentiments that typically pervade media, and society more broadly, but also as a mechanism of production.[90] "Only the act of whores taking up the camera can explode the myth that to be a whore is to be the passive subject of the male gaze and the white (moralizing) feminist gaze."[91] Much like the "oppositional gaze" that is developed from the spectatorship of black women, Starr and Francis describe how the "whore gaze" functions as a types of oppositional spectatorship, "as sex workers decry their absence, silence or twisted representation (in media and society more broadly) perpetuating whorephobia, transphobia, racism, xenophobia, and ageism."[92]

Sex Worker Fest in and of itself as a place that cultivates, screens, and celebrates sex workers' cultural production, embodies a main principle of the whore gaze (the disavowal of sex workers as passive victims or mere muses), but rather celebrates sex workers' agency as filmmaker, artists, and humans with the right to tell their own stories. The utilization of a whore gaze functions as a political project of renegotiated relationality for audiences, creating for viewer a new or altered relationship with the images. Rather than position audience spectators

[89] Starr and Francis, "I need $5 million," 585.

[90] Starr and Francis, 585.

[91] Starr and Francis, 585.

[92] Starr and Francis, 585.

into a viewing relationship built on the exclusion of sex workers' voices and lived experiences, the film, art, and performances of SWFF position sex workers as experts in their own lives with knowledge and art to share. This disruption invites an alternate viewing relationship to the films curated in SWFF depending on existing proximities. The whore gaze of SWFF disrupts models of spectatorship that would render sex workers absent from both production and the intended audience of said media. Said another way, by positioning sex workers as both producer of art, film, and media as well as the intended audience of said cultural production, SWFF radically disrupts existing contracts of cinematic proximity that assume sex workers' absence or silence their lived experiences. This disruption invites an alternate viewing relationship to the films curated in SWFF which depends on existing proximities of the audience members. The positioning of sex worker artists and filmmakers as experts in their own lives invites non-sex working audience members to learn and experience the art from a position *of nearby* or *alongside*, rather than from a place of identification or "perspective taking." This invitation to learn and share in the celebration of sex worker artistic expression *pulls* the non sex working audience in, but simultaneously *pushes* them out of the existing social contract that would allow non-sex workers position of authority on sex industry discourses and representation. The push/pull dynamic experienced by non sex workers in SWFF established from the whore gaze, allows for limited audience engagement predicated on structures of identification but rather through a proximal humanity, inviting the audience to open social constructed definitions of the human that would exclude sex workers, without dissolving the socially constructed boundaries of sociopolitical structures of power that have created communities of survival (sex worker communities).

However, many of SWFF's audience members are not outsiders looking in, they are frequently community members called in. In SWFF's celebratory focus on sex worker artists and attendees, audience members with experience in working or trading sex are *pulled into* the festival, to celebrate the diverse perspectives of other sex workers in which they share similar experiences of criminalization and stigmatization of erotic labor. The call in of community or *pull* of sex worker art for sex working and trading audience members is not exclusively structured by a universal identification with a ubiquitous experience of erotic labor. Rather sex worker cultural production positions sex workers with differing proximities to criminalization and stigmatization based on race, class, gender, documentation status, and ability into a coalitional viewing experience, where universal identification is not only unnecessary but undesired. In SWFF's intersectional mission statement to celebrate the diverse voices of sex workers across difference, the festival creates a mosaic of sex workers' voices speaking from their own experiences through art and media.

In his work on activist film festivals Lyle Davies warns of the dangers of media coalescing around individual subjective experiences at the expense of more general truth claims or a deeper analysis of the economic or political forces that define our lives, where first person narrative gets raised to the status of sole truth and notions of community are considered secondary to the needs of the individual.[93] SWFF does in fact encourage producers and artists to create from the first person, but this first person narrative perspective does not stand in to replace or construct a singular truth. The use of the mosaic first-person encouraged by SWFF and by the sex working community more broadly, functions alongside other first-person narratives even

[93] Lyell Davies, "Off-Screen Activism and the Documentary Film Screening," in *Activist Film Festivals: Towards a Political Subject*, ed. by Sonia Tascón & Tyson Wils (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2017), 43.

through dissensus. While avoiding the urge to attribute 'false consciousness,' lack of understanding, or internal contradiction as a neat way to remedy difference in perspective or experience, Heather Berg theorizes the strength in sex worker community dissensus in her work on the labor of pornography in late stage capitalism. [94] Berg calls for a dialectic way of thinking that embraces the messiness of "us."[95] Rather than focusing on the dissensus, Berg encourages an analysis that turns toward the dissensus or "messiness of us," to ask what it can reveal about existing power structures within and outside of the criminalization and stigmatization of erotic labor. Honoring the "messiness of us" in the SWFF treads a thin line that has the capacity to bleed into a relativist curatorial standpoint, where the perpetuation of harmful perspectives masquerades under rhetorics of identity-based inclusion that would accept all art from sex workers without regard to existing structures of power. The Leigh, Berman and McElroy used their curatorial power as festival producers to actively screen out problematic films and art in line with their mission statement, hoping to create a safer festival space for all attendees and celebrate the diverse perspectives of the community.

Seeking to celebrate the many ways Bay Area sex workers were creating and consuming art, live storytelling and performance became an integral feature of the festival. Since the festival's founding 1999, *Sex Worker Fest* has expanded from a weekend of films into a 10-day festival of films, performance art, workshops, and advocacy for the global sex workers' rights community. The second festival in 2001 maintained their emphasis on film and video, featuring films such as *The Biters* (2001) and *Mandragora* (1997), but expanding their work to include a

[94] H. Berg, *Porn Work*, 24.

[95] H. Berg, 24.

Symposium on "Sex Worker Representation" and *Miss Erochica's Sex Worker Performance Show*.[96] More recent festivals featured bay area local artist, writer, and former sex worker Gina Gold hosting the TMI: Storytelling events "Sex Worker Diaries: The Lusty Lady & The Reverend" (2015) and "Sex Worker Confidential: Grab Your Pussy And Run, & Other Stories Of Survival And Community" (2017).[97] Sangria Red, Bay Area performance artist, director, and radio host, presented "Sex Worker Soliloquies" in 2015, in conjunction with her Sex Worker Solo Performance Workshop, free to sex workers looking to hone their performance skills.[98] In 2017, Red performed "Stripping Down To Story," a glimpse into the gender, racial, economic and social politics of the 1930's from the perspective of black woman, weaving "our" stories within an astounding and provocative musical drama.[99] The 2015 festival hosted Australian artist Queenie Bon Bon's performance "Deeply Leisured," part stand-up comedy, performance art, and lecture on the political nature of sex work. Bon Bon's performance preceded Lexi Lipstick's

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[96] *The Biters* (2001), a take-off on home shopping, cooking shows, and contemporary sexual style with performance artist/sex workers' rights activists in Japan. *Mandragora* (1997) examines the exploitation of young rural Czech boys migrating to Prague in the hopes of a better life.

2nd San Francisco Sex Worker Film and Video Festival, Festival Director Carol Leigh, San Francisco, May 25-27th 2001.

[97] *9th Biennial San Francisco Bay Area Sex Worker Film and Arts Festival*, produced by Erica Fabulous, Carol Leigh, Laure McElroy and Sangria Red, San Francisco and Oakland, May 15-24th, 2015; *10th Biennial San Francisco Bay Area Sex Worker Film and Arts Festival*, produced by Erica Fabulous, Carol Leigh, Laure McElroy, Miki Mosmen, Kalash Ka, Gina Gold, & St. James Speakers Bureau, San Francisco and Oakland, May 19-28th 2017.

[98] Sangria Red hosted a series of performance workshops culminating in a performance event called "Sex Worker Soliloquies." Performers included well known sex worker artists Cinnamon Maxxine, Mariko Passion and The Incredible, Edible Akynos who took part in the workshop, developing their own material and serving as models for beginners.

9th Biennial San Francisco Bay Area Sex Worker Film and Arts Festival, 2015.

[99]"Performance Artist/Teacher/Film Director/Coach/Radio host Jovelyn Richards presents: Stripping Down to Story," *10th Biennial San Francisco Bay Area Sex Worker Film and Arts Festival* [Event Press Release], May 1st, 2017. Archived in Sexworkerfest internal documents, accessed January 2023.

story telling event "Born Again Pervert," on her travels from religious conservative to pansexual, kinky, professional pervert.[100]

To reserve space to the diverse experiences with erotic labor, the festival coordinated dedicated nights of the festival to engage with intersectional sex workers' issues. In 2007, the festival hosted the "We, Asian Sex Workers" fine art exhibition, displaying the work of artists Mariko Passion, Tracy Quan, Reagan Louis, Annie Chen and Surgeon Scofflaw. The opening reception paired the fine art and performance art of Mariko Passion, with an educational panel, "Asian Prostitution Sensitivity Training."[101] The following Wednesday hosted additional panels "Migrant Sex Work," "Taking the Pledge" on migrant sex work, USAID money and anti-prostitution pledges partnered with Urban Justice Center, "A Report Back from Cambodia" research panel and discussion. The following Friday hosted a "Asian Sex Worker Mini-Fest," screening films such as, *Memory of Mrs. Guan* (2006), *Old Chicks: Bailan and her girls* (2006), and *Negotiating Sex Workers Rights: Calcutta* (2003).[102] In 2009, Army of Lovers presented "Formerly Known As: A Festival Of Art, Video, Writing And Performance Of Male Sex

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[100] *9th Biennial San Francisco Bay Area Sex Worker Film and Arts Festival,* 2015.

[101] *5th Biennial San Francisco Sex Worker Film and Arts Festival,*" produced by Erica Fabulous, Carol Leigh, Justina Because and Annie Danger, San Francisco, July 14-22, 2007.

[102] *Memory of Mrs. Guan* (2006), is a tribute film to the late-Taiwanese sex worker Mrs. Guan and how she passed away in debt, due to oppressive policies criminalizing sex work. *Old Chicks: Bailan and her girls* (2006), tells the story of Balian as she falls into a coma, and how her previous life had been spent consoling lost souls and their sexual needs and supporting her family and a group of stray cats in the alley. *Negotiating Sex Workers Rights: Calcutta* (2003) is a video montage from the Calcutta Sex Workers' Conference in 1997, demanding decriminalization and the right to form a trade union.

5th Biennial San Francisco Sex Worker Film and Arts Festival, 2007.

Workers," hosted by Kirk Read.[103] In 2015 the festival partnered with SWAG, a division of the Center for LGBTQQ+ Youth, to present "Human & Here: A Community Event Against Violence Against Trans Women and Sex Workers," a community youth led event discussing the physical and structural violence queer and trans youth face every day.[104] The festival partnered with SWAG again in 2017, to host "Centering Black and Brown Trans Femme Sex Workers" film screening and panel event. [105]

In addition to films screenings, art exhibitions, and complimentary panels which creatively tackled key issues for sex working and trading peoples, the festival coordinated full-day educational panels in which audiences could ask questions and engage in dialog with film producers, artists, and experts. In 2003 the festival coordinated the "Sex Worker Rights & Culture Fest," an afternoon of panels for sex workers and non-sex workers exploring the issues of Global Sex worker advocacy, The Sexual frontiers of sex worker film and Art, "Tassel Twirling" workshop, and Streetworker's spoken word.[106] In 2007 the festival hosted the Desiree Alliance conference, bringing together sex workers, sex worker advocates, and allies to explore many diverse issues surrounding sex work, including anti-prostitution trafficking policies, the

[103] *6th Biennial San Francisco Sex Worker Film and Arts Festival*," produced by Carol Leigh, Laure McElroy, Luna Pantera, Mariko Passion, Ckiara Rose, Madam Zoe Von Presscott, Lady Megan Louana, and Kirk Read: Army of Lovers, San Francisco, May 30- June 7th 2009.

[104] *9th Biennial San Francisco Bay Area Sex Worker Film and Arts Festival*, 2015.

[105] *10th Biennial San Francisco Bay Area Sex Worker Film and Arts Festival*, 2017.

[106] *3rd San Francisco Sex Worker Film and Video Festival*, produced by Carol Leigh and Madeline Lowe, San Francisco, May 23-26th 2003.

internet and sex work, and issues impacting trans community members, street-based workers, and women's roles in pornography.[107]

The festival hosted local tour events to educate attendees and passersby on the history and legacies of sex workers in the Bay Area. In 2005, the festival coordinated the "Barbary Coast Tour," a champagne cable car cruise through the red-light districts discussing the history of prostitution in San Francisco.[108]The 2007 festival hosted a "Sex on Wheels Cultural History Tour Of San Francisco Sex Industry," including live costumed and in-character performers, telling the stories of sex workers who lived, worked, and kicked ass in various locations around San Francisco, sponsored by the SF Bike Coalition. [109] "Think colonial Williamsburg but with whores!"[110] Further, as an act to reclaim space, the festival presented the guerilla art event "Roaming Hookerfest." Festival co-director and event producer Erica Fabulous commented how she "wanted the festival to reach out past the usual crowds" with this event, bringing safer sex materials to designated alleys, in a van projecting sex worker movies.[111]

In the creation of the festival and its events issues regarding sex work are brought out of the shadows and back into public spaces through the prioritization of sex workers' voices from a vast and varied set of experiences of systemic discrimination and criminalization of erotic labor.

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[107] *5th Biennial San Francisco Sex Worker Film and Arts Festival*, 2007.

[108] *4th Biennial Sex Worker Film and Arts Festival*, produced by Erica Fabulous and Carol Leigh, San Francisco, May 1-8th 2005.

[109] *5th Biennial San Francisco Sex Worker Film and Arts Festival*, 2007.

[110] *5th Biennial San Francisco Sex Worker Film and Arts Festival*, 2007.

[111] *5th Biennial San Francisco Sex Worker Film and Arts Festival*, 2007.

The festival's goal is two-fold. SWFF aims to demonstrate the agency and cultural significance of global sex worker communities to the non-sex working public, using art and cultural production to disrupt harmful and/or incomplete narratives of the sex industry. Further the festival creates a much-needed venue for SWFF's vastly intersecting community to share art, film, education, and social justice organizing and care amongst each other.[112]

As part of this two-fold mission the festival hosts events specifically for current and former sex workers as a means of fostering relationality and building community. In 2003, the festival hosted a "How to Make Your Own Porn" workshop, in partnership with Bay Area sex toy store Good Vibrations discussing all you need to know from writing scripts, casting, assembling a crew, to sales and distribution.[113] In 2005, Carol Leigh included the sex workers only workshop, *Whore College*, a day of panels discussing body stretching, herbal medicine, self-defense, marketing, "legal issues," and DIY Webcamming.[114] In 2011, the festival hosted two skill share events, the first "The Art of Webcamming: How to make money online & have fun doing it" and another collection of panels featuring Annie Sprinkle, Miss Major, Cyd Nova, Emi Koyama and more.[115]

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[112] Internal notes

[113] *3rd San Francisco Sex Worker Film and Video Festival*, 2003.

[114] *4th Biennial Sex Worker Film and Arts Festival*, 2005.

[115] Panels include: "Clients are not your enemy," with Sabrina Morgan; "Meet the Neighbors (for male sex workers), with Kirk Read, "Sex Workers Speak to Our Lovers and Family," with Lusty Day, "The Elephant in The Room Sex Work in the Age of HIV," with Cyd Nova. "What the Fuck is Eco-sex and How Can it Improve your Sex Business?" with Annie Sprinkle, "Real Feminists and Human Rights Activists Don't Buy Ashton: How Irrational Panic Over Modern Day Slavery Harms Women," with Emi Koyama and "sex workers and social justice," with Miss Major and Cris Sardina.

7th Biennial Sex Worker Film and Arts Festival, produced by Erica Fabulous and Scarlot Harlot (a.k.a. Carol Leigh), San Francisco, May 20-29, 2011.

In 2011 festival producer and director Erica Berman founded the *Whore's Bath,* a community spa day and magical healing event, welcoming current and former sex workers to be pampered, pamper each other, and reclaim their role as healers.[116] The Whore's Bath event reimagines conventional understandings of 'a whore's bath,' the washing of the underarms, undercarriage, and genitals by sex workers in between clients, as to prepare themselves for the next. Rather than this stigmatized and utilitarian understanding of sex worker's bathing rituals, as occurring for the benefit of patrons, the Whore's Bath imagines sex worker's bathing as a practice of self and community care. In a radio interview Berman describes her creation of the Whore's Bath for the sex working and trading community and how much the community needed a dedicated healing space,

> "(Its) a really important piece in our culture, with everyone at home on their phones, not connecting in person, and we need that…We really needed a place to come together and offer each other healing from a place of knowing and understanding and care, and to bring all of our healing energy and different modalities together to create a space."[117]

The Whore's Bath hosts spa treatments, food, clothing swaps, massage, some years bringing clothing swaps, tarot readings, and sex worker led workshops. The Whore's Bath typically powered by sex worker community members who volunteer their services in two-to-four-hour shifts as aestheticians, reiki energy workers, massage practitioners, nail technicians, herbalists, movement workers specializing in Yoga, and other services volunteers wish to provide. The event is strictly "no one is turned away for lack of funds" and entry is donation based. Leigh noted that the donation-based model helped ensure an inclusive space for those

[116] Ibid.

[117] Erica Berman and Elizabeth Dayton, interview by Jovelyn Richards, *The Space Between Us,* KPFA.org 94.1, April 17, 2023.

with lower incomes who wanted to attend, and inadvertently made the event more money. She explained that with ticketed entry everyone would simply pay the $10, $15 or $25 fee, but with the donation model people paid what they could, which meant the higher earners gave more, some making donations of $200 just for the Whore's Bath event.[118] The venue and catering costs for the *Whore's Bath* are typically taken care of from the festival budget, and the entry fees are put toward paying the practitioners for their time and labor. The organizers of the event understand not just the value of the service and expertise offered by the practitioners, but also acknowledge that a lack of funding could prevent otherwise enthusiastic sex worker community members from being involved in the event and thus offer a small stipend for those who want to be compensated for their time. Berman recalled that many practitioners over the years vehemently insist on volunteering their time and others need the funds but tries to make sure all practitioner and organizers leave with something for their time. [119]

Berman understands her creation of The Whore's Bath as a 'watering hole' for sex workers and as an extension of her practices as a healer.[120] Berman goes on to illustrate how sex workers spend their lives caring for other people and holding the containers for other people's healing through their work, so it is important to have the space where sex workers could come together to both offer and receive that care amongst one another, as "a really special and important way for us to heal in community, in connection."[121] "And there's really nothing like

[118] Fieldnotes, 2017.

[119] Erica Berman, personal communications with author.

[120] Berman, *The Space Between Us*.

[121] Berman, *The Space Between Us*.

this space. It has a particular type of vibe, that the feeling or sense of connection to ourselves and each other"[122]

It is in these "watering hole" spaces, The Whore's Bath, the art shows, film screenings, and the entirety of the SWFF itself, which create a healing utopian "magic" through the practice of gathering as queer subjects. In his work *Cruising Utopia* José Esteban Muñoz theorizes the quotient acts of everyday survival and continued existence, the centering of "the here and now" of queer relational subjectivity and experience.[123] In his analysis of a poem by Frank O' Hara, Munoz theorizes moments of everyday relationality of marginalized subjects, much like the watering hole spaces of sex worker watering holes,

> "This poem tells us of a quotidian act, having a coke with somebody, that signifies a vast lifeworld of queer relationally, an encrypted sociality, and a utopian potentiality. The quotidian act of sharing a coke, consuming a common commodity with a beloved with whom one shares secret smiles, trumps fantastic moments in history of art. Though the poem is clearly about the present, it is a present that is now squarely the past, and in its queer relationally promises a future."[124]

Bringing sex workers together in these "watering hole" spaces, and in turn fostering community and practices of community relationality, offer a glimpse of the utopian promise and praxis of sex worker futurity. It is through practices of relationally marginalized communities survive in the face of state-sanctioned death or exclusion. Muñoz warns methods of hope are prone to disappointment and "to access queer visuality we may need to squint, to strain our vision and force it to see otherwise, beyond the limited vista of the here and now."[125] The sex worker

[122] Berman, *The Space Between Us.*

[123] Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia*, 1-18.

[124] Muñoz, 6.

[125] Muñoz, 24.

communities, especially trans sex workers and sex workers of color, are routinely policed from forming interpersonal connections through social exclusion, zoning laws, custody cases and felony charges of trafficking for sex workers discussing safe practices. Momentary reprieves from the consistent and unrelenting violence of the state made possible through relationally provide a promise of not just survival, but to "cruise" the utopian future absent of state violence. We see the praxis of Muñoz's theory in sex worker spaces, specifically in those spaces fostered by SWFF, where gestures of care and community formation are made, not out of naiveté of the socio-political climate but in spite of it. By continuing to foster community and engage in practices of relationality, sex worker art shows and events refuse the present as "poisonous and insolvent," continuing to create the utopian community they imagine, moment by moment, glimpse by glimpse. [126]

[126] Muñoz, 30.

Chapter Three: "*Your existence may be deleted- Error 104- please verify your identity*:" Art of Sex Working and Trading Communities post-FOSTA-SESTA and COVID-19

April 11th, 2018, the United States Congress passed the Allow States and Victims to Fight Online Sex Trafficking and Stop Enabling Sex Traffickers legislation (FOSTA-SESTA). Mainstream anti-trafficking discourse that lauds the joint bills as "the most significant trafficking policy in decades" and a universal success, measured in the sheer number of ads shut down when evaluated by US Congress.[127] Prior to the legislation, Section 230 of the Telecommunications Act of 1996 (Amendment to the Communications Act of 1934) differentiated between web "publishers" and "platforms," stating web hosting platforms such as YouTube, Facebook, Twitter or "any interactive computer service" were not held legally responsible for published content of third-party-users as a proponent of ensuring free speech online.[128] Purporting "websites that promote and facilitate prostitution have been reckless in allowing the sale of sex trafficking victims and have done nothing to prevent the trafficking of children and victims of force, fraud, and coercion," FOSTA-SESTA amends Section 230 to "clarify" (it) "was never intended to provide legal protection to websites that unlawfully promote and facilitate prostitution and websites that facilitate traffickers in advertising the sale of unlawful sex acts with sex trafficking victims."[129] Under the new legislation, all web platforms could now be held

[127] Ann Wagner (R-MO), "Statement on FOSTA-SESTA," *Congressional Record Proceedings and Debates for the 115th Congress*, Second Session, Washington: Wednesday, July 25, 2018, H7165.

[128] Telecommunications Act of 1996, 47 USC 609 note, Feb. 8, 1996, [S.652].

[129] "Congressional Record Proceedings and Debates for the 115th Congress," Second Session, Washington: Monday, March 19th, 2018, Vol. 164, No. 47.)

legally responsible for third-party users' content when said content "acts in reckless disregard of the fact that such conduct contributed to sex trafficking."[130]

Almost immediately after FOSTA-SESTA's passage, the federal government was able to shut down backpage.com, a popular advertising venue for adult services, for "facilitating" criminal sex trafficking."[131] Many other web platforms utilized by sex workers for advertising, screening practices, and basic safety were shut down (Craigslist Personals, Bay Area Cityvibes and entire Reddit sub-boards) and/or their terms of service were amended to prohibit "explicit" or "Not Safe For Work" (NSFW) content (Facebook, Patreon, Tumblr, Google). Despite evidence that the website in question (backpage.com) did not facilitate trafficking, within a month FOSTA-SESTA had shut down 135 websites that sex workers utilized for advertising and screening clients, processing of payments, and social media engagement.[132]

FOSTA-SESTA legislation has violently changed the conditions of many sex workers lives, and as such has changed the landscape of art produced within sex working and trading communities as well as the conditions in which these artists and communities create. This chapter considers a selection of art, performance, and cultural production created within sex working and trading communities under the conditions of FOSTA-SESTA. In my discussion I will illustrate the capacity of sex workers' cultural production to complicate dominant narratives

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[130] Congressional Record Proceedings and Debates for the 115th Congress," March 19th, 2018.

[131] The closure of Backpage was not the first sex worker advertising site to be shut down. Closures of MyRedBook.com and Rentboy.com were shut down prior to FOSTA-SESTA.

Samantha Majic, "Same Same but Different? Gender, Sex Work, and Respectability Politics in the MyRedBook and Rentboy closures," *Anti-Trafficking Review* 14 (2020), 82-98.

[132] Elizabeth Nolan Brown, "Secret Memos Show the Government Has Been Lying About Backpage All Along," Reason, August 26th, 2019, https://reason.com/2019/08/26/secret-memos-show-the-government-has-been-lying-about-backpage/ H. Berg, *Porn Work,* 122.

of the sex industry, with many of these works purposefully drawing attention to the material consequences the joint bills have on the lives of sex working and trading communities, which often include the anti-trafficking victims the bills claim to protect. However, I maintain that the capacity to make discursive interventions is merely one of the many functions of sex worker cultural production, and potentially not the primary one. In discussing the artwork, I orient my analysis to how sex workers' art and performance facilitate sex worker community survival, relationality, and futurity through a refusal to be silenced or disappeared.

The Material Impacts of FOSTA-SESTA

The FOSTA-SESTA legislation has fundamentally changed the conditions of many sex workers lives. A post-FOSTA-SESTA survey conducted by the Hacking//Hustling research team found from their sample of sex workers that 72.45% experienced increased economic instability, 33.8% reported increased violence from clients, and 23.71% reported a change in housing circumstances since April 2018.[133] Further, the report found that nearly 91% of surveyed sex workers used some sort of digital security technology and 94% used online public platforms to advertise sex work related services, with 78.5% reporting sex work made up the majority of their income and 47% reporting it was their only source of income.[134] The report goes on the explain,

> "An internet-based work model has been adopted by sex workers primarily due to the increased potential to create a safer workspace. This work model has given sex workers the opportunity to utilize e-verification and create larger and more concise databases for black-listing of violent clients and potential undercover police… Barriers that disrupt an online-based work model create an environment where harm reduction techniques that were previously in place become less accessible. Internet based workers still need the income that was lost due to the removal of their online platforms. Working with

[133] Blunt and Wolf, "Erased," 18.

[134] Blunt and Wolf, 22.

> increased financial insecurity and increased criminalization leads to workers taking greater risks with clients that they previously were able to avoid… [135]

Such increased risks include but are not limited to agreeing to meet blacklisted clients, tolerating boundary-pushing and coercive behavior, and transitioning to street-based work where any screening measures or negotiations must occur quickly to avoid arrest. Since the passage of FOSTA-SESTA nearly 36% of online respondents from the Hacking//Hustling survey reported increased violence, as did 20% of street-based respondents interviewed from the *Whose Corner is it Anyway?* organization.[136] Additionally of the *Whose Corner is it Anyway?* (WCIIA) members who were interviewed, 40% reported seeing an increase in the number of street-based workers once FOSTA-SESTA passed.[137] While structures of criminalization endow all sexual labor with some element of risk, street-based workers can experience increased threats of assault, robbery, and other forms of violence.[138]

Another survey from sex workers' rights organization Call Off Your Old Tired Ethics-Rhode Island (COYOTE-RI) found similar results as Hacking//Hustling. In their summary of impact, COYOTE-RI reported the passage of FOSTA-SESTA resulted in an increase of the following: risks taken by sex workers, contact from pimps and predators preying on desperation, and client demands for cheaper or riskier services.[139] Further, the same survey reported a

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[135] Blunt and Wolf, 22.

[136] Whose Corner Is It Anyway? is a community organization of drug using, low income, survival based, and/or street-working sex workers based out of Western Massachusetts, dedicated to providing political education, mutual aid, and harm reduction to its members.

[137] Blunt and Wolf, 23.

[138] Ronald Weitzer, "Sociology of Sex Work," 219.

[139] COYOTE-RI and SWOP Seattle, "Impact Survey Results- 2018,"*swop-seattle.org*, November 2018. http://www.swop-seattle.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/11/COYOTE-Survey-Results-2018.pdf

decrease in sex workers' incomes, availability of clients, ability participate in screening practices, and workers' bargaining power. [140] Sixty percent of sex workers said they've had to take on less safe clients to make ends meet.[141] Respondents explained, "I've gotten lots of vague requests, predatory, messages from people claiming to have a history with me who don't," "A client threatened me with a knife," and "I keep getting many people asking for discounts and not wanting to screen."[142] Only sixty-three percent of surveyed sex workers reported still being able to screen clients after the passage of FOSTA-SESTA (down from a previous report of ninety-two percent) and sixty-five percent said someone recently had tried to threaten, exploit, or get freebies from them.[143]

"*Celine Walker. Goddess Sadie Hawkins. Unknown:*" D17 with Vee Chattie

As it rains on the streets of the Westlake Center Mall in Seattle Washington on December 17, 2018, the nearly naked body of non-binary performance artist, comedian, and sex worker Vee Chattie sits seemingly alone on a black towel.[144] With their mouth taped over with yellow masking tape reading "CENSORED," Chattie pours (fake) blood from a canteen labeled "FOSTA-SESTA" over their head, quickly covering their body and limbs, before disappearing into the terry cloth. In the pages of a black lambskin notebook, Chattie writes out each of the names of all the sex workers reported missing or dead from the previous calendar year. One-by-

[140] COYOTE-RI and SWOP Seattle 6.

[141] COYOTE-RI and SWOP Seattle, 12.

[142] COYOTE-RI and SWOP Seattle, 13.

[143] COYOTE-RI and SWOP Seattle, 14-17.

[144] *Untitled*, Vee Chattie, Westlake Center Mall, Seattle, WA, December 17, 2018.

one they tear out each of the pages, stained from the blood on their fingertips, and surround themselves in the paper grave-markers: "Celine Walker." "Goddess Sadie Hawkins." "Unknown." "Unknown."[145] The commemorative performance continues until Chattie is surrounded by every name from the 14-page list. Concerned shoppers and passersby stop to watch the performance. One is overheard saying, "we have to stop the violence."[146]

Chattie's performance changed the social space of the shopping mall by bringing attention to the violent material consequences experienced by sex workers from FOSTA-SESTA policies, invoking a complex mixture of empathy, accountability, and discomfort. The shock of their nakedness in Seattle's December weather stopped passersby, only to see Chattie in a performative forced suicide. Rather than gasoline or tar, the canteen pours out and covers Chattie in the blood of FOSTA-SESTA, the blood of other sex workers in their wider community. The shock of seemingly out-of-place and unexpected violent imagery of the performance turned passive shoppers into active viewers of the work. This performance of violence, coupled with the building silence due to the shifting attentions in the space, evokes emotional responses from the now audience. Some viewers stopped in their tracks for the entire duration of the performance, some needed to look away while others could not, but all were engaged. Chattie's work is intentionally uncomfortable, not just due to the blood, violence, and nudity, but in its unsettling comingling of narrative, feelings, and politics. [147]

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[145] "2018 Memorial List," december17.org, Accessed December 20, 2018.

[146] Rich Smith, "Seattle Sex Workers Call for the City to Decriminalize Sex Work," The Stranger, December 17, 2018, https://www.thestranger.com/politics/2018/12/17/37181418/seattle-sex-workers-call-for-the-city-to-decriminalize-sex-work.

[147] Doyle, *Hold It Against Me,* 14.

Chattie compels the audience to *feel* the pain and vulnerability of sex workers rather than merely rationally consider it, holding the gaze of their audience while pouring the blood. The desire for an explanation or rationale in the work is an attempt to remedy its difficulty and make the complex emotions go away. The demand to "stop the violence" and those who could not bear to watch or to leave the performance demonstrates a need for the audience to resolve the frustration of difficulty when it is encountered.[148] Too frequently in the celebration of anti-trafficking successes, it is the "difficulty" of the increased violence and precarity of those working in sexual economies that need to be resolved through silencing or death. The performance's difficulty lies in Chattie's refusal to break the return gaze of their audience. Chattie refuses to be resolved, to simply perform and exit their "stage," by holding the audience's gaze with firm eye-contact which implies a culpability of 'you did this' to those walking by. "You did this" through the passive indifference to the violence experienced by sex working and trading people under policies like FOSTA-SESTA and to the rampant state-sanctioned violence be swept under the rug enabled by the legislation.

Chattie's performance not only re-narrates dominant discourses of FOSTA-SESTA to passersby but said re-narration functions as *method* to facilitate sex worker community formation, survival, and resilience around the cathartic expression. Partnering with individuals from the Sex Worker Outreach Project (SWOP) as part of the commemorative events of the International Day to End Violence Against Sex Workers (D17 or IDEVASW), Chattie's performance is part of sex worker communities' global annual tradition to honor the sex workers lost to the ongoing struggle against state-sanctioned violence. On December 17th, 2003, sex

[148] Doyle, xii.

worker activists Annie Sprinkle and Robin Few organized the first memorial vigil to honor the young victims of Gary Ridgeway, or "The Green River Killer." In his trial, Ridgeway confessed to murdering 49 women, explaining under oath his decision to target "prostitutes" as "they were easy to pick up without being noticed. I knew they would not be reported missing right away and might never be reported missing. I picked prostitutes because I thought I could kill as many of them as I wanted without getting caught."[149] After his confession of guilt Ridgeway entered a plea bargain and received a life sentence in exchange for the names and burial/disposal locations of his victim's bodies.[150] It is around this list that the first open-mic vigil for IDEVASW was organized, bringing together sixty to eighty people on the front lawn of San Francisco's city hall to remember and honor these targeted young women.[151] As a point of transnational solidary IDEVASW memorials events are now commemorated internationally, to call attention to the hate crimes and targeted violence committed against sex workers around the world.[152] While the events have evolved over the years into marches and protests, performance art, and consciousness raising Christmas caroling, or even solo-memorial baths, the reading of the names had remained a staple of IDEVASW events.[153]

It is in the reading of the names and the blood-stained pages surrounding Chattie on their black towel in the middle of the shopping mall that sex workers refuse to be disappeared through

[149]Annie Sprinkle, "Remembering Our Dead and Wounded: Why We Started the International Day to End Violence Against Prostitutes," AnnieSprinkle.Org(asm), Accessed January, 2019. https://anniesprinkle.org/remembering-our-dead-and-wounded/

[150] Sprinkle, "Remembering Our Dead and Wounded."

[151] Sprinkle, "Remembering Our Dead and Wounded."

[152] Sprinkle, "Remembering Our Dead and Wounded."

[153] Sprinkle, "Remembering Our Dead and Wounded."

structures that render them invisible and systematically disposable. Organized around and across differential experiences of the criminalization of erotic labor and societal disavowal of those who perform it, sex workers are devastated, and they are angry. While so many cases of violence against sex workers are labeled 'no human involved" by authorities, this modality of disposability disproportionately impacts Black and Brown, queer, trans, and gender-non-conforming sex workers who have been systematically and historically excluded from modern categories of human.[154] Chattie's performance simultaneously invites and demands engagement from the non-sex working public (holiday shoppers and passersby) to participate in the D17 community mourning ritual by bringing the ritual to them. In their book *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence*, Judith Butler asks "Who counts as human? Whose lives count as lives? And, finally, what makes for a grievable life?"[155] Butler looks at the structures of mourning, and how the process of grief requires the tenuous notion that we have experienced loss.[156] "Loss has made a tenuous "we" of us all," revealing "the thrall" of fundamental dependency and ethical responsibility in which our relations with others hold us."[157] By bringing the non sex working public into the "we' of the D17 community morning ritual, Chattie's performance forces their audience to not only grapple with the loss of sex workers lives, but to participate in a mourning ritual that acknowledges the un-alived sex workers as human and grievable, when so frequently they are not considered so.

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[154] Alexander G. Weheliye, *Habeas Viscus: Racializing Assemblages, Biopolitics, and Black Feminist Theories of the Human*, Durham: Duke University Press, 2104.

[155] Judith Butler, *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence* (New York: Verso Books, 2004), 20.

[156] Butler, 20.

[157] Butler, 20-23.

But nonetheless Chattie's performance remains a community mourning ritual at its core, both in and of itself as well as part of a much larger international collective of community commemorations for IDEVASW. Through Chattie's partnership with community organizers of SWOP in the performance's production and in the further circulation of the event and its preparation online, Chattie and supporting individuals invite their networked community of sex workers and non-sex working friends and allies to likewise participate in the IDEVASW project of remembrance, honoring experiences of dispossession and rendering them visible, and point-blank refusal to be disappeared quietly.

"S3x is the FR!!ends we made along the way:" E-Viction

In August of 2020, New York City sex worker art collective Veil Machine hosted *E-Viction,* an online protest, virtual arthouse, peepshow and "whore gallery."[158] Meeting us at an intersecting moment of precarity for sex workers, as they navigate both FOSTA-SESTA legislation and the COVID-19 global pandemic, *E-Viction* promised to create a new form of civil disobedience by asking users to engage on an online platform in direct violation of the FOSTA-SESTA, as a means to protest the pervasive surveillance, digital censorship, de-platforming and increasing criminalization of sex workers online.[159] The show explicitly calls attention to the question of where can sex workers go to work, gather, and organize, when public health mandates from COVID-19 encouraged a pivot to online activity, yet the internet remains hostile

[158] *E-Viction*, Veil Machine, 2020.

[159] *E-Viction*, 2020.

to sex workers' quotidian existence.[160] Veil Machine's website details how before *E-Viction* went live, the online promotional postings of the event on social media was subject to censorship policies that deemed the content as possessing "nudity or sexual activity"[161] despite the explicit description as "digital performance art piece and political action"[162]. Even after edits were made the reuploaded images were also flagged for removal.[163] Further, individual performers who were promoting the event on their accounts also had their posts flagged and removed for what they believe was the consistent graphic design of *E-Viction* picked up by Instagram's algorithms.[164]

Despite this tenuous relationship to online spaces, *E-Viction* created an intimate experience for viewers to engage with sex workers' art, performance, content and advocacy. As viewers navigate *E-Viction's* 90s-era internet aesthetic, with its bright blues, yellows and oranges, set in a craigslist-esque interface- users were immediately positioned as de-facto consumers of the sex worker's labor. Viewers scroll through the interface, browsing links to the performer's ads for virtual participation in art construction, live cam shows, the *E-Banned* store (where users can purchase both sex objects and art), and links to PDF materials about anti-sex work/anti- free speech legislation. New postings were released over the course of the 12-hour

[160] Many sex workers report their online accounts (social media, payment processing, dating profiles) are flagged and/or removed on various platforms even when they are not being used for sex work.[160]

Berg, *Porn Work*, 151.

[161] *E-Viction*, Veil Machine, 2020.

[162] *E-Viction*, 2020.

[163] *E-Viction*, 2020.

[164] *E-Viction*, 2020.

event, with it culminating in an abrupt (but scheduled) experience of de-platforming as the entire exhibition vanished at midnight, in Cinderella fashion.[165]

In her book chapter *Curating as Feminist Organizing*, academic and *E-Viction* participant Lena Chen discussed the political urgency that grounded *E-Viction* and the formation of the sex worker art collective, Veil Machine.[166] Chen discusses how organizers brainstormed the curatorial project in-between client sessions at a poorly run dungeon where they worked together as dominatrixes.[167] In the interview with Chen, co-organizer Sybil Fury expressed, "We realized the similarities between the experience of being evicted from public spaces of sex (like Times Square) and the experiences of being evicted online. We wanted to take that fear of being shut down into our own hands and dramatize it to turn it into art."[168] Co-organizer Empress Wu discussed shaping *E-Viction's* aesthetics,

> "When we were brainstorming what we wanted it to look like, I thought about Backpage and all those shitty HTML sites that feel like they might fuck up your computer, but you're willing to go there because you want that content. It had the feel of the early 2000s, before FOSTA- SESTA, when the Internet still seemed like a wild frontier, without any boundaries and restrictions – a time when you could literally put anything online and there's a certain anonymity to it, but you were also afraid because there was a sense of not knowing what the Internet could do and how long it would hold onto things."[169]

The *E-Viction* postings embodied this "post anything" logic, with suggestive posting titles like "Prety kitty looking for fun" and "Money for smiles" that would navigate users to content they

[165] *E-Viction*, 2020.

[166] L. Chen, "Objects of Desire," 258.

[167] L. Chen, 259.

[168] L. Chen, 259.

[169] L. Chen, 258-259.

may not have been expecting. The posting "hot young co-ed spreads herself open" navigates the user to poetry on multiculturalism and desire**. "**Art dont kiss ass but I do" links to the article "Dirty Commerce: Art Work and Sex Work since the 1970s" written by Julia Bryan-Wilson. The posting ""Fantasy lut" links to a discussion on the performativity of erotic labor,

> "No Brian it doesn't mean were lying to you… A painting of an apple isn't bad because it isn't as tasty as an apple. It's good because it does what an apple can't. … We're not the cheap imitations of wives or girlfriends. We do what they cannot. Your vulnerability, your satisfaction, your joy is possible because of the fantasy. Not in spite of it. Once you are able to see our craft, you will start to understand our value."[170]

Co-Organizer Cléo Ouyang explained to Chen how sex work teaches you to put a price on your work and value your labor, as well as the labor of others.[171] As such *E-Viction* created opportunities for performers to monetize multiple forms of their labor and participation in the exhibition, by posting links to live cam shows, mutual aid challenges, the e-banned marketplace, as well as links to performers external revenue generating sites and platforms. The "free sub tasks" posting reminds the users of their consumption, and to not consume sex worker's content without tipping (as indicated by the "find a link and tip someone" message)[172] *"Shop ur Art out* links to the "E-Banned" shop where users can directly purchase the art and sex objects of artists.[173]

E-Viction asks attendees to participate in the survival of the sex worker community through a money as care practice. Erotic laborer and pro-heaux scholar, femi babylon (known online as @thotscholar) writes:

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[170] *E-Viction*, 2020.

[171] L. Chen, 261.

[172] *E-Viction* posting link title.

[173] *E-Viction* posting title for link for the exhibition's E-Banned shop of art and sex objects.

> "Money and intimacy go hand in hand. Money is an offering. Of solidarity. Of care. And care is an important part of intimacy, is it not? So, it puzzles me that I constantly encounter people who believe money makes the intimacy "forced." Sending money is not revolutionary, nor is it radical disrupting the status quo as some have claimed. But it is a love/care language. The actual dirty thing is denying this care based on puritanical (sexist) values about money + intimacy. Care heightens the intimacy. Why does money ruin sexual intimacy but not my relationship with my sister when she sends me $100 because I need it."[174]

The understanding of money as care practice is not bounded by the client/provider relationship, but rather runs throughout sex worker communities as a practice of mutual aid and survival. Practices of mutual aid are frequently grounded in the structural failure of societal systems to adequately take care of its members, where ordinary people are called to respond in creative ways to address the immediate concerns of their community members.[175] Mutual aid and community care practices have their roots in structural disenfranchisement and lack of resources, resulting in the proliferation of such practices within marginalized communities, notably within the Black Radical Tradition. For example, alternative conceptualizations of 'mothering' and child-care emerge within communities affected by systemic racism, where the primary carers of children or "other- mothers" are grandmothers, sisters, cousins, neighbors, and friends.[176] Social movement organizations such as The Black Panthers and The Young Lord Party shaped modern understandings of community care and mutual with their 'survival programs,' including free breakfast programs, medical clinics, transport, and mobile services, assistance to elderly

[174] babylon, *heauxthots*, 51.

[175] Dean Spade, *Mutual Aid: Building Solidarity During This Crisis (And the Next)* (Brooklyn: Verso Books, 2020), 11.

[176] The Care Collective: Andrea Chatzidakis, Jamie Hakim, Jo Littler, Catherine Rottenburg, and Lynne Segal, *The Care Manifesto: The Politics of Interdependence*, New York: Verso, 2020, 61.

community members (errands and household needs), and the provision education on Liberation of children of their respective communities.[177]

The practices care and mutual aid of the Black Radical Tradition can be seen in sex working and trading communities, not out of mimicry, but as a site of the tradition's application, with many erotic laborers also belonging to racialized and/or dispossessed communities. *E-Viction* aligns itself with these traditions of community care and mutual aid, not only in the creation of opportunities for each other to monetize their labor (cam shows, selling art, etc), but through chain redistributions of wealth. The event was funded through a grant from Eyebeam as well as through the erotic labor of the organizers. In an interview with Chen co-organizer Cléo Ouyang explained, "I had one client that was an artist who messaged me as *E-Viction* was about to happen. I fin-dommed the shit out of him and he covered over $2000 of our expenses."[178] Event organizers then took this funding and redistributed it to performers, show crew members and to their wider community.

Additionally, *E-Viction* curators utilized the show posting links to facilitate further redistribution of resources to their wider sex worker community. Event curators Empress Wu and Mistress Niko challenge attendees who dare open the "WIN!!! One (1) spicy video session" to engage in community mutual aid by sending $22.22 to a MILF, a real sweetie pie and to royalty.[179] The "all you can imagine… sexy redhead hottie" posting links to an artist's external work page. "Super sexy sluts XXX here come pull out your wallets" links users to the Black Sex

[177] Spade, *Mutual Aid*, 20.

[178] L. Chen, 261.

[179] *E-Viction*, *Veil Machine*, 2020.

Worker Collective webpage to support their philanthropic project to provide black sex workers with peer support, legal assistance, housing and other basic needs.[180] *E-Viction* demonstrates how sex workers continue to utilize art and performance spaces as means to cultivate community through gathering (online and off) and how these moments of relationality are simultaneously a project of survival (opportunities for income generation and mutual aid) and futurity (protest, consciousness raising, rights organizing).

Alongside the creation of opportunities of individual sex workers to monetize their labor, *E-Viction* creates a space to cultivate and sustain community among viewers and content producers. While the user can navigate the interface in an individualized manner by avoiding links to live interactions, the nature even the "non-interactive" postings frequently put you (the user) into mediated relation with (other) sex workers. "Filthy paypiggies, look here: I only lick boots when the hot lady tells me to" links the Black Lives Matter webpage where the user finds calls against anti-black violence and links to information on defunding the police.[181] "S3x is the FR!!ends we made along the way" links to the International Whores' Day zine which encourages readers to consider the oppression of sex workers as directly linked to structures of oppression such as heteronormativity and white supremacy, and as such must be tackled together.[182] "Sexy tattooed ginger commands your wallet" links to a fundraiser for a youth organization Black

[180] *E-Viction* posting title for link to https://www.blacksexworkercollective.org.

[181] *E-Viction* link to https://blacklivesmatter.com/defundthepolice/?__cf_chl_jschl_tk__=d810d068c0c238f46a4c2ee4d00c9c1f8b721fef-1598066229-0-AWxqUPg6kkX21dsmaxaH_mG04uT3y4BSjE3iXQtJTA7v9oqqy31tGSdzMo4sa13V4j_n2spg-QRL7aRRCry_Attg4VoQnJLr4vDxHCggs01vuTgpwfwZnOgCWR6Xu0sba7-QzWoheP9EaiRfhnGKtV096tllpAX_4SsXZw1z11eyyhq1anltn3YZqGuIhIuThvLo2lOmBbP762dMQqq83PuFB_cotFoHEfiTLx8AhyT0NCWlR2witb3Z1C_owsL6n56VmxpagPTyQ21xrSdZvZY8Y5eguco0cGTJle8TReB_rli1HxfsTyOr0nS8OvRkFGgvWdVdhR67FAbQMOF8FE5tcpHuIo1gzqVm_cz0OiJc

[182] "International Whores Day Zine," *Kink Out* (New York, 2020), 1-56.

Trans News, LLC which offers healthcare, housing, and other healing services and resources to trans youth experiencing housing issues, and other people in the sex trade.[183] The postings reminding of your obligation to tip a sex worker for their labor or to donate/learn about the organizing of sex workers across varying proximities to power demonstrates the interconnectivity of sex worker advocacy as inherently tied to other liberation struggles. These connections demonstrate a concept of community care and survival that understands the interdependence of marginalized communities, and the necessity of an intersectional coalitional queer politic in the struggle against white supremacist, settler colonial, heteropatriarchy, which must be met with the tangible reallocation of resources.[184]

After running for the scheduled twelve hours, users are forcibly exited from *E-Viction*'s forum of ad listings and taken to the final "live cam show." However, as the user would presumably intend to sit back and enjoy the show, they are bombarded with pop ups obscuring the view. "YOUR SYSTEM HAS EXPERIENCED A GLITCH." As you click to close the first pop-up, another appears. "Your computer has tested positive for coronavirus." The initial cam show disappears into a mash-up of live performances, and the pop ups keep coming with increasing frequency. "Unwanted anti-trafficking viruses have been detected in your system. You will be "saved" Actually, you will be abolished." "Your existence may be deleted- Error 104- please verify your identity."[185]

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[183] *E-Viction* link to https://www.gofundme.com/f/support-black-trans-news-ts-candii.

[184] The Care Collective, *The Care Manifesto,* 2020.

[185] *E-Viction*, Veil Machine, 2020.

The experience of just trying to watch the live cam show replicates the inverse experience of sex workers being bombarded with invasive questions, stigmatization, and the criminalization of their efforts to survive and earn a living. When the final online performance is completed, the online location of *E-Viction* (https://e-viction.net) converts to a permanent message encouraging the desired affective response of the show as a project of sex workers' rights political advocacy and community survival.

> "NETWORK ERROR
> You've reached the end. Did you find what you were looking for? Did you get what your mouth watered for, what your body twitched for?
> We really wish we could stay and chat, engage in some pillow talk, cuddle, and fall asleep in your arms. Unfortunately, we have to go; we're on the run. Do you mind locking up after you leave? You don't have to go home but you can't stay here.
> *They can try to keep on killing us, to put their hands over our mouths, but they can never keep us away. We'll be back.*
> In the meantime, remember us by the absence we've left behind. This is the hardest part. The loneliest moments are the ones that accompany a detaching: space that was first empty, then filled, then emptied again.
> **Amplify** sex worker voices. **Contact** your representatives about FOSTA/SESTA and EARN IT. If you work in tech, **push** for change from the inside."[186]

The affective potential of *E-Viction* as protest and performance resides in "the memories of their absence" and the users' desire for a continued relationality with sex workers through the return of their presence. While there is no single theory of affect, I consider affective potential to be "a body's capacity to be affected."[187] Scholars Gregory J. Seigworth and Melissa Gregg write,

> Affect arises in the midst of in-between-ness: in the capacities to act and be acted upon… Affect, at its most anthropomorphic, is the name we give to those forces—visceral forces beneath, alongside, or generally other than conscious knowing, vital forces insisting beyond emotion… born in the in-betweeness and resides as accumulative beside-ness."[188]

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[186] *E-Viction*, 2020.

[187] Melissa Gregg and Gregory J. Seigworth, "An Inventory of Shimmers," *The Affect Theory Reader* (Durham: Duke University Press 2010), 2.

[188] Gregg and Seigworth, 1-2.

However, a desire for the return of sex workers to public spaces (online and off) mandates advocacy of users in the sex workers' rights and allied movements in liberation from structural oppression, as well as material resources. For Veil Machine, the curators, organizers, and performers of *E-Viction* the event ends with a call for their attendees to not only be in proximal or superficial relation with them, but to *act* relationally in ways that matter- namely by donating money and radicalizing by showing up for the fight for sex workers' rights. Attendees are left in the affective state of responding to this call to action from those who's art and labor they have consumed. And for attendees to continue to consume the work and labor of sex workers, to be in any relation with them at all, they must support them in ways that contribute to their survival.

"404: uh oh! You are searching for substance in a place where there's ultimately nothing at all. Use the empty space below to project your fantasies"[189]: *Low Art/High Standards* and the Temporality of Sex Workers Online

Six months after *E-Viction*, Veil Machine and Kink Out produced the digital performance panel *Low Art/High Standards* (*LAHS)* as part of Eyebeam's From the Rupture digital arts festival.[190] *LAHS* is a "very real and not at all fictional panel on the intersections of art, sex and technology."[191] The satirical panel builds on *E-Viction's* criticism of the rampant hostility, censorship, and surveillance of sex workers in digital spaces, asking audiences to consider the

[189] *E-Viction* "error" page for designated posting links.

[190] Eyebeam is a radical arts incubator based out of New York City, committed to interrupting the present biases that have perpetuated inequitable access and exclusionary practices in sectors of art and technology by amplifying diverse, justice-driven, and visionary practitioners.

https://www.eyebeam.org

[191] Tina Horn as the curator in *Low Art/High Standards*, Veil Machine x Kink Out, February 20, 2021. https://veilmachine.com/LAHS

relationship between sex work and the art world, and what can we learn about sex work through the lens of art?[192] The panel "launches" Body of Workers, an online digital art archive of sex worker art by and for sex workers and coded entirely by BIPOC, queer and kinky sex workers.[193] The Body of Workers platform was partly a virtual peepshow with tiered access for non-sex working paying viewers, and a virtual locker-room for sex working and trading artists, with *LAHS* exploring commodification, the eroticism of censorship, and the political stakes in reclaiming space for sex workers online.[194]

Low Art/High Standards "invites" six discussants from varied positions to sex workers' rights organizing and/or the art world, to demonstrate the ways in which sex worker art is consumed, commodified, and tokenized, and by whom. "Each archetype has something to gain."[195] The curator (performed by Tina Horn) was "thrilled when actual sex workers asked me to talk about their art," after having received he "Hot Curatorial Award" for her work showcasing the most titillating art by the most marginalized and tokenized artists across the US."[196] The critic (performed by Ze Royale), author of *Queering Queerness: Towards Even More Queer Theories of Contemporary Performance,* has an "expert eye on what art is" in "post modern- hyper criticism."[197] The Lobbyist (performed by Mistress Blunt), is the head of a

[192] "From the Rupture Emerges Body of Workers," Veil Machine, Feb 20, 2021, Accessed 2022. https://veilmachine.com/LAHS

[193] "*Low Art/High Standards*, Veil Machine x Kink Out, February 20, 2021.

[194] *Low Art/High Standards*, 2021; "From the Rupture Emerges Body of Workers," Veil Machine, 2021.

[195] *Low Art/High Standards*, 2021; "From the Rupture Emerges Body of Workers," Veil Machine, 2021.

[196] *Low Art/High Standards*, 2021; "From the Rupture Emerges Body of Workers," Veil Machine, 2021.

[197] *Low Art/High Standards*, 2021; "From the Rupture Emerges Body of Workers," Veil Machine, 2021.

wombyn-led anti-trafficking nonprofit, and a leader of WAP: Wombyn Against Pornos, recognized as "Mother of the Feminist Movement Award" for having personally rescued dozens of survivors who have since become feminist role models.[198] She is a personal friend of Ashton Kutcher and thinks Body of Workers is "the newest way to market in the flesh of women."[199] The artist (performed by Niko Flux) almost has a B.A. in Painting, but tells the panel she is still an artist, lowering the tone of her voice to explain, "just not in the way you would think."[200] She now does bespoke one-on-one performances for high paying art collectors.[201] The Dealer (performed by Empress Wu), "head of The Dealer Gallery, with locations in New York, Los Angeles, and Milan. Their first show, Piss/Art, was a legendary success and they are renowned for their capacity to turn art into gold."[202] The Collector (performed by Lena Chen), "works in a distinguished financial institution, and has a strong interest in supporting sex worker art in every way that makes him feel more generous and necessary."[203] He has deeply personal relationships with many of the Body of Work artists, considering them his friends, and has a deep interest in their work and is "willing to pay very highly for it."[204] The show explains that "Each archetype

[198] *Low Art/High Standards*, 2021; "From the Rupture Emerges Body of Workers," Veil Machine, 2021.

[199] *Low Art/High Standards*, 2021; "From the Rupture Emerges Body of Workers," Veil Machine, 2021.

[200] *Low Art/High Standards*, 2021; "From the Rupture Emerges Body of Workers," Veil Machine, 2021.

[201] *Low Art/High Standards*, 2021; "From the Rupture Emerges Body of Workers," Veil Machine, 2021.

[202] *Low Art/High Standards*, 2021; "From the Rupture Emerges Body of Workers," Veil Machine, 2021.

[203] *Low Art/High Standards*, 2021; "From the Rupture Emerges Body of Workers," Veil Machine, 2021.

[204] *Low Art/High Standards*, 2021; "From the Rupture Emerges Body of Workers," Veil Machine, 2021.

(of supporters of 'artists') holds a different funhouse mirror up to the viewer on the ways in which sex workers (and artists) are treated."[205]

After its initial performance, I scoured the internet looking for a video recording of the *Low Art/High Standards* after fighting with my computer's document retrieval mechanism for a few hours trying to locate my notes on the performance. As I searched the LAHS page on Veil Machine's website, YouTube, over 10 pages of Google search results, and even my own email account for my e-ticket (which I hoped might have a link to a recording for its initial viewers), I was reminded of the precarious and tentative position of sex workers, and their art's presence online. Thankfully I was able to find my notes while working on another section of this text, but they still reflect the voice of a former friend of mine barraging me during the show with "You don't need to take notes on what's happening. It's online, they'll just post the recording." While this is true of many things, especially during the COVID pandemic, I knew this was not necessarily true for sex workers, their content, or for their ability to exist online. Now, as I write and try to piece together the LAHS performance from my minimalist notes, the description that remains online, and my own lingering emotional response, reminds me of how sex worker art, either by design or as a consequence of heighten surveillance, censorship, and digital dispossession of sex workers online, is queerly ephemeral. Muñoz unpacks the necessary queerness of the temporary, the modality of queer relationality in performances that focus on the "here and now" but do not remain, a hallmark of sex worker's art and presence in digital space.

> "Instead of being clearly available as visible evidence, queerness has instead existed as innuendo, gossip, fleeting moments, and performances that are meant to be interacted

[205] *Low Art/High Standards*, 2021; "From the Rupture Emerges Body of Workers," Veil Machine, 2021.

> with by those within its epistemological sphere-while evaporating at the touch of those who would eliminate queer possibility."[206]

All the art pieces discussed in this chapter that were once promoted, shared, and viewed online (Chattie's D17 memorial, *E-Viction, Low Art/High Standards*) are now no longer available, "failing" to provide adequate proof of their existence. This failure is "profoundly queer" in its disappearance, leaving behind only traces of the works existence to those who know where to look and what to look for. Under constant threat of disappearance, art and content from sex workers is under constant threat of removal, censorship, or banning from planforms enabled by policies such as FOSTA-SESTA and rampant stigmatization.[207] Audiences do not know how long they have to view a work, if they will ever see it again, and frequently after viewing it, are only left with their own feelings, emotions, and personalized memories of the work at hand. In the ephemeral traces of the work, the structures of feeling that remain reconfigures the materiality of performance, rather than forgetting it.[208] Much like the explicit message of *E-Viction,* the affective potential sex worker's art as a creative strategy of activism resides in the memories left behind and the denied relationality from the work's absence or heavily mediated presence. As such the cultural production of sex workers online regardless of intended duration of display (as temporarily available or a permanent) becomes de facto performance art. This

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[206] José Esteban Muñoz, "Ephemera as Evidence," *Women and Performance: A journal of Feminist Theory 8:2* (1996), 6.

[207] While the censorship and banning of sex workers in online spaces has been enabled by FOSTA-SESTA, such discrimination, in both digital and material space, predates 2018 and is deeply ingrained in structures of modernity.

Manuel B. Aalbers and Michaël Deinema, "Placing Prostitution," *City* 16, no. 1-2 (2010), 129-145, DOI: 10.1080/13604813.2012.662370; Melissa W. Wright, "From Protests to Politics: Sex Work, Women's Worth, and Ciudad Juárez Modernity," *Annals of the Association of American Geographers 94, no. 2 (*2004), 369-386, DOI: 10.1111/j.1467-8306.2004.09402013.x.

[208] Muñoz, "Ephemera as Evidence," 10.

queer modality of sex working and trading persons' existence, both in artistic production or within quotidian practices of life demonstrates their mandate for relationality: support sex workers or exist in their absence.

Conclusion

Despite the rising hostility, socio-political disposability, and precarity of erotic laborers demonstrated in this project, sex working and trading communities continue to make and celebrate their art as a practice of community relationality, survival, and futurity. In 2022, I attended the *On Our Backs: The Revolutionary Art of Queer Sex Work* exhibition, hosted by the Handwerker Gallery at Ithaca College. Curated by Alexis Heller in collaboration with sex worker artists and activists, *On Our Backs* presented first-person sex worker narratives alongside works of allied artists to explore the connections between queerness, sex work, art, and activism, and the ways that they have led to radical transformation.[209] The exhibition displayed individual art installations and archival materials (photographs, industry magazines, such as $pread and Squirm, safe sex posters, and seminal community zine, "How to have Sex in an Epidemic: One Approach), as well as reading areas, 'peep show booth' rooms for screening short film works, and the interactive multi-media installation of OnlyBans.[210]

On Our Backs presents artworks and artifacts which "illuminate spaces in which queer and trans sex workers labor, create, build community, agitate, fuck, collaborate, and express

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[209] *On Our Backs: The Revolutionary Art of Queer Sex Work* was previously exhibited at the New York's Leslie-Lohman Museum, September 28- January 19, 202.

On Our Backs: The Revolutionary Art of Queer Sex Work, Handwerker Gallery in Ithaca, NY. Feb 3-Mar 11, 2022.

[210] Created by a team of sex workers and allies, the OnlyBans game positions users in role of a sex worker as they 'play' by posting erotic images online to earn money and fans. OnlyBans players attempt to evade content moderation algorithms, shadow-banning, and other threats experienced by sex workers' experiences (based on findings from the Posting into the Void study by Hacking//Hustling). OnlyBans offers "a speculative vision of how marginalized communities can unite to protest these unjust policies and create better alternatives," as they encounter more than online hostility, finding helpful peers and a wider supportive sex worker community. The game has been featured in ten exhibitions from April 2021 to June 23-28, 2022, including *On Our Backs*.

"Only Bans Media," OnlyBansGame, accessed September 11, 2023, https://onlybansgame.com/wp/wp-content/uploads/2023/01/OnlyBans_Media_Kit.pdf.

freedom."[211] The exhibition includes a portrait series of Black cis and trans sex worker activists by Kisha Bari, featured in the Sex Worker's' Pop Up exhibit in New York, seeks to "destigmatize and reframe the dialog around sex workers' rights, resilience and movement priorities."[212] The series pairs each portrait with one quote from each of the leaders,

> Vanniall – "When your very existence is criminalized, survival becomes a radical action."
>
> Ceyenne - "As a Black trans leader and sex worker advocate, I want you to inspire yourself and inspire others." #GlitsInc
>
> Nique D - "Rest at the end. Not in the Middle."
>
> T.S. Candii – "Family neglect leads to survival sex work. Sex work saved my life."
>
> Alisha King – "My life is just as valuable as yours so treat me like it."
>
> Leila Raven – "Safety starts with housing, healthcare, and an end to the criminalization of our survival strategies."[213]

This portrait series emphasizes the ways in which these leaders have created spaces of community building despite their persecution.[214]

Further, *On Our Backs* features a curated installation of archival harm reduction materials and zines by Heather Edney, the first executive director of the Santa Cruz Needle Exchange program, which seeks to expand understandings of community and refuse exclusions of drug users within activist organizing. Under the glass pane is a display of Junkphood zines and posters

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[211] "Exhibition Statement," *On Our Backs, 2022.*

[212] Kisha Bari, "Sex Worker's Pop-Up series," 2020, photography, *On Our Backs* exhibition, Handwerker Gallery in Ithaca, NY. Feb 3-Mar 11, 2022.

[213] Bari, "Sex Worker's Pop-Up series*,"* 2022.

[214] Bari, "Sex Worker's Pop-Up series," 2022.

reading, "we should fight feeling that there is something wrong with us cause we like to get high," and "drug use is not a crime."[215]

Building on ideas of community, "To Remember the Future Backwards," created by artist Eon on behalf of Red Canary Song, illustrates the force of ancestral memory, sex worker joy and the pleasures in individual and collective prosperity.[216] Explicitly drawing on East and Southeast Asian aesthetics and rituals, the watercolor on rice paper depicts a skeleton above a feast of fish, dumplings, and pork's head, with two sets of hands eating, one holding an orange or citrus fruit, and another counting a handful of hundred-dollar bills.[217] "To Remember the Future Backwards," asks the viewer to consider: "what unfolds for us in the present when we include those who came before us in our definition of community?"[218]

On Our Backs draws on art as a creative strategy to honor and write back into the archive the labor and contributions of LGBTQAI sex workers in the fight for liberation, frequently omitted or misrepresented due to race, gender, citizenship, and economic status.[219]

> "Queer and transgender sex workers have historically put their bodies on the line to expand notion of intimacy and pleasure; demand self-determination, equality, and care; and to widen the representation for diverse communities and perspectives. Well sex workers have stood firmly in the crosshairs of intersectional organizing recognition and support for their labor has remained under realized. As artists, healers, educators, social justice leaders, joy makers, caretakers, and survivors, sex workers have more than earned their due."[220]

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[215] Heather Edney, 1980s-1990s, archival materials, *On Our Backs*, 2022.

[216] Eon for Red Canary Song, "To Remember the Future Backwards," *On Our Backs*, 2022.

[217] Eon for Red Canary Song, "To Remember the Future Backwards," *On Our Backs*, 2022.

[218] Eon for Red Canary Song, "To Remember the Future Backwards," *On Our Backs*, 2022.

[219] "Exhibition Statement," *On Our Backs*, 2022.

[220] "Exhibition Statement," *On Our Backs*, 2022.

On Our Backs claims their discursive interventions; offering an "offer a rich, but incomplete portrait of LGBTQAI sex worker culture" to honor their valuable contributions and demonstrate the "queer kinship between LGBTQAI and sex worker histories, both inextricably bound with home, the street, and bars, clubs, and bathhouses."[221] Through their disruption of historical erasures of queer and trans sex workers, particularly from Black and Brown communities, *On Our Backs* explicitly depicts a renegotiated community relationality that honors radical forms of queer kinship and community formation.

Sex working and trading arts communities continue to make, exhibit, and celebrate the cultural production of sex working and trading communities, such as *On Our Backs* and the many art shows and events discussed in this dissertation, as creative strategies of community relationality and futurity. The continued efforts to foster community relationality of sex worker art, in visual and thematic depictions as well as in praxis, is a refusal to merely accept the 'poisonousness and insolvency' of present and foreseeable future of heightened precarity, socio-political disposability, and online hostility towards sex workers and their labor. In this refusal, the art and cultural production of erotic laborers functions as a utopian practice or world building, creating the world they wish to live, moment by moment, glimpse by glimpse. [222]

[221] *On Our Backs* Exhibition Statement, 2022.

[222] Brager and Mistress Velvet, *DIY Resistance*; Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia*, 30.

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