

## Screwing the System: Sexwork, Race, and the Law

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A prostitute tells me that a magistrate who pays her to beat him confessed that he gets an erection every time he sentences a prostitute in court. This essay is about the magistrate's sentence, the magistrate's erection, and the prostitute who spilled the beans.

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In 1760, a French *philosophe* coined the term *fetichisme* for “primitive” religion. Marx took the term *commodity fetish* and the idea of “primitive” *magic* to express the central social form of the modern industrial economy. In 1887, Freud transferred fetishism to the realm of sexuality and to the domain of erotic perversions.<sup>1</sup> Religion (the ordering of time and the transcendent), sexuality (the ordering of the body), and money (the ordering of the economy) took shape around the idea of fetishism, displacing

1. I am gratefully indebted to William Pietz's three excellent essays on fetishism: “The Problem of the Fetish I,” *Res* 9 (Spring 1985): 5–17; “The Problem of the Fetish II,” *Res* 13 (Spring 1987): 23–46; “The Problem of the Fetish III,” *Res* (Autumn 1988): 105–24.

what the Enlightenment imagination could not incorporate onto the domain of the “primitive,” the zone of racial and sexual “degeneration.” Imperialism returned to inhabit the liberal enterprise as its concealed, but central, logic.

“The erotic deviant is not the only fetishist familiar to us. Think of the primitive,” says William Pietz.<sup>2</sup> Yet, this could be said in another way. By thinking of the “primitive” (inventing the “primitive”), the idea of erotic deviance was constituted in Europe to serve a specifically modern form of social dominance. By the latter half of the nineteenth century, the analogy between erotic deviance and racial deviance emerged as a necessary element in the formation of the modern European imagination. The invention of racial fetishism became central to the regime of sexual surveillance, while the policing of “degenerate sexuality” became central to the policing of the “dangerous classes”: the working class, the colonized, prostitutes, the Irish, Jews, gays and lesbians, criminals, alcoholics, and the insane. Erotic “deviants” were figured as racial “deviants,” atavistic throwbacks to a racially “primitive” moment in human prehistory, surviving ominously in the heart of the imperial metropolis. At the same time, colonized peoples were figured as sexual deviants, the living embodiments of a primordial erotic promiscuity and excess.<sup>3</sup>

For Freud, the erotic fetish is akin “to the fetishes in which savages believe that their gods are embodied.”<sup>4</sup> Yet, Freud is the first to define fetishism as a question of male sexuality alone. As Naomi Schor has pointed out, “It is an article of faith with Freud and Freudians that *fetishism is the male perversion par excellence*. The traditional psychoanalytical literature on the subject states over and over again that there are no female fetishists; female fetishism is, in the rhetoric of psychoanalysis, an oxymoron.”<sup>5</sup> Lacan, too, notes, after Freud, “the absence in women of fetishism.”<sup>6</sup> By reducing

2. Pietz, “Fetish I,” 3.

3. See Sander L. Gilman, *Difference and Pathology: Stereotypes of Sexuality, Race, and Madness* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1985). See also Nancy Stepan, *The Idea of Race in Science* (London: Macmillan, 1982).

4. Sigmund Freud, *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality*, vol. 7 of *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, trans. James Strachey (London: Hogarth, 1953–1966).

5. Naomi Schor, “Female Fetishism: The Case of George Sand,” in *The Female Body in Western Culture*, ed. Susan R. Suleiman (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1986), 365.

6. Jacques Lacan, “Guiding Remarks for a Congress on Feminine Sexuality,” in *Feminine Sexuality: Jacques Lacan and Ecole Freudienne*, ed. Juliet Mitchell and Jacqueline Rose, trans. Jacqueline Rose (New York: W. W. Norton, 1982), 96.

fetishism, however, to a single, male poetics of the flesh and a privileged, Western narrative of origins, the traditional psychoanalytic theory of fetishism does not admit either race or class as formative categories crucial to the etiology of fetishism.

Foucault argues, in a different vein, that the historical notion of sex “made it possible to group together, in an artificial unity, anatomical elements, biological functions, conducts, sensations and pleasures, and it enabled one to make use of this fictitious unity as a causal principle, an omnipresent meaning, a secret to be discovered everywhere: sex was thus able to function as a universal signifier and as a universal signified.”<sup>7</sup> By privileging sex as the invented principle of social unity, however, Foucault conceals the degree to which, in the nineteenth century, a racial fetishism in analogy with sexual fetishism became the organizing prototype for other social “deviations.”

Far from being a purely sexual icon, fetishism is a memorial to contradictions in social value that can take a number of historical guises. The fetish stands at the crossroads of a crisis in historical value, as the symbolic displacement and embodiment in one object of incompatible codes in social meaning, which the individual cannot resolve at a personal level. The fetish is thus destined to recur with ritualistic repetition.

The fetish is haunted by historical memory. As a composite symbolic object, the fetish or fetishized person embodies the traumatic coincidence of historical memories held in contradiction. In this article, I explore the racial and sexual fetishizing of prostitutes and argue that the problem of social value embodied in the whore stigma is the historical contradiction between women’s paid and unpaid work.

The moment of paying a female prostitute is structured around a paradox. The client touches the prostitute’s hand in a fleeting moment of physical intimacy in the exchange of cash, a ritual exchange that confirms and guarantees each time the man’s apparent economic mastery over the woman’s sexuality, work, and time. At the same time, however, the moment of paying confirms precisely the opposite: the man’s dependence on the woman’s sexual power and skill.

Prostitutes stand at the flash points of marriage and market, taking sex into the streets and money into the bedroom. Flagrantly and publicly demanding money for sexual services that men expect for free, prostitutes insist on exhibiting their sexwork as having economic *value*. The whore

7. Michel Foucault, *History of Sexuality; Volume 1: An Introduction* (New York: Vintage, 1980), 154.

stigma reflects deeply felt anxieties about women trespassing the dangerous boundaries between private and public. Streetwalkers display their sexual and economic values in the crowd—that social element permanently on the edge of breakdown—and thereby give the lie to the rational control of “deviance” and disorder. Hence the fetishistic investment of the law in violently policing the prostitute’s body.

### The Law and the Whore

In 1981, in Britain, Peter Sutcliffe (or, the Yorkshire Ripper, as the tabloid press dubbed him) was brought to trial for the mutilation and murder over a six-year period of at least thirteen women, some of whom were prostitutes. Sutcliffe first claimed that he had killed because he wanted to “kill a woman, any woman.”<sup>8</sup> Later, he claimed that God had graced him with a “divine mission”<sup>9</sup> to purge the earth of prostitutes: “scum who cannot justify their existence.”<sup>10</sup> Sutcliffe’s defense rested on the construction of prostitutes as inherently *unlike* all other women and as culpably complicit in their own murder. He claimed he was able to tell that his victims were prostitutes “by the way they walked. He knew they were not innocent.”<sup>11</sup> For Sutcliffe, the prostitutes’ guilt could be read off their bodies as a stigma of the flesh, their culpability revealed unambiguously in the lineaments of their limbs, an anatomical allegory signifying sin.

Most troubling, however, was the systematic continuity between Sutcliffe’s mission to exterminate prostitutes and the public sentiment voiced by the tabloids, the police statements, and the judiciary itself that the prostitutes were, indeed, somehow *not* innocent. During the extraordinary trial that followed, a legal discourse, a psychiatric discourse, and a journalistic discourse took shape around the preordained verdict of the murdered prostitutes’ guilt in the eyes of the law. Throughout the trial, distinctions were repeatedly made between “innocent” victims (nonprostitutes) and “disreputable,” or “blemished,” victims (prostitutes).<sup>12</sup> Indeed, the police investigation into the murders began in earnest only when the fifth victim was killed,

8. See Wendy Holloway, “‘I Just Wanted To Kill a Woman.’ Why? The Ripper and Male Sexuality,” *Feminist Review* 9 (October 1981): 33–40.

9. *The Guardian* (London), 19 May 1981. Quoted in Holloway, “‘I Just Wanted To Kill a Woman.’ Why?” 36.

10. Quoted in Holloway, “‘I Just Wanted To Kill a Woman.’ Why?” 38.

11. *The Guardian* (London), 7 May 1981. Quoted in Holloway, “‘I Just Wanted To Kill a Woman.’ Why?” 39.

12. Holloway, “‘I Just Wanted To Kill a Woman.’ Why?” 39. See also Andrew Ross, “Dem-

and she turned out *not* to be a prostitute. A police poster read: "The next victim may be innocent."<sup>13</sup> The judge, moreover, offered the jury the following extraordinary advice. If Sutcliffe was deluded into believing that he had killed only prostitutes, "then the correct verdict was probably manslaughter," not murder.<sup>14</sup> The distinction between prostitutes and other women was finally summed up in Attorney General Sir Michael Havers's notorious comment: "Some were prostitutes, but perhaps the saddest part of this case is that some were not."<sup>15</sup>

On 28 January 1987, at the height of the celebrated trial of Madame Cyn Payne (charged with exercising control over prostitutes for the purpose of gain), Sergeant David Broadwell dragged into court a large, clear, plastic bag and exposed to the titillated courtroom the taboo paraphernalia of S/M: whips, belts, chains, a dog collar, and assorted sticks and leather items.<sup>16</sup> For days, police and witnesses had been describing the "naughtinesses" at Payne's party: spankings; lesbian shows; elderly gentlemen cross-dressed in women's evening clothes; policemen in drag; and lawyers, businessmen, and even a Peer of the Realm waiting in queues on the stairs for sex.

The prostitution trial, conducted in a blaze of publicity, exposes its own structuring paradox, staging in public, as a vicarious spectacle, that which it renders criminally deviant outside the juridical domain. Through the mechanism of the prostitution trial, contradictions in the distribution of money, pleasure, and power are isolated as crimes and are then performed again in the theatrical ceremony of the trial as confession. The judiciary is a system of ordered procedures for the production of "truth" (facts, verdicts, the rational sentence). The judge's wig (like the prostitute's wig) signifies a separation between subjective identity and body, and thereby guarantees the impartiality of the trial.

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onstrating Sexual Difference," in *Men in Feminism*, ed. Alice Jardine and Paul Smith (New York: Methuen, 1987), 49.

13. Quoted in Ross, "Demonstrating Sexual Difference," 49.

14. *The Guardian* (London), 21 May 1981. Quoted in Holloway, "'I Just Wanted To Kill a Woman.' Why?" 34.

15. *West Indian World*, 6 June 1981. Quoted in Holloway, "'I Just Wanted To Kill a Woman.' Why?" 39. As Ross notes, Sutcliffe's mission "to kill all prostitutes was *recognized*, notoriously, at all levels of interpretation, from that of the popular press to that of the professional lawyer, as a moral mission, and was therefore less culpable than the asocial desire to kill all women" (see "Demonstrating Sexual Difference," 48).

16. See Gloria Walker and Lynn Daly, *Sexplicity Yours: The Trial of Cynthia Payne* (London: Penguin, 1987).

The law is also a regime for disqualifying alternative discourses: the disenfranchised, feminists, and prostitutes who might spill the beans.<sup>17</sup> The more prostitutes are obliged to speak of their actions in public, the more they incriminate themselves. By ordering the unspeakable to be spoken in public, however, and by obsessively displaying dirty pictures, filmed evidence, confessions, and exhibits, the prostitution trial reveals itself as structured around the very fetishism it sets itself to isolate and punish. Under his scarlet robe, the judge has an erection.

The prostitution trial is not only a regime of truth for demonstrating the proper circulation of money and property but also a technology of violence, setting in motion the violent constraint of women's bodies: floggings, dunkings, jailings, and exile. The institution of the fine serves the purpose of restoring the economic exchange subverted by the prostitute. If the prostitute makes the judge pay for sexual services that she should offer for free, then by fining the prostitute the judge returns illicit female money back into male circulation.

At the outset, the "sciences of man"—philosophy, Marxism, psychoanalysis, anthropology—sought to contain the "primitive" possibility of the "perversions" by a projection backward in time to the "prehistory" of racial "degeneration." Commercial S/M (the collaborative organization of fetishism) does the opposite: It insists on playing the role of the "primitive" (slave, female, baby) as a *character* in the historical time of modernity. If the prostitution trial isolates and organizes deviant sexual *pleasure* for *punishment*, commercial S/M is the dialectical opposite of the trial, organizing the *punishment* of sexual deviance for *pleasure*.<sup>18</sup> S/M performs the social idea of the *primitive irrational* as a dramatic *script*, a theatrical, public performance in the heart of Western reason. The paraphernalia of S/M (boots, whips, chains, uniforms) are the paraphernalia of state power, public punishment converted to private pleasure. S/M plays imperialism backward, visibly and outrageously staging racial and gender differences, ecstasy, the irrational, and the alienation of the body as at the center of Western individualism. Commercial S/M reveals the logic of liberal individualism and refuses it as

17. See Susan Edwards, *Female Sexuality and the Law* (Oxford: Martin Robertson, 1981), and Carol Smart, *Feminism and the Power of the Law* (London: Routledge, 1989).

18. Let me emphasize that I refer here to the specific phenomenon of ritualized, commercial S/M, wherein the exchange of cash takes place in the context of a consensual agreement. It is crucial to distinguish between consensual S/M and nonconsensual violence and sexual sadism. These mark a continuum rather than two exclusive poles, and there are relationships that waver perilously across the twilight middle.

fate but does so without stepping outside the enchantment of its magic circle.

If the prostitution trial redistributes illicit female money back into licit male circulation, commercial S/M performed by a woman enacts the reverse: staging the contradictions of women's unpaid sexual and domestic work as *unnatural*—as theater—and insisting (strictly) on payment. The paradox and scandal of S/M is its flagrant exposure in the form of a spectacle of the conceptual and political limits of the liberal ideal of the autonomous individual. The outrage of S/M is its provocative confession that the dynamics of power are reversible.

The act of paying a female prostitute flagrantly announces the *unnaturalness* and fictive inventiveness of the ancestral edict that women do not own property in their own persons. Historically, male law has attempted, with great vigilance and inclemency, to police the contradiction between male dependence on female sexual power and male juridical definitions of women as naturally and universally the property of men.

In 1855, in New York, the Trinity Church vestryman, George Templeton Strong, confided to his diary that "what the Mayor seeks to abolish and abate is not the terrible evil of prostitution . . . but simply the scandal and the offense of the peripatetic whorearchy."<sup>19</sup> Indeed, states have seldom sought to abolish prostitution outright; rather, they have sought to curb sexworkers' control of the trade.

Of what sin are prostitutes guilty? What, precisely, is the scandal of the whorearchy?

### **The Scandal of the Whorearchy: Prostitution and Property**

In 1986, Pasadena Superior Court Judge Gilbert C. Alston presided over the trial of Daniel Zabuski, who was charged with the violent rape and sodomy of Rhoda Dacosta, a prostitute. Alston dismissed the charges on the grounds that a whore cannot be raped. He based his judgment not on standard procedural grounds of legally relevant evidence, nor on the construction of a credible, juridically sound case, but on the grounds that, as he put it, "a whore is a whore is a whore."<sup>20</sup> For Alston, all prostitutes share a common identity that makes them essentially and universally unrapeable.

19. Quoted in Arlene Carmen and Howard Moody, *Working Women: The Subterranean World of Street Prostitution* (New York: Harper and Row, 1985), 6.

20. "Judge Rules Prostitutes Can't Be Raped," *Whisper* 1, no. 2 (Spring 1986): 1. See also *Sex Work: Writings by Women in the Sex Industry*, ed. Frederique Delacoste and Priscilla Alexander (Pittsburgh: Cleis Press, 1987), 185.

In San Francisco recently, the Oakland police chief admitted to closing rape cases of prostitutes without proper investigation simply because the victims were prostitutes. David P. Lambkin, a detective with the Los Angeles police, admitted that rape of prostitutes is on the increase, but he added: "It's hard enough to make a rape case with a legitimate victim."<sup>21</sup> "Sure," said Lieutenant Vito Spano, head of the sex crimes unit in Brooklyn, "sure they get victimized, but they are their own worst enemies."<sup>22</sup> What does the male judiciary see in prostitutes that puts them outside the protection of the law?

Until very recently, two categories of women have been deemed unrapeable by law: wives and prostitutes. Indeed, Friedrich Engels first suggested that prostitution and marriage find their social meaning in dialectical relation to each other.<sup>23</sup> Rape is not illegal, it is regulated. Judge Alston's notion that a whore cannot be raped finds its logic in an ancient tradition that defines rape not as an affront to women but as an affront to male property rights. Historically, female chastity has had property value for men. In surviving law codes of the Mesopotamian valley, for example, women were legislated as the property of fathers, husbands, brothers, or sons, so that rape was figured not as the violation of women but as the ruination of male property value.<sup>24</sup> Until late in the nineteenth century, under the common-law doctrine of coverture, a woman's sexual property passed into a man's hands at marriage; so did her labor, her inheritance, and her children. Under coverture, a wife, like a slave, was civilly dead. In the eighteenth century, in Britain, Sir M. Hale's notorious injunction gave a husband *de jure* sanction to rape his wife by the legal category of *conjugal rights*.<sup>25</sup> Until October

21. Jane Gross, "Prostitutes and Addicts: Special Victims of Rape," *New York Times*, 12 Oct. 1990, 14.

22. Gross, "Prostitutes and Addicts," 14.

23. Friedrich Engels, *The Origin of the Family, Private Property, and the State* (New York: International Publishers, 1972), 129–30, 138–39.

24. Vern Bullough and Bonnie Bullough, *Women and Prostitution: A Social History* (Buffalo: Prometheus, 1987), 16. In medieval Europe, likewise, customary law gave the husband the right to execute his wife if she committed adultery, and rape was seen as the tarnishing of male property value (115). See also Gerda Lerner, "The Origin of Prostitution in Ancient Mesopotamia," *Signs* 1, no. 2 (1986): 236–54.

25. Hale laid down that "the husband cannot be guilty of a rape committed by himself upon his lawful wife, for by their mutual matrimonial consent and contract the wife hath given up herself in this kind unto her husband, which she cannot retract" (Sir M. Hale, *The History of the Pleas of the Crown* [London: Sollom Emllyn, 1778], vol. 1, chap. 58, 628). Until 1884, in Britain, a wife could be forcibly incarcerated in a state prison for re-



1991, it was legal for a man to rape his wife in Britain, except in Scotland. It is still legal in many states in the United States and in most countries around the world.

The rape trial serves to police contradictions inherent in the judiciary's own laws, isolating points of conflict in the distribution of male property rights over the bodies of women. Central to the idea of the modern, universal citizen is John Locke's famous formulation: "Every Man has a *Property* in his own *Person*."<sup>26</sup> Yet, the principle that individuals own property in their own persons is immediately contradicted by the fact that women do not, whereupon a fissure opens in the ideology of individualism. The rape trial serves to isolate and close the fissure, which is identified as a crime: a rape, a theft, adultery, prostitution.

"A woman," Judge Alston explains, "who goes out on the street and makes a whore out of herself opens herself up to anybody."<sup>27</sup> The logic of rape law is as follows: Since rape is a crime against a man's property in the woman, a wife cannot be raped by her husband, for a man cannot rob himself of his own property. Similarly, since rape is a crime against a man's property, and since the prostitute is a *common prostitute*, the prostitute no longer has private property value for men. By "opening herself up" to any man, the prostitute ruins her potential value as private property for a single man and becomes, by definition, unrapeable.

A prostitute who removes her body from the stock of male property, and claims it for her own, removes her body from the sphere of male law, which exists to negotiate the distribution and circulation between men of property and power. Historically, most regimes have legislated that a woman's relation to the rights and resources of the state are indirect, mediated through a social relation to a man (father, husband, or nearest male kin). By publicly selling sexual services that men expect for free, prostitutes transgress the fundamental structure of the male traffic in women. Therefore, as Judge Alston put it, a prostitute "steps outside the protection of the law."<sup>28</sup> As a result, she is also disqualified from speaking for herself before the law. Alston adds: "Who the hell would believe a prostitute in the witness

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fusing conjugal rights (see Carole Pateman, *The Sexual Contract* [Oxford: Polity Press, 1988], 123).

26. John Locke, *Two Treatises of Government*, ed. P. Laslett (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1967), vol. 2, 183, 81–82.

27. "Judge Rules Prostitutes Can't Be Raped," 1.

28. "Judge Rules Prostitutes Can't Be Raped," 1.

stand anyway?"<sup>29</sup> Marx's injunction could hardly be more apposite: "They cannot represent themselves; they must be represented."<sup>30</sup>

A standard Latin term for prostitute, *meretrix* means "she who earns."<sup>31</sup> Since prostitution, in European history, is theft by a woman of sexual property that rightfully belongs to a man, some of the earliest laws against prostitution were laws to curb the kind of money and property women could accumulate.<sup>32</sup> Hence the analogy between the terms *common land* and *common prostitute*. Until very recently, marital law enclosed a woman's "private parts" and transferred them from the father to the husband. The wife, by law, did not possess the title deeds to her sexual property but served only as custodian and gatekeeper to ensure that the grounds remained private. In the sexual commonage of the prostitute, however, the body fluids and liquid assets of men from different classes and races mix promiscuously.

It is, therefore, not surprising that prostitutes are traditionally associated with challenges to rule, with figures of rebellion, revolt, insurrection, and the criminal appropriation of property. The scandal of the whorearchy amounts to flagrant female interference in male contests over property and power. Not for nothing did Parisian public health official Parent-Duchatelet call prostitutes "the most dangerous people in society."<sup>33</sup>

29. "Judge Rules Prostitutes Can't Be Raped," 1.

30. Karl Marx, "The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte," in *Selected Works* (New York: International Publishers, 1973), 417.

31. Bullough and Bullough, *Women and Prostitution*, 48.

32. At the end of the first century A.D., Emperor Domitian tried to rule against prostitutes receiving inheritances and legacies. In Roman law, a prostitute was canonically barred from accusing others of crime, was forbidden to inherit property, and could not represent herself in court. Medieval Byzantine church legislation forbade a prostitute from owning property. In the Visigothic kingdom in Spain, prostitutes who persisted in their trade received three hundred lashes. In 1254, Louis IX decreed that all prostitutes be placed beyond the protection of the king's law and that all their personal goods, clothing, furs, tunics, and linen chemises be seized (Bullough and Bullough, *Women and Prostitution*, 48, 55, 116, 120, 122).

33. Alexandre-Jean-Baptiste Parent-Duchatelet, *De la prostitution de la ville de Paris* (Paris: J. B. Bailliere, 1836), quoted in Louise White, *The Comforts of Home: Prostitution in Colonial Nairobi* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990), 2.

### Black Markets: Prostitution and Race

In late Victorian Britain, the imagery for representing sexuality was drawn from the sphere of economic activity.<sup>34</sup> Sexual problems were figured as fiscal problems and were imaged by metaphors of accumulation, production, and excessive expenditure.<sup>35</sup> As Foucault has suggested, the middle class lacked the means, and therefore had to invent the means, for defining itself as a class. Sexual reproduction and economic production became deeply symbolically linked. Sexuality (one's relation to one's body and to the bodies of others) became the language for expressing one's relation to class (one's relation to labor and to the labor of others). The middle class figured itself as different from both the aristocracy and the working class by virtue of its sexual restraint (its monogamy) and its economic moderation (its thrift). The bank, as the economic institution for managing the accumulation and distribution of capital, found its accomplice in monogamous marriage as the social institution for managing the accumulation and distribution of reproductive power and property. A contradiction in the form of gender, however, opened in the formation of class identity, for monogamy was monogamy for women only, and saving and accumulating property were for men only. In order to foreclose the contradiction, *nature* was reinvented to guarantee gender *difference* within class *identity*. The primary symbolic means for the reinvention of nature was the idea of *race*, and the primary arena was empire. The invention of *imperial nature*, moreover, would guarantee that the "universal" quintessence of Enlightenment individualism would belong only to propertied men of European descent.

The relation between the "normal" male control of reproduction and sexual pleasure in marriage, and the "normal" bourgeois control of capital was legitimized and made natural by reference to a third term: the "abnormal" zone of racial "degeneration." Illicit money and illicit sexuality were seen to relate to each other by negative analogy to race. The internal, historical contradiction *within* the modern social formation was thereby displaced and represented as a natural difference *across* the time and space

34. See Steven Marcus, *The Other Victorians: A Study of Sexuality and Pornography in Mid-Nineteenth Century England* (New York: New American Library, 1974), xiii.

35. Women "saved" themselves for marriage, or "cheapened" themselves in promiscuity; men "wasted" or "spent" themselves in masturbation or homosexuality. See Sander Gilman, *Difference and Pathology: Stereotypes of Sexuality, Race, and Madness*. See also Gilman in *The Anatomy of Racism*, ed. David Goldberg (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1990).

of empire: the difference between the “enlightened” present and the “primitive” past. The movement across the space of empire was thus figured as a movement backward in time.

Prostitutes became associated with black and colonized peoples within a discourse on racial degeneration that figured them as transgressing the natural distributions of money, sexual power, and property, and as thereby fatally threatening the fiscal and libidinal economy of the imperial state. Prostitutes, who stepped beyond the edicts of heterosexual marriage and the doctrine that women did not work for profit, were figured as atavistic throwbacks to a primordial phase of racial development, their “racial deviance” written visibly on the body in the stigmata of female sexual deviance: exaggerated posteriors, mutant genitals and ears, excessive sexual appetites, disheveled hair, and other sundry “racial” stigmata.

Gambling, likewise, as Sander Gilman points out, took its place in a vocabulary that metaphorically intertwined money, sexuality, and race. If commercial S/M was the dialectical twin of the sex trial, the gambling hall was the dialectical twin of the bank. Gambling was the institutional display of organized commodity fetishism: the flagrant exhibition of the capitalist superstition that money can breed itself autochthonously without labor. The organized dream of gambling was the orgasmic excess of pure exchange value from which all labor has been voided. Similarly, masturbation (autoerotic and outside the heterosexual reproductive economy) was widely condemned in sexual treatises as interfering with a man’s ability to work and accumulate capital. Homosexuality and clitoral eroticism, similarly, stood outside the reproductive economy and outside the narrative teleology of racial evolution, and were both figured as precipitating a steady decline into “racial” degeneration, visibly expressed in the stigmata of hairy hands, shambling gait, mental deficiency, and irrationality.

In the symbolic triangle of deviant money, deviant sexuality, and deviant race, the so-called degenerate classes—the militant working class, the colonized, prostitutes, gays and lesbians, gamblers, the Irish, and the Jews (particularly those who lived in the East End of London, on the cusp of empire)—were metaphorically bound in a regime of surveillance figured by images of sexual pathology and racial aberration.

In Victorian iconography, the fetish emblem of dirt was compulsively drawn on to police the boundaries between “normal” sexuality and “normal” market relations. “Dirty” sex—masturbation, prostitution, lesbian and gay sexuality, and the host of Victorian “perversions”—transgressed the libidinal economy of heterosexual reproduction within the monogamous

marital relation ("clean" sex, which has value). Likewise, "dirty" money—associated with prostitutes, Jews, gamblers, and thieves—transgressed the fiscal economy of the male-dominated, market exchange ("clean" money, which has value). The bodily relation to dirt expressed a social relation to labor. Because it was the surplus evidence of human work, dirt was a Victorian scandal. Dirt was the visible residue that stubbornly remained after the process of industrial rationality had done its work. Smearred on clothes, hands, and faces, dirt was the memory trace of human labor, the evidence that the production of industrial wealth, and the creation of liberal rationality, lay in the hands and bodies of the working class and the colonized. For this reason, Victorian dirt entered the symbolic realm of fetishism with great force, and the body of the prostitute, standing on the street corner of marriage and market, became subject to vigilant and violent policing.

In late Victorian Britain, the infamous Contagious Diseases Acts gave British police the right to forcibly impose physical examinations on women suspected of working as prostitutes in designated garrison towns in Britain and its colonies. The initial impetus for the Acts came from blows to male self-esteem in the arena of empire, in resurgent militancy in India, South Africa, Ireland, and elsewhere. The argument ran that the real threat to the potency of the imperial army lay in the sexual bodies of transgressive women. If working women could be cordoned off, the purity of the army and the imperial body politic could be assured. With the Acts, the policing of female sexuality became both metaphor and means for policing unruly working-class and colonized peoples at large.

If the Western discourse on degeneration sees the white prostitute as a racial deviant, and colonized people as inherently sexually degenerate, the prostitute in the colonies brings the discourse on deviance to its conceptual limit. If all colonized people are the embodiment of degeneration, there is no way to represent the special case of the prostitute. How can she be defined as sexually abnormal if all colonized people are already quintessentially abnormal? In the colonies, the relation between prostitution and female property, between paid and unpaid female work, comes critically to the fore.

In colonial Kenya, for example, prostitution emerged from the collision of natural catastrophe and colonialism, from the disruptions of African agriculture and African resistance to colonial wage labor.<sup>36</sup> Yet, as Louise

36. See Louise White, *The Comforts of Home*. I am gratefully indebted to White's groundbreaking book. For a fuller discussion of White's book, see my review "The Scandal of the Whorearchy," *Transition* 52 (1991): 92–99.

White shows, the history of colonial prostitution was not a litany of victims. Working prostitutes were Kenya's "urban pioneers," some of the first residents to live year-round in Nairobi. Kenyan prostitutes themselves defined sexwork as a defiant form of labor. Dodging colonial wage labor, many of the women used the cash they earned from "digging with their backs" to buy cattle and build houses and to found the "nearly revolutionary notion" that women can control their own money and property as independent heads of households.<sup>37</sup>

As White shows, *malaya* prostitution mimicked marriage, the radical difference being that women exchanged for money the domestic, emotional, and sexual services that wives performed unpaid.<sup>38</sup> Fostering values of female and community loyalty, the prostitutes helped maintain African communities and struggled to shape the colonial urban scene to meet African women's needs.

In precolonial society, the daughter's marriage was the source of the father's accumulation of property and power. Since women did the bulk of the work and were the chief reproducers of life and labor, their work was the single most valuable resource apart from the land itself. In cattle-marriage societies, livestock were the symbolic coinage of women's labor power. More wives meant greater wealth and more cattle for men, and cattle marriage was the fundamental institution by which women's labor power was metamorphosed into male political power. Through male control of female sexuality and marriage, cattle and cash were redistributed through male familial networks.

Through prostitution, however, women began to buy their own property. Many of the *malaya* prostitutes were runaway wives who came to the city to escape forced marriages. Instead of sending their money back to the male-headed homestead, women bought livestock and houses and became independent heads of households, moving a whole cycle of new, female family formation into the new urban centers. If marriage was a source of fathers' accumulation, prostitution became the source of daughters' accumulation. As Kayaya Thababu put it: "At home, what could I do? Grow crops for my husband or my father. In Nairobi I can earn my own money, for myself."<sup>39</sup> By the early 1930s, half of the landlords in Pumwani, Nairobi's black township, were women.<sup>40</sup>

37. White, *The Comforts of Home*, 34.

38. Unlike the *watambezi*, or streetwalking prostitutes, *malaya* prostitutes worked from their homes, exchanging both domestic and sexual services for cash.

39. White, *The Comforts of Home*, 51.

40. White, *The Comforts of Home*, 64.

Many of the women, moreover, consciously refused to pass their property back through the male system, disinheriting fathers and brothers and keeping their money and their bodies for themselves. *Malaya* prostitution expressed a clear rejection of traditional male family ties. Windfalls went into helping women friends, and the women designated female heirs to ensure that their property did not pass back into the patrilineage, thereby creating new, explicitly female lineages. Not surprisingly, many men took umbrage at the women's temerity, and the prostitutes had to negotiate constantly to keep their property out of the hands of irate fathers, brothers, ex-husbands, and the state.

Indeed, the colonial state's response to Nairobi prostitution was riven with paradox. On the one hand, prostitution was essential to the smooth running of a migrant labor economy, saving the state the cost of servicing African men, as well as forestalling the perils of settled African communities taking root in the urban areas. On the other hand, the earnings of the prostitutes also allowed women and men to elude the depredations of colonial wage labor. Settlers constantly carped at African scoundrels and slothful layabouts who lived off women's earnings and were thereby able to refuse to work for whites.

In colonial Kenya, as elsewhere, the state objected less to prostitution itself than to the women's scandalous accumulation of money and property.<sup>41</sup> In a world where colonials sought constantly to control the lives of Africans through housing, marriage, and migrant labor, prostitutes owning property and passing on the values of community, self-respect, and gender loyalty were a constant affront to the white male management of power.

In many parts of Africa, the state's ambiguous relation to prostitution has endured after independence. In the 1970s and 1980s, in Zimbabwe, Gabon, Zambia, Tanzania, Mozambique, and Burkina Faso, for example, police launched massive assaults on single, independently working women in putative attempts to "clean" the cities of prostitution. Yet, the real threat to the state was not prostitution but the general specter of economically independent women, who were fetishized and demonized by the whore stigma in order to license state violence. As Paola Tabet puts it, "Control of women in marriage and exploitation of their labor is based on male monopoly of resources and means of production. When women have access to other forms of income, marriage and direct male control are threatened."<sup>42</sup> In

41. White, *The Comforts of Home*, 219.

42. See Paola Tabet, "I'm the Meat, I'm the Knife. Sexual Service, Migration, and Re-

1983, in Zimbabwe, for example, the Mugabe government ordered massive roundups of women who could not demonstrate an immediate relation to a man. Women walking alone on the streets, living alone in flats in Harare, or raising children independently as single mothers were arrested as prostitutes and sent to camps, where they were subjected to appalling abuse. The roundups were repeated during the recent Commonwealth Summit.

Prostitution is a realm of contradiction. In the colonies, prostitution may very well have confirmed colonial fantasies about white men's privileged access to the bodies of black women, but prostitution also confused racial segregation and the racial and gendered distributions of money. The fact that men had access to prostitution did not mean that they had control over prostitutes. Prostitutes obliged white men to pay far better than usual for African women's work and, at least temporarily, subjected white men to African women's control. Prostitutes dictated the times and terms of the exchange, what services they offered, and how much they charged.<sup>43</sup>

In contemporary Britain, Europe, and the United States, the policing of prostitutes as racial degenerates persists in at least three ways. Prostitutes continue to be figured as atavistic throwbacks to racial "degeneracy." In 1969, a British pamphlet, for example, widely read by probation officers, condemned prostitution as "a primitive and regressive manifestation."<sup>44</sup> Poor, black, immigrant, and migrant prostitutes are subjected to systematic, and especially violent, harassment. The police, moreover, use the control of prostitutes as a cover for policing black, minority, immigrant, and working-class communities, both male and female. Defining zones of the city as sexually deviant, the police attempt to penetrate and subdue the black body politic. As a statement from the English Collective of Prostitutes protested, "Women are pushed from area to area, and even from city to city, but the police remain in the area after the women have left."<sup>45</sup>

Through prostitution laws, space is criminalized and enters the realm of law. In Britain, the recent, notorious Kerb Crawling Bill is no exception. In 1985, under the guise of protecting women, it became a crime for men to engage in "persistent kerb crawling" (soliciting women for sex). In 1990,

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pression in Some African Societies," in *The Vindication of the Rights of Whores*, ed. Gail Pheterson, Preface by Margo St. James (Seattle: Seal Press, 1989), 204–23.

43. As White points out, women controlled the price, the type, the time, and the length and intensity of the services they preferred to exchange.

44. Quoted in Pateman, *The Sexual Contract*, 194.

45. English Collective of Prostitutes' Statement, Kings Cross, London, 10 July 1987.



under the Sexual Offenses Bill, Sir William Shelton proposed the removal of the term *persistent*, in order to make it possible for a single officer without a witness to charge any man simply suspected of talking to a prostitute (hence the term *sus law*). Prostitutes argue that the new bill, far from protecting women from violent clients, only deepens the dangers. Nervous johns do not have time to dawdle, so women do not have time to check them out or negotiate for safe sex. As a result, some women have been badly battered and murdered. As a Kings Cross prostitute complained: "If the law can nick them straight away, everything will be done so fast you won't have a chance, especially at night. With some of the nuts you get around here, it's a frightening prospect."<sup>46</sup> At the same time, the bill has been widely used as a "sus" law to arrest and harass black, immigrant, and minority men for unrelated reasons. In London, many black and immigrant men have been stopped, arrested, charged with stealing their own bicycles, or harassed and beaten up simply for talking to a woman who is "suspected" of being a prostitute. White, middle-class men, like Prosecutor Allan Green, however, are let off with a fraternal slap on the wrist.<sup>47</sup>

Prostitutes who are poor and black bear the most vicious brunt of the law. In 1982, in London, police abuse of black, immigrant, and minority prostitutes became so widespread that women occupied the Church of the Holy Cross to draw public attention to their plight. In the United States, while only 40 percent of streetwalkers are women of color, they make up 55 percent of those sentenced to jail.<sup>48</sup> In New York, police hold "trick tournaments," lining black and white prostitutes on either side of a road and forcing them to run races against each other. Those who lose go to jail.<sup>49</sup>

Generally speaking, in Britain, Europe, and the United States, black and white prostitutes experience the metropolis in different ways. A racial geography of sex maps the city and divides the sex industry. In the exchange of commercial sex, the private (white) spaces of escort services and

46. See Jo Grant, "Streets Apart," *The Guardian* (London), 3 July 1990, 14.

47. Chief Prosecutor Allan Green was arrested for kerb crawling near the Kings Cross Station in 1991. In 1985, the Campaign against Kerb Crawling Legislation was launched by a coalition of sexworkers, anti-rape, black, and civil rights groups to lobby members of Parliament and make their objections known to the press. On Friday, 11 May 1990, after a rowdy and acrimonious debate, Member of Parliament Ken Livingston talked the Sexual Offenses Bill down. The bill, however, comes up every Friday, and will be passed unless one MP opposes it.

48. Delacoste and Alexander, *Sex Work*, 197.

49. Arlene Carmen and Howard Moody, *Working Women: The Subterranean World of Street Prostitution* (New York: Harper and Row, 1985), 146.

clubs are tacitly condoned, while the public (black) spaces of streetwalking and car sex are more violent, more heavily policed, and more profoundly stigmatized. In the 1970s, in New York, massage parlors on the East Side were run by white men who overwhelmingly employed white women and were comparatively safer and more comfortable than the less opulent black parlors on the West Side. Black and Asian women in the United States find it harder to get work as go-go dancers and escort women than white and Latina women do. In Nevada, until the 1960s, black women could not enter casinos. Today, many bar owners, hotel keepers, and landlords either do not allow black prostitutes to use their premises or they charge them punitively inflated rents. Police are far more tolerant of less overt sexwork, largely because the customers are drawn from the white, middle, and professional classes. By licensing indoor work, and harassing street work, police isolate the poorest women, who cannot afford to pay high rents and who have the least access to health care, social resources, and legal aid. The police thereby ensure that poor, black women pay the heaviest price for the criminalization of sexwork.

The whore stigma polices the racial divide, stigmatizing and endangering the lives of women of color, as well as perpetuating racism within the sex industry and among some white prostitutes. At the same time, in Britain, Europe, and the United States, clients are overwhelmingly white, married, and middle class, while most of the men arrested are men of color, are gay, or are transvestite.

### **“It’s a Business Doing Pleasure with You”: Prostitution Is Work**

Prostitutes around the world are now becoming their own media advocates and political activists, radically challenging the stigma of sexual and racial deviance.<sup>50</sup> Since the 1970s, hundreds of prostitution organizations have burgeoned worldwide, from Hawaii to Austria, from Canada to the Philippines, from Zimbabwe to the Netherlands. In 1986, prostitutes from around the world met in Brussels at an extraordinary session of the European Parliament, where they launched the Second World Whores’ Congress. Drawn from over sixteen countries and representing millions of

50. See Delacoste and Alexander, *Sex Work*. See also Dolores French, *Working: My Life as a Prostitute* (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1988), and *Good Girls/Bad Girls: Feminists and Sex Trade Workers Face to Face*, ed. Laurie Bell (Toronto: Seal Press, 1987).

sexworkers worldwide, the prostitutes drew up a Whores' Charter, calling for the decriminalization of sexwork and an end to all violations of sexworker rights.<sup>51</sup>

In October 1991, sexworkers from sixteen countries met in Frankfurt at the First European Prostitutes' Congress to call for the recognition of voluntary prostitution as a profession in the European Charter and for full rights as workers under European labor law.<sup>52</sup> To the consternation of many governments, and some feminists, prostitutes called not for the abolition of prostitution but for the redistribution of sexual pleasure, power, and profit; for the transformation of land and property rights; for the removal of foreign armies; and for the right of women and men to work voluntarily in the sex trade under safe, unregulated, and respected conditions.<sup>53</sup>

Many men, however, prefer to find whores in their beds than in their parliaments, and attempts by sexworkers to organize have met with unswerving violence. An Irish organizer was burnt to death, and Thai organizers have been murdered. Ecuadoran brothel owners rotate prostitutes regularly to prevent them from organizing.<sup>54</sup> Yet by and large, the international Left has been largely indifferent to the issue, while the abolitionist tendency among some feminists has been nothing short of calamitous for working prostitutes.

Most prostitutes insist that the first target of their international organizing is the state and the law. Prostitutes argue that the laws punish, rather than protect, women, especially women of color. Where sexwork is a crime, clients can rape, rob, and batter women with impunity. Murderers know the weight of a prostitute's life in the scales of the law. As Dallas Judge Jack Hampton admitted, "I'd be hard put to give somebody life for killing a prostitute."<sup>55</sup> Not surprisingly, more prostitutes are murdered in the United States, where prostitution is still a crime, than anywhere else in the world.

Prostitutes denounce the laws that shunt them into dangerous, desolate docklands, meatpacking districts, and railway yards, unable to organize for decent conditions or against coercion. Where prostitution is a crime, women cannot demand police protection or claim legal recourse for robbery

51. For a full account of the congress, see Pheterson, *Vindication of the Rights of Whores*.

52. See Anne McClintock, "Down by Law," *The Guardian* (London), 23 Oct. 1991, 20.

53. See Anne McClintock, "Meanwhile Back at the Chicken Ranch," *The Guardian* (London), 12 May 1992, 36.

54. Pheterson, *Vindication of the Rights of Whores*, 7.

55. Lisa Belkin, "Report Clears Judge of Bias in Remarks about Homosexuals," *New York Times*, 2 Nov. 1989, A25.

or coercion, for they thereby expose themselves as implicated in a criminalized trade. Where sexwork is a crime, prostitutes are forced by landlords to pay exorbitant rents or are driven to work the freezing and dangerous streets. Prostitutes cannot claim social welfare or life insurance, health care or maternity benefits, childcare or pensions. Where prostitution is a crime, migrant women are evicted from their homes, are denied work papers, and are detained and deported. Every cent of a prostitute's earnings is criminally contaminated. The property and possessions of prostitutes are often forfeited, and mothers, brothers, friends, and lovers can be flung into prison for living off immoral earnings. Most cruelly, a prostitute cannot keep her children. Most prostitutes are mothers, and most are in the game for their children. In many countries, however, social workers have the power to take a prostitute's children out of "moral danger" into "care." In these ways, the state curtails women's power, diverting illicit female money back into the coffers of male circulation and curtailing the emergence of independent female heads of family.

Sexwork that benefits the male state, however, is tolerated and administered by a system of international euphemisms: massage parlors, escort agencies, bars, rest and recreation resorts, and so on, which are run not by hookers but by male "entertainment managers." In Thailand, for example, prostitution inhabits a twilight realm of legal ambiguity. The law makes prostitution a crime, but the green light is given to male "tour operators" and "entertainment managers," whose operations are sanctioned and defined as the "personal service sector."

Most prostitutes regard legalized prostitution as legalized abuse. Despite its benign ring, legalization places prostitution under criminal law instead of commercial law, where it is tightly curbed by the state and administered by the police. Instead, prostitutes want the law off their bodies and are calling for the decriminalization of the profession and the repeal of all legislation not ordinarily applicable to a business or trade.

Legalization puts women's bodies firmly in men's hands. In the aptly named Chicken Ranch, a legalized brothel in Nevada, prostitutes are forced to work three weeks at a stretch, servicing any man who picks them, at any time of the day or night, a dizzying and dispiriting carousel of faceless tricks. In many of the legalized brothels and clubs in Europe, Lisbet, a German prostitute, told me, "Women have no right to refuse men and often no right to use a condom."

Under legalization, the profits of women's work clatter into men's pockets. The state becomes a licit pimp, penning prostitutes in brothels

and levying punitive taxes at rates higher than other workers. In Germany, legalized prostitutes pay 56 percent of their earnings in taxes, but, unlike other taxpayers, they are not eligible for any social benefits whatsoever. Under legalization, the state controls prostitutes' work and leisure, preventing organization and often making it very hard for them to leave the trade if they wish. Most prostitutes prefer to work illegally rather than submit to the abusive and humiliating ordeals of state-controlled brothels.

French prostitutes cannot live with a husband, wife, lover, or child, as anyone under their roof can be charged with "cohabitation." Italian prostitutes cannot help their husbands or wives pay the rent or give their parents money, as they can be charged with living off "immoral earnings." In Britain, engaging in prostitution is not a crime (which lets the johns off the hook), but virtually every aspect of a prostitute's work is criminalized. Two women working together for safety can be charged with keeping a brothel. In Switzerland, if a woman decides to leave the trade and seek other work, she first has to get a "good girl" letter from the police to prove her good conduct. To get the letter, she has to wait three years without working as a prostitute to prove her good conduct. Until then, she cannot legally find other work. In Frankfurt, zoning laws force women to work the deserted harbor area, where they can be tortured and dumped in the water without a stir. In Canada, prostitution is not a crime, but "communicating for the purposes of prostitution" is. Prostitutes can be penalized for organizing and informing each other of dangerous tricks or corrupt police. Austrian prostitutes have to report to the police simply to go on holiday. Some of the most appalling conditions prevail in India. Between 1980 and 1984, not a single landlord was arrested for illegally pandering to prostitutes, but 44,633 prostitutes were arrested for soliciting in Bombay alone.

As Dolores French, author, activist, and prostitute, told me in a private interview, "Legalizing prostitution sees women as a controlled substance—controlled by men." The international prostitutes' movement thus calls for the *decriminalization*, not the *legalization*, of their work. Prostitutes demand that their work be respected as a social service for both men and women and that it be brought under commercial law like other professions. Why, they ask, can masseurs command respect and gratitude for servicing naked clients in comfortable rooms, while prostitutes are criminalized? If their work were decriminalized, prostitutes could ply their trade in safety and respect, paying normal rent and taxes, in houses as clean and comfortable as those of the average therapist or chiropractor.

Prostitutes insist it is not the exchange of money that demeans them but the conditions under which the exchange is made. They demand, as

a priority, the right to choose and refuse their clients, rejecting men who are in any way disrespectful or offensive, drunk, or simply unsavory. No respect, they say, no sex. Prostitutes also want the right to stipulate what services they offer. Some prefer to give handshandies, others prefer vanilla sex. Some prefer to work with their mouths, others with a whip. Some refuse to undress. Most refuse anal sex. Many refuse to kiss. All demand that they be free to negotiate these preferences safely and professionally with their clients and that the prostitutes have the final say on the terms.

Some clients are experts at anger, venting on whores their misogyny and sexual despair. If sexwork were decriminalized, prostitutes could work in conjunction with trained therapists, offering counseling referral for clients in need. Prostitutes could also organize collectively, educating each other, their clients, and the public about sexual pleasure and sexual health.

Prostitutes scoff at the notion that the criminal laws are there to protect them. Why, they ask, are men arrested for paying prostitutes but not arrested for raping them? Prostitution catches the law with its pants down. In the eyes of the prostitute, the emperor has no clothes: Those who make the prostitution laws are often the ones who break the laws. Police are ambiguous exterminating angels, curbing and harassing a trade they don't really want to destroy. Prostitutes insist that the police are their greatest scourge, demanding freebies, raping them in vans and in precincts, and interfering with safe sex practices by puncturing holes in condoms and confiscating bleach. In the states of Washington and Arizona, cops are legally allowed to have sex with prostitutes in order to entrap them. In New York, police are on record for confiscating women's shoes in the winter and forcing them to walk home barefoot through the icy streets.

Prostitutes are calling internationally for the end to all police harassment and to the forced testing of prostitutes for HIV.<sup>56</sup> In the current climate of sexual paranoia, prostitutes are being demonized as deadly nightshades, fatally infecting good family men. A hue and cry has gone up around the world, with public officials clamoring for prostitutes to be force-tested for HIV and corralled into quarantine. Officials, however, have been far less gung ho about throwing a cordon sanitaire of arrests, tests, and quarantine around johns, perhaps because so many of these good public servants are johns themselves.

Since most johns are husbands, the current call for legalization stems

56. See Delacoste and Alexander, "Prostitutes Are Being Scapegoated for Heterosexual AIDS," in *Sex Work*, 248–63. See also Anne McClintock, "Safe Sluts," *Village Voice*, 20 Aug. 1991.

less from recognition of prostitutes' rights than from the illusion that herding prostitutes into brothels and force-testing them for HIV will protect good family men from infection. Force-testing prostitutes, however, only fosters the illusion that either partner is then safe without a condom.

As prostitutes tirelessly point out, it is not the exchange of cash but high-risk behaviors that transmit disease. Moreover, safe sex, not testing, prevents HIV. As Jasmin, a German prostitute, told me in a private interview, "Testing is always too late." Most sexworkers, except, perhaps, for the very young, the very desperate, and those denied access to condoms, insist that men use condoms for all services, including handshandies and oral sex. As a result, studies show that, contrary to popular stigma, cases of HIV for prostitutes who are not also IV drug users remain consistently low.

Of greater concern than a safe sex slut is a client who refuses a condom. For prostitutes, the onus is on the woman to get the rubber on the man. As Jasmin told me, "Some men ask me: 'I want it without a condom.' I say: 'You can't pay me what my life is worth. Get out of here.'" Thus, the European Congress report on AIDS demanded that managers of clubs, brothels, and Eros Centers who forcibly prevent prostitutes from using condoms should be punished by criminal law for attempted homicide.

Speakers at the European Congress voiced greatest concern for the plight of migrant workers in the new Europe. In 1992, borders within the "European Fortress" will be opened to all workers but not to prostitutes. Unless prostitutes are recognized as workers like everyone else, migrant prostitutes, in particular, will suffer the increasing indignities of arrests, deportation, and racist assaults. Prostitutes are more aware than anyone else of the ordeals of forced prostitution. They insist that decriminalizing voluntary sexwork will make it far easier to detect and destroy forced prostitution.

The United Nations has estimated that by the year 2000 tourism will be the most important economic activity in the world.<sup>57</sup> The international politics of Third World debt and the international pursuit of commercial sex have become deeply entwined, turning sex tourism into a surefire, co-spinning venture—with most of the profits clattering into the coffers of the multinationals. Sex tourism is creating both a new kind of economic dependence and a new kind of international refusal. In many countries, tourism has replaced products, such as bauxite and sugar, as the leading earner

57. See Thanh-Dam Truong, *Sex, Money, and Morality: Prostitution and Tourism in Southeast Asia* (London: Zed, 1990). For a more detailed discussion of this book, see my review in the *Times Literary Supplement*, 16 Aug. 1991, 10.

of foreign exchange. The militarization of sexuality and the sexualization of the military have deep international implications, as well. Millions of women and men work in countries officially designated as R and R sites for the U.S. military, in the burgeoning cruise ship industry, and in tourist hotels, clubs, and resorts. Sex tourism depends on powerful constructions of race and gender: on the militarization of masculinity, on foreign businessmen willing to invest in sexual travel, and on a racial geography of sex that persuades privileged men that women in economically disempowered countries will be more sexually available and pliant.<sup>58</sup> As Life Travel assured male adventurers in Thailand, "Taking a woman here is as easy as buying a package of cigarettes."<sup>59</sup> Sex tourism depends on women and men available to sell their services and on a network of international companies willing to foster local bureaucratic structures, to organize sex tours, and to prevent sexworkers from organizing.

The boy's-own adventure of sex travel is as much about empire as it is about sun, sex, and souvenirs. Foreign sunseekers fly to Southeast Asia with airlines that promise to embody the feminine quintessence of their nation: "Singapore girl, you're a great way to fly." As Thai Airline advertised, "Some say it's our beautiful wide-bodied DC-10s that cause so many heads to turn. . . . We think our beautiful slim-bodied hostesses have a lot to do with it."<sup>60</sup> Multinationals, borrowing the R and R idea from the U.S. military, regularly send male employees on package tours to be sexually serviced by women billed as "little slaves who give real Thai warmth."<sup>61</sup> As yet, there are no package tours for female executives from Tokyo, Dallas, and Ryad; and company wives chafing under the sexual ennui of marriage do not light out in droves for a "taste" of the Orient.

The current social context of most prostitution—pleasure for men and work for women—well-nigh guarantees its sexism. Men enjoy privileged access to sexual pleasure, to porn, and to prostitution, not to mention that hardy perennial, the double standard. Women's desire, by contrast, has been crimped and confined to history's sad museum of corsets, chastity belts, and the virginity cult. Contexts, however, can be changed, and empowering prostitutes empowers all women. Delores French suggested

58. Cynthia Enloe, *Bananas, Beaches, and Bases: Making Feminist Sense of International Politics* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990).

59. Quoted in Thanh-Dam Truong, *Sex, Money, and Morality*, 178.

60. Quoted in Thanh-Dam Truong, *Sex, Money, and Morality*, 179.

61. Quoted in Thanh-Dam Truong, *Sex, Money, and Morality*, 178.



to me in a private interview that many women fear prostitutes because they make women feel tricked. Prostitutes call men's bluff, challenging the gendered distribution of power and profit by flagrantly demanding money for nonreciprocal sex that many women give for free.

History changes the meaning of the sexual body. There is no one privileged narrative of prostitution, nor is there any one politically correct politics of prostitution. Some sexworkers ply their trade in opulent hotels, some in parked cars, some in bars and cafés, some in agricultural plantations and migrant worker hostels, some on cruise liners, some at R and R sites for the U.S. military. Sexworkers do not share the same reasons for entering the trade, nor do they experience the work in the same way. Not all sexworkers are women; not all customers are men. The enormous trade in gay commercial sex complicates the notion that prostitution is no more than the embodiment of female bondage. By some men's accounts, commercial sex for women—arguably one of the deepest taboos of all—is on the increase. What is crucial, however, is that prostitutes themselves define the conditions for organizing their work to suit their own local needs and contexts.

Perpetuating the image of prostitutes as either broken baby dolls or fatal Frankenhookers serves only to heighten the climate of violence and hypocrisy under which so many women live. Indeed, the feminist critique of prostitutes is to my mind theoretically misbegotten and strategically unsound, short-circuiting sexworkers' efforts (many of whom are feminists themselves) to transform the trade to meet their own needs. Whatever else it is, female prostitution is the erasure of a woman's sexual desire in exchange for cash. It is, however, no different in that respect from most other forms of women's work. Prostitution that is not tightly controlled by men differs from most women's work in that it is far better paid, has flexible working hours, and gives women considerable economic independence from men. As a result, working-class women and women of color are able to educate themselves, find social mobility, and raise their children in the comfort and security usually given to only good white girls.

It seems crucial, therefore, to remain alert to the nuances and paradoxes of prostitution rather than to patronize prostitutes as embodiments of female sexual degradation or to glamorize them as unambiguous heroines of female revolt. Sexwork is a gendered form of work that takes its myriad meanings from the different societies in which it emerges.

Would feminists who condemn prostitutes for becoming complicit in commodity fetishism, for example, make the same criticism of black South

African mine workers who drag from the earth the very stuff of commodity fetishism? Doesn't the argument that prostitutes sell themselves bear an uncanny and perilous resemblance to the sanctioned male view that a woman's identity is *equivalent* to her sexuality? Prostitutes do not sell themselves; rather, like all workers (including feminists), they exchange specific services for cash and carefully negotiate with their clients what services they provide, at what rate, and for how long.

The whore stigma disciplines all women. As one prostitute told me in a private conversation, "It's the stigma that hurts, not the sex. The sex is easy. Facing the world's hate is what breaks me down." The license to despise a prostitute is a license to despise any woman who takes sex, money, and mobility into her hands. If tricks are at liberty to abuse whores, chances are they will abuse other women. Empowering whores empowers all women, and educating men to respect prostitutes educates men to respect all women.

Society demonizes sexworkers because they demand more money than women should for services men expect for free. Prostitutes screw the system, dangerously interfering in the male distribution of property, power, and profit. As Margo St. James puts it, "In private the whore has power. The great fear for men, who are running things, is that if whores have a voice, suddenly good women are going to find out how much their time is worth, and how to ask for money."<sup>62</sup> By organizing for decriminalization, prostitutes are organizing to put control of womens' work back in womens' hands.

62. "The Reclamation of Whores," in Bell, *Good Girls/Bad Girls*, 82.