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Reading Sex Work: An Introduction

it's true, sometimes I have to get extremely drunk
but it isn't like
poor me,
in a strapless sequin dress
it's just these people are all too stupid
to have all this money
—Rachel Rabbit White, *Porn Carnival* (2019)

Sex work is tedious more than it is abject or thrilling. Spectators struggle to hear this. Instead, sex work is mined for evidence of special harm or titillating edge. Sex workers refuse these poles all the time. They do this even as they know their stories will be stripped for parts, made to conform to narratives that have less to do with sex working than with the meanings civilians—those havers of unpaid sex—attach to it. They write poems about using sex to pay the bills, knowing that some readers will see the precariousness of keeping the lights on and miss the critique of the idea that sex is precious; they talk about drinking to get through a gig, understanding that many will remember that part and forget that what needs dulling is not bodily invasion but insipid, monied masculinity (White 2019: 109). Rachel Rabbit White (2019: 163) dedicates a book of materialist sex worker poetry

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to "fellow sufferers," knowing that civilian readers may pretend that this does not also hail them, even as she makes it plain: a fellow sufferer is, "any fellow worker, and not simply fellow sex workers" (Taylor 2019).

In an essay on the politics of sex and money, Lorelei Lee (2019) highlights the tedium part of the story: "Most of the time the men were fine. Most of the time they were profoundly boring." She also writes about how "violence and joy" both shape the work, sometimes within the space of the same day. Lee describes how hard it was to talk about the joy and the violence together, knowing how her writing might be taken up. In a recent interview, I asked about her process of doing it anyway. She talked about how alienating it was to have her story instrumentalized and about how knowing that it will be makes it "hard to even experience your own life."[1] When sex workers tell stories that refuse the narratives set out for them, this is not just a critique of the conditions of sex work or an economic system that makes a living something we must earn but also a confrontation with being discursively put to work. It is as much about finding ways to experience one's own life as it is an invitation to help outsiders better understand it. And yet, the risks are high. When I asked Lee if she might want our interview stored in a public archive, she replied, "I want to say everything publicly and also I want no one to know anything about me."

That knowing carries high risks for workers, and it might not do what researchers hope it will. E. Patrick Johnson's (2001: 18) classic invitation for theory that "work[s] for its constituency" becomes especially fraught in this context. As Svati P. Shah's article in this special issue of *South Atlantic Quarterly* argues, more and better evidence may not offer the material benefits to sex workers it aims for. Instead, it might maintain the status quo by making it possible for those who oppose labor rights to frame sex work as the stuff of "rigorous scholarly 'debate.'" "Carceral feminists" (Bernstein 2018: 21), employers, clients, and the politicians who write laws targeting sex workers when they are not busy patronizing them have their own reasons for wanting access to sex workers' stories, and they read them strategically. The pity and disgust they read for "are visceral, intense, and motivating," writes Vanessa Carlisle in this issue, and "have served the state well." Writing on sexual labor is thus acutely vulnerable to appropriation. Every complaint can be read as evidence of workers' abjection rather than their capacity for critique; every story of workers' creative hacks is mined for ideas of new loopholes to close.

With these stakes in mind, this special issue of *South Atlantic Quarterly* turns away from the impulse to know more about sex workers and toward a focus on what discursive encounters with sex work reveal about civilian life. The articles that follow turn a sex work lens outward rather than

a critic's gaze in. Contributors took the invitation to consider how stories about sex work and sex workers circulate and what they say about knowledge production, classed struggle, consent, brittle masculinity, and the politics of cash. If it is true that the "modern prostitute body was produced as a negative identity by the bourgeois subject" (Bell 1994: 72), this special issue is more interested in what is going on with that bourgeois subject than in the secrets of those that subject is measured against.

Academic knowledge production and sexual labor are bound up with each other in ways that go beyond the asymmetrical gaze. Sex work hustles informed and subsidized some of the thinking contained in this issue. This is not a claim to situated knowledge that is beyond reproach or a preview of disclosures to come. Rather, it is a reminder that the boundary between author and subject is porous. But although academia has come to welcome research about sex workers, it is not, as a rule, a space that welcomes sex workers themselves. "The academic sex worker illuminates the insidious class tension of academia," writes Mistress Snow (2019) in an article on sex working and academic life. She tells the story of how her doctoral adviser unceremoniously withdrew her letters of recommendation after Snow's disclosure that she worked as a dominatrix to subsidize adjunct teaching's poverty wages. Framing this as an act of "tough love" mentorship, the adviser (a senior scholar in the kind of discipline that reads *SAQ*) wanted Snow to understand that "academia and sex work are mutually exclusive." This is, of course, false but nonetheless an idea that shapes the intellectual production and economic survival of thinkers who engage sexual labor as anything other than an object of distanced scrutiny.

At the same time as research on sex work is experiencing something of a boom, the conditions of sex work are getting worse. It has become easier to make a living writing about sex work and harder to make a living doing it. The 2018 Fight Online Sex Trafficking Act and the Stop Enabling Sex Trafficking Act (FOSTA-SESTA), a US law that decimated sex workers' access to online speech, brought the closure of many of the sites workers used to advertise, screen clients for safety, build community, and share information and mutual aid (Blunt and Wolf 2020: 43). Before FOSTA-SESTA, creatively appropriating web-based tools for advertising and harm reduction made it possible for sex workers to work independently. Now, the wide reach of "networked governance" (Musto, Thakor, and Gerasimov 2020: 8) has pushed many in-person sex workers back to extractive working relationships with managers (both human and algorithmic) and to forms of work that put Black, brown, migrant, youth, and trans workers in particular at high risk of police violence. For sex workers who labor predominantly online, these shifts

make it harder to access customers directly and make workers more dependent on sex-work-specific platforms, which extract high percentages of their earnings (Berg 2021). For sex workers in general, money is scarcer, and the work has become riskier and more labor intensive. Australian Rachel, the sex worker artist whose photo is featured on our cover, offers this reminder to spectators who do not pay and platforms that profit from the unpaid labors of self-promotion: "I am not paid to wear this dress."

In view of sex work's long history as a tool for economic survival, mobility, and sometimes thriving among poor and working-class women and queers, sex workers organizing against surveillance and criminalization make the basic demand that the state "let us survive."[2] This is to force conversations about sex work policy out of the realm of performed concern and to recenter the question of who gets to have access to money and by what means. Thus, in conversation with writing on the gendered politics of enclosure (see Federici 2019), Tamara MacLeod (2019) frames FOSTA-SESTA as an enclosure of the digital commons. The EARN IT Act, proposed in 2020, sought to intensify FOSTA-SESTA's censoring reach just as the COVID-19 pandemic heightened sex workers' reliance on the web. Sex workers, meanwhile, are excluded from receiving government aid in a range of national contexts, and mass precarity has created a glutted labor market on the digital platforms that outlived censorship.

At the same time, our current moment highlights sex worker resilience and gives lie to the idea that sex work is exceptional as a form of exploitation under capitalism. With a well of experience surviving in spite of a state that is by turns violent and neglectful, sex workers were well positioned to navigate the state failures that marked 2020 and 2021. The same skills that make sex workers good at their jobs also prepare them for crafty ways of doing politics (Chateauvert 2013: 4). Sex workers' expertise at mutual aid came to be something of a curiosity to civilians scrambling to respond to the crises of the COVID-19 pandemic, with an explosion of journalistic interest in what sex workers know about keeping communities alive when the state fails to protect. Adept at parsing the difference between reproductive labor that supports clients and bosses and that which supports one's own community, sex workers understand self-valorization well (Negri 1999). And with hard-earned knowledge of police as both ineffective at addressing violence and regular perpetrators of it, sex workers come to conversations about police abolition already armed with ideas about what to do when you cannot call the cops.

Carceral feminists, meanwhile, have long argued that we need policing because sex work is exceptional in its rapacious bosses and risks of bodily harm. This narrative may become more suspect as nurses, grocery store

workers, and college professors die for their work. Long-held ideas about consent might splinter, too, as all sorts of workers face the choice to work and risk harm or to starve. The last resort thesis that so often undergirds both anti-sex-worker perspectives and the Left frameworks that try to meet them on their terms—"Yes, this is work of the worst kind, but criminalization doesn't make it better"—might say more about the commentator than about the work. As femi babylon notes in her interview in this issue, the language of "survival sex" is not by or for the communities it purports to describe. Rather, it emerged as a way to calcify a racialized boundary between sex workers who can claim the respectability of work and those reduced to bare survival. The binary sidesteps deeper questions about what it means to work to live, and it pretends that some of us work for other reasons. Sex workers and scholars have long argued that the choice/force dichotomy does not hold (see, e.g. Doezema 1998; Blair 2010; Kotiswaran 2011). Maybe the generalized harshness of this moment will make the dichotomy's fictions, and the idea that they apply only to work that is sexual, harder to sustain.

Workers' grapplings with the impossible choice between framing their stories in terms of constraint or freedom—impossible because sex work is a space of both exploitation and creative resistance, which is to say, classed struggle—echo throughout the articles that follow. The workers in Jayne Swift's article build a legible, sex-positive politics around pleasure that hopes to quiet outsiders' anxieties about paid sex. This is a story of workers' "interpretive interventions" (Rodríguez 2015) rather than their unfiltered experience. But bids for legibility are necessarily bids for respectability, and they create racialized and classed exclusions in their wake. Many anticapitalist sex work thinkers hope that a work frame might get us out of these dynamics—a job does not have to be pleasurable, or freely chosen, for it to be work (Smith and Mac 2018: 55).

But here, Vanessa Carlisle cautions that the work frame, too, can trade in a politics of respectability (see also Weeks 2011: 67). Sex work might exist in excess of work, and our insistence that a "blow job is a real job," as the saying goes, might conceal sex work's potential as at least in part a performance of antiwork (see also Horton-Stallings 2015: 19). babylon's interview lingers with this tension: how can we talk about sex *work* while also honoring that, for some workers and at some times, it is also a way "to chase a semblance of freedom." In trying to fit sex workers into the community of the hard-working class, labor frames can obscure sex work as a space of refusal and world making. At the same time, a carefully crafted work frame might open up possibilities for better futures rather than foreclose them. Kate Hardy and Camille Barbagallo situate sex workers as a labor vanguard whose strategies

are instructive for scholars of civilian work's increasingly gigified, precarious scene. Here, framing sex work as unexceptionally *work* might reveal more that it occludes.

Articles included in this issue also explore the possibility that sex work *is* exceptional, but only because it lets us do things that other working-class jobs foreclose. Here, pleasure may come not at work but with what comes after. In Annie McClanahan and Jon-David Settel's piece, a sex worker turns the stigma of dirty money on its head. Her demand: that "wages produce not just a minimal subsistence but rather a maximum pleasure." Workers profiled here also trouble long-held ideas about who gets to experience pleasure at or because of their work. In Julian Kevon Glover's article, Black trans women—often imagined as the most abject sex-working subjects—do find pleasure in their work, both (sometimes) in the sex and (more reliably) through the money that comes next. For clients, meanwhile, the pleasure of paid sex might be found less in the sex itself than in how consuming sexual services can authorize racialized masculinity. In Gregory Mitchell and Thaddeus Blanchette's piece, clients find in the brothel a space of identity performance that can depend more on proximity to other men than on the gender-affirming labors sex workers do.

The question of whether sex work is a unique kind of labor haunts the pieces that follow. Is it one that authors do not try to resolve, and rightly so. Here again, that question might be more interesting to spectators than to workers. The sex worker author Pluma Sumaq (2015: 17) has posed another question entirely: "To create a language around and an image of a 'Sex Worker' that is normalized and free of stigma did not seem very revolutionary to me," she wrote. "What if we're not like you? What then will you do to us?" These articles, constellated around what academic work does to and with sex work, offer some answers.

Notes

1 Lee, Lorelei. Interview by Author. Video call, May 15, 2000.

2 See the Survivors against SESTA website: survivorsagainstsesta.org.

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