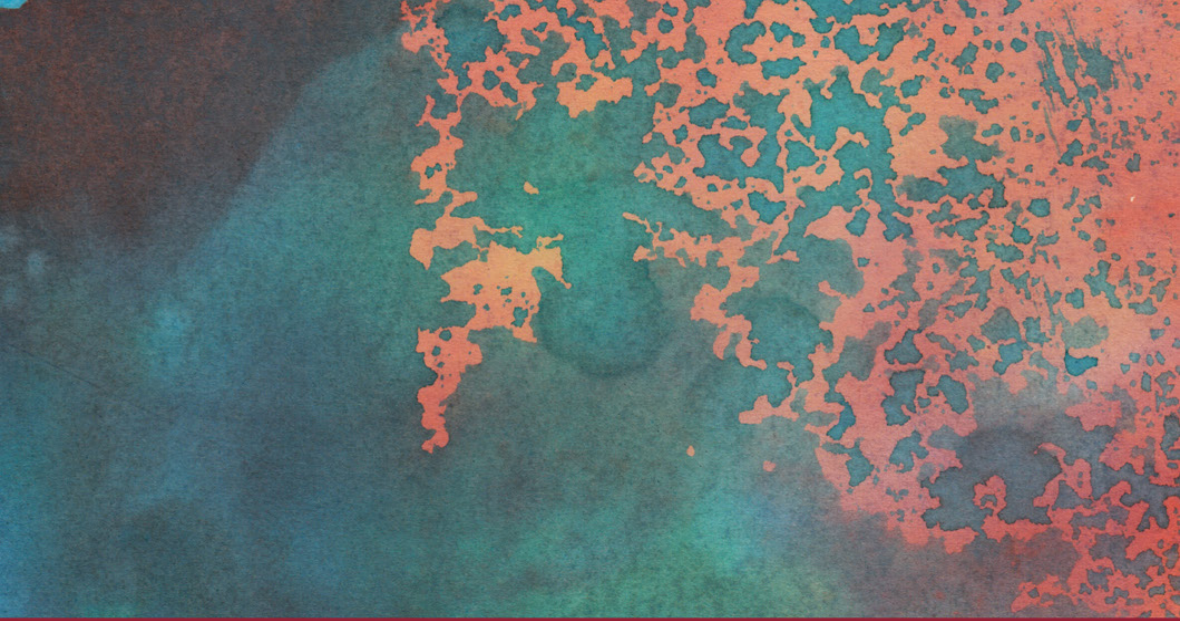
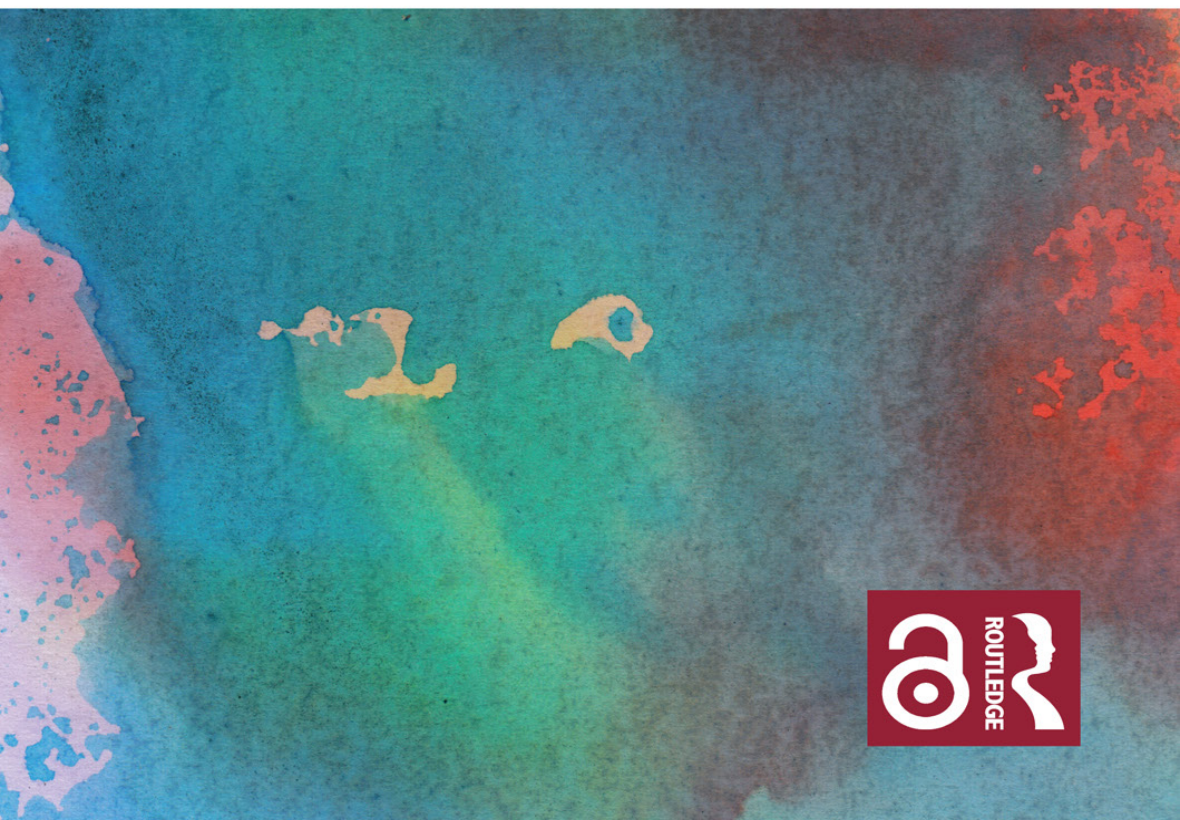


*Interdisciplinary Research in Gender*

# SEX WORK ON CAMPUS

Terah J. Stewart



"*Sex Work on Campus* centers and uplifts the voices of actual sex workers at a time when many conversations about the future of sex work are happening without us entirely. It's a must-read for anyone trying to be informed and challenged on the topic. The artful and engaging blend of anecdote and academia makes *Sex Work on Campus* an urgent book for the current discourse as society reexamines labor, sex work, and the rights and futures of college students in America. Dr. Stewart has done groundbreaking work."

**—Tianna, *Sex Work on Campus* Study Collaborator/College Student Sex Worker**

"The invisibility of sex work(ers) on college campuses is no more! TJ Stewart has masterfully written a book that is tender, loving, and opens the door for nuanced dialogues and advocacy that helps educators and administrators develop a deeper understanding of college student sex workers and the possibilities for liberation that are layered, complex, and push our definitions of labor. This book is transformative and needed, especially at a time when laws are being enacted that increase the exposure of sex workers, who are our students, to violence. *Sex Work on Campus* is a must-read for faculty members and administrators truly ready to learn about labor, harm reduction, and reaching towards justice."

**—Dr. Bettina Love, Professor of Teacher Education, University of Georgia. Author of *We Want to Do More Than Survive: Abolitionist Teaching and the Pursuit of Educational Freedom***

"As a former sex worker, I would consider this a masterpiece! Dr. Stewart does a wonderful job humanizing sex workers. Most of the time, sex workers are stigmatized, excluded, and ridiculed. Not this time, we finally have a student voice! This is a must-read for students, academic departments, and scholars who are looking to dispel any negative stereotypes about sex workers and those involved."

**—Maliah, *Sex Work on Campus* Study Collaborator/College Student Sex Worker**

"*Sex Work on Campus* is a brilliant, necessary, and—dare I say—intimate study of an invisible work force in higher education: the student sex worker. In centering student sex workers' voices, Stewart highlights the institutional biases sex workers and sex work researchers face as well as the university administration that both ignores and exacerbates their most vulnerable students' plights. This much-needed contribution to the growing academic field of sex work studies will undoubtedly become a key text for students, professors, administrators, and sex workers, as well as the increasingly visible combinations thereof."

**—Mistress Olivia Snow, Research Fellow at New York University's AI Now Institute, and author of *I Told My Mentor I Was a Dominatrix: She Rescinded Her Letters of Recommendation***

"I feel seen. And I wish this type of material was something utilized by the university that I attended (particularly while I was there).

I've seen scholarly articles, of course, by those of U.S. and U.K. sex industries, but I've never seen a book like this one that was so accessible, a book that can be used across a variety of classes, while also still holding us in such an honoring and respectful light. Dr. Stewart as simple as day tells the information like it is—There is no requirement to downplay or unnecessarily euphemize any material. Instead, he manages to be both straightforward and poetic at the same time throughout its entirety.

This is the clarity we need. If any other sex workers read this, it is my hope that you can find relation in it, too."

**—Stokely, *Sex Work on Campus* Study Collaborator/College Student Sex Worker**

# Sex Work on Campus

*Sex Work on Campus* examines the experiences of college students engaged in sex work and sparks dialogue about the ways educators might develop a deeper appreciation for—and praxis of—equity and justice on campus.

Analyzing a study conducted with seven college student sex workers, the book focuses on sex work histories, student motivations, and how power (or lack thereof) associated with social identity shape experiences of student sex work. It examines what these students learn because of sex work, and what college and university leaders can do to support them. These findings are combined in tandem with analysis of current research, popular culture, sex work rights movements, and exploration of legal contexts.

This fresh and important writing is suitable for students and scholars in sexuality studies, gender studies, sociology, and education.

**Terah J. Stewart** (he/him), PhD, is an assistant professor of higher education and student affairs at Iowa State University. His research and writing focus on people and populations that are hypermarginalized and/or who are considered to have stigmatized identities, including college students engaged in sex work, fat students on campus, and identity-based student activism. He also engages in conceptual and empirical study of antiblackness in non-black communities of color. His work often centers on critical disruptive onto-epistemological frameworks and theories which seek to destabilize dominant ways of knowing and being, including Black/endarkened feminist, womanist, and Afropessimist perspectives. His research and writing have appeared in *Action Research, Journal of Diversity in Higher Education, Journal of Student Affairs Research and Practice, Journal Committed to Scholarship on Race and Ethnicity*, and the *Journal of College Student Development*. Dr. Stewart is also a coauthor of *Identity-Based Student Activism: Power and Oppression on College Campuses* (2020, Routledge).

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**Sex Work on Campus**
*Terah J. Stewart*

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# Sex Work on Campus

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# Contents

# Foreword
## By thotscholar

When I met my son's dad, I was hustling, working at two different clubs and pulling tricks to make ends meet. My mother put me out at 18 after my first year of college. By 2009, I was traveling and dancing, trying to pay off the debt that was keeping me from re-enrolling. I met him on Facebook. He was light-skinned and looked like he liked to party, so I dubbed him at first. But once we began seeing each other, it became very clear that my being a stripper was gray ash on an otherwise near-perfect moisturized elbow. He didn't say much about it. But one of his brothers, a former dealer and pimp himself, said he should pimp me. His mother was a quiet, pleasant Howard graduate from a multiracial middle-class black family, the kind that has family reunions with custom-made shirts. Even the dark-skinned ones have freckles. His father was a dark-skinned veteran from a huge Gary clan. He was the type of man who embraced everyone openly, including me, and I miss him as much as I miss my own broad-backed grandaddy. There aren't many folks whose arms dole out love blows and kinship the way my fathers have. For who else besides a hoe or a druggie so often feels an inexplicable desire for deliverance?

I'm an autodidact. My degree, had I finished it, would have been in either Digital Fine Arts or Music (Vocals). Single motherhood and poverty generally put a stop to my pursuit of formal schooling, which is fine by me. Over the past few years, I have managed to amass a robust personal library. I have no plan to finish my degree. Being outside of academia allows me the freedom to craft a based *pornosophical*[1] counternarrative that places the locus of conversation about (black, non-normative) libidinal-transactional-sexual practices squarely outside of the university, and into the (digital) streets. Joining black feminist and sex worker groups on Facebook was an endarkening experience. Prostitution—which I'm using to refer to any exchange of "sweetener" (a lure, a vex, a tease) between two or more parties, whether bartered/traded or waged/income—has always been a very fraught issue among feminists, mainly because for some, it violates the sanctity of the marriage contract. Since the stereotype is that poor black people fail at achieving marriage, and black feminist groups are overrun with college graduates, I sometimes found myself at the center of heated debates

about "cheating (as abuse)," sleeping with married men as a sugar baby, and other highly charged topics. But the main thing that I noticed was that, when it comes down to it, hoes and non-straight black female-assigned[2] people were considered a problem.

Following Sylvia Wynter, white women are overrepresented in the category of Woman. The rest of us must affix "black," "disabled," "Chinese," or "Chicana" to it in order to make ourselves legible. Most media about "sex work" is from the perspective of white women, or "women of color" that white/middle-class women have chosen as the Proper Whore Representatives. Consequently, it is mainly white women and academics in the humanities who get to determine the "proper" terminology, political goals, and the flow of mainstream discourse. Before social media, I called myself a stripper, a hustler, a hoe, a prostitute. But once I joined, I was repeatedly corrected. I was told that *prostitute* is a pejorative term, but that *whore, slut, hoe/heaux, hooker*, and *bitch* are eligible for reclamation. When I demanded to know how "prostitute" is more offensive, the common answer was that it implies "use." But I think it's deeper than that. I think prostitute, literally and figuratively, conjures up an image of a fallen, non-normative, *freakish* sex, dangerously confounding the well-crafted myth of the feminist "sex wars" between the Sex Radicals and the Anti-Porn Abolitionists. The Prostitute is dinge, poverty, shame, and contagion. Untouchable.

According to the etymonline.com entry, prostitute is derived from Latin *prostitutus*, past participle of *prostituere*, etymologically "place before or in front," hence "expose publicly," and especially "expose to prostitution." In the 1610s, it took on the meaning of "harlot, woman who offers her body indiscriminately (usually for money)." The public/private divide dictated that men are public (political), and women rule the private domain (the household).[3] There was no distinction made between women freely seeking pleasure, women forced into the trade, or impoverished women coerced into prostitution by necessity. It is due to this history that I tend to prefer the term "prostitute" when referring to poor people in the sex trade, though I must necessarily interrogate this via engaging the history of gendered racism.

The first wave of prostitute's rights politics/sex radicalism was overwhelmingly white. Naturally, academics and peddlers of respectability politics latched onto the term "sex work" which, as Kathi Weeks wrote in *The Problem with Work: Feminism, Marxism, Antiwork Politics, and Postwork Imaginaries*, does the work of shifting the conversation from "the dilemmas posed as a social problem to questions of economic practice; rather than a character flaw that produces a moral crisis, sex work is reconceived as an employment option that can generate income and provide opportunity" (Weeks 2011; 67). The problem with this is that it relies on a fictitious line of demarcation, necessarily eliding one of the largest human-trafficking operations in the modern era: the transatlantic slavery enterprise and its lesser-known sibling, the transpacific slavery enterprise (Blackbirding). But let's bring it to the present tense: immigrants, some of whom are navigating

precarity as college students in a hostile country, may also be engaging in prostitution, placing themselves and their loved ones at risk. Thus, the popular narratives, and "sex work" and "sex trafficking," obfuscate the enduring effects of systemic racism, which functionally shunts poor black, indigenous American, and immigrant wo/men into prostitution and low-wage labor.

Hence, what white sex workers refer to as "whorephobia," I call *pornophobia*. Bear with me as I lead you through an etymological labyrinth: the Greek word *porneía* refers to fornication or the social and economic practice of prostitution, while *pórnē/pórnōs*, respectively, refer to a female/male prostitute or any dishonorable wo/man indulging in illegal connexion or whoremongering (pimping), whether for profit or thirst. *Pórnē* is thought to be from *pernémi* (to export for sale; to bribe) and *pórnōs* from *pernaō* ("to sell off"), referring to immoral (wo)men and sodomites. Also, from *pernémi* is *pipraskó* (sell), leading us finally to prao/perao ("to traverse") from *peran*—to traffic (by traveling; dispose of as merchandise into slavery).[4]

Pornophobia, drawn from this linguistic lineage, contains layers upon layers of meaning that not only hint to a deeper, more complex history than the choice/coercion binary we are often presented with but also visually links to Hortense Spillers' concept-neologism *pornotroping*—the process of reducing a person or group of people to mere flesh, making them into the object of violent, racist sexual impulses. Pornophobia, which I will fully define as an erotic, oft-racialized irrational hunger, hostility, disdain, and contempt directed at those considered to be sexually abnormal or who are stereotyped as embodying an *excessive, monstrous, primitive, deviant, corruptive, funky* sex. The gendered, deracialized *whore* does similar work as "sex work" and the clandestinely white "woman." It implicitly refers to the (White) Woman, though Fallen, ergo avoiding uncomfortable conversations about racism by way of centering "gender" and deputizing certain "women of color" (especially academics) as able to speak authoritatively on these issues, where they concern a flattened idea of Woman.

The term "sex work/er" has a lot of political utility.[5] But I also find it constricting, another linguistic imposition that does just enough but not enough for a poor, illegible *negress*. It is in this spirit that I contest "sex work/er." Attached to the white woman's idea of "rights," it simply has never described someone like me who is *assumed* a prostitute, sexually and publicly available until proven respectable. An excerpt from my current project, excuse my parrhesia:

> I posit that womanhood and femininity, as conceived of in white western (anglocratic) culture, is mostly inaccessible for black females—rendered negresses/niggas under this regime. Likewise, proper manhood and masculinity elude black males, who are similarly thingified as negroes/niggas through a variety of physical, emotional, and psychological assaults.

> In black Turtle Islander culture nigga is a subject-object/objectified subject; a thingly person or a person-like thing. Similarly, the black TI pronunciation of "whore," hoe, is rendered a verb (activity: to hoe), a personish-thing (that hoe over there) or a place-thing (we in this hoe, gimme dat hoe/object). In the same breath as a nigga will call a bitch a hoe, a hoe is almost always a nigga. However, nigga as a standalone term will never be a verb. […]
>
> In black culture, anyone or anything can be a hoe. Thus, a hoe/negress is not a *real* (white) woman, any more than a nigga is a *real* (white) man. We simply perform until our metaphorical reveal.

In this passage, I am referring to thingification.[6] Often designated nonpersons, non-white prostitutes, pass-around niggas, bottoms, studs, trade, (bull) dykes, pimps, hoes, hobosexuals, sweet and downlow niggas, (honey)trappers, and poor, black folk, in general, embody a peculiar kind of thingliness, an objectified subject position that is at once hated, coveted, masculinized, phallicized, and rendered un-rapeable. It is through this lens, as an independent pornosopher—a hoe, a negress—that I choose to engage everything else.

It is my hope that the context that I've added enriches the important work that has been done in this book. Terah J. Stewart's *Sex Work on Campus* adds to a growing corpus of academic work that speaks candidly on the many complex political and personal threads that go beyond the reductive pro-sex/anti-sex dichotomy. The discourses that I and others have participated in concerning decriminalization, among many other issues, have been distilled, but reduced, for lay readers who are interested in learning about and supporting their loved ones who are juggling college and "the life." Perhaps by beginning with the question "What would it mean for sex workers to be free?," we might begin to explore other necessary paths beyond survival, toward salvation.

## Notes

1 I borrowed this from James Joyce. It is a portmanteau of philosophy and pornography and means "a philosophy of the brothel." Interestingly, the word "brothel" is shortened from *brothel-house*. Brothel itself means "prostitute," and its earlier meaning was "vile, worthless person (of any sex)." See the *Online Etymology Dictionary*: https://www.etymonline.com/search?q=brothel&ref=searchbar_searchhint.

In my work, I take this meaning a step further and put pressure on the word "pornography," taking it in its most literal sense to mean "the process of writing, recording, or describing prostitutes." Etymology:

> →***pornography***, from Greek *pornográphos* "[one] depicting prostitutes," from *graphein* "to write" (*-graphy*, "[the] process of writing, recording, or describing" & *gráphō*, "I depict") + *pornē* (por-nay) "prostitute," originally "bought, purchased" (for prostitution; related to *pernanai*/*pernēmi*, to export or traffic in [for sale]); ***philosophy***, from Latin by way of

Greek *philosophia* "love of knowledge, pursuit of wisdom, systematic investigation," from *philo-* "loving" + *sophia* "knowledge, wisdom," from *sophis* "wise, learned."

2 I prefer "fe/male-assigned" to the acronyms in my writing because while they mean the same thing, that is, I'm referring to legal sex designations, I don't like how the acronyms look LOL.
3 This is a pre-white western lens, meaning we can't gauge other non-white culture's attitudes toward prostitution from this.
4 You can look up all these terms on Bible Hub, which collects entries from multiple sources, including *Strong's Exhaustive Concordance, Thayer's Greek Lexicon*, and the *NAS Exhaustive Concordance*. Link: https://biblehub.com/greek/4203.htm.
5 No shade to Carol Leigh, also known as Scarlot Harlot, who I've had fantastic conversations with about this and other things. My paraphrased version of her story about the term "sex worker" goes like this: Leigh was a part of a political conference about prostitute's rights. When she arrived, she saw a sign that referred to the "Sex Use Industry." Leigh was understandably put off by the term "use" and thus she substituted "work." According to her, she never meant for it to be a replacement for prostitute, and she uses both terms. So, this is a great example of how your creation goes out into the world and lives a life of its own.
6 Though this project is focused on "black" people in the west, specifically America, thingification is not unique to African-descended people. Other populations who have been, or still are, thingified include Jews, lower-caste and slave-caste people, indigenous/aboriginal peoples globally, various groups of non-white and pre-white immigrants, disabled people, and mixed-race individuals.

# Preface

## The immortal spirit of wild women

I had only been living in the south, Georgia to be specific, for a little while when I arrived at the realization that I wanted to work alongside sex workers to push toward their, and our, collective liberation. I arrived at the moment relatively early in doctoral studies; in fact, I still recall the exact moment. It was a warm Autumn evening, and extremely wet. It had been raining all day and I remember being miserable about it. As an Ohioan who rather enjoys blustery 50-degree rainy days in October, an 85-degree day was quite the adjustment. I had plans to meet a classmate for dinner so that we could catch up. She was a year ahead of me in the program, I was in my first.

I arrived at the fast-food locale and waited for her to get there so that we could order. While I waited, I scrolled the photo app on my smartphone. There were a significant number of photos of my mom that spanned across the various periods of her life. From a sepia-toned kindergarten photo—she wore a dress and her hair was braided in pigtails—to one of the last she would take while alive, at a family gathering. The photos were in my phone because she had passed away unexpectedly, approximately one month before I was to move to Georgia and start doctoral study. I still had the photos from creating her obituary a few months before. In another piece of writing, reflecting back on that time, I wrote

> There are few things that can prepare someone for the rigor, exhaustion, and challenge of doctoral education. Little could have ever prepared me for the experience of losing my mother, and absolutely nothing *did* prepare me to navigate and reconcile both simultaneously.
>
> (Stewart, 2020, pp. 28–29)

Reflecting on my mom is germane to this topic in several ways as it connects to how I come to this work, why I arrived at my decision several years ago, and what it means for this book. Most simply, I was raised by women. Kelly Norman Ellis has a poem of the same name that explains exactly what this means. She offered:

> I was raised by …
> Some thick haired
> Angela Davis afro styling
> "Girl, lay back
> and let me scratch yo head"
> Sorta Women.
>
> (Ellis, 2003, p. 5)

Indeed, I was raised by women, Black women. A series of big sisters, aunties, and my mother had a profound impact on me. They instilled in me an awareness of the ways oppression materialized in our lives and that we should be vigilant to address it whenever and however we could. Of all these women, my mother stands out in my mind; she was vocal and instilled in me and my sisters a radical Black politic as well as radical empathy and love very early on in our childhood. My mom was always for the underdog, for the maligned, for those who were unfairly judged, criticized, and held back. People like us. For this, she was often critiqued, including by members of her own family. We grew up poor and often found the people around us included society's outcasts and disregarded: Black people, poor people, sex workers, and disabled people to name a few. My mom was known to the people of the neighborhood as Ms. Candy. Her given name was Anna but from the time she was a little girl, she was called Candy for how sweet she was known to be. My mother was not just liked, she was loved by so many, especially the young people of the neighborhood. One time, I overheard a conversation between her and a close relative who upon explaining why she did not come to visit us on our side of town said:

> Can, I would love to come by, but all those drug dealers and gangbangers around. Sometimes they're even on your porch. I don't see how you are okay with that
>
> To this my mom replied,
>
> But what has that got to do with who they are?

Those words echo in my head when I think about people, and how we are stigmatized. For context, while some of the people in the neighborhood were engaged in drug dealing, not all of them were. What was unsaid by this relative is that she believed they *looked* like gangbangers and drug dealers, so, surely, they were. What I loved about this moment is my mom—being exactly who she was—did not engage with the premise presented to her; she instead changed the tenor of that conversation to invite this relative into *her* world and approach to people. She invited them to answer, what does someone's labor choice have to do with who they are? What do those things have to do with who they could be? Or might be? And most importantly,

but perhaps implicitly, where is the structural analysis in relation to these people and the systems they are trying to maneuver?

So, you see, I have always been taught to try and understand who people are. To be diligent in going beyond the dominant discourse about who is worthy of being considered human, whose labor choices are considered legitimate, without an analysis of how labor under capitalism is largely illegitimate. My mother may not have had all of the language I now possess to name the particulars of her personal and political ethic, but it does not mean it was any less transformational, not only in my life but also in the lives of all she touched.

———

Back at the eatery, my friend had finally arrived. We talked about how coursework was going, how I was handling the transition, and generally how I liked my "new normal." She asked me if I had thought about my research at all. A few things had been swirling in my brain but so many ideas felt inconsequential. Whether it was my unwavering cynicism or grieving the loss of my mom, I was generally uninspired. However, I knew that whatever topic or focus I selected had to matter. Deeply. It had to go beyond the status quo, it had to be disruptive. So, she asked me, "What matters to you most right now?" This was a powerful question. I immediately recalled two pieces of scholarship by bell hooks that had been sitting with me about this notion of the "margins": one was titled *Choosing the Margin as a Space of Radical Openness* (hooks, 1989) and the other was titled *Marginality as a Site of Resistance* (hooks, 1990). Both pieces had been weighing on me in some dynamic ways. In one sense, I felt empowered by hooks' notion that the margins serve as a place for resistance, specifically the idea that being in that space was ground zero for the "production of counter hegemonic discourse" (hooks, 1990, p. 341) both in word and deed. On the other hand, I could not help but think about some of my more dominant social locations and wonder who is in the "margins of the margins"? Who is in the shadows? Who is higher education/student affairs *not* talking about? I also remembered reading about growing "concerns" around sex trafficking and legal assaults on the website Backpage and in tandem with this news, a community of sex workers pleading about the dangers of the potential takedown. While I did not understand the minutiae of the situation, what troubled me was that no one seemed to care, and worse still, Black people, people of color, and other minoritized groups were many of the voices I noticed speaking out, already vulnerable and targeted communities in our violent world. What I also knew is not once in my professional or academic career had sex workers been centered in any conversation, inquiry, or policy decision in any meaningful way. After some silence while I pondered, I could feel my mom's ethic rising in my gut and into my chest. I finally responded to my classmate's question: "Sex work. College students and sex work."

## Purpose

Individuals who engage in erotic labor have been known by many names throughout history and across time dating back to 3000 BC (Roberts, 1992) and likely before. While there is no shortage of research and writing about sex workers, there are some gaps in the literature specifically in higher educational contexts (Haeger & Deil-Amen, 2010). The purpose of this book is to serve as an introduction to the experiences of college students engaged in sex work as a means to spark dialogue and advocacy about ways educators might develop a deeper appreciation for—and praxis of—equity, justice, and liberation. What follows is a combination of findings from a study I conducted with seven college student sex workers as well as an incorporation and analysis of popular culture, sex work rights movements, and legal contexts.

While other texts exist on the topic of college students, college students' sex lives/engagement in sex (broadly defined), and there are many books about sex work/ing/ers, there are hardly any that speak to the phenomenon I sought to explore through this project. This is to say, this book is not simply about college students or sex workers—it is about college student sex workers with racially minoritized and/or sexually minoritized identities as it relates to oppression within a larger system of white supremacist capitalist patriarchy and a moral crusade against their labor. Further, in addition to synthesizing literature about sex workers, this book also provides insight *directly* from college student sex workers and their experiences within the ivory tower. As such, *Sex Work on Campus* is not based on speculation or anecdotal evidence but, rather, on research grounded in a critical theoretical approach.

## Intended audience

If you have ever wondered about sex work, this book is for you. If you are confused about the differences between sex work and sex trafficking, this book is for you. If you are open to meditating on and having your ideas challenged about sex work, this book is for you. This book can serve as a resource for college and university leaders, student affairs professionals, and college students who want to better understand student sex worker experiences and the conditions and contexts that lead to their decision to engage in the work. My intention with *Sex Work on Campus* is to problematize the invisibility of sex work(ers) on campus and encourage college and university administrators to consider these students and their experiences with more nuance and care, especially as students with racial minoritized and sexual minoritized identities.

Finally, college student sex workers themselves are an audience for this book. I believe current student sex workers may learn from previous college student sex workers and may find resources and strategies of how to navigate

higher education as a space that is unwelcoming to them. A notable trend in the literature is that many college student sex workers experience difficulty because they feel they must keep their sex work a secret. The perspectives and experiences of college student sex workers in this book may validate and encourage current college student sex workers to continue pressing onward. If that is you, I hope you feel seen, I hope you feel validated; even if only one college student sex worker is touched as a result of reading *Sex Work on Campus*, this project will have been a worthwhile endeavor.

Additionally, I believe this project to be transdisciplinary, and as such, I expect this book would be useful work for scholars and students of sociology, sex/-uality, education, and race. This book might be well-suited for use in college courses situated within higher education and student affairs graduate preparation programs, as well as courses focused on identity studies—women, gender, and sexuality studies; queer studies; and ethnic studies—broadly, and/or how they manifest in higher education, specifically. Some institutions have diversity, equity, inclusion, and justice certificate programs, as well as electives on special topics in relation to higher education and social justice, and this book would be an excellent addition to those programs and offerings.

## Overview of the book

In the current discourse, the topic of sex work is relatively polarizing with individuals in support of either adults engaging in sex for work or those who seek the abolishment of sex work because they believe it to be degrading and disempowering. Going further to factor in issues related to sex trafficking makes the conversation evolve in more complex ways. As such, I endeavor to synthesize the complexities of this information to be more accessible and include the voices of sex workers themselves, in this case, college students. In Chapter 1, I start by sharing the methodology and frameworks that informed the study, and then I introduce the concept of sex work including contemporary issues, arguments, and introductory debates around the topic. I provide explanations for language and terminologies used in the book, provide examples of what sex work is, and discuss the equity and justice lens I used to frame the project. I also introduce the college student sex workers who collaborated with me on this project. I close the chapter by making connections between sex work and labor broadly, an imperative if educators wish to engage the topic ethically and with equity and justice in mind.

In Chapter 2, I briefly trace sex work in a western historical context and discuss how and why society has come to view sex workers with stigma. I discuss the role of law and politics and how disdain for sex workers results in paternalism in their lives and livelihoods. In Chapter 3, I discuss the specifics of college students engaged in sex work including the landscape of higher education research on the topic, and I discuss education cost and how it connects to the issue of college student sex work. Finally, I offer data and

analyses from digital/online platforms that illustrate that college students are likely engaging in sex work in significant numbers, and what that means for how we might support them. In Chapter 4, I discuss intimate narratives from college student sex workers that help demystify what conditions and contexts they maneuver as college students. Through their creation of artifacts in the form of written letters, these students reveal how they experience student organizations, academic and student services departments, and the campus broadly. Finally, students also reflect on their journeys as sex workers as they determine what they might impart to a past and younger self.

In Chapter 5, I discuss how sex work contributed to the growth and development of the college students in this project including a general distrust of men, an appreciation for intersectional feminism, and confidence in their bodies, voices, and choices. These students shared that sex work helped them develop agency in a way nothing else in their life had. Finally, in Chapter 6, I conclude by meditating on the question: What would it mean for sex workers to be free? What systems of oppression are at work that preclude sex workers, especially those with racial and sexual minoritized identities, from experiencing that freedom? What are the ways sex worker liberation is tied each of us? Finally, I introduce a theorizing toward a radical erotic politic for higher education as a potential pathway forward to remedy the numerous issues students' narratives raise across this text and within the literature.

The six chapters in this text complement each other and help recount important lessons and considerations about erotic labor and the politics of the body. To be sure, this is "not your mama's" run-of-the-mill book, in either topic, structure, or form. However, to appropriately address a topic such as sex work, breaking the rules is what is required. I want to honor and recognize the labor of the college student sex workers highlighted in this study. I want to ensure from cover to cover their voices are centered: Maliah, Kathleen, Tianna, Stokely, Kemi, Gui, and Maria. Their stories, woven throughout the book, illustrate the gravity and urgency of this topic. Using creative non-fiction, short stories co-written by the students are sprinkled throughout the chapters and reveal in vivid detail just what it is like to be a college student sex worker today. From Kathleen's story, *Three's Company*, which details her experience with her very first clients—a couple—to Gui and his *Totally Unplanned, Incredibly Unorganized, Entirely Episodic, Life as a Sex Worker* and all variations between. The students reveal what it is like, as Tianna put it, to unapologetically tap into the immortal spirit of wild women.

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To my late mother. Thank you for instilling in me a radical Black politic and for showing me what it means to love *everybody*, especially those in the margins of the margins. Thank you for always being with me, even on days when it feels/felt like you weren't. As Andrew Garfield once said, "I hope this grief stays with me because it's all the unexpressed love I didn't get to tell her." Thank you for writing and showing me the importance and power of writing. There is a saying that if a writer falls in love with you, you never die. I intend to make that sentiment true.

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To the movers, shakers, the sex work and erotic laborers, writers, practitioners, and researchers; to the disruptors, the world-makers, the revolutionaries, I see you. Thank you for your advocacy, activism, and your work. Let's keep going, together.

Finally, I want to acknowledge that parts of this text, my own words, have appeared in other writing projects, but always with clear citation and attribution. The exception to this is passages that have appeared only in my dissertation which can be found and reviewed with open access with the citation below, but they are not otherwise published or shared.

Stewart, T. J. (2019). "Dear higher education, there are sex workers on your campus:" Rendering visible the realities of U.S. college students engaged in sex work [Doctoral dissertation, University of Georgia]. https://esploro.libs.uga.edu/esploro/outputs/9949333991802959

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# 1 Introduction

> Truly I tell you, the tax collectors and the prostitutes are entering the kingdom of God ahead of you.
>
> New International Version Bible, 2011, Matthew 21:31

The scripture above is from a story referred to as the "Parable of the Two Sons" in Christian theology. For context, the prophet Jesus was speaking directly to the elders and chief priests of Israel regarding their lack of belief in him. As a result of their choosing not to open their hearts to him, he warned that the "greedy" tax collectors and harlots (who were considered some of society's worst type of people) would enter heaven ahead of them. The "Parable of the Two Sons" challenges societal assumptions about sin, judgment, and grace, given that those who believed in Jesus no longer lived under the law of the Old Testament. Implicit in the story is the belief that God's grace should be admired given that he could forgive *even* the tax collectors and the sex workers, because they accepted the way of righteousness. For me, the parable also suggests that the elders and chief priests would do well to understand the gravity of their stubbornness because if the harlots were on better terms with God than they were, then they were definitely in trouble.

What I love about this story is that it situates sex work in a historical context that dates back to "biblical times," which illustrates the reality that sex work is in no way a new occurrence and sex workers are likely to stick around for the foreseeable future. Often imprecisely lauded as the "world's oldest profession," people seem to have been engaging in sex work for as long as history has been documented. What I dislike about this story is that it also reveals sex workers have long been stigmatized throughout history and across time, and until we begin to interrogate our biases and discomfort about sex broadly and sex work specifically, we will continue to create violent experiences for an already vulnerable population.

My intention is to render sex workers visible in education as a way to highlight these vulnerabilities and situate their importance within higher education. In this chapter, I introduce important language, terminology, and

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concepts that are important to understand sex work and this research project. I then overview the study context, share my research positionality, and how I approach this work. Next, I detail the study design and theoretical framework that informed the study and the framing of this book. Finally, I close the chapter by introducing sex work and the connections between sex work and labor.

## Language and terminology

Throughout this writing, I use various terms and concepts related to sex work, each of which has a deep and complex history and is interrelated to one another. I will describe each of these terms, how I have used them within the book, and how contexts inform the terms delineations and use. Note that while I attempt to offer clear and simple definitions, sex work is fluid and one type of sex work might seamlessly connect or be adjacent to another. Further, my definitions are not meant to be holistically definitive and infallible but instead they are meant to articulate how I understood them at the time of the study. My delineations should not be interpreted as hard boundaries between them.

### *The industry*

Some individuals use the term "sex work" to mean sex in exchange for money—or prostitution as it has been known historically and contemporarily—and other times the meaning includes all sex work. However, sex work is a broad constellation of work that encompasses various types of engagement:

> There is no one sex industry. Escorting, street hustling, hostessing, stripping, performing sex for videos and webcams—the range of labor makes speaking of just one feel too inadequate. To collapse all commercial sex that way would result in something so flat and shallow that it would only reinforce the insistence that all sex for sale results from the same phenomenon—violence, deviance, and desperation.
>
> (Grant, 2014, p. 49)

Indeed, sex work is broad and vast and while Grant (2014) introduced a reality that I discuss later—views of sex work as always automatically oppression—the truth is that nearly all sex workers experience stigma as a result of their work and there are often varying degrees of consequences and risks depending on the type of sex work one might engage. The type of sex work a sex worker chooses informs their experiences and contexts.

### *Prostitution*

Prostitution is the most widely known terminology as it pertains to sex work, specifically escorting and individuals who have sex for money

(Roberts, 1992). "Prostitution" is a term that some sex workers avoid using because they view it as an incendiary and stigmatizing term (Breshears, 2017). Prostitution, or prostitute, as terminology often invokes negative images and framing of sex work rooted in despair and thus primes individuals to engage sex workers in paternalistic ways. However, some sex workers have pushed back on abandoning prostitute as language and identity when other terms—"whore," "slut," "hoe"—have proudly been reclaimed (thotscholar, this text). Where possible, I avoid using the term "prostitution" in this book. Where it appears, I have written it for any of the following reasons: because researchers or writers referred to sex workers as prostitutes in their writing, because sex workers themselves use the term, because it is a direct quote, or to illustrate a particular point in time (e.g., older texts and historical time-periods that predate "sex work/er" terminology; this would also include "harlot"). Finally, where and when I use prostitute/prostitution, I do not necessarily refer to all types of sex work. I only use it to refer to people who have sex for money, but other writers may have meant the term to refer to all or multiple types of sex work/sex workers.

### *Sex work*

As Grant (2014) asserts, "sex work is a political identity" (p.20). The term "sex work(er)" did not enter public discourse until the mid-to-late 1970s and sex work as a term was reportedly published for the first time in the early 1980s (Leigh, 2004). Sex work terminology emerged concurrently with a wave of activism during the same time-period and for two reasons. First, some sex workers advocated for a language shift away from "sex use" to help manage the stigma associated with the work (Leigh, 2004). Destigmatizing language is an important endeavor because language can be used to create culture, shape discourse, and reinforce power. Black and African scholars have often argued that language is epistemic and possesses instrumentality, which is to say, words are often *doing* something toward informing knowledge and practice (Dillard, 2006). Some argue the term "sex work" is a strong alternative because it is more humanizing and affirming of sex worker realities and distinguishes sex workers apart from a "thing" or "item for sale" (Breshears, 2017). However, this history could also be interpreted as rooted in respectability through a desire to distance oneself from doing undesirable/immoral work/behavior.

In general, it is critical to resist the paradigm that sex workers "sell their bodies;" they do not. They sell a service or an experience. The second reason for this language shift was some activists hoped to situate and legitimize sex as work. As the wave of activism in the 1970s commenced, some believed it was critical to situate the lives, experiences, and choices of sex workers within a larger labor context—an important topic I take up later in this chapter. Where possible, I use the term "sex work" not only for some of these reasons but also for utility and simplicity. Further, when I use the

term, unless otherwise stated, I typically refer to all types of sex work (such as stripping, camming, phone sex, pornography, escorting, prostitution, etc.). However, the genesis meaning of the term was used for people who exchange sex for money, its use as an umbrella term is a more contemporary manifestation.

### *Whore/Whore-stigma*

In her text *Playing the Whore: The Work of Sex Work*, Grant (2014) suggests that "being a woman is a pre-condition of the label 'whore' but never the sole justification" (p.75). This is to say, that irrespective of one's identity or praxis as a sex worker, women generally tend to always be at risk of whore-stigma; it is a gendered stigma. Simpson (2021) who wrote about whorephobia within the context of higher education specifically defined it as "a term used to describe the hatred, disgust and fear of sex workers—that intersects with racism, xenophobia, classism, and transphobia—leading to structural and interpersonal discrimination, violence, abuse, and murder" (p. 4). Contemporarily, some sex workers have sought to reclaim the term "whore" to disarm the pejorative connotations it represents (Roberts, 1992). This reclamation has also extended to the milder pejorative "slut" as a rejection of "slut shaming," of which Grant (2014) offers,

> What is lost, however, in moving from whore stigma to slut shaming is the centrality of the people most harmed by this form of discrimination … *Slut* may seem to broaden the tent of those affected, but it makes the whore invisible. Whore stigma makes central the racial and class hierarchy reinforced in the dividing of women into the pure and impure, the clean and the unclean, the white and virgin and all the others. If woman is other, whore is the other's other.
>
> (p. 77)

For these reasons, I generally do not use the term "slut-shaming" in this writing and seek to focus on how whore-stigma impacts sex workers—especially those with minoritized identities. In general, I try not to use the term "whore" unless I am invoking an analysis of which I perceive whore-stigma animating a particular context or in direct quotes/citations.

### *Escorting*

Escorts often focus on companionship and time with clients. They are paid to attend events—such as dinner, a night out, a wedding—and can include domestic and international travel. Escorts and clients sometimes have sex as part of the arrangement but not always. The exchange first and foremost is time for money (De Fay, 2017). Different types of escorting include working as a sugar baby or "sugaring" where typically an older financier (sugar

daddy/mommy/parent) helps a younger person (sugar baby) who needs money. These particular arrangements can range from platonic friendships to full romantic and sexual relationships and many variations in between (De Fay, 2017)

Escorting as terminology is used for types of sex work that fall outside of this explanation because some sex workers resolve to using "escort" to avoid using "prostitute." In this book, when I use escort, I refer to the explanations here. If I use "sex for money" or "person who has sex for money" that can include escorts but may not be exclusive to them. For example, sex workers in brothels do not focus on companionship or time spent together. Instead, sex workers in brothels and others who offer sex work for money simply focus on private sexual acts and—unless otherwise requested and agreed to—focus less on quality time/ public engagement (De Fay, 2017). Finally, escort as terminology is complex because it tends to be racialized and classed, which is to say, sometimes sex workers of color and poor sex workers may engage in sex for money but do not consider themselves escorts or use that definition (thotscholar, 2019).

### *Pornography acting/performing*

Pornography is "the explicit description or exhibition of sexual subjects or activity in literature, painting, films, etc., in a manner intended to stimulate erotic rather than aesthetic feelings; printed or visual material containing this" (pornography, 2021). Pornography (porn) performers are actors in adult-themed movies that usually include sexual acts in front of a video camera, or occasionally, live audiences (Escoffier, 2007). Pornography can be produced by large and well-resourced studios and productions companies, or the films and footage can be recorded by the sex workers themselves as independent content producers. The scenes and footage are then distributed individually or as part of a website/studio membership. In light of the COVID-19 pandemic, there was a substantial increase in individuals using platforms such as OnlyFans, Just for Fans, and ConnectPal, where they produced and distributed adult content as a way to make money, which could be considered a form of pornography.

### *Exotic dancing/stripping*

Exotic dancers/strippers focus almost exclusively on performing through dance. In some cases, they may work in clubs where there is no mutual touching or where dancers may touch clients, but clients are not allowed to touch the dancers. Strippers often create, rehearse, and perform routines on a stage in an adult club where they remove some portion or all of their clothing or costumes (De Fay, 2017). Their performances can include pole dancing, acrobatics, and other athletic and artful techniques. Again, these categories are not discrete in that one could only engage in one type of

sex work and not others. For example, some strippers sometimes engage in escorting and direct services, also termed as "extras" in the clubs directly or after having made arrangements with clients they meet.

### *Camming*

Camming is a form of sex work that involves performing sex shows online and usually they are live via webcam (hence the name). Camming can include exotic dancing/stripping, sexual acts with other performers, partners, or clients, and/or various types of role play. Camming usually takes place in a home, personal office, or studio. Clients pay for access to the livestream or session and some shows have chat features whereby viewers can communicate with the performer about what they would like to see on a stream (Jones, 2020; Richtel, 2013). In addition to a fee or membership to access the livestreams, viewers can also request the performer to engage in certain acts or scenarios and pay for those live and in real time. Some performers have preestablished tip goals that, if reached, they perform a certain act, routine, or fantasy on the stream. Camming can be a one-on-one experience, or a stream with many viewers and only one or a few sex workers/performers (Jones, 2020; Richtel, 2013).

### *Phone sex operators*

Phone sex operators host phone lines/phone services where clients can call to speak with an operator. Operators engage with clients in different ways from simple conversation to fantasy and role play. Clients are usually charged by the minute and can call in to speak with a different person each time or call to speak with the same operator (Gillet, 2015). Some phone sex workers work independently and as part of their process create different personalities and personas that their clients can engage (Thompson, 2016).

### *BDSM/Domination*

BDSM stands for bondage and discipline, dominance and submission, sadism and masochism. BDSM comprises a number of sexual activities involving role-playing and power play between two or more partners (Thomas, 2017). BDSM is also known as "kink" and there is a vast community of individuals who engage in this form of sexual activity/community unpaid. Some individuals are paid for their BDSM services as a dom/domme (a dominant sexual role) and/or a sub (a submissive sexual role; Thomas, 2017). BDSM/Domination is a *type* of sexual community and non–sex workers also engage in BDSM. Further, BDSM is not necessarily exclusive of other sex work. For example, a person can work as an escort and offer BDSM/domination services. BDSM can also be part of a role play or scene in a webcam show (Wyatt, 2015).

### *Sex trafficking*

Sex trafficking is a human rights violation where individuals are forced—broadly defined—to perform sex acts, a practice that includes the use of threats, abduction, deception, and other forms of coercive violence toward the goals of exploiting an individual (Ditmore, 2008). Sex trafficking and human trafficking are sometimes used interchangeably, though it may be more clearly specified that sex trafficking is a type of human trafficking. Human trafficking, in general, involves forced labor and *can* involve sexual exploitation (SWOP Behind Bars, n.d.). To be precise, sex trafficking would usually include some form of forced sexual activity by another whereby human trafficking may or may not.

Sex trafficking is often conflated with sex work by advocates, lawmakers, and policymakers (Grant, 2014). I address this conflation at various points throughout the book because it is detrimental to both sex workers and individuals being trafficked. Linguistically, some people use trafficking to mean anyone and anything involving sex work which further tangles the discourse. When I refer to sex trafficking, I am referring to the dis-ambiguous definition here.

### *Prohibition, legalization, and decriminalization*

At the crux of the debates around sex work is how lawmakers and policymakers should govern the issue of sex work and if it should be governed at all. The perspective on legalization versus decriminalization varies based on the country or national context in question. Within the context of the United States, three major viewpoints dominate the discourse around sex work from a legislative or legal perspective and what could or should happen.

#### *Prohibition*

Prohibition means sex for money is illegal and those who engage in that work are considered to be engaging in criminal behavior (De Fay, 2016). The prohibition ideology of sex work is dangerous because it positions sex workers in vulnerable ways, for example, should they experience harm from clients, criminal laws may deter them from seeking help or protection from police, not that they should because many sex workers experience exploitation and violence from police officers themselves. Prohibition also contributes to the pathology that is thrust on sex work as a public safety, public health, and moral issue (Weitzer, 2010a). Further, the legality or illegality of sex work contributes to moral arguments against sex work because of prevalent discourse and carceral logics would mean for something to be illegal, it must be inherently wrong. Proponents of the prohibition model often rely on oversimplifications of sex work and reject the proliferation of terms that give nuance to the specifics of the topic (sex work vs prostitution vs sex

trafficking) that paint people in sex work as always being victimized and thus in need of saving (see Bindel, 2017).

### *Legalization*

Unlike prohibition, legalization would situate sex work as a legal form of labor and commerce. Specifically, sex workers would likely find their work regulated in terms of where, when, and how the sex work could take place (Mullins, 2015). Legalization is complicated because, while it may seem like an ideal outcome—for those who believe in the choice and agency of sex workers—a legalized context would criminalize those who do not or cannot meet the bureaucratic requirements of legalization such as paying costly fees for licensing and maintaining ongoing up-to-date registration (Outshoorn, 2012). In countries where sex work has been legalized, a great deal of illegal sex work thrived and expanded underground (Outshoorn, 2012). Further, legalization contexts are rife for exploitation of sex workers via business owners and conglomerates, which is to say, they profit greatly while the actual workers—as in most contexts under capitalism—do the brunt of work and stand to benefit the least.

### *Decriminalization*

Decriminalization is a construct whereby all laws, legislation, and regulation involving sex work are removed from the books. Unlike legalization, decriminalization produces contexts that give sex work the best opportunity to avoid being exploited by businesses and conglomerates while also protecting them from having to deal with the police and legal implications. This approach also desires to simultaneously disempower the state. While decriminalization is ideal, it is not a universal fix for all sex work issues or realities. Decriminalization is a limited response that does not control for connected issues to sex work in relation to oppression and dominance. For example, Black sex workers have voiced that decriminalization is a needed but still shallow intervention and that it will not have the same material impact on Black and trans sex workers as they would on white sex workers and those with other dominant identities (Survivor, 2018). As such,

> Decriminalization is not enough for Black/poor/trans sex workers because we are marginalized in other ways. Some of us have a record. Y'alls need to reduce it to something "simple" in the face of our complex reality is racist and classist and falls short of real justice.
>
> (thotscholar, 2018; Tweet)

Anecdotally, decriminalization, as a practice, has been shown to be inequitable for individuals living on or at margins, or those who had been adversely affected by the criminalization of the issue prior to decriminalization

implementation. For example, in the marijuana legalization movement, it is clear that legalization continues to gain ground and favorability by the masses, yet still, thousands of Black people are in prisons and with criminal records for the sale or possession of marijuana with no clear indication of how—or if—states will make amends for them (McKenna, 2017; Mohdin, 2018). Some states like Colorado, Maryland, and Oregon have begun early work on how to rectify this matter (Zezima, 2018), but it is unlikely they will see a material affect writ large on their experiences as well as the irreparable damage criminalization may have had on their livelihoods and lives. Black sex workers have similarly articulated that decriminalization of sex work is not a *universal* solution from a racial justice perspective. This is not to say decriminalization is wholly useless, rather it is not necessarily a comprehensive fix for many attendant and connected issues.

## Study context

The activism and advocacy of sex workers opposing SESTA and FOSTA were the impetus for my engaging in the study. By 2018, the U.S. Congress passed the SESTA (Stop Enabling Sex Traffickers Act) and FOSTA (Fight Online Sex Trafficking Act) bills, and they were signed into law by the then President (S.1693, 2018; H.R.1865, 2018). The articulated purpose of the legislation was to reduce and ultimately eradicate sex trafficking in the United States and sought to do so through targeting online and digital platforms where sex workers often advertise their services, connect, and organize. While free speech and technology advocates also opposed SESTA/FOSTA, sex workers have experienced the brunt of the inevitable consequences of the legislation.

From the outset, SESTA and FOSTA were concerning for a number of reasons and the components of the acts are not only problematic for sex workers and victims of sex trafficking but also dangerous for a free internet/free internet activity (Romano, 2018; Stewart, 2018). SESTA/FOSTA challenge previously afforded protections—known as the safe harbor rule—to creators and entrepreneurs who build platforms online. Section 230 of the 1996 Communications Decency Act states, "No provider or user of an interactive computer service shall be treated as the publisher or speaker of any information provided by another information content provider" (S.314, 1996). As such, internet platforms and internet service providers were not to be held accountable for content generated by users on their sites (S.314, 1996). SESTA/FOSTA creates an exception to the 1996 Communication Decency Act and the safe harbor rule that holds websites and online platforms responsible if users of their sites were found to post ads for prostitution, sex work, or sex trafficking on their platforms (Arnold, 2018; Romano, 2018; Stewart; 2018).

In theory, supporters of SESTA/FOSTA claim the legislation curbs the prevalence of sex trafficking through cutting online resources, connections,

and advertisements of sex trafficking rings (Arnold, 2018; Romano, 2018; Stewart, 2018). In practice, the legislation causes confusion, and classifieds/advertising websites such as Backpage were forced offline or their owners felt compelled to shut down any advertisements that might blur into gray areas (I discuss this more in Chapter 2). SESTA/FOSTA are irresponsible in that contrary to their aims, in practice, they put victims of sex trafficking in more danger (Lennard, 2018). If and where there was a prevalence of trafficking, perpetrators often moved underground and found other means to connect and advertise, which makes it more difficult for sex trafficking victims to find the help and support they need.

In the years following the passage of SESTA/FOSTA, sex workers and sex work advocacy groups have reported a significant increase in the number of dead or missing sex workers across the United States (Tung, 2020). This reality is especially egregious given many of the critiques of the legislation seem to be realized in that the bills have likely not reduced sex trafficking, "The government claims the laws have decreased sex trafficking ads by 90%. But an analysis by the Washington Post found that just four months after FOSTA-SESTA's passage, that number had rebounded to 75% of the original figure" (Tung, 2020, para. 72). In this way, if the advertisements have rebounded, the sex trafficking itself has likely not decreased, and yet, sex workers have been precluded from using spaces that help secure their safety.

> This bill claims to target human trafficking but does so by creating new penalties for online platforms that are overwhelmingly used by consensual, adult sex workers to screen clients, to share "bad date lists," to work indoors, and to otherwise communicate with each other about ways to stay alive. Data show that access to these online platforms decreases violence against sex workers, but I don't need data to know that my friends are safer with the ability to screen clients, to share information, and to work indoors.
>
> (Lee, 2018)

This is an ongoing challenge and reality that is creating dangerous and deadly circumstances for some sex workers. While I have always been curious and concerned about the needs of sex workers, it was not until Backpage was seized by the FBI and permanently removed from the internet that my attention and concern heightened, especially given that sex workers and their experiences are largely missing from the higher-education discourse. In the years since, SESTA/FOSTA have become more widely known in activist and advocate circles as well as media and television. In 2021, Netflix released its final season of *Dear White People* during which writers focused a season-long storyline on one of two queer college student sex workers of color who directly articulated the danger and harm of SESTA/FOSTA. The sex workers brought this to the attention

of their fellow students after one of them was robbed by a client. While attention to the act is promising, at the start of this work, there was not nearly as much focus on this legislation and corresponding issues. As such, I wondered if college student sex workers were being impacted and I was curious why scholars and researchers in U.S. Higher Education had not centered them in inquiry at a prevalent rate.

### *A researcher's dilemma*

At the beginning of this study, I experienced a dilemma as a researcher that I worked to reconcile and that I must address because it informs everything hereafter. When I began examining the vast literature about sex workers, the history and legacy of sex work, and the experiences of sex workers, one thing was painfully clear: sex workers (past or present) rarely control or publish the dominant narratives about their experience. Since sex workers are not given space to document their own experiences in academic literature, I wanted to be mindful and mitigate some of the harm that could come from not attending to this reality.

One text that I relied on heavily was written by a former sex worker, author, and journalist Melissa Gira Grant. In Grant's (2014) book, *Playing the Whore: The Work of Sex Work*, she examined and reported through vivid, inclusive, and accessible writing a holistic picture of sex worker realities, including highlighting the differential experiences of Black sex workers and sex workers of color. One of the themes throughout her book is how sex workers are often regarded as a population needing voice when, in fact, Grant demonstrates that sex workers have plenty of voice. The problem lies in the matter of people not listening to sex workers and, generally, society does not believe sex workers where and when it matters. Grant (2014) implicated individuals, systems, and structures for this problematic behavior—of speaking for or over sex workers—including the media, politicians, legislators, the police, and as it turns out, researchers.

As I read and processed her text, I dealt with an ongoing struggle with how to move forward holding these realities, given that I, too, am not a sex worker. Two particularly impactful passages nudged me to stay in deep reflection about this dilemma. In the first passage, Grant (2014) examined the violence of sex worker surveillance and offered:

> Surveillance is a way of knowing sex workers that unites the opportunity for voyeurism with the monitoring and data collection performed by law enforcement, by social service providers, or by researchers. Even under surveillance, sex workers' own words aren't to be trusted without the mediation of those who are almost always regarded as superior outside experts. As motivation, such surveillance isn't meant to expand the public knowledge of the lives of sex workers; it's to

> investigate some form of harm to the public that's believed to originate with them.
>
> (p. 60)

Through this passage, I interpreted Grant offering a few different considerations for me as a researcher. The first issue is irresolvable in that, I am not a sex worker. Given the publishing of this book, my work is likely in line with the notion that I am operating as a mediator between sex workers and many who do not (or would not) view sex worker voices and experiences as legitimate without the "superior voice" (mine as a researcher) that Grant noted.

I decided to continue with the inquiry because of the dearth in the literature about college student sex workers, specifically. I felt affirmed by this choice upon completion of the study given the students who engaged articulated their hopes that a book could come out of our research project. To this end, my commitment to students (particularly those in the margins of the margins) is important enough that I believed I should move forward, albeit thoughtfully and carefully. It is critical that higher-education practitioners and scholars help facilitate a context for student sex workers where they can be comfortable being open about their realities and experiences in higher education, if that is what they wish. Additionally, I deliberately centered sex worker voices through my citational practice throughout this book, this is to say, numerous citations point to writing and scholarship of sex workers themselves and/or writing and scholarship sex workers cite. Further, my invitation to current and former sex workers to provide the foreword and afterword of this book, I hope, signals my commitment to the praxis of this ethic. In addition, I urge people in the academy who might engage with this book, to consider the importance of listening to and believing sex workers first and foremost. I hope through being mindful, careful, and bold, I help to disrupt the violence of silencing and erasing their voices.

The second issue that Grant raised, is addressed by informed consent. Beyond the fact that I do not have an ethnographical portion of my study (which in some ways could be considered a form of surveillance), any student sex worker who collaborated with me on the study did so willingly and had the opportunity to withdraw willingly. By collaborate, I am referring to a more intentional and inclusive practice that moves study participants beyond a unilateral engagement with me and the study. In addition to centering knowledge co-construction as part of the process, I also elected to provide more agency to sex workers involved with the study that informs this book. Finally, throughout this book, I actively write to disrupt the idea that sex workers are problematic or harmful to the public. In nearly every case, I have worked diligently to position sex workers within a labor context and always with power-consciousness in mind.

The second passage that Grant (2014) wrote forced me to consider how I might avoid leaning into a form of confirmation bias that seeks to perpetuate harmful misinformation and stereotypes about sex workers.

> What we should also bear in mind when considering any study or news story that purports to examine prostitutes or prostitution is that many who are described with these terms do not use them to describe themselves. When many researchers and reporters go looking for prostitutes, they find only those who conform to their stereotypes, since they are the only people the searchers think to look for. If sex workers defy those stereotypes, that is treated as a trivial novelty rather than reality.
>
> (p. 20)

Here, Grant (2014) named the ways reporters and researchers often engage in a practice of confirming stereotypes about sex workers that reduce their complexities to harmful tropes and seek to essentialize these experiences to the experiences of all sex workers. Grant (2014) also named how language matters and how often writing and research that frame sex workers using only "prostitutes/prostitution" is problematic because writers/researchers write and speak about sex workers in ways they do not necessarily speak about or think of themselves. Further, those accounts often only reflect the experiences of some sex workers. Conversely, I worked to find often erased voices within the community of sex workers (e.g., LGB sex workers, Black sex workers). I endeavored to center multiple minoritized voices deliberately—above and beyond—those of other sex workers who hold more dominant identities (e.g., cisgender-heterosexual white sex workers). My intention with this book is to help render visible the experiences of sex workers with more minoritized identities, as they have often been left out of research and writing about sex workers in both historical and contemporary contexts.

### *Researcher positionality*

As a qualitative researcher, it is imperative that I articulate my worldview and experiences as a way to position my approach to this inquiry and writing of this text. Further,

> As researchers we need to maintain an informed reflexive consciousness to contextualise our own subjectivity in data interpretation and representation of experiences in the research process. Self-reflexivity promotes the reconciliation of personal motivations for conducting research and the extent of accountability owed to the population studied. Since no research, using any mode of inquiry, has no point of view and since research is not a value-free exercise, the challenge is not to eliminate but to document the effects of personas that influence our behaviour and positionality.
>
> (Alzouebi, 2011, p. 1)

As such, I offer a bit of information about who I am to assist readers in better understanding this work. I identify as a cisgender man and have had the

privilege to be "traditionally educated." Further, I identify as having multiple minoritized identities including that I am Black, generationally poor, and fat-bodied, to name a few. My experiences as a multiply minoritized person are important because white supremacy, capitalism, and patriarchy have impacted each of my identities in dynamic and violent ways. As a result of these violent and often painful experiences, I am positioned to attend to the dynamics of power, almost with surgical precision—especially as it relates to the identities I hold. I identify as a Black feminist and womanist and the majority of my research, writing, and teaching are informed by Black and endarkened feminist onto-epistemologies. As a Black man, I often experience tension in naming my Black/endarkened feminist/womanist embrace because of how power then instructs that I (and Black men broadly) should be celebrated for simply naming this politic—as men—despite an assessment and evaluation of the actual praxis of our claims to the politic(s).

I believe that sex work is marred by some of the worst parts of the system of dominance, respectability politics, Christian dogma, economic terror, and some of the most marginalized people—Black people, Trans people, and gender nonconforming people—are affected by the laws, policies, and discourse about sex work. While I have been excited at the possibilities of this research and book project, I tried to maintain diligence as I contemplated how this project can manifest, how I could do it justice, and how I could avoid paternalism and savior-ism in my approach. It is with all of this in mind that I moved forward thoughtfully but boldly, committed to doing this justice work and unapologetically centering the experiences of sex workers and more importantly their voices in all aspects of the inquiry and writing of this book. I hope that whatever comes of this text, and the time I and my collaborators sacrificed for it, that it will elicit something useful. I hope that their voices will be used as tools toward the efforts to dismantle one of the many ways dominance plagues our lives and existence. Even now, I continue to ask myself "What is the deliverable? What is the outcome? What would you have higher education do in relation to sex work(ers)? What would you have the world do?" And the only response I have is: better. I want us to do better.

## Conceptual framework

Conceptual frameworks comprise three key components: personal interests, extant research, and theoretical frameworks (Ravitch & Riggan, 2017). I addressed my personal interest in the preface and the previous section on study context. I reference extant research throughout the book where I highlight information about sex workers broadly and college student sex workers specifically. In this section, I will outline the theoretical frameworks which include the polymorphous paradigm (Weitzer, 2010b) and intersectionality theory (Crenshaw, 1991), which informed study design and findings reported in portions of this book.

### *Polymorphous paradigm*

Supporters and opponents of sex work often use binaries to engage in debate about sex work. These binaries include discourse that frames sex workers as either having agency *or* being victims and thinking about sex work as inherently degrading *or* empowering (Grant, 2014; Showden & Majic, 2014). Some scholars have troubled the idea that sex work is inherently degrading for *all* people in *all* contexts, referring to that mode of thinking as the oppression paradigm (Weitzer, 2010b). Using the oppression paradigm is problematic, one-dimensional, and unnecessarily essentialist and is a view that "depicts prostitution as the epitome of male domination and exploitation of women regardless of historical period, societal context, or type of prostitution" (Weitzer, 2010b, p. 16). In addition to being reductionist, thinking about sex work in *only* oppressive ways lacks nuance for how sex work is experienced differently based on privileged identities and minoritized identities (such as white women who may be oppressed in their gender and sex worker space but not in their race space or even sex workers in the global north versus the global south).

The polymorphous paradigm is an analytic that gives nuance to sex work discourse and provides a more robust way to engage the experience of sex workers (Weitzer, 2010b). As an analytic, the polymorphous paradigm creates space for a multitude of truths and realities that better accounts for power structures, power differences, and would compel those interested in sex work to seek to understand the how and why of any uneven distribution of agency and subordination within sex work (Weitzer, 2010b). The polymorphous paradigm invites scholars, researchers, and the public to consider what aspects of a sex worker's identity, experience, and context might inform how they might feel/be empowered or feel/be victimized, and yet still going beyond all binary conceptions,

> Within academia, a growing number of scholars are researching various dimensions of sex work, in different contexts, and their studies have documented substantial variation in how sex work is organized and experienced by workers, clients, and managers. *Such differences also are apparent in the writings of sex workers themselves,* who contribute to online discussion forums. Together, these studies and supplementary writings help to undermine popular myths about "prostitution" and challenge those writers who embrace the *monolithic oppression paradigm*. Victimization, exploitation, choice, job satisfaction, self-esteem, and other dimensions should be treated as *variables* (not constants) that differ depending on type of sex work, geographical location, and other structural and organizational conditions.
>
> (Weitzer, 2010b, p. 26; emphasis added)

The polymorphous paradigm can be operationalized as a broad rejection of the oppression paradigm and invites analyses of sex work that go beyond

singular conceptualizations of the work rooted only in violence and despair, though those aspects can and should be considered in how sex workers themselves talk about their experiences in sex work. The paradigm does not preclude an analysis of negative aspects of sex work but rather suggests that researchers and writers do not obscure or flatten the holistic picture of sex work and perhaps more importantly, ensures analyses do not paternalize sex workers.

A polymorphous paradigm is a compelling frame through which I examined the prevalence and experiences of sex workers, including students in higher education. Moving beyond binaries means going beyond reductionist, monolithic, and simple ways of thinking about researching, analyzing, or discussing any given interest or issue. Sex work is complex and engaging this topic means going beyond determining if it is "good or bad," or if it is "right or wrong." Moving beyond binaries means letting go of the reductionist notion that sex work can *only* be either degrading *or* empowering. Sex work is messier than that, more complex, more convoluted. Going beyond binaries within the context of this book means to hold multiple—sometimes competing—truths. It also means that a "good or bad" determination is not the goal but seeking and writing toward liberation and justice are.

### *Intersectionality theory*

Theory, thinking, and concepts related to what is currently known as intersectionality have existed for generations. Some date this genesis as far back as 1850 (McKissack & McKissack, 1992) though the predominant citation of the term as a result of its "coinage" is to legal scholar Kimberlé Crenshaw (1991). My mention of this history is to highlight the reality that power is not additive but multiplicative in nature and people throughout history and across time have articulated how they experience dominance in multiple ways. However, as Nash (2019) articulated "locating intersectionality in a singular moment, and the ongoing battles over who coined it, reflect the profound 'lure' of the origin narrative particularly in the context of the intersectionality wars" (p. 42). Intersectionality wars refer to the "discursive, political, and theoretical battles staged" (Nash, 2019, p. 36) specifically within Women and Gender Studies and how the framework and analytic has been taken up within, across, and outside of the university broadly. Another offering of Nash's (2019) framing is that of intersectional originalism which is:

> an interpretive framework that confers value on "deep engagement" with Crenshaw's articles, invests in the notion that these articles have a singular meaning that can be ascertained through sustained practices of close readings, and contends that later work "distorts" that true meaning through careless reading. Originalism, then, operates as

> a methodological tool and as a political strategy. As a method it insists on close reading as a practice and as *the* primary way of accessing and unleashing intersectionality's "true" meanings. It suggests that intersectionality's critics are plagued by misreadings of the analytic and argues that close(r) reading is required to bring us nearer to intersectionality's truths.
>
> (p. 61)

Here, Nash (2019) articulated behavior I have engaged in as a Black feminist even though I may not have recognized or understood myself as doing so at the time. My mention here is to offer transparency of my positionality at the time of conducting research as well as my stance and positionality at the time of this writing; that is to say, I value intersectionality as an analytic and recognize the importance of citational politics but my intent is not to exacerbate the intersectionality wars or engage in intersectional originalism. Instead, I embrace Nash's (2019) invitation "welcoming anyone with an investment in black women's humanity, intellectual labor, and political visionary work" (p. 19) to engage Black feminism and intersectionality. Further, I think it important to note my decision to incorporate intersectionality into my conceptual framework especially because I did not engage with only Black women in this study, yet, the analytic is effective regardless. As Crenshaw (2017) offered, intersectionality is "not just about Black women, but it's never not about them either" therefore the use of the analytic was compelling.

Intersectionality is broadly an analysis of power and specifically how power constrains (differently) in relation to certain identities one might hold. For example, Black women often experience racism that is sexualized and sexism that is racialized which is indicative of oppression at the intersections. Scholars may articulate tenets of intersectionality differently depending on their discipline, what they "count" and include as intersectionality, and the purpose of their work. Given that I was interested in college students within higher education I leveraged Linder's (2016) outlining which includes six tenets: (1) identity is intersectional, not additive; (2) intersectionality places lived experiences of marginalized identities at the core; (3) identity is fluid and contextual; (4) intersectionality explores the complexities of the intersections of individual identities with systemic/structural inequity; (5) intersectionality focuses on the intersection of multiple marginalized identities and the intersections of dominant and subordinated identities; and (6) intersectionality focuses on creating change through research, policy, and practice. Throughout my research and writing process, I focused on understanding how college students were experiencing higher education in relation to the racial identities, sexual identities, and identities as sex workers as well as how they were experiencing sex work in relation to their racial and sexual identities. This was critical as it informed how I conceptualized the marginality of their experiences and made meaning with them and their stories.

Intersectionality scholars offer that academics, activists, and practitioners must resist the urge to understand the margins as only a place of deprivation; to do so mischaracterizes individuals living under dominance and their use of the margins as a potential place of empowerment and critical resistance (hooks, 2015). Reframing the margins is a factor that is important to consider when researchers think about self-determination and the struggle for liberation—both of which are salient to sex worker realities (Grant, 2014). Finally, central to intersectionality is engaging in deliberate action toward liberation (Collins, 1990, 2002), that is, scholars and practitioners must do something with the information they obtain.

> Intersectionality alone cannot bring invisible bodies into view. Mere words won't change the way that some people—the less-visible members of political constituencies—must continue to wait for leaders, decision-makers and others to see their struggles. In the context of addressing the racial disparities that still plague our nation, activists and stakeholders must raise awareness about the intersectional dimensions of racial injustice that must be addressed to enhance the lives of all youths of color.
>
> (Crenshaw, 2015, para. 12)

This book is not tangential to this aim but, in fact, material to it. For example, as a pre-tenured faculty member in higher education and student affairs, there are some who might caution against authoring a book at this time. However, the sex workers I worked with desired a book as a more accessible way to share their stories and as a point of advocacy. It is my intention to go beyond publication and the confounds of faculty/tenure structures to engage in advocacy, but my adhering to this call—for a book publication—is rendering visible college student sex workers who are astonishingly absent from higher-education research and discourse (Haeger & Deil-Amen, 2010) in ways they requested.

## Critical narrative methodology

Narrative inquiry is grounded in educational philosophy and allows researchers to better understand human experiences through storytelling and personal narrative (Kim, 2016). Within narrative inquiry, different genres assist a researcher in making research design choices. Attention to the genre is important because it makes narrative inquiry distinct from other qualitative research, and it will better guide the researcher toward what types of narrative data they should collect (Kim, 2016). For the study that informs this book, I chose to combine a biographical approach, arts-based, and literary-based approach, referred to as genre-blurring. Through combining or blurring genres researchers can better consider the multiple facets of a particular study context and create the best design for the study approach (Kim, 2016).

I situate my use of narrative methodology within a critical paradigm (Bronner, 2011). Critical theory developed out of Marxism ideology, but is less concerned with economic determinism or what Marx termed the "economic base" and is more focused on the "political and cultural 'superstructure' of society" (Bronner, 2011, p. 2). From a paradigmatic stance, Levinson (2011) offered examples of common values and goals of critical projects which can include participatory democracy and self-determination, critical awareness of power, environmental justice, economic justice, and social justice along the lines of race, class, and sexual identity. However, these values may not be shared by critical theorists or a critical paradigm alone—for example, liberal positivists may espouse similar values—therefore additional defining hallmarks of a critical paradigm include value-rationality (critical theory is not neutral, it has a point of view on social progress, liberation, and the social good), ideology-critique (critical theory urges the need to critique and dismantle dominant ideologies that enable social domination), and recognition of domination as structural (that is, oppression is endemic, patterned, ongoing, and deeply connected to the agency of the oppressed; Levinson, 2011). The polymorphous paradigm and intersectionality theory are deeply connected to the outlined values and defining characteristics of critical theory and through their use as the conceptual framework, I situate this project as a critical narrative inquiry.

## Data collection

It was important to me that this research project be community-engaged and community accountable. Given Grant's (2014) urging of the challenges of research on/about sex workers, I wanted to ensure this project was conducted properly *with* workers. My first step toward this end was to imagine this project as power-conscious collaborative research (PCCR) (Stewart, 2021). This approach involves six imperatives across three phases of the life of the study (pre-study, during study, after study) and includes reframing participant roles as collaborative roles, sharing the research process through invitations to contribute to research protocols and co-write parts of the publications, and finally robust financial incentives. Detailing of this framework can be seen in Figure 1.1 and in Stewart (2021), but I will briefly discuss the importance of the language shift.

In this study it was critical to abandon the language of "participant" when referring to the college students engaged in this study, thus alternatively, I use the term "collaborator" when referring to those students. As a critical narrative inquirer, it is crucial that as we imagine research processes with the people and communities as the subject of our inquiries, we must do so in ways that "invite them into our work as *collaborators*, sharing control *with* them, so that together we try to understand what their stories are about" (Mishler as cited in Kim, 2016, p. 169; emphasis added). Therefore, as I reframed the student engagement from participants to collaborators,


*Figure 1.1* Six imperatives for power-conscious collaborative research. Used with permission from the publisher (Stewart, 2021).

I was better able to hold myself accountable to fully centering them, their needs, and wishes as we approached the inquiry and it served as both a symbolic and material gesture to disrupt prevalent manifestations of research praxis.

To recruit collaborators, I used online and digital platforms and tools including college and university email listservs that had a reach to Black students, students of color, and LGBTQ college students. I also shared a call for collaborators on social media including Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram. On that advertisement, I instructed students to follow a weblink that would navigate them to my personal webpage. On that website, I gave students access to information about the study, the research process, and incentives they could expect should they choose to collaborate. I also provided blog posts that included my positionality statement, a short biographical sketch, and blogs that offered examples of my perspectives on equity and justice topics. My hope was that in sharing an abundance of information about myself, students could make an informed decision about our collaborative project. Confidentiality and discretion are important for sex workers in relation to their safety, well-being, and livelihood so it was important that I reveal myself in dynamic and authentic ways.

After reviewing the available information, if they were interested in collaborating with me on this study, I instructed them to follow one final weblink which connected to a Qualtrics intake form. Through the form, I collected their preferred phone number (I encouraged the use of a burner for their safety) as well as a pseudonym. From there, I contacted the interested students to explain the collaborator role, including providing iterative feedback during the data collection and analysis process, engaging the artifacts of other collaborators, and building consensus about the publication

of research findings. I also explained the collaborator versus participant terminology as a way to make the research process transparent and to build trust. The criteria for serving as a collaborator were as follows:

- College students who were currently enrolled or within two years of graduation
- Had to attend an accredited college or university
- Had to engage in any form of sex work at some point concurrently during their time as a college student. Types of sex work included but were not limited to
  - Escorting
  - Phone sex
  - Exotic dancing/Stripping
  - Camming
  - Adult film/Pornography
- While any student meeting the aforementioned requirements could participate, I noted in the call I was particularly interested in working with Black students, LGBTQ students, and students of color

While I intentionally recruited college student sex workers with minoritized racial, sexual, and gender identities, including trans people, I did not have any trans collaborators choose to participate.

I collected data over the course of two months but my engagement with the collaborators ranged from 4 to 6 months. Depending on the collaborator's location, I conducted interviews either virtually (Skype, Google Hangout, Zoom) or in person. Each collaborator participated in two interviews lasting two hours each for a total of four hours of interview time per collaborator. Each of the interviews comprised two distinct phases: the narration phase and the conversation phase (Kim, 2016). During the narration phase, I offered the collaborator grand-tour questions that allowed them to narrate freely, without interruption, various aspects of their sex work experience. The questions varied for each interview and examples include:

Interview 1: Narration Phase

I want you to take a moment and reflect on your time engaging in sex work. Specifically, I want you to put yourself back to just before you decided to engage in sex work for the first time. And tell me:

- What were the circumstances that made you consider sex work?
- How long did you consider before making your decision?
- How did you make the decision to do sex work and what was your introduction like?

Interview 2: Narration Phase

I want you to take a moment and reflect on your time as being both a sex worker and a college student and tell me:

- What that experience is/was like and how have you navigated the experience?
- Talk to me about how you handle your sex worker identity versus your student identity? Do you view them separately? Are they blended?
- What have been the most challenging parts of being both a sex worker and a student?
- How do you think your experience as a sex worker differs from that of other sex workers?

To ensure the most robust narrative data, I helped collaborators situate their stories with a narrative thinking context. Narrative thinking is comprised of three components: the narrative schema, the storyteller's prior knowledge and experience, and cognitive strategy (Kim, 2016; Robinson & Hawpe, 1986). To successfully create an interview context where a collaborator can engage in narrative thinking, the researcher must refrain from viewing protocols as robotic and prescriptive processes where questions are simply inducements for the response as opposed to viewing them as a form of full and coherent story and speech (Kim, 2016).

The most important feature of narrative interviews is that they must be designed in a way to allow collaborators to "speak in their own voices, to express themselves freely, deciding where to start their story, as well as the flow of topics" (Kim, 2016, p. 165); doing so allows them to create their own narrative schema (Kim, 2016). Simply put, the stance of the researcher is more important than the form and content of any given question in research protocol (Kim, 2016); the stance being that I, as the interviewer, engaged collaborators as an attentive listener, and they were narrators telling full stories prompted with narrative thinking.

The best way to illustrate narrative thinking was to explain the components, then I gave an example of a written story as often told or recited in research interviews, and then I gave another example of a more robust story told with narrative thinking. I helped situate the collaborators' understanding of narrative thinking by explaining what it was at the beginning of the interview, provided the examples, and had them reflect back their understanding to me, as they began to tell their stories in meaningful, intentional, and holistic ways. I also encouraged them to ask questions as we went through our conversation and as they recounted their stories.

In addition to interviews, the collaborators created three artifacts connected to the literary-based and arts-based genres of narrative inquiry (Kim, 2016). I used artifact elicitation to enrich the data collected through collaborator stories and fulfilling data collection of a creative nature connected to the methodology. Further, artifacts, or tactile data, contextualized the stories of student sex workers. My decision was informed by the notion of "blurring genres" to ensure the research design, and in this instance data

collection, were in alignment with the types of stories I wanted to collect and tell (Kim, 2016).

Collaborators were asked to create two letters: they wrote a letter to their past self prior to engaging in sex work and a letter to a person or entity connected or related to their student reality. These letters comprise the focus of Chapter 4 and I discuss methodological considerations there. The final artifact was co-created between the collaborators and me. At the conclusion of their second interview, I offered collaborators the opportunity to be in communication with me so that we could develop the creative nonfiction accounts of their first time engaging in sex work and also to provide feedback on the findings that I developed, if interested. At a minimum, all collaborators provided feedback on the creative nonfiction account of their first time—or a memorable time—related to their sex work. Our decision to have me compose the initial draft was rooted in my desire to not ask for additional labor from collaborators and because I have some experience in the creative nonfiction form.

After drafting their stories, I uploaded them onto a private password-protected website and disconnected the webpage from the website navigation or directory. Collaborators were instructed to log on with the secure login information I provided them and review the draft of their story. Next, they notified me if they were happy with their story, unhappy with their story, and what edits or revisions they wanted to make. It was important that collaborators felt that the stories accurately reflected their experiences and told—as closely as possible—in their own voice. When they had any notes or feedback, I would then incorporate them and make the necessary revisions/edits. I would notify collaborators when they had been updated for their review and we repeated the process until collaborators were satisfied with the stories. Once the stories were composed to their liking, we completed the editing/revision process. Some collaborators were happy with how their stories developed upon the first writing, other collaborators worked with me on several rounds of edits and revisions. Additionally, collaborators provided me agency to make any edits or revisions related to readability, structure, and form while the content of the stories remained.

There was an associated risk for collaborators to engage in ongoing communication with me—as a result of my needing to hold on to their contact information—so they each engaged to the degree and the length of time they felt comfortable. Finally, some collaborators provided feedback on the findings I developed from the analysis process and the degree they believed their narratives and experiences were accurately and adequately represented. Additionally, collaborators had the opportunity to offer me questions they thought I would ask but did not ask in our interviews. I then included those questions in later protocols with collaborators I interviewed. Finally, some of their questions will also shape interview protocols for future inquiries I will conduct related to college students engaged in sex work.

### *Collaborators*

A total of seven college students decided to collaborate with me on this research project as we sought to render visible the reality of U.S. college students who engage in sex work and those specifically with racial minoritized and/or sexual minoritized identities. I have included participant details that include demographic information of each collaborator but will briefly introduce them here (Table 1.1).

Maliah is a Black heterosexual cisgender woman who identified as having come from a middle-class background. She shared that her feminist identity was also salient to her, and she worked as a dancer in adult/gentlemen's clubs while enrolled as a college student. She was 20 years old when she began dancing.

Tianna is a Black bisexual, pansexual, cisgender woman who identified as having come from a poor/working-class background. She identified as a sex worker having engaged in escorting specifically and was 22 years old when she started sex work.

Stokely is a Black queer cisgender woman who identified with a poor class background. She articulated that being Muslim, Femme, and a Hoodoo practitioner as important identifications for her lived experience. She identified as an escort in relation to the type of sex work she engaged in and began sex work at the age of 19.

Kemi is a bisexual Nigerian-American cisgender woman. Her additional salient identities include that she is Black, a feminist, fat-bodied, and identified her socioeconomic status as poor. She identified with the title of sex worker having engaged in a variety of forms of the work and was 21 years old when she started sex working.

Gui is a gay Asian American cisgender man who noted that being feminist, agnostic, and middle class were also important identifications for him. He identified as a sex worker engaging in a variety of direct services with clients and shared that he was 18 years old at the time of his introduction to the work.

Maria is a biracial Latina cisgender woman who comes from a poor class background. She also identifies as a Womanist and activist and worked as a dancer in a strip/adult club. She was 21 years old when she began dancing.

Finally, Kathleen is a White bisexual cisgender woman who identifies with a middle-class background. Her identity as an intersectional feminist was especially salient to her and she identified as an escort when I inquired about the type of sex work she engaged in. She was 21 years old when she began escorting.

Table 1.2 shares the institutional type, size, and region of the college or university where the students were enrolled. I made the decision in tandem with collaborators to separate their demographics from their institution to further protect their identities. Given that I have shared their social identities along with a deep level of detail in their memoirs it might put collaborators at additional risk to share their institutional information.

*Table 1.1* Collaborator demographic information

| *Name* | *Race* | *Sexual identity* | *Gender* | *SES* | *Other salient identities* | *Sex work identity* | *Age** |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Maliah | Black | Heterosexual | Female | Middle class | Feminist | Dancer | 20 |
| Gui | Asian American | Gay | Cis-man | Middle class | Feminist agnostic | Sex worker | 18 |
| Kathleen | White | Bisexual | Female | Middle class | Intersectional feminist | Escort | 21 |
| Tianna | Black | Bisexual, pansexual | Female | Poor working-class | - | Sex worker | 22 |
| Maria | Biracial Latina | Heterosexual | Female | Middle class | Womanist activist | Dancer | 19 |
| Stokely | Black | Queer | Cis-woman | Poor | Muslim<br>Femme<br>Hoodoo practitioner | Escort | 19 |
| Kemi | Nigerian American | Bisexual | Cis-woman | Poor | Black feminist<br>Fat-bodied | Sex worker | 21 |

*age at the time of their introduction to sex work

*Table 1.2* Collaborator institution information

| *Institutions* | | |
|---|---|---|
| Large public institution in the Southeast United States | Mid-size public institution in the Midwest United States | Mid-size public institution in the Southwest United States |
| Small liberal-arts institution in the Southeast United States | Small liberal-arts in the Midwest United States | Large-size public institution in the Southwest United States |
| | Mid-size public institution on the East Coast United States | |

My intent with this research design was to center the stories of students who engaged in sex work, to collect those stories with art—and the art of storytelling in mind—to analyze those stories with attention to power and identity, and to share those stories in artful and impactful ways. I want to center the power of narratives in hopes that we may shift the tide of how stories move and operate in our world. Of narrative inquiry, Bruce (2008) articulated:

> It affirms the whole of the human person including the heart, body, mind, and spirit. It engages multiple and complex perspectives while respecting differences and remaining open to patterns of meaning in the complex. This kind of care for others, mutuality, affirmation, and respect for diversity resonate in the spiritual depths of the human person where one experiences the riches of life and the connection to ultimate reality.
>
> (p. 335)

This design allowed for depth in the stories and allowed collaborator experiences to be presented in ways that did not reduce their experiences or stories, a way that showed care for collaborators and affirmed them holistically. My goal was to tell good stories and as Kim (2016) named, compelling stories, ones that can make a difference in the lives of students engaged in sex work.

## Sex work: an introduction to core debates

Sex work is a complex phenomenon, and the debates are highly intricate; however, there are two core debates that are important—in my view—to understand when engaging the discourse around sex work. The first major debate asks: Are sex workers victims? Or are they empowered beings exercising agency over their bodies and lives? This particular debate often locates sex work in a reductionist binary and the divide between individuals on opposing sides is deep. In an effort to reject broad stigma about sex workers, some advocates, activists, and supporters of sex work often counter

the opposing side by offering that sex workers have agency, that sex work is empowering when a person chooses it, and overall, their choices should be respected. Conversely, detractors of sex work assert that sex workers are victims, disempowered, and in need of saving as a result of the oppression and patriarchal structure that is the "sex trade." These dichotomous articulations frame sex workers as *either* being in control *or* being victims and thinking about sex work as inherently exploitative *or* liberating (Grant, 2014; Showden & Majic, 2014). Recall, I discussed the polymorphous paradigm and how it rejects the oppression paradigm; however, the polymorphous paradigm also rejects the empowerment paradigm. Viewing sex work in either manner is problematic, one-dimensional, unnecessarily essentialist, and creates difficult conditions for sex workers to maneuver, yet this debate marches on.

A second major debate focuses on the question: Is sex work basically just sex trafficking? To better understand the premise of this debate, a moral and legal analysis is required. Sex work is marred by "moral" values that almost always have their footing in some form of religious history or belief and the moral argument against sex work has morphed somewhat in the legal and legislative sense over history and across time (Outshoorn, 2005; Weitzer, 2010a). Given that within the United States, individuals are supposed to be allowed to practice (or not practice) whatever faith or religion they want, it is illogical to justify law and policy against the manifestation of sex work on a religious or faith basis. If we follow the logic to the obvious conclusion and abandon moral reasoning, the question still remains: What is the *legal* basis for criminalizing sex work? And how did we get here? While I explore these questions more deeply in Chapter 2, the revelation is this: there is no true legal basis, in my view only a "moral" one. The moral crusade against sex work is reportedly relatively new. Laws against sex work are approximately 100 years old, which means there was a time when sex work and sex workers were tolerated—even if not socially accepted—in society,

> Until recently, prostitution was not a prominent public issue in the United States, as such law and public policy were relatively settled. However, sex work abolitionists have mounted a growing debate over the sex trade and they have implemented an organized campaign committed to expanding criminalization. This powerful moral crusade has been successful in reshaping American government policy toward sex work—enhancing penalties for existing offences and creating new crimes.
>
> (Weizter, 2010a, p. 61)

While the moral crusade is in full swing, criminalizing sex work on the basis of morals or religion is a weak argument, at best. Given this reality, strategies of sex work prohibitionists have shifted to focus away from policy

changes that infringe on constitutional rights (i.e., outlawing prostitution on the basis of faith or religion), and instead use the conflation of sex work and trafficking as a way to attack sex work indirectly (Weitzer, 2010a). In this framework, sex work is positioned as always already rooted in exploitation and despair and thereby induces moral panic about the prevalence of sex trafficking—resulting in the need to eradicate sex work. The issue of sex trafficking has been so flattened and conflated with sex work that it is nearly impossible to discuss one without the other.

One lineage—there are many—of the sex work and sex trafficking conflation is rooted in the Swedish model response to sex trafficking. In 1999, Sweden implemented legislation that criminalized buying sex with the aim of decreasing sex trafficking; the overarching belief was that no person could or would choose sex work, and therefore "Johns" and "pimps" must be prostituting and trafficking these individuals. Therefore, lawmakers believed that eradicating demand—where no one paid for sex—would lead to an ultimate end to sex trafficking. In this way, attempts to stop sex trafficking may be theoretically about rescuing the trafficked people, their attempts are also deliberately about eradicating *any* sex for money because, "conflating the demand for buying sex with trafficking fueled speculations that an increase in demand for sex work will increase trafficking" (Global Network of Sex Work Projects, 2011, p. 1).

The sex work vs sex trafficking discourse is further complicated by the reality that some individuals who experience sex trafficking may consider themselves sex workers, and there are sex workers who choose sex work as a labor choice who were introduced through trafficking. Black sex workers, sex workers of color, and poor sex workers often critique advocates and activists who seek to divide sex work and sex trafficking citing the erasure of many individuals that may fall somewhere in between. thotscholar (2019) offered,

> It is mainly those sex worker feminists who traffic in "empowerment" rhetoric who continue to use this language. The intention is to draw firm lines in between sex work and sex trafficking (another binary) to circumvent or undermine sex trafficking legislation that targets independent prostitutes and cyber prostitutes (erotic webcam models), and to stop people from stereotyping sex workers as victims who need their kind of saving. However, while doing it this way might protect sex workers who are actually sex workers by choice, it does not protect the rest of us who fall into that murky gray area in between.
>
> (para. 16)

Indeed, sex workers complicate the sex work/sex trafficking binary and nuance what consent means within a labor context. The reality is people experience both and are still considered sex workers—even though they may be trafficked into it.

I offer the previous debates as a foundational introduction to engage the topic of sex work. While there are many debates and each is pertinent and relevant to the discourse, my intention is to offer a primer that will situate the narratives and experiences of college student sex work and the conditions they maneuver. At this time, they find themselves in the middle of a new(er) wave of the anti-sex work crusade, and tensions are at an all-time high. A predictable refrain located at the core of general disapproval of sex work is the belief that sex workers "use" their bodies to make a living, a problematic moral-based and somewhat hypocritical argument because nearly all of us use our bodies, to varying degrees, to survive but only some of us are criminalized for it. To this end, a labor analysis is required to engage this topic ethically.

## The labor of sex work

Black women have been at the forefront of many justice movements and society has collectively benefited as a result of Black women's labor as they work toward their individual and collective freedom. Given that four of seven collaborators identified as Black women, it is critical to examine the importance of Black women's labor as a contextual foundation to discuss sex work as labor. In this section, I briefly discuss Black women and labor more broadly which might help inform understanding of sex work as a labor issue. As a note, many of my discussions about Black women and labor are also true for all Black people—in many ways—given the terror of the institution of slavery. I want to be clear my focus on Black women here should not be taken as a rendering invisible of the Black labor and violence of Black non-women and as thotscholar (this text) wrote, gender is a fraught category in relation to Black/ness/people and historical/contemporary violence.

Dating as far back as chattel slavery in the American south—and likely long before—Black women have labored in unique ways. In addition to harvesting cotton fields, crops, and other agricultural substances, Black women were also tasked with taking care of slavers' homes (cooking, cleaning, laundering) and their families (Johnson, 2018), including breastfeeding white slavers' children.

> Enslaved Black women were forced to provide unpaid labor under brutal conditions for white landowners. While white women's work was relegated to inside the home, enslaved Black women's work was both inside and outside of the home. Outside the home, enslaved Black women were responsible for various aspects of agricultural labor. Inside the home, enslaved Black women were responsible for tending to white families as wet nurses, cooks, housekeepers, and caregivers, and were subject to multiple forms of violence—including sexual and emotional abuse.
>
> (Garza, 2016, p. iv)

When slavery was abolished, Black women continued to advocate as laborers, despite how their race and gender often situated them in the margins of the minds of the powerful and wealthy. For example, in 1881, 20 Black laundresses formed an organization named The Washing Society in Atlanta, Georgia. Tired of the combination of difficult work and low wages they received, they decided to strike unless they were collectively given raises (APWU, 2009). Over time, their organization grew to nearly 3,000 members despite threats by white business owners and politicians. When they decided to go on strike anyway they wrote a letter to the Mayor of Atlanta:

> Mr. Jim English, Mayor of Atlanta
> Atlanta Georgia, August 1 [1881]
> Dear Sir:
> We the members of our society, are determined to stand to our pledge and make extra charges for washing, and we have agreed, and are willing to pay $25 or $50 for licenses as a protection, so we can control the washing for the city. We can afford to pay these licenses, and will do it before we will be defeated, and then we will have full control of the city's washing at our own prices, as the city has control of our husbands' work at their prices. Don't forget this. We hope to hear from your council Tuesday morning. We mean business this week or no washing.
>
> (American Social History Project, n.d., para. 8)

After some back and forth with the mayor on behalf of the city, the women were ultimately successful as the city agreed to their $25 annual licensing fee which gave them more control over the laundry industry and higher wages (Aronoff, 2017; Weber, 2018). More importantly, they demonstrated to the Atlanta City Council—which reverberated throughout the region—that Black women were a force to be reckoned with and they should not be ignored as a vital part of the New South's economy (APWU, 2009). In fact, as a result of their labor advocacy, Atlanta's city government also succumbed to the demands of other domestic workers in the city including maids, cooks, and hotel workers (Aronoff, 2017).

Indeed, Black women's experiences inform what we know about the politics of the body, and particularly help frame in a dynamic way how society should come to think about sex work as an equity issue, a justice issue, and a labor issue. When speaking about Black women—sex workers specifically—Sankofa (2016) issued a truth and a caution that we must not forget:

> Black women have always fought for bodily autonomy and resisted against exploitation. Instead of punishing and shaming survival strategies, we should be invested in expanding choices. Sex work decriminalization is a racial justice issue, requiring us to address the root causes of vulnerability. To do this, we need to check ourselves—by silencing our

> judgment, listening to their voices, holding space for their healing, supporting them on their own terms, recognizing their agency, respecting their choices, and challenging structural oppression on all fronts.
>
> (para 9)

Undeniably, Black women have been laboring for as long as humans have been in existence, and many of the frameworks and language we know about what it means to labor, and the histories and legacies of labor, are connected to the knowledge, skills, ability, and wisdom of Black women. My intention is to move this book forward explicitly centering on how Black women have been required to give for our survival. Black women have illustrated what it means to have a body tied to labor, the violence of labor, and what it means to advocate, speak out, and seek better labor conditions. In this way, I work to position sex work as a labor issue—let it be understood that the grounding of my discussions and articulations have evolution from what Black women have instructed us about labor, since the beginning of time.

## A primer on labor

Prostitute, escort, stripper, hustler—sex workers have been known by many names but the commonality between them, despite the type of sex work, is that society views these individuals as "using their body" in sexual ways to make money. This particular rhetoric invokes an interesting, albeit problematic and imprecise, sentiment that requires an analysis of labor in relation to sex work. Recall that many sex work advocates and activists prefer the term "sex work" specifically because it situates the work squarely within a labor context; that is, it supports the common refrain "sex work is work." While I and others have elected to use this term—largely because of its simplicity and utility—in many ways the term flattens the experiences of non-white and poor individuals in various sectors of sex work. More specifically, sex work as terminology may obscure a labor analysis instead of clarifying one.

### *Labor versus work*

In her text, *The Human Condition* Hannah Arendt (1958) offered a deep analysis of the differences between labor and work. At the outset, she quoted Locke (1680) who used the phrase "the labor of his body and the work of his hands" (Sec. 27) to describe these terms, a taken-for-granted distinction that is perhaps worthy of examination. Arendt's (1958) analysis suggested labor is an action humans engage in resulting from the need to survive, and while important, it does not necessarily produce value beyond sustenance of life. This assertion is a parallel connection to critiques of capitalism and the way it facilitates a necessity for labor. Arendt (1958) noted:

> It is indeed the mark of all laboring that it leaves nothing behind, that the result of its effort is almost as quickly consumed as the effort is spent. And yet this effort, despite its futility, is born of great urgency and motivated by a more powerful drive than anything else, because life depends on it.
>
> (p. 87)

In this way, "labor" is less about a particular mode of action (what we do) and more about conditions that necessitate the engagement in that action (why we must do it). Alternatively, the term "work" invokes the/an act of creating, and more importantly perhaps, creating beyond survival.

Arendt (1958) extrapolated on this concept through her meditation on "works of art" where she offered:

> Because of their permanence, works of art are the most intensely worldly of all tangible things; their durability is almost untouched by the corroding effect of natural processes, since they are not subject to the use of living creatures, a use which, indeed, far from actualizing their own inherent purpose—as the purpose of the chair is actualized when it is sat upon—can only destroy them.
>
> (p. 167)

The distinction Arendt (1958) offered is important as it situates two realities: first, if you follow these delineations to their logical conclusion, the term "work" invokes the way humans engage in activity, often situated through creating tangible artifacts (a musician's body of work, a writer's collection of work/writing, an artists' portfolio) that exist to sustain the person and sustain the work itself. Second, "work" and "labor" are in mutually threatening positions in that work(s) desire to be permanent and resist the disposable nature of capitalism, while labor *requires* disposability—a "laboring that leaves nothing behind" (Arendt, 1958, p. 87)—and seeks to transform work into labor. Arendt (1958) traced the contours of the consuming nature of labor by noting,

> labor and consumption are but two stages of the same process, imposed up on man by the necessity of life, this is only another way of saying we live in a society of laborers … Whatever we do, we are supposed to do for the sake of "making a living" … the only exception society is willing to grant is to the artist, who, strictly speaking, is the only "worker" left in a laboring society.
>
> (pp. 126–127)

This articulation is important when synthesizing a labor analysis over what is termed "sex work." In taking Arendt's (1958) framing—and situating through separation—labor and work, "sex work" invokes engaging in sex,

as a work, that is not necessarily born out of a necessity of survival. This notion is in line with the articulations of sex workers—mostly white, cisgender, and nonpoor—who push the empowerment paradigm rhetoric as a way to distance themselves from sex trafficking conflations. In this context, their motivations—whether intentional or unintentional—become clearer in that, for them, sex work is work. Alternatively, for some Black people, people of color, queer people, and trans people, their engagement in the sex trade is more about survival, and in this sense, survival under capitalism, so labor is a more compelling framework.

### *Erotic labor*

Increasingly, individuals with multiple minoritized identities in the sex trade have begun to (re)claim the term "erotic labor" and while its genesis meaning was synonymous with prostitute, the phrase serves as a more accurate umbrella term for individuals in sex work who do not have the privilege or interest in framing their engagement as "sex work," with the corresponding ambiguity and impreciseness of the term. Further, erotic labor(ers) occupy a subversive location within society and sex work discourse given the growing sentiments and analyses of sex work as *antiwork* and specifically, anti-capitalist (Babylon & Berg, 2021). In her book, *Funk the Erotic: Transaesthetics and Black Sexual Cultures*, Horton-Stallings (2015) suggested that in the United States many people—especially Black and other minoritized people—are choiceless as it relates to labor and survival; that is, the question is not if one will labor, but rather *what* labor will one engage to survive? Further, choosing erotic labor is a political act:

> The decision to trade sex has to be seen as not only a survival tactic like no other, but a radical reading and position against the current order of work society as well. The only way to understand the radical nature of the choice is to rewrite and reread that decision as one steeped in an everyday activism against a work society that seeks constant labor and production for capitalism.
>
> (Horton-Stallings, 2015, p. 21)

In this sense, framing erotic labor as antiwork is compelling. Given that labor is a requirement under capitalism, engaging in antiwork is revolutionary, particularly when erotic labor is broadly viewed as "libidinous and blasphemous" (Horton-Stallings, 2015, p. 10) in society as a result—among other reasons—of the moral crusade against erotic labor.

Moral objections against erotic labor are prudent to a discussion of labor because they rely on hypocritical and circular logics; that is to say, many detractors of sex work fail to acknowledge that nearly all of us use our bodies as a way to make money and survive. One of the collaborators in the study, Kemi, alluded to these sentiments when she offered,

> Sex work is simply a shitty job that had to work when I didn't have money. It was not horrible or traumatic, I wasn't trafficked—which is horrible—and that legitimately does need attention, but sex work was simply a shitty job I had to do because like I had a to do a job to make my money and I feel like most people, including university admin and staff don't view it that way. I think they would feel like they have to save me from the work. I would have really preferred for someone to save me from working at Target.

Given this, the protests of erotic labor detractors must be clarified: Are they outraged that individuals use their bodies—perhaps in "dangerous" ways—in labor? Or, are they outraged that individuals choose erotic labor as their labor choice? For example, loggers or logging workers are believed to engage in one of the most dangerous types of labor in the United States (Kiersz & Hoff, 2021; Sauter & Stockdale, 2019). With a median hourly salary of $20.36 (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2020), the fatal injury rate (per 100,000 workers) is 135.9 and the nonfatal injury rate is 2,449 annually (Kiersz & Hoff, 2021). For perspective, the national fatal injury rate, that is, the rate of on-the-job injuries that lead to death, is 3.6; therefore, logging is a dangerous and deadly job indeed. All labor under capitalism corresponds with varying degrees of physical risks, wear-and-tear on the body, and mental health deterioration. However, most are considered normal and perfectly acceptable labor options, unlike erotic labor. Many laborers live their lives free of stigma related to the way they make their money, some even at the daily risk of death. Alternatively, society views erotic labor as deviant, destructive, and problematic; and as Kemi named, some erotic laborers prefer sexual labor over other types of labor. Further, as Grant (2014) noted,

> The experiences of sex workers cannot be captured by corralling them onto either the exploited or the empowered side of the stage. Likewise there must be room for them to identify publicly and collectively, what they wish to change about how they are treated as workers without being told that the only solution is for them to exit the industry. Their complaints about sex work shouldn't be construed, as they often are, as evidence for sex worker's desire to exit sex work. These complaints are common to all workers and shouldn't be exceptional when they are made about sex work.
>
> (p. 39)

Here Grant (2014) extended an invitation to de-sensationalize sex work complaints which would require a labor analysis. To be clear, the United States has never been particularly kind to any working-class laborer, especially those with racial, sexual, and gender minoritized identities or

disabilities. Further, laborers have always had to advocate for themselves and for better labor conditions. The countless benefits that are commonplace for some jobs today such as 40-hour workweeks, weekends off, sick leave, vacation, overtime pay, and workers' compensation were all achieved as a result of the mobilizing and organizing of labor activists and various labor movements. However, erotic laborers are not viewed as laborers in the same regard, and they certainly do not receive the same benefits, let alone respect for and freedom to do their labor as they try to survive capitalism.

This reality—survival—does not cease to exist at the borders of higher education. In fact, neoliberal values and ethics, produced by a large system of white supremacist capitalist patriarchy, manifest in higher education as a primary site for reproduction (Giroux, 2020). Given this, college student sex workers are trying to survive not only the "real" world but also their student world at their respective colleges and universities. One of the collaborators in the study, Gui, was a powerful and sobering example of this exact phenomenon. As the only man in the study, his story not only reveals the challenges of being gay, Asian, and having low income but also reminds us of the nuances that exist for erotic laborers who engage in their work, because as Arendt (1958) reminded, life depends on it. This is his story.

## My totally unplanned, incredibly unorganized, entirely episodic life as a sex worker

> Call up, ring once, hang up the phone
> To let me know you made it home
> Don't want nothing to be wrong with part-time lover

Stevie Wonder was on to something with this song. I honestly thought that three times would have been the charm for me. But here I am on time number four, hustling for quick cash. My relationship with sex work is complicated. Let me count the ways:

### Number 1

I was a freshman, and my private student loan was late. My scholarship was late, and financial aid was threatening to put a hold on my account. I absolutely could not afford the hold I needed to register for classes. If I didn't register, I would have had to wait until the following year for one of the classes because it filled up so quickly, effectively holding me up for an entire year. I also didn't have books for class. That year was a mess, honestly. I confided in a guy about all my troubles, we met on a gay meetup app. He not so casually offered to give me the money if I blew him a couple times.

Quickest money I ever made. Crisis averted.

## Number 2

Familial issues are always hard when you're the oldest child. I was born the eldest of my siblings to a multi-ethnic Asian family; in that context, the eldest has a lot of responsibility. Maybe more than I cared to have at times, but Mom wanted me to come home, Grandma wasn't doing well. Although going home would hold up my studies, I agreed. I told her not to send the money through PayPal. *I told her twice*. PayPal took at least a day to process and it was the weekend. My bank didn't process on the weekend. I needed to be on the train the day before.

At the suggestion of some friends, back to gay meetup I went. It's funny, they—my friends—somehow thought what they did and what I did was different. It wasn't. The only difference was I got cold hard cash where they got material things. But a transaction is a transaction. A guy offered to give me the $69 for a ticket so I could get home in exchange for my … liquid assets.

In less than an hour, I was headed down the coast on a train home. I was so preoccupied with the urgency to get there, to see Grandma, the means that made it possible almost slipped my mind. I gave mom back her money when I got there.

> If I'm with friends and we should meet
> Just pass me by, don't even speak
> Know the word's "discreet" with part-time lovers

## Number 3

Another fucking parking ticket. My pass expired so the tickets had piled up. But it got to the point where I had to pay them, or I was going to get a hold on my account from parking services. Again. Student loans took so long to process there, at the new university I transferred to. Between 6 and 12 weeks. I worked 20 to 30 hours a week, I was a caretaker, a full-time student. With everything on my plate, I could never seem to find the time to make it to the financial aid office to fill out another application. Who had time for that shit?

There was a guy … this one guy I could ask. He had propositioned me a while ago on the app. It reminded me of the propositions I'd gotten in high school. I lived in a state where tourism was huge, as was sex tourism. My friends and I always dealt with shady propositions and comments from white tourists in the area. When we were waiting for our bus, hanging out in the city after school, going to the nearby corner store, proposition after proposition. I think in a lot of ways I—and all poor Asian boys where I was from—were desensitized to sex work and propositions from white men, from Europe, Australia, South America, and the United States. The "generous" propositions from the benevolently racist white men.

Ticket(s) paid.

## Number 4

Before getting out of my car I check the map for the nearest hospital and nearest well-lit gas station: one was two blacks to the left, and the other two miles down the road the other way. Here I am again, venturing into my totally unplanned, incredibly unorganized, entirely episodic life as a sex worker.

This guy is something … the kind of client that likes (loves) a good stereotype. I get to go and pretend to be the "coquettish and shy but totally slutty Asian boy" for him. If I was going to put up with racists, then I figure I should get some money in the process.

I always wonder what mom would think. She used to always say that if the worst should happen she would engage in some sort of sex work if it meant that her children could be able to survive in this world. To mom, it was just another job that people did. Would she choose it as her first career? No, she wouldn't. But should the need ever arise? She said she would do whatever it took. We are alike that way, Mom and me.

I've been sitting in the car for a while and I know I need to go in and get it over with. I have class in the morning.

*sigh* I reason with myself
"Ok Gui … after this song."

And then a man called our exchange
But didn't want to leave his name
I guess two can play the game
Of part-time lovers

You and me, part-time lovers

But, she and he, part-time lovers.

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# 2 History, politics, law, and stigma

> Sex workers and anyone perceived to be a sex worker are believed to always be working, or, in the cops' view, always committing a crime. People who are profiled by cops as sex workers include, in disproportionate numbers, trans women, women of color, and queer and gender nonconforming youth.
>
> Grant (2014, p. 9)

While history is important for every academic discipline, centering history in relation to sex work is especially crucial as it is complex and vast. Specifically, the history of sex work greatly informs contemporary manifestations of the politics of sex work as well as the corresponding stigma. To begin, I offer a note on this chapter in relation to citations. I draw heavily from Nickie Roberts' (1992) work, *Whores in History: Prostitution in Western Society*. As I wrote in Chapter 1, my decision to center and cite sex workers who are authors and researchers is intentional, necessary, and my strive toward epistemic justice. Roberts' text, in particular, is rich, well-researched, incredibly detailed, and as such appropriate for (repeated) citation in this chapter. Further, Roberts does excellent work in reframing data that might otherwise perpetuate historical accounts and recounts rooted in sex work stigma historically and contemporarily. In her text, she noted, "I don't profess to be objective (nobody ever is, in practice); I'm even biased in the sense that I am wholeheartedly on the side of the unrepentant whore, the most maligned woman in history" (p. xii). I offer this context in an effort to be transparent that I have a clear point of view (as was articulated in my positionality) and so do the authors I cite.

My intention in this chapter is to offer a broad overview of how ancient and contemporary history reveals taken-for-granted assumptions that help explain why sex workers experience(d) hostilities and to show how historical conditions animate current contexts. I first open with an overview of early history dating back to prehistoric eras through the early 19th century. Then, I discuss U.S. history beginning around the 19th century and make connections to earlier periods of sex work that are germane to understanding how conditions manifested as they have/did in the United States. I

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conclude by discussing law, politics, and stigma in contemporary contexts that are firmly connected to some of the historical realities shared.

To enrich the historical offerings in the chapter, I bookend the material with memoirs from collaborators in the study. I begin with Stokely's story and end with Tianna's. Stokely offered a compelling narrative about linkages to the past through her articulations about the sacred and spiritual nature of sex work. As a college student attuned to the histories and legacies of Africans and their ascendants, Stokely remained steadfast in her belief that one of the oldest Yoruba deities, Nana Buruku, was/is constantly in her corner in relation to sex work. Nana Buruku is considered the mother of mothers, protector of women, and she is also related to matters of fertility (Rodrigues de Souza, 2020). When thinking about her sex work and spirituality, Stokely offered:

> The most rewarding thing about sex work has been the ways I know the ancestors be looking out for me. Oh my God, they really do. I always pray before going out with clients and I would pray to this Orisha in particular named Nana Buruku whom some people believed that she helped take care of sex workers. I would pray to her and they would really come through. I knew this because the clients that would fall into my lap shortly after were so not bad compared to other people's clients. I know my clients could be so much worse than I received. I thank my ancestors for that and thank the Orishas who advocate for me.

This is her story.

## Stokely: Dear Nana, it's me

"Have you never seen a person praying before?"

He didn't respond. He just brushed past me and went up the staircase. Fucking white people. It's like they can't comprehend life past their limited-as-fuck gaze or something. Of course, I'm sure he had seen people praying before but probably only within the confines of some boring ass Presbyterian mass that nobody cared about and never made any real difference. Well, some of us pray in staircases (while we wait for our clients). He was a Dumbass.

> Nana Buruku … grandmother of the Orishas, watcher of women, protector of all that is femme. I come to you as humbly as I know how. Please help make this night go easy. Make this job, easy. Protect me. Please help make everything okay, please help ensure that I get the money.

Spirituality and spiritual work is important to me, I mean, sex work is sort of spiritual work if you think about it. Being connected to the Orishas and the ancestors is important to me, it grounds me, it grounds our people; a

truth that is as old as sex work itself. The Orishas look out for us, they *look* like us, they are *our* deities.

Louis, my client, always tried to make small talk and that night was no different. I'm not sure what would be considered less than small talk, tiny talk? Cuz he wasn't ever really talking about shit. The previous time I saw him he went on and on about how he was against affirmative action. I think he thought maybe I was one of those respectable-ass Black people. Depending on the day and my energy I tried to educate his unaware ass. But that day, I just didn't feel like it. I just wanted to sit and enjoy the ride in silence. Normally we would just do hot tub dates, and sometimes I didn't even have sex with him; we just did some heavy petting and had random conversation. But that night he wanted to go to a swingers party. He was into that shit … swingers and nudist parties. Normally I told him no, but that time I agreed.

I was extremely nervous. We agreed that I did not have to have sex with anyone there or have sex with him, he just wanted some … touching. I was still nervous, because even though he wasn't asking me to fuck those other people, he was asking me to be around them and interact with them and I didn't know how comfortable I felt with that. That was why I took that moment in the staircase before leaving the dorm. In the car, Louis rambled, and I prayed to Nana.

*Be with me Nana. Be with me.*

About 45 minutes later we arrived to the hotel where the party was being hosted. It was one of those boutique hotels, kind of dark, and gothic. I felt eerie about the whole situation and my stomach was in knots, who the fuck were these people Louis is bringing me to? We took the long walk from the parking lot to the entrance. As we neared the room, I could hear some sort of soft rock playing. It sounded like Journey or some other 80's shit that was before my time. Louis knocked on the door.

Silence.

Louis knocked again and after a few moments a woman with jet-black hair answered the door by poking her head out, and nothing else. Her eyes moved between us and she looked me up and down hesitantly, like she was concerned for me.

"What are you doing Louis?" the woman asked.

"Gretchen … I don't know what you mean?"

"Come inside, I need to talk to you. Would you mind just waiting right here for a minute dear?" She gave me an assuring look; it was almost like she was asking me to remain calm while I waited. I agreed.

Louis stepped inside and there I was alone again, except instead of a staircase I was in a hallway. I was so confused but whatever was going on, it made me even more anxious. I looked each way down the long dark hall,

waiting alone kind of mumbling to myself as I started to pace slowly a few feet, back and forth. Low light emitted a dull glow on the sage green and maroon wallpaper and carpet. I wanted to leave but where was I going to go? I was at least 45 minutes away from my dorm and if I did leave, I wouldn't have made any money, and I couldn't afford to lose any money that night. I couldn't. I prayed.

Nana Buruku. I don't know how, but please work this out for me. Please.

I calmed myself and thought about the ancestors, the Orishas, the divinities, and all those rooting for me. They just want to see us, Black people, survive, to see us do good. We are the front of the line and they are all behind us, lined up and holding us up. All they want to do is see us continue and see us do better and suffer less. They want to see us do well. That's why I continued to develop and cultivate my relationship with the ancestors so I could continue to make asks like that one, and hopefully find support in them.

Several moments later, Louis returned and said that they wouldn't let me in because I wasn't 21. I was only 19 at the time. As I turned to leave Gretchen looked at me earnestly and said bye.

"I guess we could just go to a hot tub?" Louis offered.
"That's cool, Louis." I agreed.

He was disappointed and I faked my disappointment; I was so fucking happy. We went to another hotel and had a hot tub date like I had done many times before with him. We had some good ass conversations that night. We showered together and hung out in the tub, I twerked on him, and we just talked. I spent the next four or five hours educating him. As long as I saw Louis, I made it my personal mission to help him unpack his transphobia and we also spent some time talking about the erasure of Black Muslims in conversations about islamophobia. Over our time together he slowly started to see how the U.S. government wasn't shit. I had no real belief that he would do anything about it, but I figured if I had to spend that time with him I rather we spent it talking about what I wanted to talk about.

As I returned to my dorm the next morning, I kept meditating on my view of sex work as resistance. Resistance to the law, resistance to how women are "supposed" to be in this society, and resistance to colonialism. Sex workers have always existed. We haven't always been criminalized but we've always been here. I thought about that as my night ended the way I had hoped it would. Nana and the ancestors really came through for me. In my heart, I know they are proud of me because I'm surviving in this world; a world that I'm not meant to survive in.

*Dear Nana, thank you.*

## Early history

Contrary to common belief, erotic laborers existed and thrived before the advent and proliferation of patriarchal rule and, in fact, many early societies operated through a matriarchal rule. That period—referred to as prehistory—can be described as the period of time before human documentation or written record. It was a time filled with communities that honored women in "non-patriarchal, non-warlike, egalitarian societies and the powers of nature were originally venerated primarily in female forms" (Marler, 2006, p. 164). Women were viewed as earthly manifestations of goddesses and, because they held such high positions, were likely in full control of their sexuality. Further, these goddess cultures—which would be later considered fertility cults by some—had temples where people could go to engage in worship and where individuals could convey their allegiance to goddesses through ritual sex with temple priestesses (Roberts, 1992). These divine women had dual identifications: "both sacred women and prostitutes, the first whores in history" (Roberts, 1992, p. 4). As such, they occupied a hallowed position and were connected deeply to the people of the period. Their status was so noteworthy in these ancient societies that Kings often had to legitimize their rule (in the eyes of the people) through a process known as the sacred marriage where they too had to engage in ritual sex with one of the goddesses' priestesses to signal that the Kings respected and sought the goddesses' blessing (Roberts, 1992). To be clear, these early priestesses would not likely be considered sex workers by modern standards because their focus was on sex as a religious ritual and not necessarily for money.

Across many periods, prostitutes/prostitution was not only well-tolerated but viewed by some as necessary for a functioning society. In China, brothels can be traced to as early as the 600s BC as a normal and accepted practice (Ralston, 2021). Priests regularly had ritual sex with prostitutes in ancient Mesopotamia; the courtesans of ancient Greece serviced high-class men, political leaders, and low-class/common men; and in ancient Rome, prostitution was more than a common practice (Bullough & Bullough, 2019). During the collapse of the Roman empire until the 19th century, prostitution was routinely viewed as a necessary "evil"—for example, despite some statesmen and middle-class moralists' objections, Brothels were considered crucial to a functioning economy in many European societies—still, as an institution prostitutes had hostile relationships with whatever church was in power at any given time (Bullough & Bullough, 2019; Roberts, 1992).

### *Hoes and housewives*

Indeed, prostitution abounded across these multiple periods; despite this reality and their necessity, sex workers still struggled due largely to their positioning as "bad women," a title that could only be made legible against the "good wives" of the period. An Athenian lawmaker—Solon—is credited

as a primary institutor of state-sanctioned brothels beginning during the 6th century BC, where he taxed prostitutes, and he was also the architect of "pimping" and, in many ways, whorephobia (Roberts, 1992). Part of Solon's rise to power lay in his representing middle-class merchants and farmers as they sought to procure a share of societal power from the old/ruling aristocracy. Of high interest to this class—and in particular the men—was producing a male heir who could be passed the wealth and rites of the family. However, contrary to previous customs as outlined in aristocratic society—where a male heir could be produced from many women or lovers—in the middle class, only one woman could produce a legitimate heir, the legitimate wife. As such:

> Solon's views on women were unequivocal: they were either wives or whores. Any woman attempting to live independently of men, all poor women, foreigners, and slaves who worked outside of the home fell into the latter category.
>
> (Roberts, 1992, p. 15)

This dichotomy would go on to inform hostilities between "good" women/wives and "bad" prostitutes for millennia. However, while Solon certainly exploited a tale older than time—the adversarial relationship between sex workers and wives—he could not take full credit as there is evidence of these sentiments that date back to 2000 BC in the ancient civilization, Sumer. According to the Code of Lipit Ishtar—the 5th King of the Ancient Mesopotamian City, Isin—the following applied:

> If a man's wife has not borne him children but a harlot from the public square has borne him children, he shall provide grain, oil and clothing for that harlot; the children which the harlot has borne him shall be his heirs, and as long as his wife lives the harlot shall not live in the house with the wife.
>
> (Steele, 1948, p. 422)

In this way, a well-known contemporary phrase is made piercingly legible in an ancient context in that you quite literally could not "turn a hoe into a housewife," and it was due to patriarchal law. However, many prostitutes in these early periods were not interested in becoming housewives at all. In ancient Greece, wives were relegated to very little social life and were only allowed out of the house for religious observances. Additionally, they were not allowed at the markets as the shopping was completed by men or slaves of the home (Roberts, 1992). When given opportunities to socialize with men of their class—which were minimal and under the supervision of their husbands—the women could not engage on equal terms with the men as "the education of an Athenian wife was restricted to the domestic skills of cookery, sewing and 'housekeeping:' intellectual knowledge on the part of a wife

was forbidden for it was the sign of a harlot" (Roberts, 1992, p. 14). This reality was contrary to that of prostitutes who could engage in social life, manage their own affairs (business or otherwise), roam the streets at their will, engage in the arts, and speak to anyone they chose to (Roberts, 1992).

Similarly, in the Roman empire, while wives were given significantly more freedoms than their counterparts in Greece, the high-spiritedness of the Roman women saw many of them rejecting the whims of emperors and the ruling class, in favor of whoredom (Roberts, 1992). Specifically, Augustus, the first emperor of Rome, fearing the decline of power by the wealthy, created laws forcing women of the upper class to marry and have children. Many of them instead voluntarily registered as prostitutes, thus side-stepping the regulation (Roberts, 1992). Further, Roman prostitutes embraced their identity as the true free women of Roman society, much to the resentment of the women/wives of the ruling class. On this, Roberts (1992) offered:

> This antagonism between two groups of women was set to reach throughout history, and at its core lay the greatest irony of all: the fact that the wife needed the whore in order to boost her own status. After all, if the "Bad" woman did not exist, with whom could the "good" woman compare herself favorably?
>
> (p. 53)

Given this, it could be argued that the woman/whore divide is the foundation, the bedrock, of whorephobia. However, this revelation still renders an incomplete picture because there had to be a clear rationale for despising sex work and prostitutes and thus situating them as inherently problematic—beyond the fact that they were not wives. Here, the pre-Christian origins of the moral arguments against sex work become salient.

### *Moral origins*

One of the earliest indications of sex worker subjugation date back to 1075 BC within the Code of Assura or Assyrian law and stated:

> If the wives of a man, or the daughters of a man go out into the street, their heads are to be veiled. The prostitute is not to be veiled. Maidservants are not to veil themselves. Veiled harlots and maidservants shall have their garments seized and 50 blows inflicted on them and bitumen poured on their heads.
>
> (Arkenberg, 1998, p. 40)

At the time, wives and daughters were to be veiled to signal their designation as property and as a caution for other men "to keep their hands off" (Jastrow, 1921, p. 11), while temple women who remained unmarried were

to be unveiled to signal they belonged to any man who would want her. Beyond the law requiring prostitutes be unveiled, one could also be punished for recognizing a prostitute who veiled herself and failing to report her (Jastrow, 1921). This articulation reveals a clear desire to separate women of classes/designations and a violent regard for prostitutes—and the poor—and her potential decision/desire to not be recognized as such publicly.

In addition to this, Greek history further offers important perspectives on the lineages of moral objections. While Solon's laws and policies contributed greatly to the difficult conditions of the harlots of the time, he was supported thoroughly by a now well-known group of intellectuals, the philosophers. Like Pythagoras, much of philosophers' reasonings of the world resulted in binary frames describing nearly everything in opposing qualities: light/dark, good/bad, left/right, etc. (Roberts, 1992). This approach naturally extended to positioning men and women in the same dualistic way, "women were identified—of course—with darkness and chaos; seen as intrinsically evil and inferior to men—to whom were attributed the 'masculine' principles of light, order, and intellect" (Roberts, 1992, p. 26). As Pythagoras and other philosophers began to spread the doctrine that men should edify themselves by overcoming the "flesh" and pleasure, women, broadly—prostitutes specifically—naturally became something to resist, to overcome. Further, some of the philosophers argued engaging in sex should be limited to marriage and only for the purposes of reproduction which was an arguably "pre-Christian" (Roberts, 1992, p. 26) sentiment. But, as Roberts (1992) pointed out, the commands of philosophers did not match their actual practices as many of them regularly kept mistresses in an unsurprising abandon of "their superior masculine principles" (p. 27).

Despite these calls, prostitution generally persisted and regularly thrived in early history. Saint Augustine, the authority on marriage and sexuality in the early Roman Catholic church, urged that the suppression of prostitution would lead to the overthrow of society due to the carnal desires of men (Roberts, 1992), which signaled a keen understanding of the prevalence and demand of the trade and how it was deeply woven into the Roman economy. Further, there was little societal stigma associated with either the buying or selling of sexual services—though the church, philosophers, and some of the ruling class disagreed—but, interestingly, "sin" as a construct was not connected to the trade until much later. However, this did not cease the disdain for prostitutes by certain powerful men. After the fall of the Roman empire, the newly growing religion of Christianity took a firm handle on what would come to animate the now well-known dogma. On this, Roberts (1992) reminded

> the men in power began to pay lip service to the idea that prostitution was morally reprehensible, and that whores themselves were an evil and

> corrupting menace to the rest of society. The prelude to a *new* era of woman-hating was set to begin.
>
> (p. 54; emphasis added)

These histories reveal that much of whorephobia and sex worker stigma is seemingly deeply rooted foremost in a hatred of women and classism, which further suggests that much of the moral and philosophical grounding of the existing animosity was, is, and likely continues to be, fabricated.

## U.S. historical context

As recounted, prostitution was a global phenomenon long before it ever had a significant presence in the United States. When considering sex work from the point of colonization onward, some of the earliest records of prostitution date back to the 17th century, and the profession grew significantly during the 18th century. By the 19th century, the United States would have a sex trade that matched that of its non-U.S. counterparts in both scope and size (Roberts, 1992). Specifically, sex work was a significant and common part of American life in cities such as New Orleans, Chicago, New York, and California. During the Gold Rush of 1849 specifically and in Chicago from 1870 to 1930, prostitution grew economically and culturally and gave rise to the early iterations of brothels and parlors that swept North America (Blair, 2010; Grant, 2013; Roberts, 1992).

Brothels (or bordellos) were designated places where individuals (mostly men) could patron the sexual services from workers (usually women; Collins, 2004). In addition to brothels, historical accounts situate sex work in the United States in tandem with the implementation and rise of red-light districts. A red-light district was the location within a city where sex was contained and/or encouraged (Grant, 2013). These districts, which sometimes included brothels, originated near work/industrial sites (such as railroads) as a result of labor force managers needing an easy way to find their workers, "rail workers left red lanterns outside the doors and windows of the houses where they met prostitutes between their own work shifts. If their boss needed to find them, he could look for the light" (Grant, 2013, para. 11). While the origins of brothels can be traced firmly outside of the United States, red-light districts are American artifacts—though regularly attributed to Europe and Asia—and demonstrate just how normal sex work had been in the United States.

### *Early laws*

While engaging in the sex trade was not universally "legal," it was also not universally illegal in the U.S. early history, even prior to and after the establishment of red-light districts (Grant, 2013). Abatement laws were established in the early 1900s which allowed virtually anyone to lodge a

complaint against any place where prostitution was occurring (Laskow, 2017). Women who engaged in sex work were targeted by the police as part of a larger disdain for sex work related to moral judgments and when that did not suffice, societal attitudes objected to sex work, viewing it as social pathology and deviance (Roberts, 1992; Weitzer, 2010a).

Historical records also indicate that where laws against prostitution existed, they tended to be leftover/carryover from English common law which made certain actions—while not inherently connected to sex—such as nightwalking and vagrancy, illegal (Beaumont, 2015; Woodbridge, 2001). This reality was not unlike other parts of the world. In France, for instance, not only were prostitutes harassed by police but any woman who might have had a sex life would also be susceptible to arrest.

> Since the bourgeois public saw all working women as whores the police defined as clandestine prostitutes not only those women who went with a "mob of men," but also those who "changed lovers frequently." Under these terms, any working-class woman who did not conform to the middle-class norm of monogamy was liable to be stigmatized—and registered—as a prostitute.
>
> (Roberts, 1992, pp. 203–204)

In this way, to be in public at all or to be in public with a man as an unmarried woman could often be a cause for harassment and arrest. Further, nightwalking and vagrancy laws served to reproduce oppressions specifically for people of color, LGBT individuals, and working-class/poor people (Grant, 2013; Roberts, 1992). For example, gay men were often charged with violating a law that "declared engaging in oral or anal intercourse, for compensation *or for free*, to be a 'crime against nature'" (Grant, 2013, p. 6; emphasis added). Further, because "streetwalkers are the most likely of all whores to be working class and women of color," it could be argued that early laws were not only homophobic and classist but also racist (Roberts, 1992, p. 296). Of all prostitutes, Black women were routinely and disproportionately jailed and there were severe implications to their home and family life as a result of their being targeted by police as erotic laborers (Blair, 2010; Roberts, 1992). These laws signaled an early iteration of what would be generations of violence and contentious relationships between sex workers, police, and the jury of public opinion (Grant, 2013, 2014). This context connects a history of classism within sex work and how class informed who was policed and for what reasons.

### *Sex trafficking hysteria*

In the early 1910s, religious groups and sex work abolitionists launched campaigns against prostitution citing the immoral nature of the trade while also manufacturing hysteria that middle-class (white) women were increasingly

joining the sex worker ranks (Baggett & Bentley, 2020; Roberts, 1992). Part of their strategy was to spread the myth of prevalent forced prostitution, which ran parallel to the growing hysteria around suspected "white slavery" (Baggett & Bentley, 2020; Roberts, 1992). The hysteria was made possible due to a ripe period which was animated by a broad social purity campaign between 1900 and 1928 and by the last decade of the 19th century had grown in scope and size to become a mass movement in the United States (Roberts, 1992). The roots of this hysteria—which connects clearly to contemporary panic around sex trafficking—date back to the 1800s and were quite literally born from white imaginations and initially for entertainment purposes. Consider the passage below, worth noting in full which makes striking connections to one origin of the sex work/sex trafficking conflation and how it has always been rooted in power and bigotry.

> the social purity campaign looked to the lurid to create its agenda, its two abiding themes being "white slavery" and child prostitution. The "white slave trade" supposedly an organized international traffic in women, was a Victorian fantasy which formed part of the stock repertoire of melodrama in fiction and theatre at this time. The typical story involved innocent white adolescent girls who were drugged and abducted by sinister immigrant procurers, waking up to find themselves captive in some infernal foreign brothel, where they were subject to the pornographic whims of sadistic, non-white pimps and brothel masters. Middle-class moralists were convinced that a "traffic in women," operated by well-established underworld networks, was going on under their very noses, and they had little difficulty in whipping up a public panic about this non-existent outrage.
>
> (Roberts, 1992, p. 253)

While the hysteria first emerged around 1885, it would reach its peak in the early 20th century. These racist and xenophobic origins continued on and conveniently became urgent when immigrants began to move more freely across borders. As a consequence, it became difficult for immigrants to migrate anywhere globally, and furthermore to be an immigrant woman, migration meant you might be accused of prostitution, or designated as needing saving from it, or for immigrant men to be accused of trafficking.

Contemporarily, these hysterics are legitimated as a cover to continue on with racist, xenophobic, and whorephobic actions. In 2019, Robert Kraft, a rich wealthy white man and owner of the New England Patriots NFL franchise, found himself at the center of controversy after being implicated in what was initially described as a sex trafficking sting by prosecutors (Ford, 2019). The case would eventually bring charges to over 300 men, all described as "monsters" (Ford, 2019, para. 5), as prosecutors warned that sex trafficking can happen anywhere "including the peaceful community of Jupiter, Florida" (Milian & Hitchcock, 2019, para. 6), a line that could

have easily been written by the middle-class moralists of the 1800s. The problem, however, is that sex trafficking charges were not actually applied; in fact, prosecutors ultimately resolved they would not charge anyone at the spa on those specific charges because, after their investigation, there was no evidence that human trafficking was actually taking place (AP, 2019).

Sadly, what *was* occurring was part of a seemingly ongoing effort to target Asian-owned and -run massage businesses. For example, in New York (NYC) between 2012 and 2016, the number of Asian identified people arrested for either unlicensed massage practice or prostitution increased by 2,700% (Dank et al., 2017), even after the New York Police Department (NYPD) pledged to decrease prostitution arrests in an effort to build trust with the immigrant community (Whitford & Grant, 2017). It is likely no coincidence that the same year an Asian woman, Yang Song, died in NYC after falling three stories while trying to flee an undercover officer. According to the NYPD, the officer had "solicited a sex act as part of a broader vice investigation" (Whitford & Grant, 2017, para. 2). So too were Asian women wrapped up in the sting in Jupiter along with the moral/virtue-signaling through which law enforcement professed they sought to smash an "international sex trafficking ring" (Ford, 2019, para. 5) but as Grant and Whitford (2018) noted, these encounters with police often lead to more harm than help including loss of license to practice, arrest, deportation, and in the case of Song, death. As such, "When a massage business shuts down, its workers—trafficked or not—are likely to remain vulnerable" (Whitford & Grant, 2019, para. 9). I would like to suggest that this vulnerability is not happenstance but in fact manufactured intentionally to be this way and connected to a deep history of xenophobia, racism, and whorephobia. After all, it becomes improbable, if not impossible, to believe that there is a broad interest in truly deterring sex trafficking when stings routinely end in the deportation of immigrant women with no material shift or decrease in the prevalence of trafficking.

## Politics, contemporary stigma, and law

While moral arguments against sex work have become more elusive in terms of law and public policy, these logics still animate the prevalent objections. However, because the moral frame could be considered a losing one from a legal perspective, much of current sex work debates hinge on two areas: flattening sex work with sex trafficking necessitating the "protection" and "rescue" of sex workers (Grant, 2014; Showden & Majic, 2014). To conclude this chapter, I discuss how sex trafficking, protection, and rescue inform the politics of sex work, and then I discuss how and why sex workers are pathologized in the U.S. society and discourse. I conclude by discussing the current status of law and legal challenges to the prohibition of sex work—and their still obvious connections to moral objections—and finally, the current state of SESTA/FOSTA legislation.

### *The shift to trafficking*

Many complications manifest for sex workers as a result of how sex work and trafficking are flattened. These complications are far-reaching and have many implications, and one of them is how we discuss choice (i.e., sex workers as having agency versus being victims) and happiness (i.e., if desire/joy should be a requisite to opt in or opt out of the work; Grant, 2014; Jaffe, 2013; Showden & Majic, 2014). As such, sex work (framed as sex trafficking) reduces much of the conversation to a problematic binary and manufactures the matter as a crisis.

> with increased globalization, "trafficking in women" has become the metonymic frame for sex work (and prostitution in particular) in both political discourse and policy practice. As a result, the current politics reflect and reproduce the long-standing, persistent, "agent/victim" debate about prostitution (and sex work in general). In the standard form of this debate, agents choose (freely) and victims have no choice.
>
> (Showden & Majic, 2014, p. xiv)

Beyond the intrinsically political and troublesome nature of the (agent/victim) binary, supporters and detractors of sex work further politicize the debate when incorporating sentiments around joy and happiness as germane to the legitimacy of sex work as a labor choice. This framing not only forecloses a useful analysis of power in relation to work and labor broadly (recall Arendt's work) but also exceptionalizes joy in sex work as a necessary prerequisite. To be clear, the politics of happiness is both a problem *within* the discourse around support for sex workers and *between* opposing sides of sex work support.

From within the support discourse, there is a constant struggle about framing sex work as *only* empowering and a desire to discuss it openly as *only*/mostly good. Unlike other labor forms, society disallows sex workers to live in a complex space (like everyone under capitalism) to both choose sex work as their labor choice while also voicing complaints about the work and labor in general (Berg, 2014; Grant, 2014). Detractors of sex work often use this politic of desire or lack of joy around work as a reason why it should be abolished, why it should go away, and why, again, these workers are victims and, in the view of many, being trafficked.

When detractors engage in framing sex work as problematic because sex workers do not engage it joyfully, it serves as a form of erasure of broader labor issues and precludes important class analyses that would implicate capitalism in meaningful and intentional ways (Berg, 2014). On this, labor journalist Sarah Jaffe (2013) offered,

> [The] happiness or unhappiness of sex workers is touted as a reason the profession should be abolished, while the happiness of other workers is

> considered beside the point. As I used to snark when waitressing in New Orleans, a town full of strip clubs and the women who work in them, no one ever wanted to save me from the restaurant industry.
>
> (para 16)

To this end, choice and happiness as a measure of if sex work should exist or not is an example of another monolithic view, where the polymorphous frame might be more useful to hold these multiple competing truths.

### *Protection and rescue*

Sex workers find themselves at the mercy of paternalists in the form of legislators and policymakers as well as some sects of feminism and academics. As a construct, protection and rescue are connected contemporarily to the flattening of sex work and sex trafficking and, additionally, the notion that sex work is not, and should not be, considered work. Both premises come together to fuel a savior complex that positions sex workers as needing to be rescued because the assumption is that no person would ever choose that type of non-work (Grant, 2014). This sentiment has been expressed at many points in time with origins that can be traced to 18th-century Europe (Roberts, 1992). In France, beginning in the late 17th century, the government included prostitutes in a collection of broader "marginalized groups" (Roberts, 1992, p. 179), which included the poor, mentally ill, and disabled people and placed them in special "hospitals" that intended to rehabilitate them into upstanding contributing members of society. For sex workers, these hospitals were especially violent.

> On arrival women were compulsorily examined for venereal diseases, and treated with mercury if found to be infected. During their stay they were coerced into repentance, largely by being worked as long and hard as their strength permitted. Religious books were read aloud to them as they laboured, no doubt stressing the Almighty's abhorrence of "harlotry," along with a few of the perceptual torments in store for them when they fetched up in Hell.
>
> (Roberts, 1992, p. 180)

While current conditions may not be this severe, the notion that all sex workers need saving and protecting (from themselves) is problematic, creates challenging conditions, and limits their opportunities to exercise agency. "Saviors" are not only made up of old white men as some might suspect. On the contrary, saviors include any person who views all sex workers as helpless, victims, and always already at the mercy of trafficking and patriarchy (Outshoorn, 2005). This contingent of saviors often includes anti-sex work feminists/reformers who seek to rescue sex workers from themselves and from marring real womanhood. On this Grant (2014) notes, "When sex

workers are 'rescued' by anti-sex work reformers, they are being disciplined, set back into their right role as good women" (p. 57), which animates a connection back to the historical hoes/housewives and good/bad women binaries. Saviors often view sex work from the previously discussed oppression paradigm which is, again, unnecessarily essentialist.

### *Pathology*

One way protection and rescue continue to maintain a stronghold on the discourse, policy, and practice in relation to sex work is due to pathology, specifically from a public health perspective. Pathology lenses promulgate a view of sex work as the most bleak and degenerative way of being because they often portray sex workers as mentally ill (which tracks historically), unable to hold steady/respectable employment, and detractors position sex workers' desire to engage in the work as intrinsically abnormal (Burns et al., 2012). In this way, sex work stigma seems to be achieved in two different ways: through whore-stigma and through framing sex workers as initiators and unique contributors of health crises (Burnes et al., 2012; Grant, 2014; Nova, 2016).

#### *Whore-stigma*

Much of the advocacy against sex work, particularly in some of the feminist discourses, finds its footing through the notion that for a woman to be sexualized, it is inherently degrading, inherently problematic, and thoroughly opposite of women's liberation and empowerment.

> For opponents of sexualization, the danger is not only that a woman will be reduced to a sexual being for the enjoyment of others, but that if a woman is sexualized, it obliterates her as a real woman—that is, it is a violence that renders her a lesser woman, a whore. At the root of the opposition to sexualization is the essential belief that for a woman to be thought of as a whore is so profoundly damaging that it constitutes a challenge to one's real womanhood.
>
> (Grant, 2014, p. 84)

In this way, within the idea of real womanhood and the purity that comes along with it—often projected through the image and archetype of a middle-of-the-road (white) woman—being a whore is the worst thing one could be (Grant, 2014; McGuire, 2010). The analysis offered by Grant is unsurprising, giving the historical connections to the good wife and bad "whore" divide.

Naturally, with all things, social identity matters and complicates the issue as whore-stigma has affected the lives of women differently depending on what other social identities they hold. For example, during the Jim

Crow south and throughout the civil rights movement when Black women were raped or endured other types of sexual assault by white men, they were often blamed for it, in many cases being named/cited as prostitutes or whores (McGuire, 2010). White lawyers and police officers would often try to discredit Black women during trial citing sexual promiscuity; and law enforcement would often use promiscuity as an excuse when deciding not to investigate these crimes (McGuire, 2010). As such, their being *both* Black and women informed the reality that being viewed as a whore is uniquely violent. This frighteningly points to a larger issue of violence against those perceived to be—and those who are—sex workers as something *deserved* and *normal*. This sentiment continues to be a cause of concern in relation to broad sex worker safety (Grant, 2014).

### *Health pathology*

The vast majority of empirical research and historical accounts about sex work seem to focus on issues pertaining to public health in relation to sex workers' health, or proliferation of crises in society (Burns et al., 2012; Laskow, 2017; Nova, 2016; Roberts et al., 2007). Detractors of sex work weaponize narratives about sex workers as initiators and unique contributors of disease in direct and indirect ways. These narratives are used to fearmonger the public toward the elimination of sex work and to quell decriminalization efforts, specifically (Showden & Majic, 2014). Sex work, as pathology, is reinforced often through questionable empirical research/statistics and sex workers are often framed as vectors of illness (Grant, 2014; Laskow, 2017; Showden & Majic, 2014; Nova, 2016). Scholars of health and medicine (e.g., psychology/psychiatry) often explore and study sex work from mental illness models, stress models, as maladaptive behavior, and as deviant behavior (Burns et al., 2012; Maddux et al., 2008). Sex workers report experiencing violence, trauma, and health-related terror by medical professionals, hospitals, and clinics (Burns et al., 2012; Nova, 2016), and they are highly aware of how society views them in relation to public health. Former sex worker Cyd Nova (2016) offered,

> The transaction [sex for money] is assumed to be dangerous from the beginning, leaving us in constant jeopardy of being accused of being a vector of disease, with the only salvation laying in the arms of being a "good whore." The laws that target sex workers for HIV go beyond incarcerating individuals. They reinforce a story that we are dangerous, need to be managed, medicated, legislated, and our bodies rendered safe to the so-called general public.
>
> (p. 200)

Deviant-framing, pathologizing, and deficit paradigms create a contentious and adversarial relationship between sex workers, governments, and

lawmakers (Burns et al., 2012). Pathology lenses give those entities ammunition to posit that sex work should be illegal because it is a detriment to society—I revisit this when discussing legal arguments against sex work—and allows these entities to exact brutal action against sex workers.

> Sex workers are managed as dangers to society, as vectors of disease. When HIV-positive sex workers have sex with or without condoms, with or without a suppressed viral load, they are prosecuted as sexual criminals and imprisoned as felons in the United States and Canada. When HIV rates went up in Athens, Greece, those who were perceived as drug users and/or sex workers were rounded up and forcibly tested, with images of their faces displayed in the media.
>
> (Nova, 2016, p. 199)

Pathological attitudes about sex work go beyond simple ideology and speak to a larger issue of epistemic violence and epistemic injustice as it pertains to sex work. Messages and misinformation reveal the *way* knowledge and information is produced about sex work and sex workers is critical (and not tangential) to the movement. As such, society must rethink "not just *what* we know about sex work and sex workers, but *how we know* it" (Showden & Majic, 2014, p. xxv). Through this process of knowledge production, activists and scholars may have an opportunity to disrupt and shift the tide of sex work pathology and advance the larger movement for sex work acceptance or at minimum, decriminalization.

### *Law*

Many sex workers and advocates continue to push decriminalization efforts nationally yet find prevalent pathological views of sex works undergirded by moral objections increase the difficulty in shifting the tide, as both come together to fuel law and policy. In 2016, I became aware of sex worker organizing to oppose SESTA and FOSTA and threats by the government to shut down the Backpage website. Beyond the immediate danger the threat posed to sex workers, the legislation had a chilling effect on the potential future of sex workers—of many types—to be able to exist online, at all.

Since the passage of SESTA/FOSTA, many websites seemingly braced for the impact of what the legislation might bring while sidelining sex workers and their ability to use said platforms for work. To illustrate the timing, the U.S. Senate passed SESTA/FOSTA on March 21, 2018, and by March 23, 2018, Craigslist had totally removed its entire personals section (Kennedy, 2018), which included primarily classified ads for dating and hookups with some advertisements for sex work. In notifying its users the company released a statement:

> US Congress recently passed HR 1865, "FOSTA," seeking to subject websites to criminal and civil liability when third parties (users) misuse online personals unlawfully.
>
> Any tool or service can be misused. We can't take such risk without jeopardizing all our other services, so we have regretfully taken craigslist personals offline. Hopefully we can bring them back some day.
>
> (Craigslist, n.d., para 1–2)

During the same week, the website Reddit enacted a new policy that "users may not use Reddit to solicit or facilitate any transaction or gift involving certain goods and services including: Paid services involving physical sexual contact" (Reddit Policy, 2009). By December 2018, Tumblr announced that it would no longer allow *any* adult content on its platform. While the company cited concerns related to child-sexual-abuse content posted on the site (Locklear, 2018), it is difficult to ignore what had been a trend across these platforms in the wake of the legislation. Finally, when sex workers use(d) platforms only tangentially related to their sex work—as in they were not posting content or advertising services—they still experience(d) discrimination. Platforms like PayPal and Venmo regularly ban individuals they suspect are sex workers from using the platform with little or no due process (Holston-Zannell, 2021). In this way, sex workers are actively being pushed off the internet and or shadowbanned in droves, while dangerous and fraught conditions materialize for them online and offline (Blunt et al., 2020).

During this same period, there were notable legal challenges of the constitutionality of laws prohibiting the sale of sexual services, seemingly as part of a broader pushback against what was happening nationally to sex workers. In 2015, the Sex Worker and Erotic Service Provider Legal, Educational, and Research Project (ESPLER) mounted a legal case in the U.S. Federal District Court challenging the state of California's anti-prostitution law. In 2016, a federal judge dismissed the claim stating, "the state had adequately justified the current law as a deterrent to violence against women, sexually transmitted diseases and human trafficking" (Egelko, 2017 para 3). Here, the logics of protection and rescue, sex workers as vectors of disease/dangers to public health, and flattening of sex work/sex trafficking once again wreak havoc.

By October 2017, the case was heard before a three-judge panel in the Ninth Circuit Court of Appeals in San Francisco, California. My repeated mention of the moral logics and their structuring politics in stigma operate as ghosts—more accurately poltergeist—in broader legal arguments bears repeating once more. During oral arguments, the following exchange between the attorney representing the state and one of the judges was revealing, if not excruciating, as it reflects how little has changed:

*Judge:* Why should it be illegal to sell something that it is legal to give away?
*Attorney:* Because the legislature can make a choice. The legislature can say you can't purchase sex because of all the attendant evils that arise in the context of prostitution.

(United States Court of Appeals for the Ninth Circuit, 2017, 00:17:22)

The use of "attendant evils" should be unsurprising here but telling on many levels around the grounding of objections still occupying moral grounds. On this, a different judge inquired about the rationale (moral disapproval) in relation to another legal context invoking *Lawrence v Texas* (Kennedy & SCOTUS, 2002), a Supreme Court case that found a Texas statute criminalizing intimate sexual conduct unconstitutional. It is worth noting that the Texas statute was originally written criminalizing *any* oral and anal sexual activity but was rewritten to target gay people, specifically. On the moral question, the Attorney responded,

> In this particular case, the district judge did not rest his decision at all on moral disapproval. We did make the argument before the court … but the court found moral disapproval … we made a commodification argument. That the commodification of sex, the state had an interest in deterring that. But Judge White did not accept that, he relied on the other bases in support of the law; which is deterrence of trafficking, violence against women, use of illegal drugs, and the transmission of disease.
>
> (United States Court of Appeals for the Ninth Circuit, 2017, 00:18:23)

Here, the attorney references the 2016 case and reveals the claims of this writing and experiences and stories of sex workers are not only legitimate but normalized. Beyond what appeared to be stumbling over the moral question by the attorney, likely recognizing in both the district case and the appeals case it seemed to be a losing stance, the justifications against sex work are still always already tied to moral objections. That is, the moral view still instructs and structures objections while the legal justifications rely on stigma, paternalization/rescue, and pathologizing of sex workers which, in turn, still entrench the moral view. This entrenchment is sufficient to maintain criminalization of the work: a merry-go-round. Moving toward the end of the argument of the state, one of the judges inquired about the government's interest in prohibiting prostitution, to which the attorney replied:

*Attorney:* The record before this court does include voluminous reports on the impact of prostitution on various ills of society.

*Judge:* And are there any credibility determinations to be made as to that evidence?

*Attorney:* There doesn't have to be a perfect match between a law and the evil that it is seeking … it's very important, I think, that legislatures be able to try to address—and be given leeway to address these issues … and legislatures come to different conclusions around the world of what is the best way to address the evils that arise from prostitution. But that is something the legislature should be allowed to do.

(United States Court of Appeals for the Ninth Circuit, 2017, 00:30:45)

My intention is not to offer a legal analysis or to argue on the philosophy of law—especially related to good/evil—but rather to illuminate that regardless of what they are, the social conditions that animate the realities of sex workers are still marred by moral stigma. To characterize negative aspects that arise from sex work as evil is significantly reductionist and misleading in that the characterizations (drug use, abuse, potential for exploitation) are situated as unique to sex work, which is unfair at best and dangerous at worst. In February 2018, the Ninth Circuit Court of Appeals dismissed the case and upheld the ruling from the lower court.

With such a prevalent moral campaign, supporters' claim is rooted in the desire to protect and rescue individuals being trafficked, one might suspect a sweeping move of prosecutions to curb and ultimately eliminate sex trafficking. This would be an incorrect suspicion. On June 21, 2021, three years after the passing of SESTA/FOSTA, the U.S. Government Accountability Office (GAO) released a report titled "Sex Trafficking: Online Platforms and Federal Prosecutions" (GAO, 2021). This document reported an update as required by Section 8 that details information on Section 3 violations/prosecutions as articulated in act "which states that it is a federal crime for those who control online platforms to do so with the intent to promote or facilitate the prostitution of others" (p. 7). Based on the report, and at the time of this writing, there has been only one federal prosecution which invoked the act. Journalist Melissa Gira Grant (2021) summarized it best:

> If SESTA/FOSTA was intended to protect people by making it easier to prosecute traffickers, it was a miserable failure … If SESTA/FOSTA was meant to associate sex workers with allegations of sex trafficking, leading platforms to refuse them service out of fear of increased legal risks, and in turn further marginalizing and stigmatizing sex workers, it was a tremendous success.
>
> (para. 4)

Once again, sex workers correctly voiced that this particular legislation was a mistake, well in advance of its passing. Beyond the fact that the act has not

been meaningfully used in three years, it has harmed those interested in willfully engaging in sex work, increased difficulty for police to find trafficked individuals, and created fraught conditions for free speech online broadly (Grant, 2021). This pattern, the vilification, stigma, and paternalism of sex workers, throughout history and across time is troublesome; yet, sex workers continue to find ways to exist and resist. This resistance, like sex work, is timeless and perhaps as old as the sex worker herself which Roberts (1992) reminded is the most maligned woman in history. One of the collaborators in this study, Tianna, reflected on her experience and view of sex work as the noble and timeless institution that it is, one that perhaps creates a sisterhood between her and the millions of women who have come before her.

## Tianna: Fight Night

I remember being so sick of hearing about the fight. Mayweather and Pacquiao. It was all anyone seemed to be talking about. It was why I was on that God forsaken road-trip with some of my sorors. There was a small part of me deep down inside, though, that was glad I decided to go. It would be a nice break. School, work, my sorority, all the other clubs and organizations. Not only that, but I'd just lost my job on campus. It was becoming all too much and I was falling into a deep depression. So, I needed the trip to get away and more importantly to make some money.

I had packed several things, but I had no idea what I was going to wear to meet him. A huge side-effect of my depression was that I had gained weight. So, I didn't even know if any of that shit was gonna fit.

The girls and I rented an AirBnb and the best part about that particular group of girls was that we didn't feel the need to be together in groups for the entire trip. So, I didn't even need to come up with an alibi for why I would eventually dip on them later. I'm not really a "partier" so they had come to expect me to always do my own thing.

I texted Mike—the guy I met online—about the plan tonight. He was slow and sporadic to respond and so it kind of let me know he might be an older person. Older than me anyway. When he did respond he kept asking what I was wearing, and I said I wasn't sure yet. He just said he wanted me to look as sexy as possible. He told me to meet him at MGM once the fight was over. I was worried about traffic, so I left before the fight even got started.

I sat in the parking lot of the MGM hotel waiting for Mike to hit me back. It was taking a while but surprisingly I wasn't losing my nerve. Maybe it was the riskiness of it all that started to make me feel, something. I gazed at myself in the mirror … my hair was cute. My face was beat, and I picked out a red lipstick. Classic hoe. As I sat waiting it was clear that Mayweather had won the fight based on the Black excellence that began to spill out of MGM. The most vivid memory I had of that night was just being at and around the hotel. It was like something out of a movie.

Black people were everywhere. A Mayweather win was like a win for all of us. Dope boys, business and music executives, doctors, lawyers; riding in Maseratis, Tesla trucks, BMWs, Benzes, Cadillacs, Porsches, Rolls Royce, and every expensive foreign car you could think of. Someone in a red Tesla was blasting UGK, and every guy had a beautiful girl in Louboutin's with tight dresses, breasts hiked high, and thigh-high hemlines. They sported every type of jewel, gold, platinum, and all levels of glam and stunt were front and center on the strip. Young Black women and men living their best life in Vegas. That night felt like one of those nights that would go down in history and I was glad that I'd left the house to be a part of it. No matter how the night ended, no matter what happened, I felt alive again. It was like I was back and finally engaging society again; bearing witness to all of this excitement and seeing that it was Black.

Mike finally texted me and asked me to send a picture of what I was wearing. I sent a photo and also told him that I had a tighter one-shoulder number if he preferred, to which he replied, "Tight as you can get. Short as you can get. I need some arm candy." I changed clothes and headed inside. There were more cars—cars I had never seen before—butterfly doors, people were blasting music, drinking all types of alcohol and lean. It was like the whole property was a party. Everything was a buzz. I remembered seeing Jesse Jackson as I exited the garage and knew that this night was bound to be surreal.

I was nervous walking in. Mike told me to meet him at the bar and I spotted him from the back based on what he told me he was wearing, all Black, Bally dress shoes and gold jewelry. I walked up and tapped on his shoulder and said, "I'm Tianna." When he turned around, I was so relieved. "Thank you, God" I thought to myself taking in his chiseled jaw, smooth skin, and full lips. I know it sounds really weird to be like "thank you God for helping me with this hoeing tonight" but I was legitimately relieved like, wow, this is not going to be that bad.

Mike said he didn't drink but that he would buy me a few if I wanted them. I accepted his offer because I needed the drink, I ordered whiskey. I was interested in making money that night, but I also wanted to know more about Mike and his career. I was in school after all, and if I could make some cool connections or build my network, I felt like that would be dope. A lot of men got off on that shit. Helping the poor coed … it helped to feed into their daddy complexes, I think.

None of my hope for conversation materialized because we didn't have much conversation at all, although I'm sure Mike would disagree. I spent most of the time listening to him ramble about himself and how great he thought he was and how much fun he had. He was sure to let me know how glad he was that he was rich and could afford to come to the fight at all. He also regretted not inviting me to attend the fight itself after seeing "how beautiful I was in person." Son of a bitch. Spacing out, I tried to ignore his words and focus on his physical features.

Before we could leave the bar, Mike started making plans about future trips and suggested I come travel to see him and all I kept thinking was, can we get through tonight first? I interrupted him and said: "Let's go upstairs."

On the elevator there were 5 or 6 younger guys. In my mind, I imagined what they were seeing and did my best to stifle laughter. Mike was like 50 and wearing a suit and then there was me in my black, tight, one-shoulder piece, wearing red lipstick. I saw the guys looking at each other kind of laughing, but the best part was that I was in on the joke. I looked over at Mike, who's expression hadn't changed—he was oblivious to all of it. The guys exited before us as we made our way to the top floor. I just smiled. They smiled back as if almost to say, "good luck."

As the elevator neared our floor, I thought, "Well this is it. Once I do this, I can never undo it. I was making a life choice for myself. I thought about all the stigma surrounding sex work and I wondered, if I did this tonight, would I wake up tomorrow sobbing? Am I going to feel like less of a person? Less of myself?" The elevator doors opened, and we walked toward the room.

*TJ (interrupts the story): Was it a long walk from the elevator to the room?*
*Tianna: It always is.*

The next day Mike wanted me to stay and have breakfast and hangout in the MGM with him for the day. I reminded him:

> "Remember that time when I told you I'm doing this for money because I'm in college? I'm in college … So, I have college stuff to do. If I had the freedom to just lay up with you for 24 hours, I wouldn't be in this position"
> "Wow you're feisty! I like you. When can I see you again?"
> "Text me." and I walked out the room.

As I took the long walk back to the elevator, I kept imagining that a squad of officers was going to jump out and arrest me. Gotcha! This type of sex work is illegal after all. I could just picture having to tell my mom that I was in jail for hoeing.

When I met back up with my girls, it was like any other day. Everyone recounted their tale of the night before. I made up a fake one of course. And we road tripped back home. It's interesting because I didn't wake up sobbing, questioning my existence or my choice. I didn't feel bad, all I felt was relieved. I felt better than I had in months and just a little freer from my depression. I felt really good because I had money. Cash. It was bill money. It was food money. It was Starbucks money. It was great.

I reclined my seat in the car and sipped my iced dirty chai and reflected on my night as we headed back to campus. I loved drives like those because I loved seeing the mountains, they were timeless.

You know what else I think is timeless? Sex work. I have engaged in one of the world's oldest professions and that meant something, it mattered. After that fateful night in Vegas, and each time I had a client to meet I always stopped to look in the mirror at myself before I left. I would stand there and think about how many women in history have had the same experience as me. Going out to make a person – or people – feel good for a few hours. To be therapist, confidant, and doctor. Timeless.

And honestly, what could possibly be more noble than that?

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# 3 College students, sex work, and higher education

> Mostly students doing sex work don't talk about it, because if it comes out, it could affect your future and job prospects. Since I started escorting, I've heard that a former roommate exchanged sex with her landlord to cover the rent, and another woman I know was a part-time sex worker to earn enough to travel home to visit her family. Sex work among students is much more common than people think, and is likely to increase as long as fees, rent, and the cost of living is so high.
>
> Claire, second-year studying History and Philosophy (McIntyre, 2015, para 10)

When I was an entry-level student affairs professional, I believed it was integral to be student-centered, to reasonably place myself in the places and spaces students occupied on campus. This also meant attending closely to the ways students engage with each other, to understand how they related to fellow students and the campus contexts they maneuvered. Part of this praxis meant taking interest in their ordinary conversation and through these engagements, I learned sex work as a topic is not far removed from the consciousnesses of college student experience, even if only used as fodder in their everyday interactions. The countless times I heard a student exclaim, to me directly and others, "I'm over school! I'm getting a sugar daddy" or, "O-Chem is too hard, I'm dropping out to become a stripper!" and other similar sentiments illustrate that sex work is not an unfamiliar phenomenon. I do not suggest exclaiming such rhetoric signals that students actually engage in sex work, rather, there is clearly an established recognition of sex work as a phenomenon in the worlds and minds of college students.

When factoring in a (trans)national analysis in relation to this reality, an odd conundrum surfaces. The vast majority of empirical literature which focuses on college students engaged in sex work are largely grounded in non-U.S. contexts. My mention of this is not rooted in a desire for a predominant U.S.-centric perspective whereby our contexts must be centered within all things. Instead, the oddity lies in the fact that not only is there significantly less U.S. literature but the reality is also coupled with a clear recognition that U.S. college students engage in sex work and likely in greater

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numbers. When recounting the genesis of college student sex work research in the United Kingdom, Roberts (2018) offered,

> initial publication of the data was followed by an invitation to a conference on College Health in San Diego. There, I was surprised to learn that what was news in the UK was considered unsurprising in the US even if it was not publicly acknowledged.
>
> (p. 37)

As a higher-education scholar with former lives as an administrator/practitioner, I would agree with the notion that there is a public (sub)conscious awareness of sex work labor and college students, and yet meaningful attention to and engagement with these students are largely nonexistent.

This chapter is organized to cover four different areas toward rendering a more complete picture of sex work, higher education, and college students. First, I open with Maria's memoir *Boobs, Hips, and Hoe Barbies*, which offers the story of what happened when her family found out about her sex working. Her experience suggests that students' background may inform their pathways into the work with considerations for how they navigate their student realities. Next, I offer an overview of the limited extant literature related to college student sex work which includes research in both U.S. and non-U.S. contexts. While nuances exist across global higher education and college student experiences, all the available information is vital to working toward a deeper understanding of U.S. contexts specifically. Then, I offer Maliah's memoir *Maliah in the Mirror*, which operates as a strong case narrative—specifically for Black student sex workers—in relation to how they find themselves in the work and what it might mean for them. To conclude the chapter, I outline connections between higher-education finance and neoliberalism and how findings from my own inquiry add nuance to current college student sex work research.

## Maria: boobs, hips, and hoe barbies

The jig was up. I didn't know how she knew but she did. I didn't know what was going to happen but there was nothing I could do about it at that point. It wouldn't have been a big deal if I was only waitressing at the club like it started, but I was dancing at an entirely different club by the time I knew she had found out. I couldn't believe she bought that shit, that I was waitressing at a "hookah lounge." What hookah lounge was open until 4 or 5 in the morning? When I was waitressing, I would leave the house in my uniform with my hair and makeup done. When I started dancing, I would leave with a duffle bag right after rolling out of bed—since I got ready at the club—it was easier that way. But I think I got too comfortable and so everything was catching up with me.

Looking back, I think I always knew that I would eventually dance somehow. I had always been super fascinated with strippers and fast money, and I think it had everything to do with how sex was projected onto me. I've always been a curvy girl. One day in elementary school I woke up and—boom—I had hips and I've been labeled a hoe ever since, regardless of what I did or didn't do.

I remember hanging out with friends and some of their parents would give me the side-eye. I'd overhear them asking "Why is my kid hanging out with her?" all because I had hips and boobs before everyone else. One time another kid's mom told her daughter not to play with me because I played with Bratz dolls. Her daughter had Barbie Dolls and she didn't understand why I would want to play with "hoe Barbies." I preferred to play with Bratz dolls because they looked more like me than Barbie did. But I guess that made me an "on-the-way hoe." I didn't even have my first kiss until I was 16 but it didn't matter, I was a hoe to everyone based on my body. My body kind of put me on this path. My body—and apparently Bratz dolls—indicated where I was going. Thanks a lot, Bratz.

"Maria … did you hear me?" Mom's voiced pierced through my thoughts.
"No Mom, what did you say?"
"I said what's the worst thing you've ever done?"
"Oh shit," I thought.
"Honestly," I said "… lie to you."

Mom had been onto me for a while by that point. But I just kept thinking, that was it. It was over. I'd been being kind of shady and she knew it. My location—on my cell phone—was always turned off so she couldn't track where I was. I told her it was broke—it wasn't. I was tired all the time and I could tell that she finally started to pick up on things. Mom invited me to dinner so we could have some much-needed girl time. It had been a while since we had been able to connect, and I couldn't resist my mom missing me. I thought the dinner was to catch up and celebrate her new car, but I was wrong. I never wanted to lie to my mom, and I decided starting at that table, I wouldn't anymore.

"What did you lie to me about?" Her face was stern, serious.
"You know, don't you?"
"Yes, but I want to hear you say it."

I was about to have a full-blown panic attack and I did my best not to hyperventilate at the dinner table in that nice ass brand new restaurant.

"It's okay Maria, what are you so afraid of?"
"Well … Mom. I'm dancing."
"I know … I know."

She just took a sip of her water and looked off in the distance. Tears started welling up in my eyes. I didn't know how to take her reaction; I almost preferred a different one.

"So, what now? Are you going to slap me? Are you going to make a scene?"
"You really think a lot less of me than I thought."
"Am I out of the house? Can I at least keep my car? What's about to happen?"
"What are you talking about? Nothing is going to happen. I love you no matter what you do."
"What about Dad?"
"He's not thrilled about it, but he understands. He just wants you to be safe. *We*… just want you to be safe."

We spent the next few hours just talking, and I told her the whole story about how I got to the point of dancing at the strip club. How I went with friends on New Year's Eve and it was the best night of my life, the rest was history. I assured her that I didn't do VIP or extras at the club. She told me that it would have been okay if I did. I don't think she believed me, but I will always appreciate her for understanding either way. She revealed to me that our family is no stranger to sex work. She told me that my dad used to work as a security guard at a strip club, and at one point, he also worked as a phone sex operator. I couldn't believe it. I still can't. She also told me that my Abuela was a gogo dancer back in Mexico many decades ago. I guess it runs in the family. What's that bible saying? "There's nothing new under the sun" or something like that, I think I know what it means now.

Once my parents found out, it felt like a small weight was lifted. My dad and I never talked about his past or mine. It would make us both uncomfortable, so I didn't really see the point. But I appreciated that he was okay with it, even if it was silently, and I am still curious to know how he got into that work all those years ago. Maybe we'll talk about it someday when more time has passed.

While I don't have to worry about my family, I do worry about being found out at school though. While I don't dance anymore, I know people don't have the capacity to understand even as part of someone's past. As a society, we can't even talk about sex comfortably. We don't have a shared understanding that people use it, experience it, or value it differently. So, I don't expect them to even begin to understand that world.

The whole double life thing was probably the most difficult part of it all. I'm not ashamed of what I did but I am terrified that it might get out. I feel

like my name would be trashed; I would be excluded from future opportunities. I feel if you're found out as a sex worker, it becomes part of your life forever. No one was ever shocked to find out someone was a waiter 20 or 30 years ago. No one is ever thrown off if they find out you used to be a cashier or once worked in retail. But it's like "You were a stripper?! OMG!" It's all so hypocritical because the same girls that judge sex workers, dance just like me when they go out clubbing. Then they sit around during finals week complaining about their shit classes that they barely study for and say "Oh fuck it, I'm going to be a stripper" but in the same breath go around and judge people who do it, people who are actually being about it. They grow up to be Mothers who instill respectability into their daughters and judge other little girls who have hips, little girls who have boobs, and little girls who play with Bratz dolls.

They joke about wanting to have a sugar daddy or wanting transactional sex not realizing that it too is sex work. They joke about someone's job and lifestyle as if we were failures … as if we *are* failures. And while they joke about others' reality, I wonder if they reflect on why. Are they jealous? Do they wish they had the knowledge or confidence to do what I did? In a world of fake ass Barbies, who all act the same, think the same, and believe the same, I'll take being a Bratz hoe with boobs, hips, and a history every day of the week. And I regret nothing.

## Sex work and higher-education research

Sex work among college students and implications for policy and practice is an emerging area of study. While the majority of current research covers students in higher education in international contexts, they offer compelling considerations for college students engaging in sex work in the United States including understandings of student perceptions of sex work and university policies around sex work. Maria's story, for example, invites us to consider (non–sex working) student perceptions of sex work which animate sex worker experiences on campus.

Despite my personal belief that additional—ethical- and justice-based—research with sex workers is needed, developing and implementing research inquiry related to sex work is difficult, including making research projects conscionable to Institutional Review Boards, funding bodies, and other stakeholders (Simpson, 2021). This reality is likely due to deep-seeded deficit perspectives of sex work in society broadly. As such, making the case that engaging research renders these students more visible toward an effort to better support them, is often a challenge.

Conversely, when funding bodies, review boards, and other stakeholders offer strong support of these inquiries they can at times be rooted in protection and rescue logics which concern themselves first and foremost with "saving" sex workers from the labor (Simpson, 2021). Given these difficulties, a significant portion of early researchers inquired about student

sex workers indirectly, largely through survey research. The type of information elicited from these inquiries included gauging the degree to which college students knew of peers who engage in sex work (Roberts et al., 2010), student attitudes about sex work/sex workers, and if students would themselves ever opt-in to doing the work (Long et al., 2012; Sagar et al., 2016). To this end, while college students were likely respondents in those studies, they were asked about sex work—like all student respondents—in secondary ways. This approach offered a way through some of the institutional barriers and restrictions to the inquiry but also indirectly added an additional layer of protection to student sex workers themselves, though researchers did not indicate the latter as a motivating factor. Some of the second-person questions included inquiries like do you know any sex workers?; how prevalent do you think sex work is?; and why do you think students engage? (Roberts et al., 2007; Roberts et al., 2010).

### *Student perceptions*

College students generally believe that higher education is too expensive and is the primary reason why students elect to enter sex work (Roberts et al., 2010; Sagar et al., 2016), though evidence has shown that rising costs of education is not the only reason students engage sex work (Sagar et al., 2016). Student respondents admitted they either had engaged in or would be open to engaging in sex work if they needed to (Roberts et al., 2010; Sagar et al., 2016) and many believe higher-education institutions do not go far enough to support students sex workers. Specifically, students indicated financial support, career support, research (about sex work), and promotion of health and wellness/information/behaviors would all be useful in creating contexts that allow student sex workers to thrive while pursuing their studies (Roberts et al., 2010).

Non–sex working student perceptions of sex workers vary greatly and they cite that while they understand why someone might engage in sex work, they find it generally unacceptable (Long et al., 2012; Roberts et al., 2010). When probed about why they believed their peers engaged in sex work, students identified four reasons: money, sexuality, despair, and personal contexts (Roberts, 2018). Despair and personal contexts as defined by student respondents unsurprisingly rely on deficit logics with connections to the oppression paradigm (Weitzer, 2010). When explaining personal circumstances that might compel a student to engage in sex work, students cited low self-esteem, family issues, peer pressure, lack of guidance, and unfortunate circumstances as possible motivating causes (Roberts, 2018). This reality asserts the negative ways sex workers are perceived, or made legible broadly, are mirrored in higher-education environments. As such, negative logics also reveal themselves in the student body. In one study, researchers found a positive correlation between hostility toward women in general and negative, stereotypical views of sex workers (Long et al., 2012),

which evidences historical trends of hatred for women as an organizing principle for hate of sex workers. However, in the same study, the reverse was also correlated, if students knew a sex worker personally, they tended to have less stereotypical and more understanding views (Long et al., 2012), which conversely illustrates why legibility and visibility may be important in higher education, and beyond.

Finally, some students who labor as sex workers sometimes held negative views of other sex workers and they reconcile their dissonance by distancing themselves from "stereotypical" women in sex work. The stereotypes invoked included sex workers as unintelligent, immoral, and, oddly, whores for engaging in "extras"—referring to strippers who engage in sexual acts for money (Haeger & Deil-Amen, 2010). They cited that while stereotypes were true of other women, they were not necessarily true for them. This phenomenon potentially underscores the depth of sex work(er) stigma that permeates perhaps even in intracommunity contexts.

### *Institutional logics*

In addition to student perceptions, staff, institutional policies, and institutional practices perpetuate negative views toward sex workers (Cusick et al., 2009; Sagar et al., 2015; Stewart & Scanlon, 2021). In some instances, staff and institutions—through their limited policy articulation or implementation—show that while they did not care about student realities as sex workers, staff and administrators did worry that student sex worker realities would bring shame or disgrace to the institution (Sagar et al., 2015). In other cases (particularly where and when commercial sex-related activities were legal), institutional policies facilitated contexts that promulgated negative views about buying or selling sex or sexual activities of any kind. For example, analysis of policy documents at 236 institutions in England and Scotland revealed,

> Although no institution had a policy on staff/student involvement in commercial sex, all of these responses implied that the institution concerned viewed such involvement with "taken for granted" disapproval. It is also clear from the dominance of discussion about disciplinary procedures and behaviour bringing institutions into disrepute that staff/student participation in commercial sex is widely perceived as some kind of institutional threat.
>
> (Cusick et al., 2009, p. 191)

The jarring disconnection in having no policy on staff/student involvement in commercial sex while simultaneously situating involvement in sex work as problematic, and cause for disciplinary action, seems like an espoused policy in practice. Examples of these "non-policies" by institutions related to sex work included:

> Any member of staff engaged in an act of sexual impropriety or criminality, whether or not conducted at their place of work or during working hours, shall be considered to have engaged in an act of gross misconduct and shall be subject to the University's disciplinary procedures.
>
> The University has no policies that explicitly deal with sex work but does have an expectation that staff and students will refrain from engaging activity that might jeopardise the University's reputation or position.
>
> (HEI, England; Cusick et al., 2009, p. 191)

While researchers provided these examples, they also indicated that none of the institutions gave information on why the policies were needed or relevant. Sex workers seemed to be viewed as an institutional threat which is consistent with how they are generally negatively perceived. Additionally, researchers found any mentions of sex work were followed with relatively strong language in policy documents which situated sex work as problematic and as a form of misconduct (Cusick et al., 2009). Similar contexts and logics abound in the United States, specifically. In an analysis of 255 college and university codes of student conduct, not one institution used the phrase "sex work" in relation to policies/policy language that would potentially govern the conduct of college students engaged in sex work (Stewart & Scanlon, 2021). However, institutions relied heavily on carceral and trafficking logics as well as legal articulations against prostitution to inform policy and practice. These articulations potentially perpetuate stigma and shame for college student sex workers as well as a broad flattening difference against types of sex work students might engage in (Stewart & Scanlon, 2021).

It is worth noting that the Cusick et al. (2009) study concerned itself not just with students but also staff involvement (including patronage) of sex work. This is worth noting because it highlights a broader project of sex work stigma that animates the ivory tower, including in the United States. In 2019, the Chronicle of Higher Education published an essay titled "I Told My Mentor I Was a Dominatrix: She Rescinded My Letters of Recommendation" authored by Mistress Snow. In the essay, Snow recounted her experiences within academia as both a student and an adjunct faculty member and her work as a dominatrix. Detailing the common precarious position adjuncts often find themselves, she elaborates on the fraught position of the body within an institution that is supposed to be concerned with only the mind,

> Sex work, on the other hand, exposes the scholar's body in a way that highlights the very vulnerability and, indeed, the humanity that academic work politely ignores. It lays bare the prevailing truth that bodily exertion cannot be acknowledged unless it is in service of intellectual work—never mind survival. The academic sex worker, selling her body

> to subsidize her brain, is a mirror: See how my candle burns at both ends. Look at how I set myself ablaze for you.
>
> (Snow, 2019, para. 16)

A sentiment also theorized by hooks (1994), the mind/body split that dominates the sensibilities of academia has direct implications for sex workers specifically. This is evidenced by Snow's ex-mentor, who, when learning of her dominatrix work, offered: "You will lose all credibility" (Snow, 2019, para. 3), "if this information comes out in any way, shape, or form, it will destroy your academic prospects" (Snow, 2019, para. 12), and finally "Academia and sex work are mutually exclusive" (Snow, 2019, para. 23). These sentiments, if not publicly acknowledged, are certainly mirrored in the praxis of college and university responses to sex workers. For example, in 2013, when Duke University student Miriam Weeks was outed as a sex worker (acting in pornography), the institution provided little support as she was "doxxed" and harassed, receiving rape and death threats (Jones, 2020; Kingkade, 2014), including from fellow Duke students. Weeks later revealed that university administrators did urge faculty to ensure she was at least "safe" in class (Morris, 2014). Similarly, after cam model Kendra Sunderland recorded a show in an Oregon State University library—which was later posted without her consent on an adult website—there was little indication that the university was concerned with her safety given the corresponding harassment she endured (Jones, 2020). However, the institution did ensure to implement a lifetime ban of Sunderland from the university (Dickson, 2015). When responding to her ban from campus she offered "I understand their [the university] thoughts towards it. I understand why they don't want me there … they want to take precautions for the other students" (Dickson, 2015, para. 32). That Sunderland views her ban as the university taking precautions for other students conveys a logic our institutions undoubtedly use to operate: sex work is not only dangerous but something higher-education institutions need protecting from, even if only, the institutional reputation. This further supports Cusick et al.'s (2009) findings.

While one might argue that Sunderland may have violated campus policies by recording such a show in a public campus space, the point remains that sex work stigma is retained within higher-education contexts (Lister, 2019; Simpson, 2021). As author, scholar, and sociology professor, Angela Jones (2021) suggested, "Universities and colleges *are* hostile to sex workers and probably do not realize how many of their students (and faculty/staff) have done or are considering sexual labor" (para. 7). Further, institutions likely do not care as they do not meaningfully include sex workers in university policies, and what is worse, many existing policies muddy how sex work might be managed. Take for instance policy language from the Code of Student Conduct from Fairmont State University detailing an example violation of conduct policy:

> Obscene Conduct. "Obscene conduct" means conduct which the average individual applying contemporary University standards would find (i) taken as a whole, appeals to the shameful or morbid interest in sex; (ii) depicts or describes in a patently offensive way ultimate sexual acts, normal or perverted, actual or simulated; and (iii) the matter, taken as a whole, lacks serious literary, artistic, political or scientific value.
>
> (Fairmont State University, Prohibited Conduct, Section 3.2.n)

In Chapter 2, I made a case for how morality and law are double binding in relation to sex work and this bind clearly trickles into campus policy language. The above code specifically raises a logical question: Are strippers and online/digital sex workers/porn actors covered under this articulation? Much is unclear, the least of which is that "there are no policies, protocols, and little knowledge about supporting sex worker students at universities" (Jones, 2021, para. 10). The lack of support and meaningful (non-deficit) engagement with sex work and lack of sex work policy is not unknown to sex workers themselves. U.K.-based Doctoral candidate and lecturer Adi MacArtney (2019) reflected,

> It is hard to know whether my open association with sex work and the sex work community damages my future in academia, although it probably does. The stigma is structured so that it is more acceptable to say "I was a sex worker" but have "moved on" and am "doing better." (para. 6)

Snow's (2019) experience suggests MacArtney is likely correct, and MacArtney's point is well taken that a reformed sex worker, or "repentant whore" to invoke Roberts (1992), is more legible and, frankly, more welcome in the ivory tower.

Despite what seems to be difficult and negative context and discourse about sex work, some faculty and staff at higher-education institutions recognize that support is needed for student sex workers (Sagar et al., 2015). Early recommendations include better training on the details that give nuance to sex work law, better training on referrals/general support services (Sagar et al., 2015), and fostering supportive and nonjudgmental environments that help student sex workers cope with the stress of the work and negative stereotypes (Haeger & Deil-Amen, 2010). Additionally, researchers suggest institutions should limit inquiries into students' status as a sex worker, arguing it should be viewed as an aspect of private life to be covered under anti-harassment and bullying policies (Cusick et al., 2009).

## Diana "Diamond" Armstrong

After reviewing research, cases, and public narratives about college student sex workers, it seemed the picture was incomplete for two reasons. One,

the available data while important, felt impersonal, as a critical qualitative researcher it felt like some nuance was missing and the essence of the students' stories and experiences were unclear. Two, as far as I could tell, nearly all of the research focused on the experiences of cisgender white women in sex work. So, I wondered, for a community of people who are stigmatized, how is it that the most vulnerable are made invisible through the little information available? This question was the beginning of my work to learn more about not only college student sex workers broadly but also those with racial- and sexual minoritized identities specifically.

Media, film, and popular culture have a significant part in contributing to how society thinks about college students and sex work; *The Girlfriend Experience*, *Chocolate City*, and *Sleeping Beauty* all depict a reality of college students as erotic laborers. The film that contributed significantly to my own thinking around college student sex workers is *The Players Club*, a 1998 New Line Cinema film that was produced and directed by rapper, actor, and producer Ice Cube. A classic Black American film that chronicles the experience of Diana Armstrong and her eventual introduction into stripping after being kicked out of the house by her father. He and Diana were unable to agree on where she would go to college. Her dream was to enroll at Southern Tech, a fictional HBCU in Atlanta, Georgia, while her father instead wanted her to go upstate to a "good" college (Cube, 1998), of which we can surmise that what made the college good was it not being Black.

Diana took a job at the Players Club as a way to support herself, her new baby, and pay her tuition and living expenses at the college of her choice. At The Players Club, she was given the stage name Diamond by the club owner citing her pretty face (Cube, 1998). The film's larger-than-life characters such as Dolla Bill, played by the late-comedian Bernie Mac; Blue, the corny-yet-likable house DJ, played by Jamie Foxx; and Tricks and Ronnie, played by comedian Adele Givens and Chrystale Wilson, all contribute to the chaos of Diamond's life and the difficult lessons she learns about herself and the world.

The best part of this depiction is that Diamond's goal of graduating from college and becoming a journalist—though placed in the background of the film—is the true thread that keeps the story moving. Her identity as a student is the heartbeat of the film that keeps the pace, and her student identity is the anchor that she uses to center herself as she navigates the tumultuous atmosphere at the club. Her student reality is the reason she is working at the Players Club in the first place, and not simply tangential to her student experience. To be clear, my intent is not to romanticize higher education, colleges/universities, or the students who attend them. My intention is also not to engage in essentialism through a "means to an end" sex work narrative—though Diamond invokes this logic in the film—because the reality is that many sex workers with racial- and sexual minoritized identities may need to rely on sex work or choose it for various reasons regardless and inclusive of student status; and for some, perhaps there is no end.

Given this, the germaneness of her student reality is illustrated by a few different scenes. In the first, Diamond falls asleep in class because of her late nights working at the club. At the end of class, the professor expressed his concern to Diamond about her passing the course given she was having difficulty being attentive during the lesson. She illustrated that she was in fact focused by regurgitating a portion of the lesson that occurred when she was seemingly sound asleep, easing the professor's concern (Cube, 1998). This particular moment sets up a later scene when that same professor unknowingly walks into the club where she works causing her shame and embarrassment. The filmmakers reveal a not so fictitious reality of presumed logics that sex work and academia are wholly separated and illustrate what happens when higher education and the erotic collide.

In another scene, Diamond and her boyfriend Lance have an argument as he desired that she stop dancing at the club because his friends were giving him a hard time about dating a stripper, exclaiming that his friends can see her (naked body) whenever they wanted. Diamond, unmoved by his frustration said "So what? I'm trying to go to school" (Cube, 1998, 0:50:22). Later that day, on campus while being measured for her cap and gown, a classmate approached Diamond after having left a group of other classmates. The student recognized Diamond from the club and asked her for a "lunch table dance" while throwing money at her. After refusing the invitation, the classmate hurled insults at Diamond, while she, overwhelmed, made a hasty exit from the venue (Cube, 1998). The scene illustrates Diamond's life as a dancer, or rather her dancer reality being revealed, had become overwhelming and as her erotic labor world and her student experience began to overlap more blatantly, she felt pushed to a turning point: would she persist or leave the club life? Through it all, the film establishes an example narrative about college student sex workers and more importantly, a Black sex worker.

As I reflected on Diamond's fictional experience, it reminded me of Maliah's story. Maliah was the first student I spoke with about her experience as a college student sex worker, and just like Diamond, she worked as a stripper/exotic dancer. I recall being nervous to speak with Maliah at first, I wanted to ensure my questions did not offend her, I wanted to make sure she felt comfortable talking with me, I had hoped I could convey that I appreciated her time and her labor, and I desperately wanted to do her story justice. When Maliah first walked into the room, she was warm, kind, and had deliberate energy about herself. She wore distressed jeans, a dad cap and T-shirt and had the kindest smile. We sat down and began to talk about her, her childhood, her family, her memorable college experiences, and also her life as a dancer. We talked about many things, and I was most curious about how a college student finds themselves considering sex work? How might they go about their introduction to it? Do they consult someone? Do they dive-in head first? So, I asked Maliah to recount for me the time leading up to her sex work; I was interested in the circumstances surrounding her

decision and how she navigated those first 24 hours. The story she told me surprised me in many ways, and it is a story I will not soon forget.

## Maliah in the mirror

I remember thinking how fascinating it was to look in the mirror and see myself: beautiful, brown skin, bright eyes, high ponytail. I wondered about the woman I was becoming. To see her staring back. Knowing who I was, where I come from, and how I was brought up. From a well-known family, a family who's huge on … image. An image that didn't necessarily match, at least not privately. At least not all the time. At least not … anymore.

> **thump thump** A dull knock at the door. I knew that knock.
> "Hey Baby, do you need the car today?"
> "Yes sir, I need it a little earlier than normal too. I have some things to do before I get with my girls."
> "Ok. I'll be back soon."
> "Don't be late Dad!"

He shuffled away without responding. There was something poetic about meditating on my family's image while looking at my own image in the reflection of a mirror. I couldn't believe I was gonna do it, but I was broke as fuck, and school was starting in a couple of months. Perhaps I wasn't the girl that people would expect to strip, hence my family's image, but there I was—less than 24 hours before I would for the first time, poetic. If I hadn't spent all my scholarship money, maybe I would have been doing something else that summer. Or maybe my dancer reality was inevitable, I mean … I *had* always joked about becoming a stripper.

The next few hours were the slowest of my life as I prepared myself to make my debut at the club. It was called Lavender. I still can't believe I had to fill out an application. Who "applies" to be a dancer? While I waited, I thought about everything that could go wrong with my decision but also what could go right. Was it possible that it wouldn't all be terrible?

After helping Dad carry in the groceries, I closed the door behind him; he hurriedly dropped the keys in my hand, gave me a kiss, and I headed out the door. As I walked out, he asked deliberately

> "What time will you be home?"
> "I don't know Dad … Don't wait up." I cooed nonchalantly.

He peeked out the window as I walked to the car. I think he confusedly noticed my mostly empty high-school cheerleading duffle bag that I had taken along with me. He hadn't seen it since Senior Night at my last game in high school, two years ago. I only had a pair of stilettos in the bag—Mom's to be exact—but I didn't think she would notice that they were gone. In the

car, I started the ignition and tried to leave quickly before he got it in his mind to come out or try and flag me down and ask more questions.

My first stop was the plasma center in town. I was not at all fond of needles, but it was honestly the furthest thing from my mind in that moment. It was a means to an end—quick cash that I needed to buy an outfit or two.

"Wow," I said it out loud to myself just to believe it.

Roughly two hours and $50 worth of my plasma gone later, I made my way to a small shop very near Lavender to buy some items. When I walked in the little boutique, it was the type of place you would imagine coeds might go to get their bathing suit for spring break in South Beach. Something really "Becky" about the whole situation. I kept rubbing my arm where the bandage was. All I could think was, I hope I can take this shit off by eight o'clock. It was a little stuffy in the shop, probably because it was sweltering that day.

The store was empty which calmed my nervousness at the thought that someone might see me shopping there. The salesperson in the boutique had soothing eyes. She asked me if I was looking for anything in particular and I told her

> "Your cheap shit."
> She laughed.
> "I'm dancing at Lavender tonight it's my first night working there."
> "Oh, ok honey. Don't be nervous. You're going to do so good. Just be confident, you're going to be great and I'll give you a discount so you can get what you need."

I appreciated that lady for a lot of reasons, mostly for saving me some money. I got my things and headed to my bestie's house. She was the only one who knew what was going on. When I got there, she was sure not to ask a whole lot of questions. She offered me some food—wings fried hard with extra sauce and a side of fries—which I accepted, and then I took a nap.

About an hour before I needed to be at the club I woke up, did my makeup, said a prayer, hugged my bestie, and hit the door. I got there early, around 7:30, and I will never forget that because I'm never early. For anything. I remembered thinking how cool I thought the club was when I arrived but looking back it was honestly just dusty as fuck, I was excited and nervous at the same time. My stomach was in knots flipping all over the place, my body would do the same in a few hours.

The host took me to the back of the house, they had been expecting me. She took me straight to the House Mom. For the next several minutes, Donna ran down all the rules of the club, Donna rattled the rules off so fast that I couldn't keep up. I was so lost. I kept wondering when the lessons would start: How to Dance 101, Building Clientele 280, Advanced Pole Acrobatics 500. The only pieces of information I remembered were where to sit and be dressed and on the floor by eight.

"Ok, what outfit do I put on first? How many outfit changes do I do?"

Donna just smiled and walked away. There weren't any lockers or a place to put my things. There were just these long wooden tables. Some of the girls had storage bins to hold all of their stuff, but all I had was my cheer bag. I was not prepared at all. Jesus. I sat at one of the tables and got dressed. I put on my mom's heels and headed to the floor.

When I went out I didn't know what to do so I sat by another dancer, Katrina. She was thin, about average height, energetic, and had doe-like eyes. I said hi and squeaked out,

"This is my first day, I'm Maliah."
"Hi Maliah! I'm Katrina and I'm 19, how old are you?"
"I'm 20."
"Ok Maliah, you seem nervous."
All I could do was nod.
"I get it. But the best piece of advice I ever got and I'm gonna give to you is just be yourself! You'll make money, it'll come to you. The most important thing is to just be yourself."
"Ok"
I said with an anxious smile.
"You see that guy over there?"

Katrina nodded to a guy across the room. He had on a suit like he came to the club straight from the office.

"Go talk to him, he's nice."

I went over to sit with the man. He didn't smile when I walked up but I felt my anxiety start to subside a little, something about his energy seemed like he might be ok. He asked me my name and we exchanged pleasantries for about 30 minutes.

"It's my first time, I'm really nervous." I finally admitted.

He was so cool about it and took me to VIP so that my first dance could be in private. He was so nice to me. I'll never forget him. I remembered thinking how easy the money was, he wasn't a creep. "I could really get used to this. This isn't like the *Player's Club* at all!" I thought to myself.

A few minutes after I came back to the floor, I got a tap on the shoulder. It was Donna.

"You ready to dance baby?"

I nodded and followed her to the back. They were putting me on stage with a girl named Kelly. She was weird. While we waited to go on, she told me

she was a naturalist, and while she explained what it meant, the only thing I really got from it was that she didn't wear deodorant, which was obvious standing there next to her.

They finally announced us, and we came out on stage. I didn't know what to do so I just pretended I was with my girls and danced how I normally would have danced. I'll always remember glancing at myself in the mirrors on the wall. "Wow. I'm really a dancer." I kept saying it over and over in my head. "Wow. I'm really a dancer." I felt in control, not only of that moment but of my body, my circumstances, and, perhaps, my future. The music took over me as I rocked rhythmically, like ocean waves going with the flow, I let the music take me away. Warm waves crashing against my uncertainty, perhaps my fear, they washed over me as I danced, twerked, and realized a new version of myself. Bringing my body into view, not necessarily for the club patrons, but my own view, seeing myself in the mirror.

Before I knew it, my first dance was over. I started collecting my money, it was about $150 and suddenly all these people start running up to me.

> "When you get down come dance for me!" "I want to take you to VIP!"
> "Aye, let me holler at you!"

All these random guys trying to get my attention. I was lowkey feeling myself.

When I walked to the back of the house everyone was applauding me. Katrina came up to me, running, to give me a hug

> "You're going to do so good here! Were you nervous?!"
> "I was nervous as hell!"
> "What?! You can't tell, I could not tell. When you get onstage you look like you are a pro at this."

I held onto that moment. It would keep me going that night, and several nights to come. The owner of the club was also backstage, he just nodded at me and said

> "Welcome."

For the first time, I felt like I would be ok. I started to feel a confidence I hadn't felt before.

By the end of the night, I was tired. I put back on my regular clothes. I slid off my Mom's stilettos and inspected them. They looked the same, she never found out I had them or wore them for my debut. I wiped them off for good measure and then pulled my hair up back into the high ponytail in the mirror. She's back, co-ed Maliah, but not quite the same as before.

As the rest of the girls cleared out of the back room, Donna found her way back to me. We made small talk, she asked about me: where I was

from, how old I was, what made me decide to dance. The standard questions. She asked me if I had told anyone about my new career, and I let her know only my best friend knew.

> "Well Maliah, I want you to know I will do my best to protect you, and to keep you safe while you're here. I've been doing this a long time and your wellbeing is important to me. It's my priority.
> "Thank you, Donna." I was emotional all the sudden.
> "You're welcome. I've been where you are, and I will always have your back for as long as you are here."

Over time, we got close, and she told me all about her dancer life. Like the time when her mom walked in on *her* when she was naked and dancing onstage – a personal fear of mine. Because she had been where I was, she was the best person to understand what I was experiencing. She was the best maternal figure I could ask for in that space. She embraced me, in a mama bear hug and walked me to the door so she could lock up. Right before I got out of sight, she called to me:

> "So, what was it like? Tonight, what will you remember about tonight?"

I spun on my heels to see her warm chubby face, wrinkled and worn, the twinkle in her eye, and her salt n' pepper hair, and I thought back to having one of the most self-actualizing moments of my life while being on stage. I think about all the experiences I would go on to have and the one thing that remained consistent from that night forward is what I responded to her,

> "There's no greater feeling than being naked, sweating, and having dollar bills clinging to your body."

Donna laughed with her whole body. Head back, belly-aching laughter. I laughed too.

> "And you know what else Donna … there's nothing in the whole world like seeing yourself in the mirror … really seeing yourself, you know? There's nothing in this world better than that."

## Sex work, finance, and neoliberalism in higher education

> *Get your boots and your coat for this wet ass pussy*
> *He bought a phone just for pictures of this wet ass pussy*
> *Paid my tuition just to kiss me on this wet ass pussy*
> *Now make it rain if you want to see some wet ass pussy*
>
> —Megan Thee Stallion

The lyrics above are from the smash hit "WAP" which is an acronym for, wet ass pussy. In it, rappers Cardi B and Megan Thee Stallion wax poetically and explicitly about sex, desire, and pleasure. Their offering comes as a new iteration of a long tradition of women rappers who "spit" about the sexually explicit, rappers such as Lil Kim, Salt N Pepa, TLC, and Missy "Misdemeanor" Elliott. To me, what differs about this song and the cultural moment is Meg's invitation of the sexually explicit within higher education, student contexts, and transactional sex. Megan Thee Stallion has been open about her love for and the importance of higher education (Long, 2021) as she is a graduate of Texas Southern University with a Bachelor of Science degree in Health Administration (Mauddi, 2021). As such, her nods to the realities of college students engaged in sex work or transactional sex cannot be denied and are likely not coincidental, although to be clear, she has not claimed to be a sex worker herself. While the vast majority of students do not have the wealth and fame of Megan Thee Stallion, there are various ways college students who might want to engage in sex work for their various financial needs, to do so. There is one platform that seems to be overwhelmingly centered in the college student sex work narrative. Described as a space where "members could form relationships based on agreed-upon expectations" (Seeking, n.d.), the website formerly known as Seeking Arrangements reported they have over 20 million active members located in over 139 countries around the globe. Now known as simply "Seeking," the 15-year-old website serves as one of many places individuals can connect for various relationships/arrangements, although the company makes clear that the arrangements made on their site are not transactional in nature.

At one time, a portion of the Seeking website was dedicated to an initiative known as Sugar Baby University (SBU). Annually, Seeking would post the top universities for sugaring based on the number of college students registered on their site. In 2020, NYU topped the list with a total of 1,676 students registered, followed by Georgia State University at 1,304 (Martin, 2020). A complete list of the top 20 in 2020 schools can be found in Table 3.1.

I downloaded an SBU press kit to examine its contents which comprised a press release, an infographic, various promotional images, and a promotional video. Seeking estimates that in 2021 over three million students in the United States were registered and engaged on their platform, the most of any country represented. Behind the United States was the United Kingdom with over 500,000 students which underscores my earlier point about the disproportionate literature between the two countries in relation to the estimated number of students in sex work. Seeking provided this information to advertise the potential benefits of registering for the site and unsurprisingly focus almost exclusively on decreasing or eliminating student debt, which Seeking estimates to be $1.7 trillion. As a caveat, it is unclear if seeking requires students to disclose their educational institution nor if those

*Table 3.1* Top 20 schools for sugar babies in 2020

| *University* | *Sugar babies* |
|---|---|
| New York University | 1,676 |
| Georgia State University | 1,304 |
| University of Central Florida | 1,068 |
| Columbia University | 1,008 |
| The University of Alabama | 968 |
| University of Texas, San Antonio | 875 |
| Florida State University | 873 |
| Rutgers University | 684 |
| University of California, Los Angeles | 614 |
| University of Nevada, Las Vegas | 583 |
| University of Southern California | 583 |
| University of North Texas | 573 |
| West Virginia University | 550 |
| University of Missouri | 542 |
| California State University, Fullerton | 525 |
| University of Cincinnati | 522 |
| University of North Carolina | 514 |
| San Francisco State University | 510 |
| University of Florida | 501 |
| Colorado State University | 356 |

*Source*: Martin (2020).

institutional affiliations are verified. There is also no clear indication of how Seeking collects, analyzes, reports, or verifies its data, and at the time of this writing, the entire SBU portion of the website has been removed.

### *Neoliberalism, college cost, and college student sex work motivations*

Scholars, researchers, and activists have all underscored how neoliberalism has come to inform the current conditions of higher education. An often-elusive definition to wrangle, one study found that the term "neoliberalism" is often used in imprecise and contradictory ways (Boas & Gans-Morse, 2009). In this text, I rely on Carruthers' (2018) definition of "a model of capitalism that operates through the privatization of public goods, deregulation of trade, diminishment of social services and emphasis on individual freedoms" (p. x). This framing of the concept is particularly germane to higher education, how it has been and come to be financed, and why it connects—at least in part—to college affordability and sex work by extension.

One logic that guides a neoliberal view is that those who stand to benefit from an investment should be the ones to pay for it (Mintz, 2021). On this point, the shift from education as a public good to what is now considered a private investment/decision is piercingly clear. To this end, the trend that privileges "loans over grants and the systematic de-funding of

public colleges and universities" (Mintz, 2021, p. 84) have clear implications for college access and cost. In the United States, the average college student debt (at graduation) in 1997 was $13,670 and rose to $35,520 in 2017 (Hanson, 2021). Similarly, Roberts (2018) recounted the skyrocketing student debt in the United Kingdom which averaged £5,000 in 1997 and rose to £50,000 in 2017. He explained "the picture of the corporatized higher education system, correlated with rising student debt, is completed by the increased participation of students in the sex industry over the same period" (p. 33). All of which is corroborated by the narratives of college student sex workers.

### *Motivations*

Nearly all of the existing literature on college student sex workers articulate money as the main motivator for engaging in the work (Haeger & Deil-Amen, 2010; Masvawure, 2010; Roberts et al., 2007; Sagar et al., 2016) and this was also true for all collaborators in this study. Specifically, many students cite the amount of money they receive for sex work in relation to the amount of time they spend doing the work as a primary factor for their decision and something they would not be able to achieve through other types of work or labor forms (Haeger & Deil-Amen, 2010; Sagar et al., 2016). Some researchers frame sex work as a type of transactional sex (Masvawure, 2010) and suggest some students engage for more than monetary reasons (Masvawure, 2010; Sagar et al., 2016). Further, some studies nuance the financial hardship lens to offer that, students from different socioeconomic backgrounds/classes engage in sex work for different reasons including those who may be economically stable (Bott, 2006; Masvawure, 2010). For example, some students engage in sex work to achieve and maintain a "high" social status (including material gain) in their educational settings and among peer groups (Masvawure, 2010). Additionally, some students do not engage in sexual activities (have sex for money) but still are considered to engage in "transactional sex," which includes time spent or sex in exchange for material/physical items (Masvawure, 2010). Finally, students also engage in sex work because of job flexibility, because they enjoy the sex itself, and in some instances, out of curiosity (Sagar et al., 2016).

In general, students cite the most difficult part of engaging in sex work is the pressure to keep their work secret as a result of the negative views of sex work and the potential backlash they might receive (Haeger & Deil-Amen, 2010; Sagar et al., 2016). Specifically, in one study students articulated that sex work did not negatively impact their education, rather it impacts them personally which creates challenges for them to focus on their education/academics (Haeger & Deil-Amen, 2010). Furthermore, balancing that pressure and stress can sometimes have negative impacts on their mental and physical health (Roberts et al., 2007) but is likely also due to navigating

their roles as students and sex workers and trying to survive economically, all together.

## "Sex work on campus" gives nuance to the literature

While there were many connections between how collaborators articulate their experiences and findings in the extant literature, there are some differences worth noting. In this final section, I briefly recount important findings of this inquiry and what the narratives and interviews of collaborators import into the discourse of college student sex work including the importance of personal histories, complicating money as motivation, relationships with colleges/universities and the actors within, and finally the importance of centering minoritized identities as it relates to researchers and the researched.

### *The nuance of personal histories*

First, over the course of this study, collaborators spoke about their histories as they related to their social identities, class realities, and sexualization. Beyond musings on college cost, and issues related to class, not all the extant literature engages these particularities or histories. For example, all collaborators of color recalled having some deliberate experience or coming to knowing around sex/sexuality that in many ways informed their path to engaging in sex work. For example, both Tianna and Maria distinctly recalled how people would project onto their bodies when they were growing up. In Maria's story, for example, her early physical development informed how she was perceived and treated by other kids as well as their parents. She was often considered a "hoe" simply because of how she looked and the types of dolls she played with. She discussed in her interview that once she did start to explore her sexuality those projections framed her understanding of sex and who she might be, sexually. Tianna had a similar experience,

> I remember once I started growing hips, I was suddenly this jezebel and I was treated differently. And at 14 or 15, I'm trying to make sense of my place in all of it. Then I started high school and some of the older girls would ask me "Are you a hoe? Because you kind of look like a hoe." I remember a specific incident in high school. I was in a large group of friends and this girl's boyfriend was coming to visit and she said that everyone could meet her boyfriend except me she said, "I don't need all that ass around him." Although she was joking, I didn't like being made to feel that way. So, I embraced it. It made me feel edgy. Like yeah, I was this bad ass hoe, what's up? So, I'm being hit with all of these messages for years and so I finally just decided to run with it.

> Like maybe I am this person people think I am. I started being flippant about sexual things even though I wasn't sexually active at all.

To be clear, it is critical to not reduce collaborators' early experiences with socialization around their bodies and sexuality as the sole factor to explain their motivations for engaging in sex work, or their engaging in sex work as an inevitability. As I and countless researchers have written, money is the primary motivator for most college student sex workers. However, these experiences may color what and how the transition into sex work manifested and the contexts and conditions which animate them. In addition to projections onto collaborators which formed their experience some of them had environmental or familial factors that influenced the ease of transitioning into sex work. Kemi, for example, discussed her complicated relationship with sex and how that informed her introduction into sex work,

> I don't want to do the thing where people are talking about sex work like "I had a tragic childhood and so that's why I do sex work." I'm not trying to frame it that way. But in thinking about my sexual history and how my sexual identity formed, I've never been under the illusion that I had to enjoy sex or that sex was something that needed to be pleasurable for me.

Kemi will later recount that she had always been engaging in sex for something, that it was/is a transaction that she engages in, and she suggests that many people do also, if they would only be honest with themselves. Similarly, Gui discussed how his exposure to sex workers in his community growing up—though stigmatized—made him more receptive and open to it as a legitimate form of survival. He spoke in his story about how his mom had always told him that she would engage in sex work if she ever needed to. Gui also shared,

> Sex work was stigmatized in my community as I was growing up, but I still felt that they should be respected, and I still feel like it's a legitimate source of work—desperate times call for desperate measures. I know some people do it for fun, but I understand for some people it's the only source of income that they can get that's steady. So, for me, I would never say that I was "predisposed" to sex work because that carries a lot of connotations with it that are very anti-sex worker; but I would say that I was more open to it than other people would be. I understood why someone might want to do something like sex work.

As evidenced by collaborator narratives, they each have connected histories and experiences to sex work—or sex and sexualization generally—which informed how they perceived sex work, how they perceived themselves as sexual people, and their ultimate transition into sex work.

Given that this inquiry focused on college sex workers with racial and sexual minoritized identities, it is fair to say that collaborators' experiences with oppression in relation to their social identities—prior to their college enrollment—also inform how and why these college students come to sex work. Intersectionality requires that researchers situate their work with a deliberate analysis of power and its multiplicative nature based on social identities and realities (Crenshaw, 1991). Prior to sex work, some collaborators were already experiencing oppression in the world, and for nearly all of them, their experiences were related to racism and capitalism. The system of dominance is happening altogether at the same time (white supremacist capitalist patriarchy imperialism), and collaborators' histories and social circumstances informed their decision to engage in sex work.

### *The nuance of money as motivation*

In addition to personal histories, there are other aspects of collaborators' narratives that give nuance to extant literature. For example, as evidenced in his story, Gui, a gay Asian cisgender man, only engaged in sex work in crunch time/pinch time situations to get himself out of financial binds which threatened other aspects of his life that he deemed important (getting home to a sick relative, avoiding university holds being placed on his account which held up his academic progress, etc.). On the other hand, Kathleen, a white queer middle-class cisgender woman, wanted financial independence. More specifically, her loan debt was looming, and she wanted to take responsibility to pay it off herself instead of her parents, she offered,

> realizing that I was probably going to be graduating the next year, I had a lot of student loans. My parents said they would help me, and while I appreciate that and know I'm very lucky for that, I didn't feel like they should. So, you know, looking at your $40,000 plus debt, it's like you start to panic about it.

My intention is not to generalize or essentialize the relative conditions of each collaborator to all who might share their identities. Rather, I simply highlight their identities to raise the consideration that differences around them (as a result of power) seem to inform contexts and urgency around how and why college students engage in sex work. Gui, Tianna, and Stokely each discussed their sex work earnings as being crucial for day-to-day needs: food money, bill money, parking ticket money, etc. Similarly, Maliah recalled being so "broke" that she had to sell plasma to buy costumes so she could dance on her first night. To this end, the multiplicative nature of how power seemed to press upon these students as sex workers who were queer and/or of color and situated the need for sex work differently. While being relieved of college student loan debt is important for peace of mind,

prosperity, and happiness, that urgency is different than needing to eat or pay day-to-day bills/expenses.

The findings of this inquiry provide depth and nuance to the "money as motivation" finding that is prevalent in extant research about why college students engage in sex work to simply add, identity matters. For example, suppose sex workers with more dominant identities tend to engage, mostly, to pay for college (though some also do so to pay for living expenses) and sex workers with minoritized identities tend to do so for survival (to eat, to pay basic bills, and necessities), then what might that mean for when they finish college (if they finish college)? If one sex worker pays for college with their sex work and another paid to eat through college, though they both were able to use the sex work for their needs, they still find themselves in inequitable and vastly different realities post-degree. I argue this is an urgent consideration given the neoliberal logics that animate the current context higher education finds itself within. The breathtaking rise of college cost and corresponding student debt disproportionately impacts minoritized students. This is a reality that scholars and researchers must attend to when speaking to the experience of sex workers and to avoid flattening difference so severely that it renders these experiences invisible (Crenshaw, 1991; Luft, 2009).

### *The nuance of relationships with institutions and institutional actors*

Broadly the collaborators in this study offer important additions to the literature first; they articulate a broad fractured confidence in the staff, administrators, faculty, and fellow students at their institution (see Stewart, 2021a). The use of the term "fractured" to modify "confidence" is important as it signals that there is *some* trust that sex workers in this study held in certain individuals but there is still a broad distance between individual-level trust and broad institutional-level trust. For example, collaborators identified faculty as the primary group they might likely reveal their realities as engaging in sex work, but only in very specific contexts. Faculty in social sciences and identity studies as well as faculty who show an active disruption of sex work stigma were identified as potentially trustworthy (Stewart, 2021a). In addition, the collaborators view their institutions as a place where their sex worker identities/selves are generally not welcome and assume higher education is a place that will not be supportive to that part of their lives/experience. They struggled broadly to even imagine what support might look like, which is to say, imagining a sex work ontology free of stigma and shame in higher education was an impossibility (Stewart, 2021a). Specifically, some collaborators "not only expect[ed] a lack of support they *accept it*, in ways they would not necessarily in their other identity spaces" (Stewart, 2021a, p. 11). In addition to free HIV and STI testing, student emergency funding programs, and campus free-food programs, the collaborators suggest

additional programs, speakers, lectures, and events that engage the topic of sex work from non-flattening and non-deficit perspectives would be critical steps to creating better conditions for them and other college student sex workers (Stewart, 2021a)

More importantly, given intersectionality as a framework, this study provides evidence once again that focusing on single issues is insufficient when trying to understand or create solutions for problems created by a system of dominance (Crenshaw, 1991; McClain, 2016). In the case of this study, moving beyond single-issue focus/analysis means embracing the reality that labor (capitalism) is violent, and as such, people around the world work hard to try and survive it as best they can. However, those who find themselves at the nexus of dominance from a race perspective, sexual identity perspective, and class perspective might need to navigate strategies in markedly different ways from people, not at that nexus. Sex work is no exception. In this way, money is—and may continue to be—the primary motivation for college students engaged in sex work, but the gravity of that motivation is, was, and will continue to be informed by other factors.

### *The nuance of centering minoritized identities*

Beyond financial aspects, the collaborators in this study articulated important distinctions between their experiences and sex workers with more dominant identities. Specifically, their narratives suggest they are hypermarginalized within sex worker movements and discourses (Stewart, in press), which means, even within a marginalized community, they feel their experiences and needs are further relegated to the margins (within the margins). Collaborators generally argued for a pushback of the broad whitening and uncritical empowerment rhetoric of "mainstream" sex workers in addition to a naming of the way racism and white supremacy animate sex worker contexts, opportunities, and possibilities (Stewart, in press). For example, opportunities to make equal or comparable money, and to do so without whitewashing themselves or disappearing their queer identities. The queer sex workers suggested through their engagement with cisgender men clients, there is trauma to their queerness, including how their queerness is rendered invisible in the sex work itself, and prevalent sex work(er) movements (Stewart, in press).

Finally, I had ongoing discussions with collaborators about how our collaborative efforts in this research were affecting them, why they decided to collaborate, and what other researchers could do in the future to re-create a sense of community and trust that we built together. There are three critical considerations to note. First, for college student sex workers with racial and sexual minoritized identities, *researcher identity matters*. Second, the collaborators in this study articulated that their interest in this research project was fueled by what they viewed as an ethical process, including fair payment for their labor (see Stewart, 2021b). Third, the collaborators shared

people with multiple minoritized identities want to see studies that explicitly center them. For example, Kemi stated:

> I saw the study advertisement and I thought, oh a sex work study? On college students? On queer and brown people? Oh, you actually want to hear from *me*? This is about me. If it would have been just about like sex workers generally. I would have been like, whatever. I understand that people like me have to see themselves in whiteness all the time because the narrative is always white, but when I don't have to stretch to see myself in the narrative it's so much easier.

Beyond wanting *explicit*, *descriptive*, and *specific* centering of their experiences in inquiries, the person who is conducting the inquiry may be more important. For example, many collaborators shared Tianna's sentiments when I asked what made the process easy and affirming for them.

> You not being white covers a huge gap for me. We've kind of touched on this yesterday. I think sometimes like white women have really good intentions but when it comes down to actually having the conversations, I feel like a lot of times when I get comfortable and I start to, you know, actually speak on things that are unique to a Black experience [or sex work experience]. They're just these large gaps in their understanding. And so what started off as a therapeutic conversation becomes like me teaching this person what it's like to be me.

Maria offered similar sentiments by saying,

> I was like, "wow. Someone actually cares about particular kinds of sex workers [with minoritized identities]." Someone wants to hear and understand. I think it would be different if say I was calling up a white man or something, I would be like, I don't know the intention here. So, I think there's a level of a comfort I have around your [the researcher] demographics [social identities] as well.

Kemi reiterated one final time,

> You're a Black person. I know you're a Black man and I don't know your sexuality, but you read to me as queer. I'm queer. I don't feel like there's a weird dynamic you know what I mean? Like I'm fat. You're not like skinny, I feel like when I talk to you, I don't have the pretense and I'm not worried that that fatphobia is gonna come jumping at me, you know, like I feel very comfortable talking to you. I also don't think that these concepts are alien to you.

These quotes illustrate two important final thoughts. First, if researchers pursue inquiry on college student sex workers with racial and sexual minoritized

identities it would help if those inquiries are made *specific to them*. If collaborators can avoid having to guess if an inquiry is about them or have to force to see themselves and their experiences in whiteness, it would be invaluable. Secondly, it was affirming for collaborators to work with someone who shared experiences they have. I mentioned in my positionality that while I do not understand power and dominance from a sex work perspective, I know and understand what *it* is. To this end, Black, brown, queer, trans, fat, disabled, and generationally poor scholars should take up research like this, if they are interested and able, and those without these identities should materially support the researchers who do. To be clear, I am not necessarily suggesting that any and every one with these identities should assume they have the license to engage in these inquiries—as power-consciousness and ethics go beyond identities one holds—I am suggesting *if* anyone is going to do engage in similar work they must understand and empathize with what it means to be in the margins of the margins and how to design inquiry that best explores those realities *alongside* those that live them.

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# 4 Letters to a young sex worker

In 1993, Touchstone Pictures released the much-anticipated sequel film titled *Sister Act 2: Back in the Habit*. In it, actress Whoopi Goldberg reprised her role as Sister Mary Clarence—the fast-talking and talented Vegas headliner—who was tasked by her Catholic Nun friends with saving St. Francis Academy High School by starting a school choir. The film featured many talented young actors who would go on to wonderful projects in the world of music and entertainment including Jennifer Love Hewitt, Monica Calhoun (who famously co-starred in the film *The Players Club* as Diamond's cousin, Ebony, which I discuss in Chapter 5), and the incomparable, Lauryn Hill. Hill, who played Rita Watson, was the focus of the film's arc as she struggled with how to pursue her passion of singing, against the wishes of her mother played by Sheryl Lee Ralph. Watson also harbored a general hostility and resistance to Sister Mary Clarence and what she viewed as her disruptive nature to the school life the students were used to.

One scene, in particular, always stuck with me and sets the stage for how I come to this chapter. Midway through the film, Watson and Clarence collide as Clarence attempts to encourage Watson to be intentional with her musical passions. Clarence recounted her own journey to chart a path of being an entertainer after her mother gave her a book titled *Letters to a Young Poet* by celebrated poet and novelist, Rainer Maria Rilke. This was the first time I heard of Rilke or this particular text, but it stuck with me for years to come, almost 30 to be precise. A young poet by the name of Franz Kappus wrote Rilke seeking counsel about the prospects of his work and life as an artist. In a short, yet beautiful and insightful text, comprised of ten letters and one sonnet, Rilke shared his perspectives on love, loss, loneliness, and joy. Interestingly, the text does not include Kappus' letters, rather only Rilke's responses appear which contribute to the beauty and mystery of the gentle, yet powerful words imparted to the young artist. A particular quote stays with me in which Rilke (2001) offered,

> If only it were possible or us to see farther than our knowledge reaches, and even a little beyond the outworks of our presentiment, perhaps we would bear our sadnesses with greater trust than we have in our joys.

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> For they are the moments when something new has entered us, something unknown.
>
> (p. 28)

This chapter is named for an experience similar to what *Letters to a Young Poet* represents. As the college students in this study worked to think back on their time as college students and who they were prior to engaging in sex work, they revealed the complexities of their experiences and illustrated the polymorphous reality of the corresponding good and difficulty of their labor. Through their writing, they unearthed the beauty, struggle, and resistance in their various lives and contexts, making meaning of the many new unknowns, joys, and sorrows they have navigated over time.

## Methodological considerations

In addition to the interviews as part of the data collection process, I also tasked the students with creating two artifacts. They wrote a letter to their past self prior to engaging in sex work and a letter to a person, department, group, or entity at their college or university that connected or related to their student sex worker experiences. Researchers have situated artifact elicitation in inquiries to contextualize interview responses that assist a researcher in negotiating meanings related to the interview data and to the artifact itself (Douglas et al., 2015; Kim, 2016). Further, artifacts can be used to help collaborators articulate and deepen memories of incidents, and to help researchers gain a better understanding of their experience and knowledge (Douglas et al., 2015; Kim, 2016). Artifacts comprise a number of different mediums including video diaries, photographs, maps, drawings, writings, diagrams, and television programs (Douglas et al., 2015; Hartel, 2014; Kim, 2016).

From a methodological perspective, my intention for adding this component of the study stemmed from principles grounded in the arts-based and literary-based narrative inquiry genres. I use the terms letters, artifacts, and art interchangeably to refer to the student's creations and this is rooted in my earlier discussion of genre blurring (Kim, 2016). There are a few different rationales I have for framing these letters as both literary and art. First is the connection broadly to creative nonfiction (CNF) as a genre of writing that tells and talks about reality but does so through creative methods and means (Smith et al., 2016). Collaborator memoirs that appear in this text are an example of CNF writing. As for their letters, students had to engage in a creative process to imagine and map themselves in a temporal way; first noting who they are, and how they are (in the past and at the time of the study), and then what to impart unto themselves in the past. This is also directly aligned with the temporal commonplace of narrative inquiry design where researchers and collaborators must consider the past, present, and future in relation to the inquiry (Clandinin & Huber, 2010; Connelly & Clandinin, 2006).

As such, asking collaborators to write a letter to their past self (both real people in points of time, them in the present and them in the past) is a creative and artistic pursuit. More than mere reflection, I pull from Catherine Field's (2011) argument on letters as a creative act, and I argue, an artistic one:

> A good handwritten letter is a creative act, and not just because it is a visual and tactile pleasure. It is a deliberate act of exposure, a form of vulnerability, because handwriting opens a window on the soul in a way that cyber communication can never do.
>
> (para. 11)

In this way, collaborators engaged in a creative process in relation to their lived realities which sits squarely within a creative analytic practice (CAP) approach. Specifically, I argue that the use of CAP gives way to CNF as one option of reporting form in qualitative research (Kim, 2016; Smith et al., 2016). Further, readers will note the overlap between the content of collaborators' letters and their memoirs which have been peppered across this text. The overlap conveys the cyclical nature of how collaborators and I used their letters in creative ways to inform the story-building of their narrations, which resulted in the final memoirs.

This chapter is organized into two sections, and each follows the different focuses of the letters. First, students wrote letters to some person or entity related to their colleges and universities. In the second set of letters, students wrote to their younger and prior to sex work selves.

### *Prompt 1*

Please think back to your time engaging in sex work while also negotiating your student reality and respond to this prompt:

> If you could write a letter or an email to your university president, board of trustees, the entire campus community, or some other person or entity of your choosing; What would you say to them about your experience? What would you want to say to them about sex workers? Write to them and tell them whatever is on your heart and whatever you would want them to know.

### *Prompt 2*

Please think back to just prior to your very first day engaging in sex work and respond to this prompt:

> If you could write a letter or an email to your former self just before you started sex work what would you say? What advice or cautions would you offer? What would you want that younger self to know?

This process should be understood as a form of hindsight perspective-taking as it reveals the most important experiences the students had until the point

of the study and this exercise. The prompts for each letter were provided to the students at the conclusion of each interview. Which is to say, they wrote the letters after we engaged in robust conversation and interview together, and as such, the various topics of the interview likely informed or primed what ultimately rose to the surface of their letters.

## Dear campus community

Upon reviewing the letters to college and university entities, they can be divided into three distinct groups, or rather, stratified levels of campus the students addressed. First, Tianna, Maria, and Gui addressed their letters to their peers: a student to student level. Tianna and Maria addressed their sororities and Gui addressed the student body at large. These letters reveal their experiences with fellow students, how they make meaning of student perceptions about sex work, and how those perceptions impact them. The second level is the departmental or unit level, where Stokely, Maliah, and Kemi addressed their letters. Both Stokely and Maliah addressed academic departments and the way faculty approach sex workers in their discourses and curriculum. Kemi, on the other hand, addressed her letter to the Women's Student Center highlighting the particular ways their treatment of sex workers is harmful and reductive. The last level is more complex which is a multi-layered treatment as Kathleen addressed the Health Center (department/unit level) the campus community (which she seems to primarily focus on students, though there are broader implications) and finally to the university president (executive level), and her letter is the only one to do so.

The students' letters are published in full and grouped according to the level of the institution they addressed. After each grouping, I provide brief summary thoughts in relation to any implications for college student sex workers, centering the conceptual framework as the lens. My brevity is intentional as it stems from my desire to mediate being perceived as a "superior voice" (Grant, 2014 p. 60) but is also rooted in a true ethic of collaboration which requires allowing collaborators' voices to remain as unobstructed as possible (Stewart, 2021a). I encourage readers to reflect on the students' words, and beyond my offering of synthesis, consider where these students' voices and perspectives lead us, collectively.

### *A letter from Tianna*

Dear Black Sororities,

As a proud and active member, I am aware of the good you are capable of doing in communities, and your long record of advocating for social change. But we need to talk. We need to reckon with the harmful images you are projecting and upholding. Many of the standards of behavior you

are requiring for prospective or initiated members are very close, if not identical, to the standards enacted by the sorority's founders. But sis, that was 100 years ago.

Your vision of what constitutes a well-rounded woman is in desperate need of an update. So let's rip the band-aid off: Chastity does not define womanhood. Purity is not a measure of femininity. Nothing that I do sexually impacts the good I do in the community, and the people who think it does, are just wrong. I am confident in that knowledge now, but wasn't always, and your conditioning contributed to my confusion. You taught me that women who were open about their sexuality were "less than."

I can have a perfect GPA, do hours of community service, and sell sex. And I can—and do—still contribute positively to society. I am still a good representation of what we should stand for. Most of us at this point understand that women's sexual behavior is not indicative of our moral values. Waves of feminism have come and gone, and yet you, the place where women go to allegedly better themselves, are still stuck in the early 1900s. This is not encouraging women to "carry themselves better," on the contrary. Just like we see in church systems, all these standards are doing is encouraging judgment, and liars. The Venn diagram between the judgers and the liars is a circle by the way.

Holding onto these outdated puritanical standards is denying women the sisterhood we desperately need and were promised. It is important to serve the community, but it is equally important to take care of ourselves as black women; to take care of each other. I have found so much love and joy and solidarity in my organization. I've met women that would do anything for me, and I for them. But even those closest to me in the sorority will never know that I engaged in sex work, because I know that through our conditioning during the pledge process, their first thought would be "How does this impact the organization? What would this say about all of us?"

We have been programmed to believe that upholding a non-sexual image is a key part of achieving success as black women. While I understand the genesis of that thought process, I believe many of us now realize that is no longer the path to true liberation. The tides are changing as they have many times in history before. Opposition to sexual freedom from organizations that claim to champion equality and justice will not age well. You do not have the luxury of waiting for legislative or legal changes to embrace sex workers. Our sisters are out there: lonely, in danger, and in need of your support.

And if you are really about everything that is in your oaths and mission statements, you owe it to them. To do anything otherwise is anti-progressive, anti-feminist, and reactionary at best. Get from behind the times, or get left behind, as the rest of us march on toward a safer, more inclusive tomorrow.

With love, One of your own (Tianna)

### *A letter from Maria*

Dear sisters of the sorority,

There's something I have kept a secret because of the lack of acceptance I know I would undergo. Hearing the gossip you all partake in tells me once you know my secret, it would spread like wildfire. But what is so odd about how you all would react, is how much you all secretly want to do what I have done.

I am a sex worker. I don't feel the need to go into detail about anything I've done, but I want to let you know all your fantasies of having a man pay your way, is sex work as well. To joke about wanting to have a sugar daddy or about stripping is to joke about someone's job and lifestyle. Without me, some of you would have been scammed and taken advantage of, so take that into consideration before you say it's so much easier and would take your problems away. And while you joke about others' reality, reflect on why. Are you jealous? Do you wish you had the knowledge or confidence to do what others have? Turn your reflection into acceptance. Understand that what you are comfortable to laugh about and judge is what you wish you could do, so become an ally instead. Understand that these attitudes are what kept me from being comfortable around you all, the people I'm supposed to be sisters with.

If this doesn't get through to you, I understand, but denying me respect and humanity is something I won't accept.

—Maria

### *A letter from Gui*

To the student body at large,

It has come to my attention that many of us do not know of the existence of sex workers on our campus. Sex workers on our campus deserved to be treated as human beings with full autonomy, and respect. There are several things I think our campus can do for these students, like me, that might be of interest to everyone.

"Things such as 24-hour testing, free testing, sexual health screenings on campus, increased access to birth control, contraceptives and sexual health education. It would also be helpful to institute a financial aid emergency loan program and a campus food bank at our school for people who may feel inclined to do sex work because of short term financial troubles" (Stewart, 2021b, p. 11).[1]

As you see, if we can provide services to address this particular underserved population, then the rest of the campus can benefit from it. It is with all of this in mind I urge you and bring this up for your consideration.

—Gui

### *Considerations*

Tianna, Maria, and Gui offered compelling thoughts as they wrote to their peers about their realities as sex workers. First, each of their letters suggests

there is a perception that sex workers either do not exist in their campus contexts—or more pointedly through Tianna's and Gui's letters—they do not (or perhaps would not) exist in their specific student or campus contexts. For example, note Gui plainly stated that many students do not know of the existence of sex workers. This notion supports the claim that sex workers are rendered at least illegible, or at most invisible, in the campus imagination. Tianna, on the other hand, offered a complex argument that names the bounded nature of women's sexual behavior and whorephobia. As recounted in Chapter 2 and directly stated in Tianna's letter, these logics clearly rooted in historical contexts still animate her reality of navigating a space that—if not for whorephobia—would otherwise be robust and affirming to her. Through her words, she works to disarm respectability which disciplines her and the organization and along with whore-stigma, have affected Black women uniquely (Grant, 2014; Wolcott, 2001). Similarly, Maria suggested she believes that despite their lack of outward acceptance, many of her sorority sisters secretly want to do what she has done as a dancer. This, again, leads to a place where educators might consider the logics that discipline women in ways that compel them to distance themselves from sex, sex work, and sex workers, for fear they risk being perceived as or become "a lesser woman, a whore" (Grant, 2014, p. 84).

All three letters, but Gui's and Tianna's most noticeably, suggest that sex workers exist in a hypermarginalized state, or a spatial location that I have termed in my writing and work as the *margins of the margins*. That is to say, populations and groups are marginalized even within marginalized spaces, usually produced from various levels of social stigma, resulting in the illegibility of the corresponding communities' issues as in fact, justice issues. To this point, Tianna urged her sorority sisters to not wait for social or legislative changes to help their *other* sisters, sex workers; she argued that based on the individual and collective values of the sorority, their support is owed. Gui alternatively appealed to the spirit of an ethic similarly articulated by the Combahee River Collective (1983) that if we center the most marginalized among us—the hypermarginalized, those in the margins of the margins, student sex workers in this case—then all students potentially benefit. He offered this as something for his fellow students to consider while they develop their ethics around supporting college student sex workers.

### *A letter from Stokely*

Dear Head of the Criminology and Criminal Justice program,

I typically don't like begging or asking people in power to give me my rights or to help my people and I survive. But I'm writing this email to you because no one else will.

Whorephobia is the hatred and antagonism of sex workers. As you know, sex work is a form of labor that is criminalized. This means that sex workers

are perceived and treated as criminals. With such a significant sex worker population in the United States, it is questionable how much of the population gets no discussion or advocacy within this department and program.

Do we not deserve for people to be educated about us? Do you, too, believe that we deserve as little rights as possible and to remain vulnerable to violence committed by both the state and civilians? As both a sex worker and student of this university and specifically within this program, to be in classrooms where my community is only mentioned for a few seconds, if that, and then moved on from is violence. Even when we are mentioned during classes and in curricula, we are talked about as if we also don't have plenty of experiences and research published online, accessible to the public. We are talked about and never actually listened to, yet plenty of professors here love to ask students their opinions on sex work being criminalized and state their own opinions, with looks of amusement on their faces.

Sex workers deserve advocacy. We deserve for people to listen to us and for people to fight for our lives and hold our abusers accountable, especially those who are law enforcement and other agents of the state. This is especially necessary for this program, as you are truly breeding new police officers every day and other agents, preparing them to fall into the same encouraged system of abusing and targeting us for living and existing in the ways we do. You are breeding new police officers and other agents of the state to engage in a system that especially and disproportionately hurts Black trans sex workers, and other LGBTQ+people of color. This program cannot ignore us forever.

Now what are you going to do about it?

Stokely

### *A letter from Maliah*

Dear African American and African Studies Department,

I wanted to take the time out to communicate some of the issues I have encountered with more than a few of your professors. I hope that these concerns will be taken into consideration and that a remedy will be made ASAP.

As an undergraduate student I had the opportunity to take several courses pertaining to African American culture. While in these courses I encountered a few professors, who made negative remarks and sparked conversations about certain topics that I feel didn't correctly represent whom they spoke about.

For instance, I am a sex worker who had to sit through an entire lecture during our unit about Sarah Baartman alluding to how any Black woman participating in any act that was seen as sex work was disgracing our history and the fight against the ill treatment of Black women.

I know people have opinions, I also know how important it is for students to feel comfortable and not feel judged. As an African American scholar

looking to raise up other African American leaders, I think it's important to welcome all people. Inclusiveness is a must in our community if we want to be a strong unit.

Thank you.
—Maliah

### *A letter from Kemi*

To the Women's Student Center

You can do more. We need to expand the narrative of sex workers beyond trauma and pain. My sex work story isn't about me solely being a victim to patriarchy or capitalism, at least no more than the person losing their health in a coal mine. My story is of trying to get into grad school by any means. The only conversations surrounding sex work are ones of drugs, violence, and death. That is trafficking, something I wouldn't wish on anyone.

Please host more discussions to expand the conversation so students do not have to deal with stigma. If you want to reduce the need for sex work (or work to avoid poverty) here are some suggestions. I would love if we had a food pantry, emergency funding, or housing resources for students, but we don't or if we do, we have them in very limited supply. You often brag about me to incoming students, but you don't even know me, not in my entirety.

Sex work is a part of my story that deserves to be told.

Signed,
Heading to Grad School.

### *Considerations*

Combining the perspectives Stokely, Maliah, and Kemi offer there are a few different places they lead. First, Kemi's letter supports arguments I have offered in that the conflation of sex work and sex trafficking wreak havoc in the lives of sex workers. Kemi asked for more expanded discussions, which might be served well with polymorphous framing (Weitzer, 2010), to address the corresponding stigma that student sex workers must maneuver. Finally, Kemi's letter converges with what Gui's memoir surfaces and underscores imperatives for college students who engage in sex work on purely episodic and need-based bases. Perhaps, if there were more robust resources for emergency financial needs on their respective campuses, students like Kemi and Gui possibly would not have engaged in sex work at all. To be clear, I do not suggest that the availability of these resources would fill needs for all students who engage in sex work, but certainly some of them.

Stokely and Maliah both suggested that sex work stigma and whorephobia persist in academic departments through curriculum choices and paradigmatic stances faculty ascribe to. Stokely argued that sex workers are routinely invisible, which she positioned as a form of violence but

when sex workers are made visible within courses and curriculum, they are stigmatized. Stokely's rationale can be understood when situating the faculty behaviors as forms of epistemological and pedagogical violence. Epistemological violence can be defined as

> a practice that is executed in empirical articles and books … when theoretical interpretations regarding empirical results implicitly or explicitly construct the *Other* as inferior or problematic, despite the fact that alternative interpretations, equally viable based on the data, are available.
> (Teo, 2010, p. 298)

Some might argue that empirical data on sex work could legitimately be interpreted in ways that situate the work, for example, as problematic. Again, here the polymorphous paradigm (Weitzer, 2010) is a crucial counter analytic, which is to say, essentialist interpretations of sex work as inherently/only problematic or inherently/only empowering are too reductive to address the fullness, complexity, and constellation of sex work, which then situate those misreadings back to a solidly violent position. Further, while faculty cannot be held accountable for the way researchers interpret nor present their data, faculty are instead responsible for the literature they assign, the literature they do not trouble, and when they do not center the voices of the "*Other*" in meaningful ways, the latter of which Stokely specifically critiqued. To this end, faculty could be considered complicit in perpetuating epistemological violence.

Additionally, Stokely and Maliah articulated behaviors that I perceive as also a form of pedagogical violence. Of pedagogical violence, I rely on psychosocial and relational pedagogical violence framing as articulated by Matusov and Sullivan (2020), specifically centering the epistemological imposition dimension. When faculty purport logic and rhetoric about sex work in uncritical ways, they reinforce certain harmful stereotypes that not only create epistemological pain—resulting in "undermining a student's existence"—but these instances can also "break the students existential well-being" (Matusov & Sullivan, 2020, p. 448). Finally, pedagogical violence always already uniquely impacts minoritized populations and groups and serves to "domesticate, colonize, and sort" students who do not necessarily fit in the prevalent and dominant educative imagination (Matusov & Sullivan, 2020, p. 443). As such, Maliah's professor, who suggested that Black women engaged in sex work were a disgrace, or programs like Stokely's that engage sex work(er) topics as amusement, align themselves with this broad praxis, and doubly bind sex workers with racial- and sexual-minoritized identities. Stokely's repeated use of the word "breeding" to describe the behavior of the faculty in her program points to her perception of their complicity in unending perpetual harm specifically through creating agents who go on to maintain the system of violence against sex workers. I argue her recognition of this reality operates as a form of pedagogical

violence itself as she bears witness to it and also the lack of disruption of the harm in her educational context.

### *A letter from Kathleen*

Dear Health Center,

There are sex workers on your campus. We need your help and your support. I doubt we are the biggest thought on your mind, but we exist. We need resources, like free STI testing. We want non-judgmental care, if needed. We want acceptance, not pity.

Dear campus community,

There are sex workers on your campus. We are here. In your classroom, downtown at the bars, in restaurants. We're your roommate, your coworker, your friend. It's not that we don't want to tell you, we just don't know if we can or how we could. We have to stay safe and stay hidden. The best way to support us is to not joke about "becoming a stripper" if your classes are too hard. Stripping/other sex work is not an "out." It is not a back-up plan or only for college drop-outs. It is not a failure to be a stripper/sex worker. We work hard. Our job is not a joke.

Dear University President,

There are sex workers on your campus. We would appreciate support and understanding. We understand the limitations you have as to not condone illegal activity, but you can't ignore our existence. We want visibility, even if we have to remain anonymous (and most times we will). Illegal does not mean impossible. We exist.

—Kathleen (Stewart, 2021b)[2]

### *Implications*

Finally, Kathleen's letter triangulates several points raised in the other letters. First, her naming that sex workers desire visibility even though they may remain anonymous creates an interesting nexus with Gui's point that support for sex workers may benefit many students regardless of whether they engage in sex work. Further, though Kathleen stated that, in most instances, sex workers may remain anonymous, the assertion that sex workers want acceptance, not pity, could be synthesized with her desire that sex workers should not be the subject of jokes or fodder for conversations. Kathleen's sentiments taken together with Stokely's letter lead to a request for sex work visibility in non-deficit, non-stigmatizing ways, including in curriculum, discourse, and student life. This context might lead to sex workers revealing themselves but only if we have earned their trust by working to create the affirming contexts they ask for. Finally, Kathleen's letter was the only one to mention a

university president. Given her positionality as an escort, she is aware of the legal barriers, perhaps, to how support might materialize for sex workers in higher education who share engagement in her type of sex work. Despite this, she reminded that support is not impossible as she ended on a powerful, yet simple message: "we exist." Further, her aiming of messaging to that level of the university communicates perhaps a desire for more structural support, on a policy/executive level, the kind of support that might lead to more social/cultural changes on campus. Indeed, sex workers exist in higher education in various different ways and educators must consider ways to render them and the issues that are important to them, visible.

## Dear me

The student letters to their younger selves are powerful, nuanced, and represent the fullness of their individual and collective realities. The letters are grouped according to the type of sex work the students were primarily engaged in or the type of context. For example, Maria and Maliah were both dancers in adult clubs and, as such, I pair their letters together. Similarly, Gui and Kemi both engaged in direct services/escorting—Kemi also engaged in cam-adjacent work through selling nude images—they both, however, were engaged in sex work on more episodic bases. Finally, I pair Stokely and Tianna's letters as they identify themselves as escorts, and both engaged on a more consistent basis as escorts. As each of the letters is unique, my intention is not to collapse their narratives and what they offer and impart unto themselves but, rather, offer an organizational lens through which to consider connections and divergences. I used Woodcock's (2016) color-coding method as part of the Listening Guide analysis process to analyze the letters to their younger self. Through this analysis, I identified six primary themes including money, body, emotion, stigma, encouragement, and forewarning. I briefly describe each of the themes, the colors they were coded with, and how I understood them.

**Money (green)**
The money theme refers to when students discussed their material needs. Instances where they used words or phrases such as saving, hard work, job, rent, survival, or payoff each were tagged in this way. Additionally, the money theme coalesced around a labor framing, for example, when they remind that their work is simply, a job.

**Body (purple)**
The body theme referred to parts of the letter that related to any physical aspects of their sex working including the sex itself. Instances where they spoke about their body or the physicality of the labor would be tagged as part of the body theme, or when they focused on concepts like consent and sexual protection.

**Emotion (pink)**
The emotion theme referred to any feeling words or phrases which pointed to the affective parts of engaging sex work or when they signaled emotional experiences. Words such as guilt/regret, exciting, love, fear, would be tagged and fall within this scope.

**Stigma (yellow)**
The stigma theme related to any aspect of the student letters where they named the corresponding stigma of sex work they either experienced or anticipated. For example, words such as stigma, shame, struggle, or what I perceived to be "negative talk" would be tagged under the stigma construct. To be clear, sometimes the letters mention stigma-related language but they typically manifest as cautions to their past self to be prepared for it, not that they are stigmatizing themselves.

**Encouragement (blue)**
The encouragement theme related to any aspect of the letter that seemed to focus on the uplift of their past self as they began engaging in sex work. I also perceive this theme as related to affirmation of experiences, positive self-talk, and reassurance. Also, this theme seemed to be somewhat bound to the stigma theme, that is, encouragement could be considered as a resistance to the stigma they experienced and wanted their younger selves to anticipate.

**Forewarning (orange)**
The final theme is related to broad forewarning in relation to the letters. Of all the themes this one should be considered as an umbrella for the others. First, this theme is inextricably tied to the temporal nature of the creation of the artifacts (imagining conversations across and back in time). As such, this theme interacts with each of the letters in nuanced ways. For example, in Maliah's letter, she writes a simple "Maliah you have to save!" This would be an example of the money theme and the forewarning theme colliding and instructs that Maliah likely had difficulty managing her money and wants to caution past Maliah of making the same choice. In general, any aspects of letters that were cautioning, warning, or future-telling were tagged in this way.

## *A letter to Maria*

Maria,

You think you know what you're doing but you don't I'm not saying that to scare you but trust that once things in that club happen, they can't be undone. That's anything in life, but this one is big. Once a stripper always a stripper, the thing that may still become a problem for me even now.

Your family eventually finds out and it's bittersweet. They won't hate you and that what you will grow to resent. Be ready to find more things to repair in that little girl you wish you could have given guidance with the hindsight you have now. But what can you do? It is what it is now.

It's not all bad though, you'll meet some of the best girls you'll ever meet and learn maybe what you really need to know. To know how to feel about boundaries you won't cross that others will. You'll learn to take less shit and know what you want. I learn more every time I think about what we have done. Living a life that is full and vibrant and driven by choices is what you'll begin to fulfill.

As we move forward and live in less guilt and less regret, don't weigh yourself down in fear of the "what ifs," focus on the "what's next." We don't get trapped in the club mentality, it slowly becomes more of a distant memory. But while you're at it: demand more money, be more confident and have more fun. You're a beautiful person, never lose sight of that. This doesn't define you, people may try to make it your identity, but I stand my ground well for you. For the girl in over her head, about to begin a double life.

We'll look back on this together with pride and admiration, maybe not every day, but in our clearest mind's eye.

—Me

### *A letter to Maliah*

Dear Maliah,

Tomorrow is an exciting day, pretty nervous huh? But that's ok. You'll be fine. There is always a reason for everything You need to make sure you are always comfortable, safe and aware. You don't need to let this job define you either sis! You are dancing to make sure you'll always be taken care of. I don't know when you'll break the news to the family but make sure the timing is right. You are going to be great at this new (and any future hustles) because you get it out the muscle. Maliah you have to save! Also make sure you don't get lost in the chaos. Don't ever let nobody disrespect you either, just because you choose to dance does not make you any less valuable. I can't wait until you graduate then you'll see all the hardwork payoff. You are destined for greatness. I'm so proud of the woman you are becoming. The grind doesn't stop. You'll make it to the top.

P.S. *Remember God does NOT make any mistakes! His timing is always perfectly done

Love ya<3

### *Considerations*

Despite the similar sex work contexts Maliah and Maria maneuvered, their respective letters strike different foci and tones. For example, I perceive Maria's letter to be largely focused on the emotion and forewarning theme. She was clear that she does not seek to scare her younger self but cautions that things "can't be undone" in the club once they happen. She mentioned how her family finding out about her work is "bittersweet" (as we learned in *Boobs, Hips, and Hoe Barbies),* and she offered hope to her younger self that she is eventually able to move forward with less guilt and regret. Maliah, on the other hand, situated her letter almost squarely in a place of encouragement and reassurance. She reminded herself that "you'll be fine," "you're going to be great," and "you'll make it to the top." She also mentioned or alluded to the money theme a few different times which seems to serve as a reminder that dancing is just a job or a grind and not something to "lose" herself in.

An interesting place where both letters connect is in relation to being defined by their sex working. Maliah exclaimed, "You don't need to let this job define you sis!" and she went on to assert her dancing is about making sure her needs are met. Similarly, Maria stated, "This doesn't define you, people may try to make it your identity, but I stand my ground well for you." I point to this connection because it presents tension in the overall study in terms of how I position sex work as a kind of identity these students hold. Further, intersectionality as an analytic would perhaps require an arrival here as the focus is an analysis of power in relation to an identity (Crenshaw, 1991). In this sense, the tension is that there may be limits to framing sex work as an always already avowed identity. This is to say, some college student sex workers may in fact reject this labeling. To be clear, upon entering the study, I asked students plainly how they identify in their sex worker space and none of them troubled this question directly, but their articulations in the letters are illuminating.

Finally, there may be connections to their articulations around identity and the concept of disidentification (Muñoz, 1999). As a construct, disidentification is grounded in queer theory. On this, Butler (1993) asked, "What are the possibilities of politicizing disidentification, this experience of misrecognition, this uneasy sense of standing under a sign to which one does and does not belong?" (p. 219). Mariah and Maliah's mention might be understood as wanting to reject signage or framing, that does not articulate who they are—which is to say, how exotic dancers are made legible in the public and higher education imagination. In this way, disidentification operates as a counter-ethic leveraged by minoritized people to resist, and redefine. Muñoz (1999) described this as a "recycling and rethinking" (p. 31) of meaning and mainstream messaging about minoritized people,

> disidentification is a step further than cracking open the code of the majority; it proceeds to use this code as raw material for representing a disempowered politics or positionality that has been rendered unthinkable by the dominant culture.
>
> (Muñoz, 1999, p. 31)

This articulation answers any speculation that in Maliah and Maria's disidentification they may be succumbing to prevalent whorephobia which can at times be reproduced in sex work(er) spaces (see Haeger & Deil-Amen, 2010). Rather, their disidentification can be considered a *partial identification* as they recognized sex work archetypes and stereotypes, deconstructed them, and transformed them into something more fitting (Muñoz, 1999). I perceive this concept similarly situated to both the polymorphous paradigm (Weizter, 2010) and intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1991) in that all three lead to the importance of understanding the complex minutiae of any given experience, an analysis of power in relation to identity, and a rejection of ill-fitting essentialist analytics, labels, or discourse.

### *A letter to Gui*

Dear Gui,

You're going to do this. Remember what you were taught in high school: always use protection every single time! Make sure he pays you upfront and make sure he listens to you on every move. Consent is important. Focus on your main goal, whatever it is. If it's gonna happen, it's gonna happen. So make sure to listen to the advice your fellow sex workers have for you. And make sure to take all of their leads. Don't be too personal and take care of your boundaries. Share your wealth if you can but do not let everyone borrow! Never let your clients gaslight you, you can do this. Just know the risks and never be afraid to back away if it is too much. And as your best friend says, receipts, receipts, receipts.

—Gui

### *A letter to Kemi*

Dear 18-year-old me,

Stop fucking men for free. They offer you nothing by their presence alone. Take money. Take rent. Demand gifts. You deserve good things.

Best,
You at 23

### *Considerations*

While Gui and Kemi's letters represent the shortest letters to their younger selves, they are each striking in their own way. Gui recounted several

cautions to his younger self which focus on the safety of his body, and consent with clients. He articulated that he wants his younger self to be in control and always focused on his goal in any given sex work engagement. Gui urged his younger self to resist gaslighting and to never be afraid to back away from the work which connects with his urging of keeping good boundaries: safety. Kemi, on the other hand, issued a command to her younger self that connects the choices she makes with her body and what she receives in return. Her words present a clear point of view of the transactional nature of sex, or more specifically, that she wants her younger self to be more transactional with sex in terms of what she gets in return. Later in this text, I share Kemi's memoir, *A Small Jump,* which further contextualizes why this perspective matters to her.

Gui and Kemi's letters unsurprisingly converge on matters of money. Given that they each only engaged in sex work when in difficult financial positions, ensuring they receive and keep their material gains would naturally be of the utmost importance. Kemi's letter exclusively focused on this aspect as she recounted almost poetically, "Take money. Take rent. Demand gifts." This, taken together with her opening as she urged her younger self to stop engaging in sex for free with her closing on "you deserve good things," suggests her resisting that sex, in and of itself, is an exchange—a physical one—but rather she should demand her financial and material needs be met in the process. Recall she proclaimed, "they offer you nothing by their presence alone." Gui reminded his younger self to get paid upfront and to share his wealth but not let everyone borrow money from him—as the latter of which may lead him back into the work. These letters underscore the nuance of episodic sex work and the clear reality that some college students engage when it is necessary but perhaps, they otherwise would not, if they could avoid it.

### *A letter to Stokely*

Dear Little Stokely,

I hope you are well. I'm writing this letter as a Big Stokely, still a daughter and son of many.

I got many jobs and hustles, and this includes spiritual services and sexual services (if you choose to separate the two). I … you have come a long way from what you once knew. About your body, about your Blackness, about how loud you can be, how proud you can be. Who you can love and who you tend to love the most. I work in an underground economy, which to some seems amazing since our government is corrupt anyway. But you must also recognize that this grants me less safety. It grants us less safety. There is hiding, there is suppression, there is fear. But there are also bits of joy, healing circles, cute ass outfits, manifestations of beauty in all forms, and people you encounter who were meant to be in your life and sent from above.

Next, I want you to know that niggas ain't shit. And will not hesitate to use and exploit you, and throw you away in the same breath. You're young and no matter how grown and/or responsible you think you might be, you are vulnerable and there are many seeking you out as prey. This world is full of people who will refuse to accept you. Work to pay them no mind, even when they are people in power. And always get them to pay you as much as you can, because you deserve it, even if you didn't do a goddamn thing besides exist.

Sometimes I wonder if I'm harming you in the long run, I know that I carry you with me in my heart at all times. Times can get pretty rough and it is not always easy to protect you, my inner child, myself at its purest. Know that you have an ability to bring a type of care into people's worlds that is unique and permanently shapes lives. You are not dirty or immoral for selling services criminalized by this society. Lastly, remember that no matter what choices you make, you will always be supported, whether it's by the living or dead. Liberation looks different for you and always has, don't ever let anybody try to limit the possibilities of your freedom.

With love,
Stokely

### *A letter to Tianna*

Dear Me,

First, it is going to get better. You will make it out of college, out of depression, and out of that dusty city. But in the meantime, you have work to do. We each have one life with only so many choices and so many opportunities. Don't ever let anyone try to convince you to pass up opportunities because of their own patriarchal limitations.

Your body can be an asset, but it will never define you. Don't ever be ashamed of anything you will do for your own survival. Everything you have, everything you are, every privilege you enjoy, is because the women who came before you resolved to do what they had to do for survival.

Pay no mind to the stigma and misconceptions—those were invented by people who sensed and feared the immense power of sexual freedom. Which, deep down, you've always known. But that's not to say all of it will be empowering, of course. Some days, it's just work. Some days will be rougher than others. Some days the burden of all your own lies will feel too heavy. Some days you will struggle to grasp your own identity in the confusion of who others want or need you to be.

But it will be okay. Struggle breeds empathy and that's an invaluable thing to have. Compassion will be your strength. Never forget anything you've been through and never lie about it. You never know who your story could help. So, go into it strong. Go into it YOU, and do it YOUR way. There are no rules to any of this.

Use what you have to get what you need. And to get some of what you want. The journey you are about to embark on is timeless. Channel the

ones who came before you – the immortal spirit of wild women. You are Cleopatra, you are Marilyn Monroe, you are Belle Watling, you are Zsa Zsa Gabor, you are Magnolia Shorty. All who have understood that this world belongs to women. So, go take it.

Calm the flutters in your stomach. Take the night, take that man's money, take the next step into your empowerment. You're gonna do amazing sweetie.

—Tianna

### *Considerations*

Tianna and Stokely's letters offer powerful perspectives for consideration. First, Stokely referred to her past self as "Little Stokely," which when taken together with her later mention of an inner child suggests she, unlike others, went further back as she reflected on her time before engaging in sex work. This reality also likely explains why roughly two-thirds of her letter seems to focus on forewarning, as there exists an urgency to not only protect the body and spirit of little Stokely but also herself at her purest. Tianna's letter strikes as one of the most consistently encouraging, recognizing the difficult place she began, the difficult times to come during the process of engaging in sex work, and ultimately ending in a better place overall. As was indicated in her memoir, Tianna invoked the power and timelessness of sex work to her past self as a reminder of the unforgettable, "immortal spirit of wild women." Her framing of sex work in a clear feminist perspective underscores the importance of the power to be leveraged from the sexual freedom of women (Lorde, 1984) and is a thread throughout her narratives.

I end with these letters because they both bring out most vividly the challenges and opportunities of sex work. Recall, the polymorphous paradigm invites us to consider the nuance when engaging the topic of sexual labor, "Victimization, exploitation, choice, job satisfaction, self-esteem, and other dimensions should be treated as variables (not constants) that differ depending on the type of sex work, geographical location, and other structural and organizational conditions" (Weitzer, 2010, p. 26). Each of these student letters reveals why attention to this complexity matters as too much is lost in essentializing the experience as only or all of one paradigm. Stokely said there exists hiding, suppression, and fear but that there *also* is joy, healing circles, and beauty. Tianna asserted to her past self that not all sex work will be empowering as there are days she will struggle to hold on to herself amidst confusion but *also* there is empathy and compassion as a result of the immense power of her sexual freedom.

## Implications

These students' stories deserve to be told. Their stories deserve to be uplifted and they deserve to be listened to. The reality, however, is that

support for college student sex workers may never materialize in higher education. The ivory tower is not exempt from perpetuating the violence, dominance, and respectability mirrored in society more broadly, as was illustrated in their letters. As such, I do not expect sex workers to be miraculously supported in education in ways that they are not supported in society at large. In fact, higher education may be worse in some ways as educators work collectively to resist manifestations of our existence in the neoliberal imagination and in the fabric of the world against our broad espoused values. This study, and this topic, is new(er) ground for higher education and I present the rawness of these students' experiences fully knowing higher education is not yet a space that is welcoming or accepting of sex workers, and my hopes for college student sex workers support may never materialize in higher education.

These letters, however, render college student sex work more visible on campus which is a first step in creating structural and strategic change. College students are under significant pressure as they pursue their studies, and many students attend college as a means to survive. College students engaged in sex work must carry the reality of their labor choice and hold it by themselves because higher education has not created environments or contexts where it might be okay for them to share that information and find support. Educators will never successfully create those contexts if assumptions about sex work, which reproduce harm, go unchallenged. While educators might understand the pressures that come with financing an education and—to a lesser extent—the day-to-day survival of low-income-, racial- and sexual-minoritized students; when students engage in sex work as a labor option, educators must disarm the deep-seeded hostility and whorephobia, which informs the obstacles student sex workers maneuver.

The letters to and from sex workers support the claim that sex work as a labor choice is complex and the fullness of its complexity can only be served when higher education embraces the various contexts that give nuance to their experience. This consideration creates space for a multitude of truths and realities that better accounts for power structures, power differences, and would seek to understand the how and why of any distribution of agency and subordination within sex work. Further, this embrace pushes us to leverage a structural analysis of sex work that does not seek to solve corresponding challenges by flattening differences or creating harm and violence in the process. A structural analysis is required because, as Tianna named for some, the work is about survival. To rely on either an empowerment paradigm or an oppression paradigm does not afford these students or others like them the complexity of their individual truths—and despite their differences—the important truths between them. Given the realities as they are, I offer these narratives uplifting the experiences of Black students, LGBQ students, and other students of color who are largely missing

from extant sex work research. I urge college and university administrators, policymakers, and student affairs practitioners to make decisions, provide resources, and enact policy toward supporting college students engaged in sex work following the clear suggestions from their letters and narratives. Specifically, I urge college and university leaders to work to create contexts that normalize and affirm students in their sex work and help demystify and de-stigmatize sex work in campus contexts.

As I turn to close, readers may notice that Kathleen's letter to herself is missing in this chapter. I did not include it in this text for two reasons. First, it was deeply complex and I believe it warrants its own focus and analysis in writing. Second, I desire to end the chapter with her memoir, *Three's Company*. Kathleen's story not only expresses some of the prevalent sentiments within her letter to herself but also vividly animates the dual and perhaps mutually facilitating nature of joy and struggle in sex work and how both impact the human, and the heart.

## Kathleen: *Three's Company*

I realized it had only been a few minutes since I parked but I was sure I had been waiting for hours, at least the length of two full listens of Rihanna's ANTI album waiting on his text. But when he finally did, the vibration almost made me jump out of my seat.

> *buzz buzz*
> *Harvey: Are you close?*
> *Kathleen: I think so, I can't find it.*

A couple. I really jumped headfirst into that world, that work. I wondered what they'd be like … the couple.

> *buzz buzz*
> *Harvey: Call me.*

Well, here we go. I dialed his number and during the time it took him to pick up my call, 9,000 thoughts went through my head. I was incredibly nervous but thankfully when he answered, I was relieved; he was so normal sounding, and calm and confident. His voice had a warm and deep tone, familiar almost, reassuring. I was happy that he didn't give off creep vibes, I was thrilled actually. He gave me instructions on where to park, so I could have dinner with him and his partner, Jessica. I was glad she was there, it felt safer with another woman present, I could pretend that we were all just friends hanging out.

He was tall and had dark brown hair, he had a worn face, not from worry or work, but from aging. I guessed he was in his 40s, Jessica was also

tall, strawberry blonde, and a medium build, certainly younger than he, she was in her 30s. I wondered how we looked together … how we appeared to other people as we sat in that larger-than-life booth at the restaurant. I tried to seem mature, even though the vodka and cranberry I ordered was likely a dead giveaway: real undergrad. But despite my curly hair and cherub-like face, I wasn't carded by the waiter, and I ordered the most delicious moussaka for dinner.

Over the course of enjoying our meal, the conversation immediately turned to what we were doing on the website where we met, how we got into it, and what we were hoping to get out of it. I think they were the first polyamorous couple I had ever personally met, and it didn't take long for the subject of sex to come up. It got real intimate. Real fast. I was thankful for the vodka and cranberry at that point. I noticed that Harvey talked a fuck ton, which wasn't surprising because he thought he was pretty great. Fabulous. Jessica didn't really say anything at all, very quiet, but I remembered loving her blouse, she had a great sense of style.

At the end of dinner, Harvey invited me to a club with them, a swingers club. I eagerly accepted the invitation because somehow in my head I imagined, actual swings. Like a type of circus-themed club where people swung at the bar and drank. Who *wouldn't* want to go to a club like that? I followed them in my car to the place.

Have you ever experienced a place that smelled dark? Dark has a smell and it smelled that way at the club. It also smelled like food. Chocolate. Powdered Sugar. Sweet smells. The walls were a dark red and floor-to-ceiling black silk curtains hung all over the place. The main room was called GenPop and there was a dessert bar, folks eating, drinking, a few dance floors and a few poles. Deeper inside, there was a nude room. Creep central. Boners everywhere. We made our way back to VIP, and along the way, there were the most beautiful women, glamazons in leather corsets who worked for the club. VIP was a lot fancier than GenPop, they had glamazons after all, and there were private bedrooms and larger-than-life leather couches. GenPop, VIP, it didn't really matter, you couldn't get into this place unless you were a member. It was exclusive.

We stopped at the bar to get more drinks and continued to chat; I could feel my guard continue to come down. The music, the people; the atmosphere was intoxicating. It was in that moment that I realized I was truly having a good time. I was relaxed. After a while, Harvey grabbed my hand and led me toward a private bedroom. I grabbed Jessica's hand and the three of us walked together. We spent several hours together. Some of the best I would come to spend.

In the parking lot, Harvey handed me a wad of cash; later, I would realize it wasn't nearly enough but at the time I was glad to have it. Jessica waited in the car while we handled the business of our meeting. Then I waited for valet to bring me my car. I had about a two-hour drive ahead of me to get home. I turned on the radio and listened to some music as I replayed the events in my

head. Rihanna's "*Work*" played—how appropriate—and I was donning an undeniable post-orgasm glow. The Harvey and Jessica glow.

> **buzz buzz**
> *Harvey: We really like you, we'd love to see you again. Are you free in a few weeks?*
> *Kathleen: Sure thing.*

That buzz … that notification from Harvey—always bursting through my phone and killing the silence, interrupting my thoughts—would come to be the green light to many adventures. In the six months that we were involved, I attended swinger parties and Halloween hotel parties. I walked through a club naked and unashamed with all eyes on me. I learned to dance on a pole and won a wet T-shirt contest. I made lots of money and I was mostly ok doing it. But that Harvey and Jessica glow was a glow that ended up being one of the few I would ever have as a sex worker. Harvey who really was quite fond of me, and Jessica who I ultimately never really hit it off or have chemistry with, but I appreciated the adventures with them, nonetheless.

Sadly, not all of my experiences would rise to the glamor and fun of Harvey and Jessica. In fact, that was rarely what it was like. It was like letting a man pound me in the woods for 30 minutes before his shift at the haunted house. It was like meeting another man on his lunch break and fucking in my car until he got too paranoid, threw money at me, and ran out of the car with his pants barely on. It was the times that I did things I didn't want to and got stiffed on payment. That only happened once, and I never let it happen again, but it happened. It was like losing loved ones and only knowing strained personal intimate relationships ever again.

All of it I carried. All of it. And it all matters. I would experience each and every one of those things and still get up for class in the morning. It's wasn't always easy, but it was always an experience. And what is life if not for experiences? The easy and good stuff; the messy and hard stuff. And in between writing papers, cramming for tests, and making money, I wondered, and I hoped. I hoped that through my sex work that I could still learn, still grow, and still love. But most of all I wondered if I could ever *be* loved … be really loved.

I still wonder.

## Notes

1 As part of an in-press article a portion of Gui's letter, the part in quotes, was included to convey practical strategies and suggestions to practitioners and administrators about the types of support that would be helpful to college student sex workers. This is why a citation appears at the end of that paragraph to point to where that passage first appears in print. The full citation can be found in the reference list at the end of this chapter.

2 As part of an in-press article Kathleen's letter was included to open the piece as a way to deliberately center their narratives, in full, within empirical work. This is why a citation appears at the end of that paragraph to point to where that passage first appears in print. The full citation can be found in the reference list at the end of this chapter.

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# 5 Endarkened consciousness, the lessons of sex working

> When you are spending private time with a person and they're paying you for it, they feel like they can be their most honest selves, their most primal selves and sometimes their most disgusting selves; and I don't mean that in a sexual way at all.
>
> —Tianna

A key plot point in the film *the Players Club* involves Diamond's younger cousin Ebony moving into Diamond's home and ultimately working at the club as a dancer, much to Diamond's reluctance and dismay. Diamond attempts to keep Ebony safe—and her dancing secret from the family—while also encouraging her to avoid engaging in risky behavior or forming relationships with unsavory characters. In one scene, Diamond stops a drunk Ebony from leaving the club with two men she just met moments before (Cube, 1998). After a heated exchange, during which Ebony reminded Diamond that not everyone can or desires to go to college, and as such some people might seek to make a career from their dancing, Diamond urges Ebony: "Make the money, don't let it make you" (Cube, 1998, 0:42:08). The statement was in rebuttal to Ebony's embrace of the ethic, "use what we got to get what we want" (Cube, 1998, 0:41:21), a motto parroted by two villains and fellow Players Club dancers Tricks and Ronnie.

Despite Diamond's attempts, Ebony ultimately becomes prey to another dancer in the club—Ronnie—which leads to her being brutally raped by Ronnie's brother, Junior. After a series of chaotic events, the film ends with the Players club burning down after being blown up by St. Louis—a character whom club owner Dollar Bill evades repaying a $60,000 loan (Cube, 1998). In the ashes of the aftermath, Diamond reflects on her time as a dancer at the Players Club offering, "I loved the Players Club for providing a way for some of the girls to reach their goals in life, but I hated the Players Club for all the girls it destroyed in the process" (Cube, 1998, 1:36:10). Immediately after, the film closes a loop on an earlier lesson. Diamond shops for shoes for her upcoming college graduation alluding to the reality that she was one of the girls who was able to reach her goal because of the club.

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Alternatively, Ebony, healing with visible scarring and still recovering from her brutal rape works in the shoe store. The film alludes to her reality as one of the girls the club destroyed or attempted to destroy. As Ebony provides customer service to two young dancers from a new club—Club Sugar Daddy—viewers are reminded of Tricks and Ronnie one last time when the young dancers tell Ebony they are simply using what they have, to get what they want. Ebony retorts, "Well if that's all y'all got, you don't want too much" (Cube, 1998, 1:37:01). Ebony, departing from the young dancers, apologizes to Diamond for needing to miss her graduation because she is unable to get time off from her job at the shoe store. Shortly into their conversation, Ebony is rudely called away to assist the young dancers from before. As Ebony reluctantly turns to help them, Diamond calls to Ebony "Make that money, girl" to which Ebony responds, "Don't let it make you" (Cube, 1998, 1:37:49).

While *The Players Club* is a fictional account, the arc above underscores a desire to communicate learning and lessons in relation to the journey traced through the plot of the film. More specifically the film suggests that there are significant lessons to be gleaned through engagement in erotic labor. To be clear, I do not suggest that lessons are or should be borne out of violence and struggle, rather I agree with the assertion that sex work is clearly a context ripe for learning and should be examined. While I fully identify as an interdisciplinary scholar, my "home" discipline is higher education and student affairs, and it is broadly this framing through which I approached and attempted to understand the experiences of students in the study. Over time, the work of student affairs and student development has become more appropriately recognized for its importance within the context of higher education and as such has contributed to a more holistic understanding of what education is, what learning is, and where learning happens (Guido et al., 2010).

Turning to student experiences on campus—including sex workers—I operate from a position that everyone and everything teaches. By this, I generally refer to the part of my philosophy that recognizes a broad and nuanced understanding of what learning is and where it happens. Gone are the days when individuals can suggest that learning only takes place within the confines of a classroom. Instead, educators generally ascribe to a more robust understanding of teaching and learning that incorporates the whole of higher education, college/university settings, as well as personal and social contexts as part of the learning process and environment. This part of my philosophy brings together principles and ideals from person-environment theories as well as some foundational theories/ideals/documents of the profession of student affairs (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Keeling et al., 2004; Keeling et al., 2006; Strange & Banning, 2015). This perspective calls scholars and educators to pursue a holistic and integrated view/approach to the conceptualization of learning and where it happens and, above all, situate learning as a student-centered phenomenon. Like all students, sex workers

make meaning of their lives, experiences, and contexts and put them into conversation with one another as a way to learn, grow, and develop. Further, their sex working, which is to say their student work/student labor, is likely (uniquely) contributing to their learning.

In this chapter, I open by situating important connections between student work and learning broadly, and then I briefly complicate "learning" as rhetoric, being insufficient to capture the fullness of what sex work was contributing to college student development and understanding for the students in this study. Then, I share two broad themes from interview data with sex workers which animate my assertion including how sex work helped students develop clarity around power and dominance as well as confidence in their bodies, voices, and choices. Finally, I introduce a concept, *endarkened consciousness*, as terminology and analytic to frame what sex work contributes to student development, and I conclude by offering Kemi's memoir, *A Small Jump*, which details her introduction to direct-service sex work after she struggled to finance graduate school applications.

## On working, learning, and learning from work

During 1980–1984, one in twelve full-time college students were employed full-time while enrolled in college and 25% worked fewer than 20 hours weekly (Carroll & Chan-Kopka, 1988). Twenty years later, in 2004, approximately 80% of U.S. college students worked while attending their college or university (King, 2006). Many factors contribute to this particular rise in work including covering basic/essential needs (Callendar, 2008) like Gui and Tianna articulated: a desire to maintain a particular lifestyle or image (Masvawure, 2010; Williams & Martin, 2021); a desire to take on the burden of their own expenses and debts to relieve their parents (Hall, 2010; Williams & Martin, 2021) as Kathleen articulated; and given the prevalent hustle/grind culture that capitalism and neoliberalism socialize many students into, they desire to enhance their professional networks, with supervisors and colleagues, and gain additional experience and practical work skills (Curtis, 2007).

Earlier in this text, I argued that the bounded nature of capitalism, neoliberalism, and the corresponding rise of the cost of higher education is a primary factor why many college students engage in sex work and likely why any student engages in any work, while also being a student. This assertion was affirmed by the college student sex workers in this study and specifically low-income students and students with racial and/or sexual minoritized identities seem to use sex work to supplement their everyday expenses. Which is to say, for multiply minoritized students in this study, work earnings were often not applied to college-related costs (e.g., tuition and fees) because they needed to finance more basic needs. The bottom line

is that the cost of college has increased significantly over time, and students generally are working more than in previous years/decades.

Given this marked increase in the amount of time students work, it is integral to understand how work might be connected to or impacting learning. Researchers have examined the potential relationships between student work and student experiences in a variety of contexts. However, as Rossmann (2019) noted, "student employment is infrequently considered an applied learning experience by students or institutions" (p. 43), yet college work does in fact impact student learning, student success, and other outcomes (Astin, 1993). For example, researchers have asserted that while some work is generally beneficial to students, too much work can be detrimental to student success (Salisbury et al., 2012). Further, some work while in college is generally more beneficial than no work at all (Perna, 2010). Some research has asserted that on-campus employment tends to elicit more positive effects on students' performance and satisfaction than off-campus employment (Astin, 1993; Perna, 2010; Salisbury et al., 2012). Additionally, researchers suggest on-campus jobs are more likely to enhance college students' civic engagement while off-campus jobs do not (Barnhardt et al., 2019). Student employment has been established as a catalyst for developing soft skills, cultural competence, and an opportunity for students to connect and apply their academic/classroom learning within practice contexts (Rossmann, 2019). Finally, working impacts which students have access to campus leadership roles which may have better outcomes for them when they graduate (Williams et al., 2021).

When centering social identity in relation to student work and student learning, there is likely important nuance that should be considered in tandem with some reported findings. For example, in general, racially minoritized students report greater financial need to access higher education (U.S. Department of Education, 2015). As such, these students likely make up greater proportions of students who work, students who work longer hours, and students who work off-campus (Carnevale & Smith, 2018). Given this, the corresponding benefits, challenges with the volume of student work, and the attendant benefits and drawbacks likely also impact these students in disproportionate ways. Despite all of this, it seems fair to assert that many of the studies on student work and the nexus of student work and student learning, do not include students who engage in sex work or erotic labor. There is perhaps a chance that these students might be included in qualitative and larger quantitative/survey studies particularly if types of work are self-reported (where students could obscure their erotic labor), or if specifics of types and locations of employment are not collected by researchers. Regardless, the specificity of how sex work might contribute to student experience or thus be a site of learning is not fully realized. It is here where this study offers insight specifically between sex work and learning for college students.

## Complicating "learning"

Implicit in, and connected to, my previous assertions is the reality that college students are learning as it relates to their sex working. This sentiment is evidenced across their narratives and letters as they reflect on how their experiences are brought to bear on their understandings about themselves, the world, their place in it, and constructs such as power, privilege, and oppression. While I assumed their engagement with sex work was instructive in all of these ways, I did not anticipate the depth and complexity of which sex work contributed to their schemas and algorithms of survival and resistance. Through my initial setup and framing of this study, I was interested in what collaborators were learning as it pertained to sex work. However, once I began to engage with collaborators, their stories, and the data analysis process, it was clear to me that collaborators were actually beyond learning. By this, I mean learning seemed too shallow of a concept or terminology to fully understand the gravity of understandings and realizations collaborators were coming to.

My interpretation of learning within higher-education research and scholarship seems to focus largely on instrumental learning and there is a natural overlap between learning and student development broadly. Despite this, learning as a construct does not fully capture the essence of what new insights are imported into their ontologies and epistemologies. Instead, collaborators developed what I interpret and term as a weighted or *endarkened consciousness*. Before further extrapolating on endarkened consciousness, I first turn to interview data that illustrate why I arrived at this conclusion. There are two concepts that inform my understanding of this concept as an outcome of college students engaged in sex work. First, engaging in sex work provided each of the collaborators a heightened sense of clarity as it related to power and dominance, particularly through their experiences with clients, primarily cisgender men. Second, engaging in sex work provided a backdrop for collaborators to understand themselves, and more specifically, develop agency, confidence, and voice in a way nothing else in their life had.

## Clarity of power and dominance

All collaborators spoke directly, succinctly, and vividly about the ways engaging sex work revealed to them how dominance and violence materialize in the world and in their own lives. To be clear, they did not broadly articulate that sex work itself was violent, but rather the interlocking nature of oppression and dominance and sex work provided them with a clearer analysis of such systems and structures. Sex work made clear for them how power is enacted, including a deep sobering reality that their experiences with men were often ranged from unpleasant to emotionally violent and robust intersectional understandings of equity and justice all of which informed and refined their own values.

***Distrust of cisgender men***

Engaging in sex work forced collaborators into proximity to men which provided them with a better sense of the pervasiveness of undesirable behaviors that go beyond the stereotypes of certain types of men (for example, the "douche fraternity guy" or "jock athlete" stereotypes/archetype). In fact, collaborators indicated that, as a result of engaging in sex work, they remain wary of a vast majority of men—including the unusual suspects. Kathleen offered,

> It's not like I had a bunch of faith in men in the beginning, but because I saw so many different kinds of men, [sex work] made me realize I can't trust any man … at all. Like even the men who seem like such good family men, who love their wife and they have kids, and they've built a wonderful business, and they're so kind. But then they ask for disgusting things and treat you like shit. And I feel like at the core, every man I'm going to come in contact with, there's some creepy part of him. And what would they ask for or try to get away with if/when they are able to pay for something?

Here, Kathleen seems to illustrate her surprise at some of her clientele and how they revealed themselves to her in sex work in ways they perhaps did not in other places. While Kathleen does not directly articulate this point, it bears mentioning the connection between the broad stigma of sexual activity and a corresponding level of comfort with asking/vocalizing a desire for specific sexual acts when engaging with erotic laborers, perhaps because of corresponding taboos themselves. Maria shared that her wariness of and clarity about men was not limited to strangers but even the men closest to her, as sex work found her questioning who men might be or become when given the opportunity to engage with sex workers.

> I can genuinely say everyone in the club acts the same when it comes to men coming in. I know my brother acts the same, my Dad acts the same, family members, friends, everyone acts the same. I don't know how to explain it but it's like they get filled with like primal lust.

Gui, a gay cisgender man, shared a similar sentiment about his learning to be uneasy around men: "Men can be kind of scary. When they get you alone, they think they can do things or kind of pressure you into doing things that you may not want to do and that's scary." Gui's articulation of men as scary made him experience anxiety when he had to meet clients and added to the difficulty of his experiences at times. Gui's example is also worth noting because he was the only collaborator in this study who provided services to clients of the same gender and, as such, still named the challenges of engaging men as clientele. Further, this reality potentially complicates whether sexuality matters in relation to these realizations—as

collaborators named gay men and heterosexual men in similar ways—and if analytics that center cisgender men, might be more compelling. Kemi identified, for her, the most difficult thing about engaging in sex work is the fear of getting caught, but specifically as a result of a potentially vindictive man.

> The fear. Being afraid of someone finding out and someone being vindictive and calling my university or leaking my pictures. So, these men are your clients, but they're also … men. And men get their feelings hurt once and every person who comes in contact with him for the next 20 years has to suffer. It's like everything about sex work and men being resentful of the fact they're willing to pay for this service, it's scary.

Even when collaborators did not speak directly to their undesirable experiences with men clientele, some, at times, articulated that they yearned to be able to engage queer clientele, specifically non-cisgender men. Which is to say, outside of Gui, some collaborators desired to embody their queerness in relation to their sex work. For example, Stokely offered,

> I haven't been able to capitalize off of my queer identity very much. I fucking wish I was able to get a sugar momma; just do some gay shit for pay. Of course, I'm gay for free all the time, you know what I'm saying? I would love to exploit my sexuality [in sex work], that would be so amazing.

Every collaborator named some form of realization of the challenges of engaging—particularly cisgender—men as their clientele. They spoke about their newfound wariness, deep skepticism, and constant surveying of the men they come into contact with. They spoke about fear and anxieties, and it informed how they approached protecting themselves from men. They developed a distrust of men because they were able to see beyond the "face" they believe most men present to the world. Indeed, collaborators credit sex work with providing them an understanding of men in ways they believe they would not have received otherwise. However, this understanding also provided them with the knowledge they could use to protect themselves not only in sex work but in their everyday life encounters.

### *Intersectional feminism*

Sex work helped cultivate a more robust feminist politic for collaborators. They were pushed in their worldview when they witnessed various struggles across differences. Additionally, collaborators reconciled sometimes competing and conflicting aspects of their identities and experiences—and that of others—which allowed them to advocate and have empathy for themselves and others. Stokely shared,

> Sexual liberation looks different for me because of all of my identities because of being a Black Muslim woman sex worker; to reclaim sexuality looks really different for me. In terms of being a Muslim, the issue of modesty comes up. But modesty is a political thing as well as a spiritual thing. Modesty in Islam is about regulation, in multiple ways. For me it reminds me to be modest in my relationships with others; modest in terms of how I walk through this world and making sure that I'm always being mindful of how much space I'm taking up. It's about agency and taking control of your appearance. I'm going to be sexual on my own terms and be modest so that you can't see shit I don't want you to see.

Similar to Stokely, Tianna also indicated that sex work informed her feminism which was articulated not only in her letter to her sorority but also through our interview. She offered,

> I think so much of what young women are taught is how to interact around men and what appropriate interactions are and how to coddle or work around their feelings to maximize benefits. A lot of times people frame that benefit as "how do I find a husband" which is not something that interests me. So, in going off the grid and completely ignoring everything that I've learned about how to deal with men, I learned that there are no rules. Be yourself, see where it goes. I won't be made to feel like I have to mute myself or make myself smaller in real life. I had to do that in sex work situations, and I got something out of it [money]. And so, I'm like, wait a second … people do this in real life? And they don't get anything out of it? I'm definitely not doing that.

Kemi, who at the time of our interview had ceased engaging in direct services, reflected on how sex work helped her build empathy for herself and others still engaged in direct service work.

> I'm seeing a lot of the anti-sex work rhetoric, legislation, and atmosphere that we're living in right now. I appreciate that I've engaged in sex work because it has allowed me to not be a trash person to sex workers to judge them or myself as harshly as other people. I've seen the things people say to sex workers online and our perceived values and it's like, this is just the job we're working. Also, it's given me perspective on labor, what labor means, and the cost of your labor. I don't think if I wouldn't have done sex work in the official capacity that I would have ever been able to realize the unofficial ways that I engaged in sex work, and how a lot of us engage in exchanging sex for some type of thing we want.

Kemi's assertion connected to Stokely's recounting of the ways many people commonly engage in transactional sex, which is to say sex in exchange for needs and other material items.

> You might go to Grandma's house or you're with your mama just playing around or whatever. And then they tell you to go to your room because this man is coming over, "her little friend," and the next thing you know, you've got groceries in your house. You know what I'm saying? They don't have like a romantic relationship. She's just using him for funds, like that shit is common as fuck. Especially if you're low income, you know, that shit is common. And that's sex work, even if we don't use that terminology, like that doesn't mean it's not sex work.

While individuals who engage in this manner may not use sex work as an identity or terminology, Stokely humanized and empathized with that experience. Of particular emphasis was Stokely's indication of this being a classed reality, which sex workers with racial and sexual minoritized identities routinely articulate as a desperately needed analysis to center when examining issues and experiences in erotic labor and transactional sex. On a similar point, Maliah found sex work provided her the space and language to identify the need for intracommunal inclusivity and coalitions.

> I have a guy friend who was really popular on our campus and he was pro Black everything. But when it came to the experiences of Black queer people or Black trans people, he acted like he didn't know how to include them. But what I tried to get him to understand is they're still Black. You're an influencer on this campus and people know you're very involved you have an organization dedicated to better the Black experience on campus, how do you go day to day and try not to include Black trans or queer people? Inclusive, bitch! And that means everybody. You have to include all of us. A struggle is a struggle and dancing got me there.

Collaborators demonstrated remarkable clarity that materialized as a result of the gravity of being sex workers with racial and sexual minoritized identities. And, as a result of that gravity, they developed weighted consciousnesses and the ability to hold multiple truths and empathize with others across and within difference and struggle.

## Confidence of my voice

Each of the collaborators in the study indicated that engaging in sex work allowed them to strengthen their voice as well as confidence in who they are, their bodies, and their decision to engage in sex work, a confidence they may not have found if they had done something else. Maliah recounted,

> It's ok to say no and that's in every aspect of life. I feel like I'm a really nice person and I never want to say no. So when I'm at work sometimes I feel like I have to put on this big smile and act like everything

> is ok, but it's okay to not be okay. If I feel like [someone] is doing too much, I'm gonna let [them] know. Like, I'm not with that, relax. People sometimes think we sell our souls because they see one girl do something and they think that we all do that. But deep down inside, maybe that girl wanted to say no but she didn't think she could. It's okay to say no. If anyone ever makes you feel uncomfortable it's okay to say no.

Maliah's recounting asserts a reality that sometimes sex workers may not feel they are able to set boundaries, alternatively, a sex worker might choose to engage in different types of sex work or "extras," as Maria articulated in her memoir. Here again, I point to my previous articulations of disidentification, partial identification (Muñoz, 1999), and the broad complexity within and across sex worker experiences as important contexts to hold in tandem with collaborator narratives. Maria, who is also a dancer, spoke to the pressures of the club and how it allowed her to harness her voice in a way to set clear boundaries,

> Definitely stand your ground. People will try to pull one over on you, whether it's trying to get you to do something you're not comfortable doing or even setting rates and clients trying to talk you down. Don't settle because you're there to make money and they should be there to spend it. Period. Sex work has allowed me to understand my worth and how I price my work. I definitely think there's a confidence surrounding anything that I do when it comes to money in terms of what I will and won't do.

Like Maria, Kemi also established her limits not only with clients but also with how far she would be willing to go to secure her survival in the world. Additionally, Kemi's developed consciousness helped her to reconcile what might seem like competing or conflicting values—hers and society—related to how she should feel as a sex worker.

> I learned what I'm willing to do for money. Some people say "I would never do this or that" but I have no shame about it. I felt like I kept waiting for myself to have this weird morality moment that a lot of people talk about related to sex work being bad. A moment when I was going to feel horrible about it. I never had that. I kept expecting it to happen, I kept waiting for this moment and it just never happened. I think I learned when it comes to my survival, I make no compromises. I learned my own limits and what I'm willing to do for a check.

Collaborators in this study indicated that sex work helped them understand incredible things about themselves that were beneficial not only in their sex work realities but also in all of their realities. Kathleen offered that through

sex work she established confidence in her voice, in her boundaries, and in her body.

> Prior to sex work if I was having sex with someone I was just focused on having a good time and I didn't feel allowed to say "we are going to use condoms and this is how it's going to go and no you can't stay over or yes you can stay over;" I learned how I kind of feel about my body in a sex related atmosphere and the overall confidence with it. I learn something different with each client, like body confidence or how to be safer, or how to be secret.

Collaborators said they were able to establish confidence in themselves and their voices. They developed an unapologetic ethic related to their understanding of self, their survival, their decision to engage in sex work, and incorporating those developments in their lives outside of sex work. The weight of their consciousness around their decisions provided them with a greater understanding of how to maneuver through dominance in the world.

## Endarkened consciousness

As evidenced across the narratives and in the quotes above, collaborators spoke about their experiences in clear and direct ways. There were rarely moments of confusion or uncertainness about who they are and what their sex work realities meant within the context of a system of dominance as well as their racial and/or sexual identities. Collaborators not only had a consciousness of power, social identity, and how they manifest in the world but those consciousnesses were also weighted, concentrated, and endarkened. By endarkened, I borrow from Dillard's (2000) endarkened feminist epistemology where she situated endarkened in contrast to "enlightened," which is typically used to "express the having of new and important feminist insights (arising historically from the well-established canon of white feminist thought)" (Dillard, 2000, p. 662). Endarkened reframes what it means to come to knowing and rejects traditional western understandings and philosophies and instead locates knowing at the "intersection/overlap of the culturally constructed socializations of race, gender, and other identities and the historical and contemporary contexts of oppressions and resistance for African-American women" (Dillard, 2000, p. 662). Similar to the concept of endarkenment, intersectionality theory (Crenshaw, 1991) establishes how one comes to knowing based on identity and power, something that collaborators identified as a familiar experience. While collaborators articulated they had an understanding of oppression—even from childhood—something about their experiences as sex workers accelerated, elevated, and weighted their individual and collective consciousnesses. That is, sex work seemed to materialize as a consciousness-raising phenomenon in their lives.

My introduction to consciousness-raising as an intentional political tactic and intellectual exercise is based on the historical literature of second-wave feminism/feminists (Redstockings Manifesto, 1969; Rosenthal, 1984). Feminists and women's rights activists/advocates used consciousness-raising to help make—mostly—white women aware of oppression and patriarchy and help them make connections between their individual experiences and a systemic phenomenon (Maeli, 2016; Redstockings Manifesto, 1969). However, the tactic is in contrast to the way Black women, for example, articulate a historical and ancient knowing around oppression because of the nexus of their gender and racial identities (Dillard, 2000), without the need for political and intellectual exercise. Given this and the narratives of collaborators, I argue for a positioning of sex work as a consciousness-raising event in the lives of collaborators that is more in line with what would be a natural come to knowing as a result of the additional weight of how the system of dominance presses upon sex workers, specifically. Further, this situatedness may help individuals seeking to understand how sex workers decide to engage in the work in the face of moral objections and moral frames.

Sex work, as a social or avowed identity, is not additive to these collaborators' identities; it is multiplicative and exponential and manifested as clarity of power and dominance, critical understanding, radical empathy for others, and a deliberate and unapologetic confidence of their voices. Their consciousnesses moved beyond a binary of right and wrong—as it related to moral and legal assumptions about sex work—and instead oriented their understandings through justice and survival. Recall, I offered earlier in the text that seeking to think about sex work in a good/bad or right/wrong binary was ill-fitting and unproductive. This is to say, college students may engage in sex work—particularly "illegal" forms—having transcended understanding themselves within good/bad or right/wrong constructs. They are clear about their choices, they are more appropriately thinking about sex work in relation to power/dominance, stigma/freedom, and shame/justice. In my view, they transcend "learning" in the most basic sense and instead illustrate a weighted consciousness and endarkened awareness. As I reflect back on my initial interviews with some of the collaborators in this study, I was in awe at how exceptional they were. I had no idea what to expect and at the same time they exceeded every expectation I had of them. On March 12, 2018, I wrote a research memo,

> These collaborators are incredible humans. Today I cried with one of them, we cried together. They are so smart but more than that, sharp; and deliberative. I don't know what I was expecting but holy shit I am in awe and I'm learning.

This illustrates that it was immediately clear to me that these students were quite different than other students I had encountered in my professional

work. It was evident to me that they had an awareness that is significant and exceptional. I am clear now that what was surfacing was their endarkened consciousness, which resulted in my assessment of them as smart, sharp, and deliberative. From the beginning, it was obvious that what and how they understood the world had advanced them far beyond what I have ever experienced as a practitioner working with non-sex-working college students. They demonstrated to me a relatively thorough conscious awareness about the world and how power informs it. They achieved this awareness in such a short time—and more deeply than many people might ever.

As a reminder of their demographic information, each collaborator began their sex work between the ages of 19 and 22, and at the time of our interview, none of them were above the age of 25. So, their consciousnesses, the way they experience(d) dominance, and their articulations of how they understand and reconcile their sex work and—for some—their criminalized identity was quite advanced. The way they discussed their experiences, understandings, and realizations is on par, if not exceeding, the way peers and colleagues or students in doctoral studies, for example, discuss them. My intention here is not to suggest that students who pursue "traditional" forms of education are or should be more advanced in their understandings of power and corresponding reasonings of the world than people who do not. I am saying that *within* classes of students who pursue "traditional" education, my assessment is that college student sex workers' analyses and meaning-making are advanced; it is odd to me that an experience that is so deeply, deliberately, and decidedly contributing to their development is so relegated to the margins that few in higher education and student affairs work have seemed to notice.

Intersectionality theory instructs that power and dominance changes situations, circumstances, contexts, and experiences (Crenshaw, 1991). In addition, intersectionality theory further reveals why and how these consciousnesses might be so robust and unique. Knowledge is produced and legitimized from the experiences and stories of individuals resisting from the margins; in other words, their experiences under and through dominance are part of their knowing (Crenshaw, 1991). Intersectionality theory reinforces the importance of honoring and legitimizing lived experiences as a way to interrogate and deconstruct oppression (Crenshaw, 1991; Delgado & Stefancic, 2012; hooks, 2015). To be clear, I am not suggesting that one can only achieve the type of consciousness these students demonstrate through experiencing oppression, dominance, and pain. However, because they experience these things and still get up for the class in the morning, because they have to silently navigate carrying the realities of their sex work, and because they do it despite the illegitimacy of labor under capitalism, they are experiencing a consciousness-raising event that is robust and probably critical to their survival long beyond their time in the ivory tower.

As I reflect on my past work with students, I struggle to think what exactly I or other student educators could teach Kathleen about the world? What

could educators possibly reveal to Maliah about herself? How would educators frame for Gui what it meant to think critically in crunch/high-pressure situations? How could educators achieve those aims and not insult the integrity of their experiences and the legitimate knowing that has formed from them? I offer these rhetorical questions not to disempower my work or that of my college student educator colleagues but to urge us to consider how we approach our work with students so that we assume some of these students know things and we should reflect on how we can honor that knowing.

I wrote about the sobering reality that the support for college student sex workers may never materialize in any meaningful way in higher education. A reality that is not lost on collaborators in this study. However, after meeting these dynamic individuals, I have to wonder and radically imagine how might we transform our contexts to affirm and center these incredible people. How do we provide them space to be experts on development, learning, and knowing, without exploiting their labor, or expecting them to offer it? Education is about integrating what we read from books, what we consume from others, and what is innately inside of us. We can affirm for students—at the very beginning—that they know things and they should embrace that knowing and the consciousness that comes along with their lived experiences. Educators must remind students, just in case they do not know, that their living is part of that knowing, and further, we must believe it ourselves. We must remain open to that knowing and all the places that knowing may come from—including sex work. In her work, *Teaching to Transgress*, bell hooks (1994) words ring as a critical reminder of what this may mean,

> The classroom, with all its limitations, remains a location of possibility. In that field of possibility, we have the opportunity to labor for freedom, to demand of ourselves and our comrades, an openness of mind and heart that allow us to face reality even as we collectively imagine ways to move beyond boundaries, to transgress. This is education as the practice of freedom.
>
> (p. 207)

This practice might help us disrupt dominant notions that marginalize, render invisible, and exact violence on college student sex workers. Educators must determine what it means to labor for freedom and on behalf of college students who labor in, inarguably, one of the most difficult contexts, one that is stigmatized and, for some, criminalized.

Throughout this text, I have shared the myriad of contexts that bring college students to and through sex work. For example, some college students engage in episodic sex work which we learned through Gui's memoir, *My Totally Unplanned, Incredibly Unorganized, Entirely Episodic, Life as a Sex Worker*. The collaborator who shared similar contexts with Gui was Kemi whose introduction to sex work was through her needing to finance graduate school applications as a senior undergraduate student. Kemi's

incisive thinking was fully present when we spoke as she articulated intricacies related to power, whore-stigma, fatphobia/sizeism, colorism, and the politics of the transactional nature of sex. Specifically, she offered critical reflections on the connections between the transactional nature of all labor and connections and implications of/on the body. At the start of our conversation on sex work and learning she offered,

> I've learned that a lot of the things that we do are transactional, we're trading our bodies in all labor. I think my experience as a sex worker has definitely emboldened me to ask what I want in the workplace; because I've been on the other side of giving someone the illusion of this relationship as more than transactional. My workplace bosses try and give me the illusion of work as not being transactional. "This is a family we're a workplace". Absolutely not, this is a transaction, therefore here are my terms. I think it [sex work] made me an all-around better individual which may sound very cliche. But honestly I see a lot of the rhetoric around sex workers and I don't know, that'd be a progressive in my thinking if I had not been a sex worker even if it was for only a brief period of time.

These framings are important and connect deeply to the type of understandings college student sex workers arrive at, due in part to their engaging sex work. As a collaborator, Kemi was deeply aware and cognizant of the various conditions that informed her work and the personal histories that also contextualized her personal relationships to sex, her body, and material wants and needs. In her memoir, we recount her introduction into direct-service sex work, and for Kemi, moving from sex work in exchange for material items to sex work in exchange for cash was not necessarily a grand leap.

## Kemi: a small jump

8:00 pm

Dear Prospective Student,

We're thrilled that you are interested in our graduate program and we look forward to your application. While we work very hard to remove any barriers to student success in our program, unfortunately we have no way of waiving the application fee. Below we have linked you to potential resources but they are time-sensitive and at this time it may be too late. We hope you are able to ultimately submit your application. We would love to consider you for our program.

Sincerely,
Graduate Program Number 3

This is the third fee waiver rejection I've received so far. I have to fight the urge to throw my phone across my tiny ass apartment and against the wall. How they expect undergrad students to come out of pocket for these grad application fees—$75 a pop—I don't know. I just paid for the fucking GRE and I barely even have money for food. Damn. I know I'm going to go to grad school no matter what, but at this point, I don't see how. I need to get to graduate school to help me chart a future for myself, to help me have the life I believe I should have. What's the alternative?

It's finals week so thankfully it's quiet, but I can't help but glance at my calendar and to-do list with all the upcoming deadlines. I'm stressed as fuck and the thought of grad school is making it worse and I haven't even gotten there yet. I can't ask my family for help, we're not close and they're abusers. I grew up in an abusive household and asking your abusers for money is like selling a part of your soul … it's just not a pleasant experience. I've sold plasma here and there but it's not cutting it and those applications are due in a few days. Fuck.

9:00 pm

Kemi
*Girl. I'm broke as fuck. *eyeroll**
Rachel
*LOL me too. What else is new?*
Kemi
*Yeah … but like if I don't come up with some money soon I don't know if I'll be able to complete these grad school applications. Like …*
Rachel
*Damn. Well what you gon do sis*?
Kemi
*You know what … fuck it. I'm about to get on the Shush app and sell some nudes.*
Rachel
*BITCH!!! I know that's right! I was just about to tell you to do it. People do that shit all the time, you should be able to come up easy.*

Kemi
*Bet.*

10:00 pm

Let me look in this closet for some cute booty shorts. I need some good lighting too; good nudes are honestly all about angles.

*click*

I feel like a contortionist trying to get the best shot, LMAO. This is it, I think.

*click*

Perfect. Let me post this shit up.

*DM me for details about nudes.*

10:05 pm

**48 unread messages**
Guy1
*how much for a pic?*
Idiot1
*lemme see…*
Idiot2
*bend over baby* ☺
Guy2
*wats the rates …?*
Kemi (to everyone)

*Hey, this is Kemi, my pics are $5 each but I also have a premium ChitChat account and for $25 you can have access for the life of the app. If you want personal videos we can discuss.*

10:15 pm

Guy1
*lol*
Idiot1
*I get nudes for free ma*
Idiot2
*yeah…not payin for nudes *shrug**
Guy2
…
Kemi
*Ok … then why the fuck are yall in my inbox?*

11:00 pm

Scammer1
*I'll buy some … but how do I know if you're cute?*

Scammer2
*Can I get a lil sneak peek? I'll buy.*
Kemi
PG 13 Rated *Photo 1*
*PG 13 Rated Photo 2*
*PG 13 Rated Photo3 (sent)*

*Those are PG … imagine when I take off the bra and shorts … *fire emoji**
Silence.

1:00 am

Fucking jerks.

Took my photos and ran. No more doing that Kemi, what the fuck. Now you're getting played. Not that I expect everyone I encounter to be ethical, but damn like why fuck with someone who is clearly tryna hustle? I already feel like I gotta guard against getting played by the world, I don't want to deal with this stupid shit too.

**1 unread message**
SweetGuy1
I'll buy some. How much?
Kemi
$20 & you gotta send me the money first.
SweetGuy1
Of course
*sends money*

OMG. Yes! Shit. Like this shit was getting old. Let me send him a few extra.

SweetGuy1
Wow, u r really beautiful. Thank you.
Kemi
No problem, lmk if u ever want more ;-)

SweetGuy1
Do you do any direct service stuff?

I haven't really thought about it but … I could make all the money I need tonight. Will I regret this later if I do it? But like, I've fucked men for free and that shit wasn't always useful either. I don't think on it too much longer before I say, "fuck it" and shoot off a text.

Kemi
Call me.
**incoming call from SweetGuy1**

I've always done sex in exchange for something.

I've done sex in exchange for love and affection. If I'm bored and want someone to hang out with me, I know no nigga is gonna come and hang out for free; he wants pussy. I think if we were all honest with ourselves, we would have to admit that a lot of us are casually engaging in transactional sex. I've never had a boyfriend, never had a girlfriend, never been in a committed monogamous relationship. For me, sex has always been a transaction. I've always used it to get the things I want, and it's never been about this "sacred space." And I'm okay with that.

I've always been ok with fucking someone and not knowing their name. I'm okay with fucking someone and not caring if they give a fuck about me. I'm okay with fucking someone and never talking to them again. I'm comfortable with casualness and sex.

2:45 am

Kemi
BITCH. I did it!!!
Rachel
OMG!!!! How did it go?!
Kemi
It was good, he was really sweet! He couldn't afford much more than some heavy petting but it's all good! I got what I needed.
Rachel
Ok cool I'm just glad everything went ok!! I'm proud of you.
Kemi
I'm proud of me too! I wanted money. I needed money and I got money!! I'M GOING TO GRAD SCHOOL!!

I've been exchanging sex for things for a while. I've been smiling seductively for things for a while. I've been leveraging showing my cleavage to get money, food, and material shit for a while. The better question is when have I *not* engaged in sex for things? I can't think of a time in my life that I haven't used sexual fantasies that people project on to me to get things that I needed and wanted.

I don't know how to be a girlfriend, but I'm a *really* good fuck. And because I'm good at sex, I can do it for other things I need. Transitioning from wanting things in exchange for sex, to wanting actual money in exchange for sex … it's not a hard jump for me. It's a small jump.

So, if you're going to text me, call me, shoot your shot with me, or DM me and tell me about how much I turn you on? That's great.

Fucking pay me.

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# 6 If sex workers were free

## Toward a radical erotic politic in higher education

> I have a lot of trauma in my life and so much of it is surrounded by silence. I hate the silence of my story sometimes. And so even though my [sex work] story isn't horrible—it isn't dramatic or violent—I still get to tell it and that's important to me. It's important I don't live my life in silence.
>
> —Kemi

Kemi's comment above was in response to my inquiry about the research process, what it meant to her to be a collaborator, and to help me assess if I met my goal of creating an ethical and power-conscious experience for college student sex workers in this study. From the moment she spoke those words, I have been simultaneously haunted and inspired, in ongoing reflection about the trauma, the pain, and the violence of silence. I have stayed in continual meditation about what it means to be burdened by the silence of our individual and collective stories; what does it mean for someone to hate the silence of their story? And, in the case of the collaborators in this study, who is responsible for silencing them? This is a question scholars and researchers must contend with. The Combahee River Collective was a Black feminist organization most famous for the Combahee River Collective Statement. The statement is an early example highlighting oppression as an interlocking system, one that transcends the bounds of a single identity or single issue. One of the most poignant lines in the statement reads: "If Black women were free, it would mean that everyone else would have to be free since our freedom would necessitate the destruction of all the systems of oppression" (Combahee River Collective, 1983, p. 270). In this chapter, I conclude by pondering the question: Sex workers, too? What would it mean for sex workers to be free, particularly in higher education? Or, more importantly, what would be required to get to freedom? Throughout this text, I have explored the following questions and some of their answers: What systems of oppression are at work that preclude sex workers, especially those with racial and sexual minoritized identities, from experiencing freedom? What are the ways sex worker liberation is tied to the liberation of

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all oppressed people who labor under capitalism? and How are college student sex workers positioned to help us understand what it means to labor, to develop new ways of thinking and being, and to resist, by choosing to survive despite common perceptions of any given labor choice? While every question may not resolve by the end of this book, I offer this chapter as the coda of my critical narrative inquiry project (Kim, 2016), which might move higher education closer to that resolve.

## On narrative coda, justifications, and theory

Kim (2016) articulated the genesis of the term "coda" to musical theory where it is situated as a finale which brings a piece of music to a close, a signature by the composer which "musically and metaphorically" (p. 228) concludes and completes the piece. Narrative researchers have borrowed coda as a concept and term to invoke an action which links the "past world of the story to the present work of the storytelling" (Patterson, 2013, p. 32). This connects to many aspects of narrative inquiry, including the temporality commonplace which invites narrative inquirers to consider aspects of past, present, and future in relation to their inquiries (Clandinin & Huber, 2010), and as such, to quote musical artists Soul II Soul, the coda requires bringing consumers of the research stories "back to life, back to the present time" (Jazzie B et al., 1989, 0:57) and operates as "what comes *after* the story" (Bruner, 2002, p. 20). Narrative coda is important because it helps frame implications, possibilities, and yet still unsolved problems of the research; the coda operates as an invitation to dialogue (Kim, 2016), and the coda also provides the reader "catharsis, reverberation, 'oomph' or new understandings of the field" (p. 229). In addition to narrations which inform the coda, researchers must also engage theory and have articulated justifications to help fully realize the narrative coda's possibilities.

On justifications, three should be articulated by the end of a narrative inquiry project including the personal, the practical, and the social (Clandinin et al., 2007). The personal justification articulates the importance of the study and why it matters to the researcher specifically (Clandinin et al., 2007). I articulated my personal justifications throughout the text but most notably in Chapter 1 and through my outlining of my positionality and how I came to this topic in the preface. Practical justification refers to a clear outlining of how the research can inform practice (Clandinin et al., 2007). I offered practical applications and implications for support of college student sex workers in Chapters 3–5 and other published research from this study (see Stewart, 2021a, 2021b, in press). Social justification refers to how the research connects with or addresses broader social issues (Clandinin, 2007), of which I outlined connections between college student sex work and other social contexts and phenomena including labor, capitalism, neoliberalism, historical and contemporary whorephobia, and carceral logics, among others.

In addition to these justifications, Kim (2016) offered that there must also be a scholarly justification which explains how and why the research contributes to the scholarly field. Detractors of narrative inquiry research leverage critiques that the methodology offers limited contributions to scholarship given it is mere storytelling, that is, it is "easy" research (Conle, 2000; Clandinin et al., 2007; Kim, 2016). Contrarily, Kim (2016) offered that narrative inquiry is about a quest for knowledge about life and living but that the "quest is not only philosophical and ontological, but also *theoretical*" (p. 236; emphasis added). The urgency for narrative inquirers to embrace theoretical development and engagements cannot be understated as stories by themselves are not inherently liberating (Bowman, 2006; Kim, 2016). Further,

> Personal stories can be ironically incapacitating when they are placed out of theoretical and social context, disempowering the very people narrative inquirers seek to serve (Goodson, 1995). As Goodson (1995) remarks, "It is not sufficient to say we wanted to 'listen to people,' to 'capture their voices,' 'to let them tell their stories'" (p. 95), if the stories are divorced from the understandings of social context and social process.
>
> (Kim, 2016, p. 236)

Instead, Kim (2016) invited narrative inquirers to engage in a practice of narratology: a science of narrative, a theory of narratives (Bal, 1997; Herman, 2005; Kim, 2016), of which "we use stories as a beginning point to understand, analyze, evaluate, and theorize the human and social phenomena" (Kim, 2016, p. 237). On this, Kim (2016) reminded that this is the final connection to what the narrative coda imports on narrative inquiries, where researchers, "substantiate our knowledge claims … making scholarly contributions to advancing our respective fields" and ultimately to make a marked difference in society through planting "seeds of social justice" (p. 237). To achieve these aims, narrative inquirers must situate narrative inquiry as both a descriptive *and* an interventionist project (Kim, 2016).

To realize the coda for this study, I endeavor to theorize toward a *radical erotic politic* in higher education grounded by the narratives and experiences of the students in the study and where I perceive they lead us. I use "toward" to convey this theorizing in the process of being birthed, a meditation on the page as it were, that articulates what the theory may mean at the time of this writing, but always leaving from for the possibilities what it could be and what it might be as it continues to arrive and be fully realized. As such, this theorizing serves as my overarching scholarly justification for this research. Before articulating dimensions of a radical erotic politic for higher education, I first outline some grounding contexts and assumptions that animate my approach to the theoretical in this case and specifically undergird a radical erotic politic.

## Grounding context and assumptions

Conversation, discourse, research, and writing about sex work are usually grounded in particular paradigms, or schools of thought, that animate approaches and philosophies related to the erotic, the pornographic, and women. This reality is true regardless of whether actors within particular discourses and camps clearly articulate them or not. To this end, I want to be clear about where I broadly locate myself within these matters. Nash (2014) categorized four traditions as they related to feminism and pornography specifically, which I perceive as having some natural extrapolation to sex work. I will briefly outline three of these paradigms including anti-pornography feminism, pro-pornography feminism, and sex-radical feminism. While these are not the only paradigms and there is significant nuance across these designations in relation to the erotic, pornography, and sex work, respectively, I discuss them in broad ways for space, simplicity, and utility.

### *Feminist paradigms of sex (work/pornography/erotic)*

Anti-pornography feminism is largely grounded as a "robust theory of patriarchal power" (Nash, 2014, p. 12). This school of feminist thought locates pornography as an active action that "mirrors and cements the actual position of women under the conditions of patriarchy" (Nash, 2014, p. 9). More than this, anti-pornography feminism is also a "theory of legal action" (p. 12). Through this articulation, the praxis of anti-pornography feminists has sought the abolishment of the pornographic as it exacts "production and consumption harms" (Nash, 2014, p. 12); this is to say anti-pornography proponents argue that women who act in pornography are harmed through the production of porn and all women are harmed by its distribution and circulation (Nash, 2014; Peluso, 2016). To this end, proponents of this paradigm have at times sought redress through legal action and means (Nash, 2014) and can be broadly situated as perpetuating carceral logics, and as such, a form of carceral feminism. Grant (2014) described this as a type of feminism that relies on law and legal structures to achieve justice around gender issues (e.g., the desire of anti-pornography feminists to outlaw the production and consumption of pornography). This approach is problematic for several reasons, namely "we can't arrest our way to feminist utopias" (Grant, 2014, p. 10). Despite this, "that has not stopped influential women's rights organizations from demanding that we try" (Grant, 2014, p. 10). In addition to this reliance on law and legal structures, anti-pornography proponents also neglect any useful analysis of the erotic and pleasure in feminism (Lorde, 1978; Nash, 2014), and they also engage in a troublesome symbolic use of Black women's bodies to further their cause (Nash, 2014) without any real embrace of Black women's ontological, needs, truths, or desires. Finally, this school of thought could be considered

as laying squarely within the oppression paradigm (Weitzer, 2010) and it is for these reasons I reject this particular approach and framing.

Conversely, pro-pornography feminists emerged as a direct response to anti-pornography feminism, specifically because of their reliance on carceral logics for remediation of gender justice issues (Nash, 2014). This paradigm is largely connected to third-wave feminism, particularly receiving a second-wind with the emergence of sex-positive feminism/movements (Nash, 2014). Broadly, pro-pornography proponents view porn as "potentially liberating and celebrates subjects 'choice' to consume or produce whatever they enjoy" (Nash, 2014, p. 15). This paradigm broadly obscures—if not altogether ignores—contexts (such as race) which might complicate access, barriers, and manifestations of choice, pleasure, and agency differently for Black women and other women of color (Nash, 2014). Pro-pornography feminism could also be considered as situated squarely within an empowerment paradigm of sex work and the erotic which—like the oppression paradigm—over relies on simplistic and dualistic framings of complicated matters (Weitzer, 2010).

Finally, Nash (2014) described sex-radical feminism/sex radicalism as having "destabilized the tendency of pornography as exclusively a site of women's subordination *or* a locus of women's agency" (p. 16; emphasis added). This articulation connects the most strongly to the polymorphous paradigm (Weitzer, 2010) and where I locate myself and some of the authors and thinkers I cite. Sex radicals situate sexuality—and perhaps the erotic—as an unsettled location for women: "a space where pleasure and danger bleed into each other in messy ways, *particularly for multiply marginalized subjects*" (Nash, 2014, p. 17; emphasis added). This distinction is of obvious interest to my own work. Finally, sex radicals challenge feminism to open up sexual possibilities and invite sex workers into feminist discourse (refusing to situate sex workers and feminists as mutually exclusive categories; Queen, 2001; Rubin, 1984). Further, sex radicals embrace a "fundamental investment in treating sex work as labor and in treating sex workers as feminists without either romanticizing or condemning the practice of sex work or the labor of sex workers" (Nash, 2014, p. 18). All of which are perspectives I embrace.

### *On endarkened queer ecstasy*

The final concept that undergirds my articulation of a radical erotic politic is endarkened queer ecstasy which loosely combines and situates queer theory—or more precisely reading and theorizing queerly—an embrace of Black/endarkened epistemology, and an embrace of ecstasy into meaningful conversation. On Black/endarkened epistemology, I refer to earlier articulations of endarkened feminist epistemology (Dillard, 2000), particularly the imperative to not only abandon linguistically (and otherwise) sentiments of enlightenment but also embrace Black thought as a disruption to the

canon of whiteness, which Dillard situated within feminism specifically. I argue whiteness has also permeated articulations of theory, the erotic, queerness, sex work, and pleasure. Specifically, I lean on Nash's (2014) framing of ecstasy within Black feminist projects, through which ecstasy is described as "both the possibilities of female pleasures within a phallic economy and to the possibilities of black female pleasures within a white-dominated representational economy" (p. 2). Further, Nash (2014) articulated ecstasy as a "utopian wish" for Black feminism, and specifically draws on Muñoz's (2009) invitation to look toward the future, which is to say, ecstasy is an opportunity to "step out of the here and now" (p. 186). For Nash (2014), this desire was specifically related to wanting to unearth "paradoxes of pleasure rather than the woundedness or elisions of shared injury, around possibilities rather than pain" (p. 3), specifically referring to Black feminist visual culture studies and the pornographic.

On queer theory, I turn to Warner (1993) as a point of departure to think about queer critique where he offered it "rejects a minoritizing logic of toleration or simple political interest representation in favor of a more thorough resistance to regimes of the normal" (p. 7). This is to say, at the outset, queer theorizing is firstly an ethic of resistance to normality, of which I also embrace Love's (2018) framing which suggests embracing a queer ethic, to read, to theorize queerly means running away from *anything* embraced, situated, or perceived to be "normal"—including whiteness and sexual respectability. In addition, queer theorizing can be a subjectless theorizing or one that embraces queerness as an identity marker (Berg, 2015) or, I argue, both. By subjectless, I refer to Berg's (2015) articulation who offered that it is an approach to "queerness as a way of thinking (sideways or otherwise)" (p. 23), which was of interest to the particular piece they wrote in relation to labor and performance. In the case of this study, it would seem perhaps irresponsible to abandon queerness as an identity marker given the ontologies of the collaborators in this study; so, I embrace both queerness in relation to a running away from—an abandon of—the controlling constructs of the "normal" in relation to the sexual and gender identity, a running away from canons of whiteness within queerness and the erotic, and a thinking sideways and otherwise. This is to say, to refine my invocation of queer theory—the spirit of which I intend to situate it—can be described as an intentional desire to destabilize and provoke normative notions of sex, and the erotic in higher education. I endeavor to put these framings into the conversation and situate an endarkened queer ecstasy, as undergirding a radical erotic politic in higher education.

## Dimensions of a radical erotic politic in higher education

At the outset, I want to name that my offering of a radical erotic politic (REP)/radical erotic politic for higher education (REPHE) is connected to not only all that has been shared throughout this text but also the broader

context of this research study (see, Stewart, 2021a, 2021b, in press). Given this, I begin by discussing why I chose radical erotic politic, as terminology. The naming of theories or frameworks should be thoughtful and intentional. As other scholars have argued, language possesses instrumentality, meaning that it is often *doing* something toward informing and transforming our understanding (Dillard, 2000). In this way, what we call some "thing" instructs us before we ever get to know what that "thing" is, therefore, it is important to start with naming. As such, the extrapolation of the naming of REP should be embraced as also *comprising* a REP. Then, I articulate dimensions of a REP as a politic of refusals and embraces and what they entail. Finally, I discuss the visual model for a REP and the symbolism it is meant to convey in relation to the erotic, higher education, and college student sex workers.

### *On radical*

To begin, I use radical in REP invoking two meanings; first, its genesis meaning, which is root or fundamental base (Kurayeva, 2018; Radical, n.d.). In this way, I argue for a grounding and retracing of erotic back to eros as a point of departure of our understanding of the erotic in the contemporary. This grounding also better underscores (un)intentional disruptions to those foundations. The second meaning I invoke is an homage to sex-radical feminism and their framing/articulation of a refusal of radical feminisms' (anti-pornography) position that all sexual expression—or sex itself—is always already equated to violence and exploitation. To be clear, at times, scholars conflate radical feminism as an always progressive, transgressive, or disruptive feminism, and as such, I refer to a disambiguated radical feminism that is/was traditionally aligned with anti-pornography feminism which I view as decidedly nonprogressive. Radical feminists believed women's sexual pleasure could not be realized as long as women exist(ed)/live(d) under patriarchy (Peluso, 2016; Rubin, 1984), describing women's sexuality as inherently gentle, loving, and nonviolent and men's as aggressive, fueled by lust, and "genital."

Beyond a conflation of sex and gender and further constructing sex as gendered and dichotomous, we can trace the casual and "causal" link between violence against women and pornography/depictions of women in media back to radical feminists' activism (Nash, 2014; Peluso, 2016). Finally, radical feminism's invocation of "radical" seems to focus on a desire to clarify the root of women's oppression as patriarchy, but when done so very imprecisely, it wreaks/ed havoc on and in feminism broadly and is frankly a white-centric framing. It is, at this point, that sex-radical feminism enters the arena, this is to say sex-radical feminism "grew out of a direct response to radical feminism's over-determined and rigid framework" (Peluso, 2016, p. 756). Therefore, the *sex* of sex-radical perhaps modifies which "root" or fundamental base the respective bodies of work intend to

focus on. Given the history of women and sex, dating back to prehistory and the temple priestesses (Roberts, 1992), the latter is the articulation of radical, REP embraces.

### *On erotic*

Next, I turn to the erotic. Recall, I mentioned that my theorizing a REP is queer(ed) endeavor, a thinking "sideways" (Berg, 2015, p. 23); but, I also argue a thinking *otherways*. Through this otherways thinking I—perhaps—situate the erotic in contested terrain. To begin, I endeavor to put into conversation hooks (1994), Lorde (1978), and Bell and Sinclair (2014) as they each have either connections to histories and legacies of the erotic and/or connections to education, specifically. I trace the erotic back to its root *eros*, or love (Bell & Sinclair, 2014; hooks, 1994), which can include "imaginative love, the prospect of love and a love of wisdom as well as sexual passion" (Bell & Sinclair, 2014, p. 269). In this articulation, as in others, there is a clear connection to the erotic as love, passion, and pleasure, which can include sex but is not necessarily exclusive to it. Lorde (1984) situated the erotic as having a transformative quality, which is to say, the erotic is a source of power that can be used to create change. She wrote,

> The erotic is a resource within each of us that lies in a deeply female and spiritual plane, firmly rooted in the power of our unexpressed or unrecognized feeling. In order to perpetuate itself, every oppression must corrupt or distort those various sources of power within the culture of the oppressed that can provide energy for change.
>
> (p. 87)

Here, Lorde suggested that transformational change is disrupted as long as oppressive systems—and perhaps the actors within—corrupt our connections to and with the erotic. Lorde argued this is especially true for women whose lives are often animated by a "suppression of the erotic" and is achieved due to "male models of power" (p. 88). Inevitably connected to these articulations as it relates to the erotic is the matter of the body.

In hooks' (1994) discussion of the erotic, the body is centered in deliberate ways. Earlier, I discussed in Chapter 3 Mistress Snow's (2019) recounting of the matter of the mind/body split in relation to education: "bodily exertion cannot be acknowledged unless it is in service of intellectual work" (para. 16). This is to say, in education broadly, and higher education specifically, the body exists in peril. On this, hooks (1994) wrote, "to call attention to the body is to betray the legacy of oppression and denial that has been handed down to us by our professorial elders" (p. 191). This articulation is not limited to the erotic—sexual or otherwise. hooks (1994) illustrated this by recounting her initial time as a teacher being befuddled at what to do when she needed to use the restroom in the middle of class, for example.

What does it mean to split—which inherently means to partition, to deny—the mind from the body? From bodily function(s)? From bodily feelings?

These questions are critical because the answers and their potentialities lead to numerous places/directions. For example, Bell and Sinclair (2014) were clear about their refusal of the erotic to be conflated, used interchangeably, or be situated as always already sex, sexy, or sexual. This sentiment is not inherently problematic; however, I become curious how the refusal is situated in relation to the body. First, Bell and Sinclair (2014), citing Brewis and Grey (1994) offered, "in re-eroticization there is a 'focusing [of] attention away from genital activity … [expanding] not only the possible range of erotic acts but also the intensity and length of erotic play' (p. 72)" (Bell & Sinclair, 2014, p. 270). They went on to offer, "eroticism is not sexuality in this view—far from it. Instead, it emphasizes 'potential, playfulness, unpredictability and danger,' and involves a rejection of conventions and 'sexual fixity' (p. 73)" (Bell & Sinclair, 2014, pp. 270–271). Implicit in their discussion is that sex, sexuality, and sexualization is an active process, and specifically informed by a patriarchal context, or, men. For example, when they offered—citing Brewis and Grey (1994)—

> re-eroticization can easily mask itself as emancipatory while being used to advance a phallocentric, sexually manipulative agenda. The desire, perhaps especially among women, to have their erotic lives recognized, gets translated into another means of reducing women to their sexual value.
>
> (p. 269)

This articulation (un)intentionally imports a few different assumptions. First, some of the framing of contemporary issues in relation to the erotic seems to be grounded in radical feminist paradigmatic schemas, which is evidenced by the invocation of a "phallocentric sexually manipulative agenda" as well as a refocusing of eros away from the "genital," that is to say, away from the inherent nature of "men's" sexuality as being aggressive, genital, and lustful (Peluso, 2016). Not only does this articulation place the body and gender in peril (in different ways) but this articulation is also a departure of a more balanced or potentially neutral terrain that love and sex might share in eros. For example, hooks (1994) too, invited us to move beyond thinking of eros and the erotic—particularly in education—as *solely* sexual, but "*that dimension need not be denied*" (p. 194; emphasis added), a view I also share.

I am particularly moved by hooks' (1994) retelling of the potential dangers of suppressing the erotic—and this particular instance maybe the sexual—in/on education and the educational context. The passage, worth noting in full is illuminating,

> At one point in the middle of the semester, I received a call from a school therapist who wanted to speak with me about the way I treated

> this student in the class. The therapist told me that the student had said I was unusually gruff, rude, and downright mean when I related to him. I did not know exactly who the student was, could not put a face or body with his name, but later when he identified himself in class, I realized that I was erotically drawn to this student. And that my naive way of coping with feelings in the classroom that I had been taught never to have was to deflect (hence my harsh treatment of him), repress, and deny. Overly conscious then about ways such repression and denial could lead to the "wounding" of students, I was determined to face whatever passions were aroused in the classroom setting and deal with them.
>
> (pp. 192–193)

This story, taken together with hooks' (1994) assertion that the sexual need not be denied, is where I ground my conception and assertion of the erotic. Not only does a denial suppress, repress, and have implications for our bodies but also, as educators, there is a possibility we might unintentionally wound students through our disciplining of the sexual within the erotic, as perhaps evidenced by the narratives of students in this study. What would it mean for us to deal with our arousals not as refusal, and not as an invitation to embody or act out/on them, but in ways that honor and allow us to *be* in and with our bodies as a vessel of the sexual erotic? To be clear, I do not argue that we need to invite others into this being, or have others help us resolve our arousals, but what might it mean to be in our bodies with the erotic as sexual, in education?

Returning to Bell and Sinclair (2014) and this particular partition, I hope to underscore how a denial of the body vis-à-vis the sexual might also undermine a broader reclamation of the erotic in higher education, which they seek to do in and through their work. First, they lean on Lorde (1978), who in one sense wrote not only in defense of the uses of the erotic for women, but also as a refusal of the pornographic situating it as a "direct denial of the power of the erotic for it represents the suppression of true feeling. Pornography emphasizes sensation without feeling" (p. 88). Lorde went on to describe pornography as a type of obscene abuse of feeling, of which Nash (2014) offered some resistant framing of reading through the lens of ecstasy as opposed to injury, or, stepping out of the here and now. Lorde (1978) suggested what animates women's avoidance of the erotic is the way men have traditionally misnamed and used it against women. While I do not disagree with this sentiment, my reading of Lorde, taken together with Bell and Sinclair (2014) is that instances of sexual embrace by women might not ever be useful or legible in the service of the(ir own) erotic, because it may inherently always be pornographic. To me, this underscores again a potential refusal of the body, pornophobic ethic (thotscholar, this text), and an always injured (Nash, 2014) reading. Recall thotscholar (this text) defined pornophobia as "an erotic, oft-racialized irrational hunger,

hostility, disdain, and contempt directed at those considered to be sexually abnormal or who are stereotyped as embodying an *excessive, monstrous, primitive, deviant, corruptive, funky* sex."

Lorde (1978) wrote,

> to refuse to be conscious of what we are feeling at any time, however comfortable that might seem, is to deny a large part of the experience, and to allow ourselves to be reduced to the pornographic, the abused, and the absurd.
>
> (p. 91)

Here, my question is what does feeling mean and how it is made real if not in the body (with all the attendant thoughts and feelings, including physical)? Does this framing whiten the sexual? Or always suggest the physical to be pornographic? To be a sensation with no feeling? And is the sexual excluded from the invitation to be marshaled as part of our collective feelings? To think on these implications queerly, or an otherways, is there a potential obscuring or erasure of queer and trans people in relation to the erotic through these articulations? I argue these framings seem to harken to white cisheternormative schemas whereby women are always sexual objects and men, sexual subjects (Smith, 2015); and if true, how might this reinforce gender binaries, disappear non-men, non-women, non-cisthetero onto-epistemologies; be bioessentialist, and limit erotic agency and expression?

To be clear, Bell and Sinclair (2014) offered considerations about the refusal of the mind/body split in higher education which is worthy of examination, but I view their urging of a re-invitation of the erotic and the body as welcomed as long as the body comes de-sexual. For example, Bell and Sinclair suggested that the body can be a "tool of inquiry, a vector and well spring of knowledge" (p. 275) and that a "disembodied academic life" (p. 273) works against women in deep and unrecognized ways. Therefore, they argued for not only an awareness of the body "as an instrument of knowing" but also "according the knowledge that the body generates" (p. 275) to equivalent status as other generative of knowledge and knowing. Yet, all of this is on the premise of a refusal of the sexual, though at times they articulated the sexual*ization*, of which I am not necessarily hostile. To refuse sexualization is a refusal to be sexualized by another but not necessarily a refusal of the sexual, which I think encapsulates a sex-radical position. I am not arguing for an inherent benevolence of the sexual but rather the possibilities of ecstasy, a stepping away from the here and now of how we come to think about sex, the sexual, and even the pornographic, a refusal to be defined or limited by another in the realm of sex.

In thinking on narratives, such as Kemi and Stokely, there seemed to be a refusal of sexuality as a respectable/moral issue and an embrace perhaps of its meaning/use as connected to the divine on one end or purely transactional on the other. What might it mean to normalize both within the erotic?

I agree we should refuse education as only the "life of the mind;" however, to start "from the definition of eroticism as pleasure and love rather than sexuality" (Bell & Sinclair, 2014) is to wreak havoc on the position of the body, the sexual, and the erotic, and a dismissal of the *shared* terrain that the sexual shares within eros. The sexual need not be centered, but again, it also need not be denied.

### *On politics*

Finally, my invocation of the political nature of the erotic—in education or otherwise—is rooted in my desire to embrace the contextual histories and legacies of sex work, including a historical disdain for women, and the politics of capitalism/classism, racism, xenophobia (Roberts, 1992), transphobia, queer phobia (Rubin, 1984) sex trafficking hysteria, and "white slavery" (Baggett & Bentley, 2020; Rubin, 1984). Further, other sociopolitical factors inform the erotic including the attendant stigma and carceral logics that animate hostilities against sex work(ers) as vectors of disease, in need of rescue and saving, and a labor analysis in relation to sex work (babylon & Berg, 2021; Nova, 2016; Showden & Majic, 2014). It perhaps goes without saying that the personal is political, and as such, sex and the erotic are no exception. When discussing the connections between sex work, the corporatization of higher education, and neoliberalism broadly, Roberts (2018) argued, "the subjective position occupied by student sex workers is a political rather than a moral one and hence it is a political critique of the situation that is required, not a moral one" (p. 93); and I agree with this assessment.

Specifically, I embrace this incisive framing in two ways. First, an embrace of the political in a REP rejects the terrain of discourse, dialogue, and debate about sex work or the erotic which would seek to situate it in a subjective moral arena. At best, morality is a questionable construct and analytic in relation to sex work, because of how it has been leveraged initially by the church and middle-class moralists, and contemporarily through society broadly as a cudgel to discipline any person or entity seen as nonnormative: women, Black people and people of color, queer and trans people, and poor people (Roberts, 1992; Rubin, 1984; thotscholar, this text). In this way, I refer to implicit assumptions that one's morality can be determined, not only based on what they do but also based on who they are. For example, it could be argued that part of the challenge in addressing capitalism is that the system instructs average-class, working-class, and poor-class individuals to aspire to wealth—and wealthy people to aspire to maintain their wealth—as such, society views wealth as inherently benevolent, or wealthy people as inherently good, moral. Conversely, society broadly renders poorness as a personal, social, political, and moral failing; this is to say, that society views poor people to be poor because they are bad people—poorness/poverty as a moral failing. Of course, this is not a new analysis as George Bernard Shaw, among others, actively countered a century ago the belief that being poor

was a moral failing and as such framed *poverty* as the problem, not the people who experience it (O'Toole, 2017; The Guardian, 1907/2012). Further, some have argued that the mere existence of poverty is a true moral failure of society (Rawls, 1971/1999). Despite this, morality and what constitutes it is a contested terrain. Finally, morality in relation to sex specifically has *often* been fraught and political uses of morality to induce panic abound,

> Moral panics are the "political moment" of sex, in which diffuse attitudes are channeled into political actions and from there into social change. The white slavery hysteria of the 1880's, the anti-homosexual campaigns of the 1950's and the child pornography panic of the late 1970's were typical moral panics.
>
> (Rubin, 1984, p. 163)

In this way, I argue that the construct of morality invites chaos into an otherwise potentially straightforward engagement with sex, the erotic, and the possibilities thereof.

The second embrace of the erotic as a political project maps back to the types of disruptions sex radicalism sought to import within feminism. Rubin (1984) offered sex radicalism as an analytic to make meaning of power and oppression in relation to the corresponding "stigma of erotic dissidence" (p. 160) where feminism, historically, has focused quite tightly on/against gender oppression (Queen, 2001). This focus initially rendered no true radical feminist position on sex beyond any connections that can be tied back to gender oppression, which, as Queen (2001) stated, "feminism finds no shortage of gender-linked problems with sex" (pp. 92–93) which can include, for example, issues related to rape, domestic violence against women, and abortion. Rubin (1984) argued the root of the praxis of suppression and control in relation to sex/the sexual, largely acts as a displacement of broader social anxieties. This is to say, the broad war on sex/uality is a by-product of societal perturbation and societal general lack of "control" as it relates to sickness, war, and other human existential related threats and crises. Disciplining sex and the erotic often become the societal scapegoat. Further,

> The realm of sexuality also has its own internal politics, inequities, and modes of oppression. As with other aspects of human behaviour, the concrete institutional forms of sexuality at any given time and place are products of human activity. They are imbued with conflicts of interest and political maneuver, both deliberate and incidental. In that sense, *sex is always political.*
>
> (Rubin, 1984, p. 143; emphasis added)

In this way, I situate REP as a political project that seeks to unsettle and destabilize, particularly within higher education. While some might argue that a societal embrace of sex/uality/ualization is at an all-time high, and

therefore it seems odd that I further advocate for reclamation of sex within the erotic, I again turn to Rubin (1984) who reminded that throughout history and time, sex has been more sharply contested in some instances and not others, more politicized at certain times than others. My argument is that within education it is time for the "domain of erotic life" to be "renegotiated" (Rubin, 1984, p. 143).

## Radical erotic politic: on refusals and embraces

As I reflect on the narratives and experiences of Maliah, Kathleen, Kemi, Stokely, Maria, Tianna, and Gui, several constructs come to mind, including invisibility/legibility, the body, the erotic, stigma, and each of these in relation to education. To extrapolate these concepts within a radical erotic politic, I situate them in terms of refusals and embraces and what they might mean/have meant for the college student sex workers in this study. At the outset, my overall thesis is this: the major challenge higher education seems to have in relation to sex work is largely connected to a broad aversion to sex/the sexual. In thinking about the narratives of the collaborators, my own experience as a student affairs practitioner and faculty member; as we think about how we tend to engage students around sex and the sexual, educators tend to do so in three ways: sexual violence response, sexual health promotion, and, in few instances, through academics and curriculum. What might it mean for students to *only* be engaged when they violate or are violated sexually, given condoms and other prophylactics, or as fodder for discussion in some academic programs and courses? Similarly, how society broadly disciplines sex/sexuality in times of anxiety and existential dread, in higher education, sex is diminished almost beyond recognition or meaning as it relates to college student experiences. As such, a radical erotic politic surveys and works to refuse or embrace certain aspects of sex/uality within higher education which I hope might get us closer to sex work/er liberation in higher education.

### *A refusal of hyper (il)legibility/hyper(in)visibility: an embrace of chosen (in)visibility*

I interpret a difference between illegibility and invisibility, and, as such, a radical erotic politic refuses illegibility while embracing chosen invisibility in relation to sex work. The term "legible" can be defined as "capable of being read or deciphered" (Legible, n.d.) when applying legibility of sex/sex work in higher education, I refer to the degree educators make decisions either individually or structurally that better create conditions for sex/sex work to be read, to be deciphered, and to be understood in educational contexts. As collaborators recounted faculty, staff, and students at their institutions and their corresponding perceptions about sex work, uncritical conflations with sex trafficking, or jokes about the nature, impact, or import of sex work, underscore—at a minimum—a lack of legibility. This is

to say, sex work/sex workers are illegible within their educational contexts but sex work itself is also not legible within connected issues to sex/sex work along the lines of neoliberalism, capitalism, and labor (Roberts, 2018). Sex work is not broadly legible in educational contexts as a *justice* issue which is concerning particularly as it relates to college student sex workers with multiple minoritized identities. These actions and broad illegibility could be considered as a form of institutional betrayal college student sex workers experience (Stewart, 2021a).

A refusal of illegibility would involve personal and structural commitments to college student sex workers by inviting the topic of sex work into higher education in stigma-free ways. A refusal would also involve disrupting stigmatizing and incendiary rhetoric and action in relation to the lives and experiences of sex workers. For example, in one of Maliah's courses, a student said negative things about sex workers that when shared was immediately disrupted by the professor of Maliah's class (Stewart, 2021a). This action was clearly impactful for Maliah because shortly after she disclosed her identity as a sex worker to the class and confronted the student. I term this action *institutional stopgapping*,

> I use stopgap to reflect the disruptive nature of the action to stop misinformation or denormalize harmful contexts in these moments but also to convey the temporary nature of dealing with a structural issue. This terminology also reflects the individual level of the action, but I view those actions as "on the way to" broad institutional/structural support through consciousness raising and visibility rendering.
>
> (Stewart, 2021a, p. 11)

While this example is not the only way a refusal might manifest, it does illustrate an example of how this refusal might materialize and underscores why it might be a transformational ethic for college student sex workers.

The issue of (in)visibility is less straightforward but important to consider in relation to the experiences of college student sex workers. Based on the narratives of college student sex workers in this text and other writing (see Stewart, 2021a, in press) disclosing their status as engaged in sex work is risky given the attendant issues in relation to stigma, safety, and legal issues (e.g., if the type of sex work a student engages is illegal). The concept of hyper(in)visibility initially comes from studies of the body and visibility where Casper and Moore (2009) suggested some bodies are highly public and made spectacle, where other bodies are often erased usually due to oppression along the lines of race, class, gender, etc. From there, Gailey (2014)—who invited this framing into conversation with fat studies—suggested that some bodies exist in paradox in that they might be criticized and scrutinized publicly (hypervisible) but be erased in other ways that matter (hyperinvisible) simultaneously; when taken together those bodies are then made hyper(in)visible. I argue sex workers occupy a similar social position.

Specifically, I believe there is some public consciousness and awareness of sex work(ers) in higher education and beyond, but when sex work is raised within educational contexts, it is often done so in damaging ways; or the assumption is that sex workers exist but certainly not *here*—not on *my campus*. College student sex workers exist in film, music, and casual conversation within higher education as I have highlighted throughout this text, but the depictions and articulations are often imprecise deficit caricatures which perpetuate harm and operate to silence their truths, stories, and ontologies. As evidenced by their narratives, some students desired their institutions to know they exist but do not necessarily want them to know exactly who they are (yet), this might be where the paradox emerges.

As I wrote in Chapter 4, Kathleen's letter suggests some college student sex workers may not ever come forward. This is to say, for some college student sex workers, being in the/a shadow, the dark, may be preferred at this time. This is where I argue for an embrace of (in)visibility, particularly because in some instances it may be chosen (invisibility); and yet, that should not mean within higher education we should ever assume the college student sex workers are not with us in meaningful ways on campus (visibility/legibility). In general, my belief is that researchers and practitioners must be incredibly careful as we think about (in)visibility, if it makes sense to render certain students/attendant issues visible, and if so, how. In the case of college student sex workers, sometimes the invisibility, the dark, operates as a form of shelter,

> These students are sometimes not visible because they choose not to be. Some are not sure that they can trust their institution or institutional leaders. We have to show that we don't mean them harm and want to support them. In some ways, being in the margins operates as a protective feature, and so I always caution that we don't want to recklessly pull folks in unwillingly, but I do think it's important to focus on who is not present, and how can we bring them center if it makes sense to do so.
>
> (Stewart as cited in Burns, 2021, para. 4)

In this way, I argue for a refusal of illegibility which obscures and muddies the realities of college student sex workers or allows harmful information or practice to persist, and we must embrace any chosen invisibility until higher education creates conditions where students might choose to reveal themselves in broader ways—as invisibility does not mean non-existent. As Kathleen reminded, "we exist."

### *A refusal of mind/body split: an embrace of mind/body assemblage*

As I articulated earlier, the body broadly exists in peril in higher education (Bell & Sinclair, 2014; hooks, 1994) and specifically the erotic within

the body, and the sexual within the erotic. This reality, the desire to split the mind from the body, is not only an ongoing process but also a goal of higher education, though I would argue this extends to society broadly. There exists an overarching desire for disembodied ontological contexts, the suppression of feeling, and the sexual. As such, a radical erotic politic refuses this disconnection and disembodiment, as well as any invitations of desexual erotics within the body. Implicit in this refusal is also a refusal of stigmatization along the lines of sex, sex work, and the sexual broadly.

As I meditate on the experiences of students, so much of their narratives focus on a counter of and resistance to stigma in their campus contexts and beyond. Goffman (1963) defined stigma as "an attribute that is deeply discrediting" of which Weitzer (2018) clarified "what is key is not the attribute itself; instead stigma is a product of a relationship between at least two actors, not something inherent in a type of behavior or condition" (p. 717). This articulation is important because it underscores stigma as an active process; someone has to be *doing* the stigmatizing for stigma to exist and persist. Further, stigma is not necessarily a permanent function or structure, but rather it is a variable that is changeable and able to be disrupted. On this, Weitzer (2018) offered several pathways to address stigma in relation to sex work including sex worker activism, industry mobilization, mass media, and language shifts. His invitation to the academic community is salient including encouraging scholars to use our research in practice and passing resolutions to support these broader societal issues. He contended that higher education engages in similar advocacy on other issues but has been rare in relation to sex work. He writes,

> Scholars can intervene in other ways, such as writing columns for news sources, appearing on talk shows, and publicizing research findings that challenge prevailing [sex work] fallacies.
>
> (Weitzer, 2018, p. 725)

While Weitzer (2018) went on to argue that more "expert involvement would offer an evidence-based corrective to policies based on myths regarding sex work" (p. 725), an important caveat I would add is that sex workers need to be situated and invited as *the true* experts on issues pertaining to their work. Including writing and research produced *by* sex workers. Heather Berg, Angela Jones, and PJ Patella-Rey (n.d.) curated the *Sex Worker Syllabus* as a toolkit for academics which can help identify such experts, expertise, writing, and research. This is important so that non–sex work scholars and academics resist being situated as the "superior voice" on sex work that Grant (2014) warned about.

On embrace, a radical erotic politic invites a reassembly of the mind and body, or the mind/body assemblage as it were. This language invokes a repairing of the disconnection of the mind and body, and, by extension, the sexual from the erotic. The term also holds context that suggests while

these pieces should have never been disconnected in the first place, they have been, and there needs to be an active assembly of these parts and pieces as a broader whole. Additionally, given the refusal of sex (work) related stigma, there is also an embrace and normalization of sex. By this, I mean what might it mean for higher education—and particularly in my work of student affairs—to embrace the reality that some people desire sex, enjoy sex, have sex, *and* some embrace its utility as labor? Given higher education broadly engages with students and sex related to sexual violence, sexual wellness, and curriculum in certain departments and programs, what would it mean for us to embrace the sexual in the lives of students beyond? Not in a voyeuristic way, or in ways that cross boundaries, but as a normal part of many of their lives. I argue this embrace might move higher education to be able to better engage with sex work(ers) with lowered stakes, because of a normalization of the sexual.

Finally, this dimension includes an embrace of non-respectable framings of sex, sex as perhaps dirty, an embrace of the pornographic, an embrace of the sexually obscene. Given these constructs are subjective, reading them queerly is important because it destabilizes and unsettles them, specifically the way power inherently "others" and suppresses along the lines of respectability. For example, there are many actions and realities within and outside of the academy that I view as obscene, such as anti-Black racism, and violence (Dancy et al., 2018; Givens, 2016; Harper et al., 2018; Smith et al., 2007; Solorzano et al., 2000). It is a type of obscenity that is routinely taken for granted and ignored and/or otherwise embraced in higher-education contexts. It would seem, at times, that only the sexually obscene is broadly understood as "inappropriate" in the realm of public obscenities. But, I argue this further underscores the subjective nature of obscenity and the degrees of normalization different obscenities receive. Again, these embraces should not be understood as an inherent invitation to consume, engage, or cross personal sex-related boundaries but embrace as refusal to *stigmatize* and *other* along particular sex-related lines.

### *A refusal of work: an embrace of labor/antiwork*

Finally, a radical erotic politic must entail a refusal of work which underscores the inherent labor analysis required to fully render the issue of sex work in a social, political, and economic sense. By the refusal of work, I refer to emerging perspectives of sex work as antiwork. Specifically, some sex workers and sex work scholars call into the question the premise of work and as such the "sex work is work" refrain because it seeks to situate sex work in a white-centric, respectable, and capitalistic paradigm (Babylon & Berg, 2021). A by-product of this reality is that classes within and among sex workers become exacerbated which can further entrench inequities. Take for instance the framing of "survival sex work" which often "reinforces the idea that marginalized sex workers—who are usually nonwhite,

trans, or gay/bisexual—are engaging in risky behavior more often than other classes of workers" (Babylon & Berg, 2021, p. 635). This framing, leveraged by protection/rescue proponents and sex-work empowerment paradigm advocates, reinforce stigma on sex workers with multiple minoritized identities, invoking schemas that "sex workers of color are disease ridden, irresponsible, reckless, or a danger to themselves, their children, and society as a whole" (Babylon & Berg, 2021, p. 635).

Consider Gui and Kemi's experience of only engaging in sex work on critical need bases or even Tianna's recounting of her sex-work earnings being bill money, food money, Starbucks money; what is lost if we frame their experiences as survival sex work? Beyond perpetuating the previously mentioned stereotypical logics, these types of articulations obscure a systemic and structural analysis which would acknowledge that we *all* engage in "survival" work because we live under capitalism. I do not offer this rhetoric to obscure or flatten very real-class differences but to perhaps highlight the illegitimacy of all work/labor under capitalism and to refuse a "surviving" versus "thriving" binary. In short, I am arguing that deconstructing the legitimacy of labor under capitalistic regimes is more productive than disciplining any given labor "choice" or decision and assists in a rejection of erotic labor specific stigma more toward a stigma of all labor. This is a crucial imperative for higher education to interrogate because of our broad embrace of capitalism, neoliberalism, and the corresponding impact on student (sex) work (Giroux, 2020; Mintz, 2021; Roberts, 2018). Sex work as antiwork is an important framing as we imagine what a postwork politic (Weeks, 2011) might mean for educational institutions. This is to say, if educators are truly invested in equity, justice, and liberation, we have to complicate work vs antiwork vs nonwork and higher education's future in an ecosystem that has—or seeks to—destroy the very conception of work and what it means to labor.

To put this ethic into further conversation, it is compelling to think about how we might situate sex work as resistance, specifically. Through the conception of the Matrix of Resistance, Stewart and Williams (2019) examined the philosophical bounds of activism and resistance arguing that the two conflated terms may actually have distinct meanings between them. To better understand their differences that give nuance to their practice, scholars and researchers must explore both methods and intent of any given action as a starting place to uncover whether the action is activism or resistance and for what purpose (Stewart & Williams, 2019). This analysis requires an embrace of understanding power as co-constitutive, power as interlocking, and that one aspect of oppression or marginalization cannot be meaningfully engaged without a recognition of and engagement with others (Figure 6.1).

The matrix is represented by a square with the intent of the resistance represented on the y-axis and the methods to employ the resistance on the *x*-axis. For example, when someone organizes a march or protest to advocate for gun policy reform, their *method* is the march/protest, the *intent* is

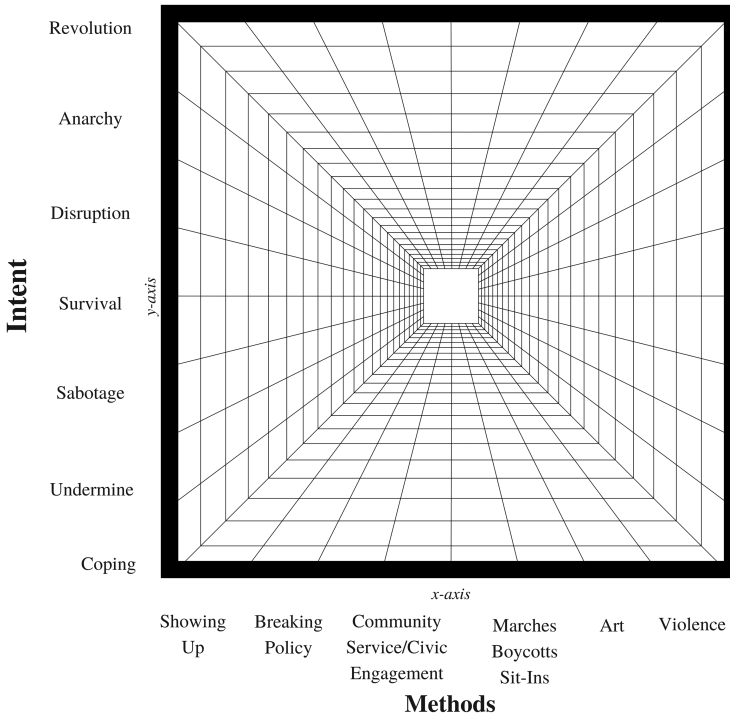


*Figure 6.1* Matrix of Resistance. Figure courtesy of Stewart and Williams (2019) and the *Rise Up! Activism as Education* text. Reprinted with permission from authors and Michigan State University Press.

policy change, disruption. However, on the matrix, there is vastness between methods (breaking policy, art, or violence) and intent (coping, anarchy, revolution). To be clear, the demarcations on the figure of the matrix are not exhaustive and are for demonstrative purposes (Stewart & Williams, 2019). To this end, given the variety of ways and purposes someone might engage/embrace/embody resistance, it is plausible that sex work (as antiwork, as nonwork) can be a form of resistance: resistance to capitalism, resistance to work, resistance to respectability, resistance to whorephobia, resistance to a system that denies possibilities for you to be whole, and resistance to a system that seeks to "grind you to dust" (Lorde, 1984, p. 42).

## A model for a radical erotic politic in higher education

Typically, theoretical models consist of simple shapes and directional components that visually assist a reader in understanding how the pieces and parts of a particular theory connect or work together. As a visual learner

and thinker, I too desire to offer a visual articulation of a radical erotic politic. However, rather than simple shapes, I endeavored to sit this politic squarely in relation to the subject matter and use the imagery of a mouth to illustrate it. A mouth can be used in many ways; for example, for many people, the mouth is how we receive food and sustenance—one entry point to help keep our bodies alive. The mouth is a conduit for pleasure: physical/sexual/erotic, food/taste, and by offering words of compliment and praise. The mouth can also be a conduit for pain: physical/sexual/erotic, food/taste, and by offering insults, hate speech, and biting. While not the focus of this work, I recognize that pain and pleasure are not mutually exclusive or binaried; I only mean to illustrate the fullness of what the mouth imports on any given experience or context (Figure 6.2).

A mouth imagery and imaginary convey a queering of model presentation, a sideways and otherways, and specifically communicates that there is no linear or directional way to think about the model, only relational, contextual, historical. One must ask, how are lips used or situated in relation to teeth? Teeth in relation to the tongue? Tongue in relation to the jaw? The mouth is a unit with several distinct parts that operate together seamlessly, rhythmically, to chew, to taste, to talk, to convey. To begin, we start at the lips which represent an endarkened queer ecstasy. You cannot get to other parts of the mouth without going through the lips; it operates as a proverbial passageway into all the mouth imports and exports; it is the first stop in and the last stop out. In this way, you cannot get to or through a radical erotic politic without an endarkened queer ecstasy.

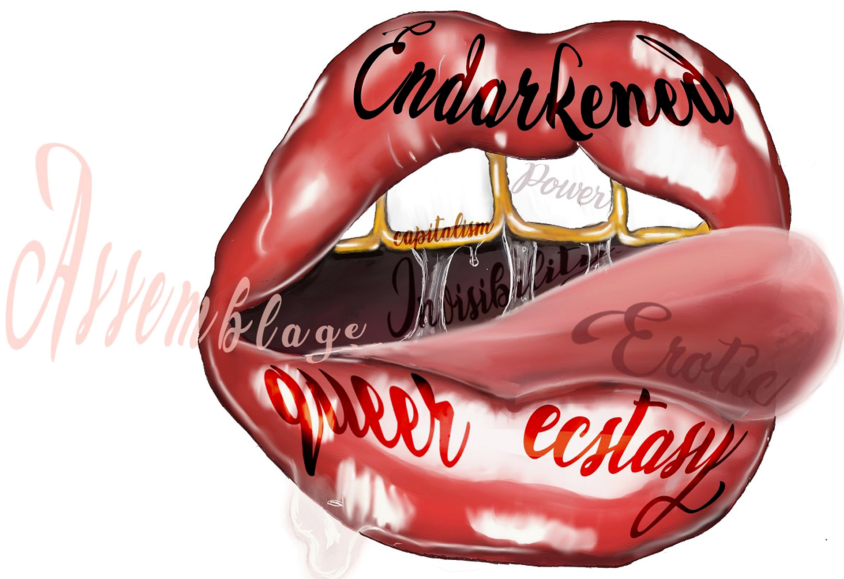


*Figure 6.2* A Visual Model for a Radical Erotic Politic. Illustration by Lilian Juma.

Next, we move to the teeth, which represent interlocking systems of oppression broadly. Within the ecosystem of the mouth, it is our teeth that stand to offer the most physical pain and devastation. Surely teeth, if one has them, are propped up and take center stage in our mouths, for example, when we smile for photos to convey joy; yet teeth, especially within the animal kingdom, represent a threat; a paradox of joy and anger; and happiness and antagonism. We understand what it means for one to bare their teeth and likewise understand the pain of accidentally or purposely biting a tongue or lip. Biblically, when describing end-of-time judgment, Matthew often warned that there would be "weeping and gnashing of teeth" (Erdey & Smith, 2012), a most haunting description. And we know that when teeth are threatened by injury or lack of care, they tend to cause us significant pain, where at times the only relief lay in having them pulled—if only rooting out power was so simple. Given all of this, the teeth represent systems of power that always hover over and within a radical erotic politic, a proverbial double-guillotine that is always ready to—and routinely does—bite down.

On top of the teeth are grillz, a kind of jewelry worn over the teeth, which have two diametrically opposed meanings. The first meaning represents how higher education embraces aspects of systems of power, namely neoliberalism and capitalism, a shiny emblem to dress up the violence the systems import. They represent the way higher education profits and thrives from these systems to the detriment of others. The grillz also represent an appropriation of which higher education is routinely guilty, grillz made popular by hip-hop music and Black culture represent the glam and stunt Tianna talked about in her memoir. Over time, the image has come to be associated with power and wealth; however, I appreciate Boyd's (2020) framing in that

> Black people thrive the most creating meaning where most think there is none. My grill means I made it or I am going to make it, I know who I am, and I know who I am going to be. It's like wearing your trophies. (para. 34–37)

In this way, for Black people specifically, grillz represent a resistance to systems of power, no matter how futile the resistance may be: an effort to live and love in the meantime, the in-between time. An effort to make beauty out of struggle. To have nice things, to wear trophies.

The tongue operates as the core, the center, of a radical erotic politic as it also is the center of the mouth. Of the five primary "senses," the sense of taste is housed within the tongue, and the tongue can trace and touch all other parts of the mouth, the lips, the teeth, and the broad mouth interior. The tongue can be used in service of the erotic; it is powerful, and it is sensitive; it can be bitten, and it can be burned. Within a radical erotic politic, the tongue represents the sexual within the erotic. If the heart, for example, represents love and passion, its counterpart is the tongue. The tongue

operates as a refusal of divorce from the erotic, and a reclamation of shared terrain within the erotic. Sex can be connected to love and passion, but it can also be lust. Embracing the tongue symbolically within the erotic is also a refusal of sexing the erotic as being "genital." The tongue seeks to destabilize notions of obscenity in relation to sexing the erotic, perhaps an embrace of the pornographic, a realization of ecstasy, the invitation and reminder to step out of the here and now.

The dark interior of the mouth represents the proverbial shadow that not only conceals but also protects. The dark represents an embrace of the chosen invisibility of sex workers but a rejection of the prevalent fear that corresponds with the dark, a rejection of fearmongering based on lack of understanding of the dark. The dark also represents a broad desire for the erotic to be hidden from public life. However, the dark interior also represents the future, the possibilities of sex, sex work, and the erotic, the unknown potentialities of what and where an embrace and normalization of sex might lead us. The mysterious, the unknown. Finally, speech represents the mind/body assemblage, a reunion of the life of the mind with the erotic of the body. The entire mouth must be engaged to speak, to elicit certain sounds. Teeth connect with teeth, lips connect with teeth and tongue, and the tongue—the acrobat of the mouth, the contortionist—operates at light speed shapeshifting to bring to bear different aspects of speech and language to make them legible as they are spoken, as they are shared. The mind's thoughts are often—but not always—communicated through the mouth. As such speech represents an embrace of the reunion of mind and body including sex in the erotic and a refusal of their separation.

## Conclusion

So, what might it mean for sex workers to be free? Free to live, to love, to fuck, to refuse work? For sex workers to be free would potentially mean a destruction of *all* work, for there to just then be, sex, sans the work. What would a world like that mean for each of us? I opened this book discussing how bell hooks' work had me reflecting on the concept of the margins, which extended to a natural interest in who and what was still missing in equity and justice discourse, advocacy, activism, and practice. As I attempt to close the text, I would like to return to hooks (1984/2000). In one of her early, yet profound, works *Feminist Theory: From Margins to Center*, hooks (1984/2000) wrote about the margins in relation to the center as two pieces of a larger whole. This particular conception still compels me as I think about my argument of the mind/body assemblage, and therefore makes me ponder about her notion of wholeness and what it means in this context. When reflecting on her own life and upbringing, she wrote about train tracks that served as a divider in her hometown separating where she and other minoritized people resided (the margins) and the affluent city where white people tended to live (the center). She wrote,

> Across those tracks was a world we could work in as *maids*, as *janitors*, as *prostitutes*, as long as it was in a service capacity. We could enter that world but we could not live there. We had always to return to the margin, to cross the tracks, to shacks and abandoned houses on the edge of town.
>
> There were laws to ensure our return. To not return was to risk being punished. Living as we did-on the edge-we developed a particular way of seeing reality. We looked both from the outside in and from the inside out. We focused our attention on the center as well as on the margin. We understood both. This mode of seeing reminded us of the existence of a whole universe, a main body made up of both margin and center. Our survival depended on an ongoing public awareness of the separation between margin and center and an ongoing private acknowledgment that we were a necessary, vital part of that whole.
>
> (hooks, 1984/2000, p. xvi; emphasis added)

hooks' articulation of the margins as part of a larger and whole universe is critical to understanding the why of it all. Sex workers, including on college campuses, make up part of the larger whole; this is to say, they are part of our communities, their lives and experiences matter, their desires and wishes are important, and their stories are worthy of being told. Hypermarginalized subjects are often keenly aware of systems of power and the actors within who exploit and manipulate the systems. As hooks (1984/2000) wrote, her survival depended upon an awareness of the separation but perhaps, more importantly, a private recognition that those in the margins are vital, to the whole. And, "I now argue our collective survival and potential to thrive is also dependent on the awareness of that separation, the impact of that separation, the implications of that separation, and our decision—or indecision—to act on it" (Stewart, 2021a, p. 12). Further, I want to work toward a world where hypermarginalized or multiply marginalized subjects get *public* embrace as vital parts of our collective whole. In the final pages of this book, I desire to center once more the seven collaborators who graciously gave of their time, their talent, and their treasure. I desire to offer a final word from each of them about their contexts, experiences, and potential paths forward, an attempt to engage in the praxis of whole-making. When I asked for a final thought during interviews here are some of their offerings. First, Maria reflected on visibility, stigma, and transactional sex, on campus.

> There's nothing that's really, open about it [sex work] on campus. I don't think that it's even a thought to people to realize there are sex workers here. But sex work exists. And I know I'm not the only one here. When it is talked about in conversations, all I hear is people talk about selling pussy or whatever, and they're were like, "oh, like I could

> never," but I mean you're fucking people that won't even buy you a meal, you know? I really don't care what people do in their personal lives, but when you hold that judgment of people having sex for money, and doing the same thing that they're doing, but not benefiting at all, it's weird that you think that you're better than other people.

Stokely reminded us that even when we think they are not there, sex workers are with us on campus, and what does it mean to discuss them as absent abstractions?

> Sometimes the topic of sex workers will come about in my program; it comes up every now and then because prostitution is a crime in most places. But even then, when sex work or sex workers are discussed, nobody talks about it as if they're students sex workers sitting in the classroom, *like that exact classroom*, when we're talking about it. And even then, very little time is focused on it [sex work], we don't spend time on it. We don't spend days on it, we don't read anything else about it.

Kemi suggested there are things we can do as we invite sex work(ers) into our respective work, and she urged us to disrupt harmful conflations and deficits.

> We need to distinguish between trafficking and sex work. Like fine do the "woman empowerment" thing of "don't get trafficked" but also do the other thing of like, if you're going to engage in sex work, this is the way that you can do so to avoid getting a pimp. This is what you can do to keep yourself safe. And so I think that like the school rhetoric was always around like these women are victims and it's like I wish they just talk about us like we're people and not hidden victims needing to be saved. That would've been supportive.

Further, Gui invited us to think about destigmatizing sex work on campus as a way to better ensure safety for college student sex workers.

> I think the school should be there, finding a way to make it safe for everybody. It doesn't matter what you do, no matter what your background, no matter what your profession is, and includes *all* professions. This is a campus, that we look towards everybody's safety no matter what. No judgment. Or even like amnesty for people who let's say have experienced sexual assault, but maybe they were doing something that's technically illegal or something like that, so students can come forward so they can resolve that safety issue.

Kathleen invited us to dispel inaccurate perceptions about the ease of sex work and to work against rhetoric about sex workers as failures, or material for jokes.

> It's not easy. None of it is, you know, even if you're just like camming or whatever, people think that all you do is just stand up and take off your clothes, that people throw money at you and it's so much more involved than that. So I think this idea that, oh well you can always become a stripper if you fail out or thinking strippers are fail outs or it's their last resort or things like that. It's like there are plenty of people who aren't failing out and do sex work. So I just never know what to say to that. And when confronted don't say, oh I was joking. It's like, okay. Every joke has some truth in it.

Maliah firmly seeks to hold campuses (especially her own) accountable for any potential pushback against the more visible presence of college student sex workers on campus.

> Let me just say this, there are literally white student unions at some of these campuses, so y'all better not, have no problems with, strippers, prostitutes, sex workers, sugar babies, anything. You shouldn't have a problem with what anyone is doing, you know what I'm saying? You all literally let extremists come on campus with big signs condemning all of us to hell and you protect them. You let them on our campus in our space. So, you know what I'm saying? You let them be, so as for us, you don't have a choice.

Finally, Tianna reflected back on the difference power-conscious, thoughtful, deficit-free research can make on the lives and experiences of the hypermarginalized, wishing to tell their stories.

> Being in this research project has definitely been freeing. It's been, I don't wanna say therapeutic because there wasn't a problem, but it feels therapeutic in a way that it just feels good to sort through things in your head by saying them aloud. As preparation for this, I sat down, I was on a long flight, and I sat down and just wrote down all my experiences because it's been like a year I have never told anyone this stuff. And so it took me a while to even remember all the things that had happened. So it was interesting to rehash that as well and to think about where I was when I made the decision to take up this kind of work and where I am now, to see like my internal growth and to see like how much more confident I am in myself and the things that I've done. Every time you mentioned confidentiality, I just keep thinking, you know, actually I don't think I care. When I was in college and I was really stressed about

> "how am I going to pay these bills," and "how am I going to maintain my reputation enough to create a stable life for myself."

She went on to offer,

> Now that I have a fairly stable life for myself, I'm like, okay, how can I help to break down walls for others? And would it be helpful for me to just be like [openly], fuck it, like I do this [engage in sex work]. Sometimes I engage sex work, we all have to survive. You know, people out there shouldn't feel bad for what they have to do to survive.
>
> (Stewart, 2021b, pp. 14–15)

These students are incredible, and their offerings are important. I invite readers to consider their words and stories and the ways they challenge education for the better and reflect on how educators and researchers might rise to the challenges they offer. I took on this work because I believe so deeply in liberation for all. When initially embarking on this research project, I worried so desperately about the safety and privacy of my study collaborators. I worried that some law enforcement person/agency, or anti-sex work advocacy group might have an ax to grind and work to dox my collaborators somehow, or—in the case of law enforcement—attempt through "legal" means to try and find out who they are and somehow punish all of us. Whether my paranoia was warranted or dramatic is inconsequential, but I mention it here to illustrate that this project showed me what it means to do important, radical—and in some ways—dangerous research. When I meditated on the concept of "danger" within the context of research inquiry, I thought about *Create Dangerously* by Edwidge Danticat (2011) she stated:

> Create dangerously for people who read dangerously. This is what I've always thought it meant to be a writer. Writing, knowing in part that no matter how trivial your words may seem, someday, somewhere, someone may risk his or her life to read them.
>
> (p.10)

I believe this project moved collaborators and me well beyond the bounds of the intellectual exercise to a praxis of radical, disruptive, and potentially—hopefully—liberation work. What would it mean for scholars to research dangerously? To stop asking the same questions and having the same conversations? What might it mean for practitioners to practice dangerously? How might we take on or share the risks associated with or experienced by the people we seek to help through our work in education, and beyond? I hope others might join me in pursuing radical and disruptive work because college student sex workers—like the collaborators in this study—want to

tell their stories, they want to be heard, and they want ethical researchers and practitioners to take their lead, and work *alongside* them—with them—on advocacy for sex worker rights and protection. Join us.

It is my hope that I have honored and adequately recognized the labor of the college student sex workers highlighted in this study, Maliah, Kathleen, Tianna, Stokely, Kemi, Gui, and Maria; from cover to cover, my desire was that their voices be centered. Their stories, woven throughout the book, illustrate the gravity and urgency of this topic, and I thank them for their trust in me, for trusting me to shepherd their stories. It is my hope that this book, *their book*, honors them, and opens new pathways, possibilities, and futures for sex work on campus.

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# Afterword

## By Raquel Savage

The day I graduated with my master's degree, I took my family to a restaurant that had been introduced to me by a trick. It felt emblematic in that I was celebrating somewhere I had spent many nights hustling to make that achievement possible. In the same way, I was reminded that this duality was kept, mostly, to myself as I shared this context neither with those at the table nor my classmates with whom I spent two years sharing space. I cried as I walked across the stage, considering the identities I occupied as I wore my cap and gown. I was *all* things, *as all sex workers are*.

I am the granddaughter of a revolutionary—my grandfather, a white man, was a Methodist minister in rural Maryland who married gay folks and advocated for female clergy in the church, well before that was considered "progressive" in that area. And my grandmother spent her time in the 50s and 60s teaching women about sex and helping them take back autonomy in what were otherwise likely unpleasurable circumstances. Together, they housed Black and brown folks during the civil rights era. Compassion and rebellion are in my blood. I've spent my life sharpening my principles and holding steadfast in what I consider justice. Consistently naming, sometimes screaming, what's unfair and attempting to find a way to make it right, even when I have little agency in doing so. During undergrad, I attended a historically all-girls, catholic, private school—being a Black, queer woman on that campus felt wrong. The first week someone wrote "nigger" on the elevator in black permanent marker. And, so started my disobedience on campus.

After complaining, they pulled me into the hiring process for a multicultural director and used me as a token to gain knowledge on what was missing from campus. In my second semester, I started the first-ever queer organization, much to their dismay. They wanted "diversity and inclusion" aka Black folks and wheelchair-users on their brochures, not actual queers running around with rainbow flags. When I printed "I<3 my vagina" shirts for the vagina monologues I organized, the student activities director and dean pulled me into their office, reprimanded me, and told me they were disposing of the "inappropriate" shirts. I crossed my arms. I rolled my eyes. I told them they were wrong. Bigots. This was my punishment for being exactly who they asked me to be but I'd gone outside the bounds of what

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was acceptable for a minority. Instead of selling the T-shirts, I wore fishnets to the event. And, subsequently, when we planned the Queer Prom, I wore pleasers. They would not erase me.

Naturally, and intentionally, I disrupt every space I enter. Even when I'm scared. That has always been my practice even if there's something to lose. For graduate school I, again, attended a historically private, Catholic school to become a therapist (I'm not Catholic, I don't know why I kept choosing those schools lol). It was "diverse" on its brochures but had a clear campus culture of bigotry. In one of my first counseling classes, students asked contrarian questions about working with gay and lesbian clients. Another student spoke at length about the "proper" role for women in any given family dynamic. These conversations were allowed in the spirit of "learning" or "accepting everyone's opinions." At this time, I was three years into sex work. It had carried me through during impossible times and felt deeply rooted as an identity.

But along with my identity as a queer person, it became clear that talking about my job from the perspective of occupying it was not an option. Certainly, I am not obligated to announce myself in any given space but showing up, fully, is always my goal. Instead, I spent those two years casually mentioning Blackness, queerness, womanist principles, and sex work, from the perspective of challenging folks. While I couldn't explicitly name my proximity to some of those identities, I refused to never mention them at all. Recognizing that you need to keep parts of your identity hidden for your safety quickly becomes detrimental to your well-being, academic, or otherwise, but I didn't want to risk losing the degree entirely. Academic spaces are a specific kind of violent, where it's open season to debate the topic of people's humanity and easy to weaponize "the ways in which" because it's positioned as "nuanced."

Race was discussed often as it's the poster child for being considered "progressive." But, unlike Blackness, sex work was simply ignored altogether. It was nowhere in any of our literature, in any of our classes. We did not exist. The only time the sex industry was mentioned was during my second year, Crisis Intervention. When I skimmed the syllabus, I noticed porn and prostitution would be discussed alongside the topic of rape and sexual assault—there was already a connotation. A speaker from Kristi House would be joining us for that discussion, as well. Upon googling, I learned they were an organization in Miami whose motto went like this: "our goal is to eradicate child abuse and child sex trafficking—working nationally on solutions, and locally to heal child-victims." Christ.

When the day arrived, just as you suspect, the speaker admonished sex work and stated porn informs child sex trafficking. She conflated sex work and sex trafficking, supported criminalization, and didn't have the wherewithal to discuss the nuances of why lots of people are in the sex industry in the first place. There was no room for a conversation about systems of oppression or the concept of choice, circumstance, or coercion. I raised my

hand and began to question her presentation and politics, naming that criminalization further harms trafficking victims and that her porn-to-trafficking pipeline politic was propaganda. She quickly realized she didn't have the sticks and my professor asked us to move on.

Beyond her presentation being patently false and harmful, the assumption was, and always is, that there are no sex workers in the room. I did not exist at that moment because we were in a classroom of future therapists at the graduate level, with no place for a sex worker. I wanted so badly to reveal myself out of spite but ultimately decided against it as to not ruin my chances of graduation. It was then that I decided that my work as a therapist would revolve almost exclusively around the needs of sex workers. Providing safe and anti-oppressive care to my people because no one else in that room would.

Days later as I was leaving class an undergrad student stopped me, asking "aren't you Raquel Savage!? Oh my god I love your podcast." She mentioned how she'd seen videos of me on yachts, twerking, and my tweets about selling pussy to NFL players—my favorite genre of tweets. The same room where I was felt to be ashamed and hide my identity as a sex worker became the same place I was recognized for my work as one.

Years into my private therapy practice, I recognize over and over how sex workers are denied access and agency. How we're placed in containers with labels and limitations. How folks either glamorize or feign disgust—both equally dehumanizing. How therapy clients who are sex workers name that they've never been able to talk about their jobs—or their peripheral experiences—without therapists asking them when they plan to transition out or positioning them as victims. Instead, my therapy clients and I chat about their favorite tricks and feelings of pride from sucking dick for money. I get to remind them that they are powerful and experts in their own lives. And that they get to have complex feelings about their work, identity, their co-workers, the state, whatever. That it may be true that they are (or have been) exploited and that they can still feel neutral or happy about the work they do. Because all labor under capitalism is exploitative and their experiences as a massage worker or stripper deserve both gentleness and care, and a reminder that bank tellers, teachers, and corporate workers hate their fucking jobs, too.

And now when I facilitate lectures with grad and PhD students who wish to become counselors, I'm often the first person in their programs to ever mention sex work. Most of them only know sex work as Liam Neeson's *Taken* or City Girl's lyrics -no in between- and have no idea how to make sense of that to be competent enough to care for therapy clients navigating sex work. So, we discuss what it might be like for them to actually think of sex workers as people and what a treatment plan might look like for whatever their presenting concern is, moving away from the assumption that it'll be sex work. That there's nuance in sex working and that their responsibility is to know that like the back of their hand if they intend on offering

competent care. I teach them about whorephobia, capitalism, transphobia, ableism, and other systemic barriers that inform labor, generally, and sex work, as well. To recognize that sex workers, the people, ought not to be eradicated, rather that the systems, like less access to housing, criminalization, food and job insecurity, borders, etc., need to be burnt the fuck down. When they ask about mandated reporting, god forbid one of their future "child" clients is "prostituted," I remind them that they are agents of the state and if they intend to be accomplices to people on the margins, sex workers or otherwise, they'll have to move away from any practices that involve the police. Sometimes, I ask if they know any sex workers personally and remind them that if no one has disclosed that part of themselves, it's likely they have not done the work to make it safe to do so.

I spend many nights chatting with other sex workers about how we can organize to make our communities safer for us. What it would take to build a world where all of our basic needs are met, allowing us to navigate life differently. Dreaming about ideal clients who cum quick, don't talk too much, and tip us triple just because. It's entirely possible for this world to exist and, within pockets of our communities, it already does because we've made it so. *What have you done*? If you're a civie reading this, find something tangible to do to disrupt the system and level the playing field. Recognize where you carry your whorephobia and actively remove that shit. Stop calling yourself a "hoe" as a term of endearment if you feel disgusted when you think about street-based sex workers. Unpack your transphobia and be reminded that Black trans women sex workers are the blueprint and set every single trend you currently follow. Go make a sex worker a meal, babysit their kid, pay their rent. Demand sex workers have a seat at the table in every professional space you occupy and make sure you negotiate a high consulting fee for them. Ask your professors to make books written by sex workers or about sex work required reading. Second guess your research if the people you're researching aren't leading, directly reflected in, and compensated for their labor. Use your body as a shield to protect sex workers on the ground who are fighting violent policies in your state. **Do something.**

And if you're a sex worker reading this, hi, my love. I see you. You're everything. Always get the money upfront and remember, you're not alone. I hope your week is lucrative, babes.

# Epilogue

As I reflect on my experience conducting this research and what has followed in the years since, I am both exhausted at all there still is to do and also inspired that I am not alone in the work. I think about my dissertation committee who pushed me—even up to and after the final defense—to go further, deeper, and more radical in the work. I think about my dissertation chair, who, when I presented this topic and a different "safer" topic option, *immediately* encouraged me to pursue this one. I am in awe that so much of my doctoral and dissertation experience was an exception to what is often the violent experiences that doctoral students with minoritized identities face; and for that, I am grateful.

In the same breath, I am exhausted because I have felt discouraged given the attendant stigma I perceived from others in relation to this work. To be clear, what I experienced pales in comparison to that of my collaborators and sex workers in society broadly, and I do not suggest I was/am stigmatized; but like other scholars, I have found there is resistance to this work, and it is unsettling. These experiences were important and necessary to help me get closer to understanding the gravity of collaborators' realities. For example, one association that offers research grants for the study of college students replied to my proposal submission with the following rejection:

> The committee greatly appreciated your proposal pushing the edges of existing research, while also exploring a population that is quite vulnerable and (we perceive to be) hidden within higher education. Your proposal is the most creative proposal put before the committee in some time, and it resulted in a robust discussion among the entire committee.
>
> In considering your proposal, the committee expressed some concerns how participants would be recruited for this study, given the extremely vulnerable nature of this population. Additionally, the committee would have appreciated some insight into how this is a significant issue in higher education. Also, the committee was a bit unsure, within the proposal, the overall aim of the study. Was it in terms of these individual's identity? How they interface with campus resources?

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> The nature of their interaction with the campus? A bit of clarity on this point would have been welcome by the committee.

It is odd, to me, that a proposal that was the most creative in "some time" and also pushing the edges of existing research was not funded, for reasons that read, to me, as mere excuses. I do not believe I was unclear in my articulation, clarity, or framing of the research purpose and its importance to higher education. I *do* believe the decision-makers were worried about the optics of the potential (very) public conferring of the grant to me—and having to announce the topic—at the conference luncheon. I applied for this particular grant to help fund the collaborator incentives as it was important to me that I honor their labor beyond the typical "chance at a $25 gift card to Amazon" as is typical in research studies. I paid them out of my own pocket, but thankfully, I was awarded some funding by the Commission for Professional Preparation of ACPA–College Student Educators International, who saw the critical value in this undertaking.

In addition to this example, I think about the many raised eyebrows, concerned tones, and confused faces that I witnessed when I revealed to inquisitive minds what I and my collaborators were working on. I think about my long process—though it felt more like a battle—with the Institutional Review Board (IRB). While I knew going into this project that IRB would be a nightmare, at the same time sources confirmed to me that my IRB process was longer than nearly every other scholar in my program, even for a full review. I kept wondering if perhaps someone, somewhere, was trying to figure out how to deny my request or hold it up long enough so that I would give up and choose another topic. I will also never forget receiving confidential knowledge that one of my peer-reviewed journal submissions received a rejection from an editor against the recommendations of my reviewers, of which there are few interpretations that are plausible for such a choice, and at the top of the list in my view is whorephobia and moral objection. I was, and still remain, unapologetic about this work, advocacy for sex workers, and power-conscious and collaborative approaches to research. And, I will remember every single time I felt "judged" by someone who did not seem to understand why this work was important, including, those who profess to value equity, justice, and truth. I will remember every obstacle that materialized throughout this process, and I will not soon forget them.

I hope others might join me in pursuing radical and disruptive work about college student sex workers. College student sex workers—like the collaborators in this study—want to tell their stories, they want to be heard, and they want ethical researchers to take up projects like these to further the work and advocacy for sex workers' rights. Before beginning this inquiry, I was unsure if any collaborators would join me on this project. However, 24-hours after my initial call went out, I had a total of 17 college student sex workers interested in the study. By the time I closed the call, there were nearly 30.

As you have just read, I had a total of seven collaborators who decided to participate. One reason for the lower number is that I wanted to model an ethical praxis of consent. Therefore, after my second attempt to reach potential collaborators (with no response) I stopped contacting them. I chose to do this because I did not believe a potential collaborator needed to answer their phone to tell me they were no longer interested, for me to assume they were no longer interested. Lack of a "no" does not mean yes. Perhaps, they changed their mind, got cold feet, or got scared. Speaking to a researcher with whom you've never met—about a sensitive subject—is hard, and I understand that. At the same time, I wonder if I had a research team, and was able to follow up sooner with folks, more students would have followed up with me. In any case, I look forward to furthering this work and continuing to develop research projects that college student sex workers can join and feel how the collaborators in this study felt after doing so.

Finally, I am reminded that I have always loved endings more than beginnings. Movies, books, relationships, most things in life; I always love the ending. I like the clarity that endings provide, that "hindsight is 20/20," and that more than anything, the reality of the journey cannot be disputed; the journey was the journey, and we cannot change what it was, though we can change how we perceive it or perhaps how we feel about it. However, in this instance, I think it is important to go back to the beginning to conclude this ending to reflect on how I came to this topic, college student sex workers.

Throughout the research, I experienced multiple moments of "should I be doing this?," "was/is this the right choice/?," and my belief was that I would know for sure at the end, as writing, if nothing else, makes clear its purpose, impact, and import—for better or worse, at the end. I think about that conversation with my classmate as I was deciding on a dissertation topic six years ago. She asked, "What matters to you most right now?" I answered then "Sex work. College students and sex work." That would still be my answer today and I am proud of the work collaborators and I have done together. In research, we read, we write, we rewrite, we receive feedback, and write some more; it is a relentless cyclical process that feels unending. Through our working and reworking of our research and writing, the needle on our compass, our practical and proverbial direction, might shift (and it probably should shift if we are doing "it" right). Occasionally, however, we get the fortunate chance of being on the right track—in the beginning—and we find that the beginning and the ending are not that different at all, and I think this is one such case. In some instances, the ending puts you right back at the beginning, but this time, older, wiser, more informed, and better equipped to do it again (and again and again), and I think this is one such case. Sometimes, the ending is truly just the beginning, and this time, that *is* the case.

# Appendix
## Data analysis

Part of the benefit of book projects is they provide an opportunity for more context and space to "breathe" in the writing to explain certain aspects or approaches, especially to the research process. I felt it was important to offer a detailed explanation of how I engaged the analysis process because journal articles often limit the amount of detail that might be useful to emerging and established scholars alike. Before sharing a bit of information, with corresponding examples, about how I engaged data analysis within this study, I do want to offer a few caveats.

First, qualitative research is an iterative process and as such, since my analysis at the time of initial study and dissertation publication, I have gone back to examine and reanalyze data specifically as I sought to publish research findings. As such there may seem to be minor contradictions in articulations from my dissertation versus published research. Where and when that occurs, it was usually the case that I reanalyzed data for a particular manuscript, usually in tandem with introducing new frameworks. For example, in Stewart (2021a) I introduce institutional betrayal as a framework in tandem with the polymorphous paradigm, the former of which was not part of my dissertation analysis process. As such there are slight differences with how I approach(ed) or interpret(ed) data analysis in that manuscript. Journal articles are meant to, and should, stand on their own apart from other published works—even when from the same or similar study—though they are always in conversation.

Second, there may be minor differences in particular details, across published writing from this study that I would like to explain. For example, I use Woodcock's (2016) coding method in different ways across the life of this study and writing projects. Specifically, the method was part of an overall data analysis strategy for Stewart (2021a) but was the *primary* strategy for Stewart (in press). While the *findings* are not different, I use different *colors* for certain codes in that analysis process versus in my dissertation. So, in one article I may mention "violence/challenges" was colored one way (red—dissertation); however, in published peer-reviewed writing, I may say it was coded in another way (blue—Stewart, 2021a, in press). These moments are

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pointing to re-color-coding of which I used different colors, though in both instances color selection was arbitrary.

Finally, color-coding processes intentionally varied between interview data and artifacts. For example, in Chapter 4, I completed color-coding as part of this book project but was not completed as part of the dissertation project because my initial intention was to *not* analyze them. That initial choice was connected to my embrace of certain principles in relation to collaboration, voice, and mitigating power (see Stewart, 2021b) that I have since refined and clarified. As such the codes and colors of the collaborator letters have no connection to the color-coding of collaborator research interviews. Keeping all of this in mind, I wanted to outline the Listening Guide method with an example passage and how I engaged analysis prior to overlaying Woodcock's color-coding method.

## The Listening Guide

I completed my data analysis through a process known as The Listening Guide (Brown & Gilligan, 1992; Gilligan, 2015; Gilligan et al., 2006; Taylor et al., 1995; Tolman, 2002; Way, 1998), to analyze the interviews. The process is grounded in feminist, qualitative, relational, and participant-centered values/approaches and is a strong choice for research that is concerned with stories. This approach also requires an embrace of the ties between researchers and participants in knowledge co-construction, that is, it is an overarching assumption of research processes and outcomes (Petrovic et al., 2015; Woodcock, 2016). Four phases comprise this analysis process, also termed "listenings," including listening for the plot, listening for the "I," listening for contrapuntal voices, and composing the analysis (Brown & Gilligan, 1992; Gilligan & Eddy, 2017; Woodcock, 2010). The term listening refers to the process of a researcher listening to the audio of research interviews in tandem with reading and notation of interview transcripts, simultaneously. This is a critical consideration when designing studies that use this interview process as it will inform IRB applications. As such, researchers must keep audio recordings of interviews until the analysis is complete, whereas in other forms of qualitative research they may be destroyed before one even begins data analysis.

### *Listening for the plot*

The first listening helps the researcher understand the overall scope, arc, and plot of the story. The researcher should listen for,

> who is present, is anyone missing, what are the major and minor themes, are there emotional hotspots, salient images or metaphors, what stories are told, are there gaps or ruptures in the narrative, and

> also what is the researcher's response to being on this landscape with this person?
>
> (Gilligan & Eddy, 2017, p. 78)

The researcher must attend to *specific* and *descriptive* details to use the collaborators' words and to refrain from any analysis or interpretation, yet (Gilligan & Eddy, 2017). I decided to select a brief passage from Kemi's interview transcripts to illustrate each of these listenings and how I applied them. Below is how I understood the plot of one of her stories.

> So, after it was done he[2] said, "Thank you, I enjoyed myself." And I[1] said, "Okay bye, it was really sweet. [You're such a sweetheart.]" I was really nice to him and waited in the car with him while he paypal'd me the rest of the money[B]. I got out of the car, went upstairs, and immediately called my homegirl[3], [I was geeking[A]. I was laughing, cracking up because something about it was so exciting[A].] I was so proud[A] of myself. I was so proud[A] of myself. I wanted money[B], I needed money[B] and I got money[B], and I used sex to get money[B]. So, I was so happy[A] I used sex to get money[B].

The passage above highlights three example aspects that I attended to during listening for the plot including who is present, emotional hotspots, and major/minor themes. In this passage, I noted there were three people part of the story/plot: Kemi (hyperscript 1), her best friend (hyperscript 2), and her client (hyperscript 3). The interaction of these individuals with Kemi revealed her state of mind and how she navigated this experience, presenting different versions/faces of herself: service provider to the client as his confidant and then a friend to her best friend who serves as *her* confidant in these separate moments.

As for major and minor themes, the major theme is about a self-actualizing moment where Kemi proves to herself that she is able to survive, and she is proud of that. Her survival in this case related to money, which operates as a minor theme. Though money is repeated several times, it is a minor theme because while it is the object of her want, need, and ultimate procurement (underlined in the passage), the repetitiveness is related to her excitement about *her* being able to achieve something. Something that had eluded her and put her in a position that felt dangerous. This passage opens up by her revelation of how "sweet" her client was, and it illuminated a level of relief, given how bad the meeting could have gone. I identified two emotional hotspots for this part of the story which informed consequent listenings, and those hot spots are contained within brackets above.

### *Listening for the "I"*

The second listening allows a researcher to focus on the first-person voice in relation to the research inquiry. Specifically, the researcher's focus should

be on trying to understand how participants talk about themselves in relation to the research questions/purpose and in any given psychological or sociological contexts (Gilligan & Eddy, 2017). To engage this process, the researcher should construct "I" poems which involves the following steps: "(1) highlight every I phrase within a given passage, (2) record these phrases in order of their appearance in the passage" (Gilligan & Eddy, 2017, p. 78). The benefit of this listening and this strategy is that it provides a consistent, structural, and methodical means to understand the first-person voice within the broader context of stories. Using the same passage as above, below is the "I" poem that I constructed during the second listening of Kemi's story, which I follow with explanations of my interpretations of the listening and what it adds in relation to the first.

I said
I was (really nice to him)
I got (out of the car)
I was (geeking)
I was (laughing)
I was (so proud)
I was (so proud)
I wanted (money)
I needed (money)
I got (money)
I used (sex)
I was (so happy)
I used (sex to get money)

In the example of the poem above, the initial theme that jumps out is that Kemi speaks about herself in relation to the past, which should not be surprising because she is telling a story. I then controlled for tense to look deeper. For me, this poem is more about how Kemi experienced joy and fulfillment as a result of her being able to get something that she wanted and needed. The story is not only about getting the money but what she *feels* as a result of her being able to get it by and for herself. She sees herself in control and as having agency over her circumstances at this moment.

### *Listening for contrapuntal voices*

The third listening provides the researcher the opportunity to attend to vocal and contextual points and counterpoints within the story. Focusing less on the plot or building blocks of the story itself, this listening is about the sonic quality of the story and how participants deliver them, as one listens for "different voices and their interplay, or harmonies or dissonances within the psyche, tensions with parts of itself" (Gilligan & Eddy, 2017, p. 79). Researchers should be descriptive and specific in their notetaking,

for example, is the voice "angry" raw, loud, and/or unpolished? Is the voice vulnerable, soft, muffled with phrases that trail off, or is there nervousness in the voice? (Gilligan & Eddy, 2017). Taking the same passage as before and adding notation for contrapuntal voices I found the following in this part of Kemi's story:

> So, after it was done he[2] said, "Thank you, I enjoyed myself." And I[1] said, ["Okay bye, it was really sweet. You're such a sweetheart."] [*a kind soft tone, really reminiscent, honest, earnest, really relieved*] I was really nice to him and waited in the car with him while he paypal'd me the rest of the money. [I got out of the car, went upstairs, and immediately called my homegirl[3], I was geeking[A]. I was laughing, cracking up because something about it was so exciting[A]. I was so proud[A] of myself. I was so proud[A] of myself.][*highly energetic, hasty, and exciting tone as if she couldn't WAIT to get up those stairs to talk to her friend*] [I wanted money[B], I needed money[B] and I got money[B], and I used sex to get money[B]. So, I was so happy[A] I used sex to get money[B].] [*inspired tone, proud nostalgic moment, rhythmic cadence of the similar statements about wanting, needing, and getting money; as if thinking back lovingly on the moment*]

In the passage above, I included a block of text, and after each statement, I bracketed and italicized my notes of the third listening. Specifically, the notes reveal how I listened for contrapuntal voices and not what Kemi said but *how* she said what she said. This part of her story was a proud memory for her, bore out of circumstances that—at the time—felt hopeless. Her ending tone is in direct contrast with the initial setting up of the story—consider her memoir *A Small Jump* for comparison—which was frustrated and bleak.

### *Composing an analysis*

Each of the phases had multiple rounds of listening to ensure I became saturated in the data and as part of the process of strengthening the analysis (Gilligan & Eddy, 2017; Woodcock, 2010). After completing a total of 42 initial listenings, which were 14 interviews from 7 participants—who each had two interviews—I began developing themes. My analysis of the listenings allowed me to recognized patterns related to collaborator experiences specifically as they interrelated with social identity and learning and within the context of intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1991). For example, Kemi identifies herself as fat and a dark(er)-skinned queer woman. Part of her excitement in the above passage was connected to the reality that the way she, versus skinny white women, navigate sex work is markedly different. She mentioned that she would find the rates of white sex workers and then cut hers in half so that she could find clients because her sex work was

not valued the same way (see Stewart, in press). So, my analysis of the plot readings in tandem with an intersectional lens (the multiplicative nature of power, dominance, and in this instance, desire) further contextualize Kemi's recounting this story in a triumphant and nostalgic tone. Her tone and story revealed how her fat, Black, queer body was able to procure her survival, a survival she is not supposed to be able to achieve at all, let alone in that way.

Across each listening, I focused on the interview audio and transcript that I was analyzing at any given moment, in addition to the previous listenings I conducted. For example, I made note of connections and divergences across narratives (of other collaborators) or within a single narrative where certain conflicting themes collided, for example, the challenges of sex work versus the joys of sex work. After each listening, the colors and markings become more complex, but connections become clearer. For example, by the third listening, there can be—and in my case, there often was—overlap across color codes and the themes I recognized in the narratives. This phenomenon is illustrative of the analysis method,

> A key feature of these two listenings is to extract [two] themes of the narrative that melodiously react with one another or that are in tension with each other (Raider-Roth, 2000, p. 50; as cited in Woodcock, 2016) … The crucial aspect is to look at these two themes as being in relation to one another. Referring back to color-coded themes, one may see that colors tend to overlap at particular places. This harmony of color flashes a tangible sign that those overlying colors are the badge of a contrapuntal point for analysis and exploration.
>
> (Woodcock, 2010b as cited in Woodcock, 2016, p. 6)

An example of this was in collaborator stories when they spoke about violence. There was often overlap between that color and a subsequent discussion of how the violence and difficulty helped them develop a greater sense of self, how to protect/advocate for themselves, and having more confidence in their voice. While both those themes show up in findings separately, the color-coding process shows those findings are in a relationship with each other and I believe confirmation of the appropriateness of the polymorphous paradigm as a framework (Weitzer, 2010). Given that collaborators share that sex work has difficult aspects, they still find that engaging in sex work has pushed them to develop multiple layers of confidence and an unapologetic ethic of protection (of themselves) and survival.

Hopefully this appendix makes clear how robust the Listening Guide was/is as evidenced by how so much can be unearthed by such a short passage when a researcher revisits and relistens for different aspects of the same story. It is my wish that others who seek to engage in this analysis process find the detailed examples in this appendix a valuable resource.

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