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Sex, Work, and the Feminist Erasure of Class

On Mother's Day 1973, with a \$5,000 grant from the Glide Methodist Church in San Francisco, Margo St. James founded COYOTE (Call Off Your Old Tired Ethics), which remains to this day one of the United States' most active and vocal sex worker rights organizations.¹ Money raised from the organization's first fund-raiser that year helped launch the first of a succession of infamous Hookers' Balls (St. James 1980, 200–201). Convinced by San Francisco sheriff Richard Hongisto that if "someone from the victim class" spoke out, the National Organization for Women and gay rights organizations would get behind the sex worker rights movement, St. James decided to go public with her experience as a prostitute (St. James n.d.).² Making common cause with anthropology professor Jennifer James—who coined the term "decriminalization"—St. James and COYOTE succeeded in securing NOW's endorsement of decriminalization and, further, formed an alliance with the organization for the purpose of fighting for the Equal Rights Amendment (St. James 1980, 200–201).

But by 1985 St. James had moved to Europe, citing as her reason "the conservative swing in the US and the women's movement" (n.d.). Despite a brief window of time during which the US women's movement extended its reach to encompass the voices and choices of sex workers, by the mid-eighties guards had gone up and gates had come down. Not coincidentally, it was during this same period that feminism made way for queer theory—which many date to the now-infamous 1982 Barnard Conference at which Gayle Rubin first presented "Thinking Sex: Notes for a Radical Theory of the Politics of Sexuality" (1984) in response to the radical feminism (more or less contemporaneously) launched by Catharine MacKinnon. The advent of queer theory radically troubled feminist politics' privileging of the ontological (rather than epistemological) status of "woman," which had been remarkably unchallenged up to that point. Queer theory wanted to

I would like to thank Kelley Walker at Mighty Quare Dewd for the inspiration to write this piece.

¹ WHO (Whores, Housewives, and Others—"others" here referring to lesbians) was COYOTE's forerunner.

² Carol Leigh (aka Scarlot Harlot) coined the term "sex work" in 1978 (see Leigh 1997); hence the semantic tension in a project such as this one, which spans the period before and after the neologism's uptake by sex worker rights' groups.

know less about normative sex, gender, and sexuality in their present incarnations and more about the many and varied permutations of nonnormative sex, gender, and sexuality as they had always been or could be. Thereafter, a certain stripe of feminist politics, one steadfast in its commitment to an engagement with sex, gender, and sexuality *as is*, needed a *raison d'être* around which to rally in the face of queer theory's epistemological interrogations. Things might have been different yesterday, and they might be different tomorrow, but today (this politics argues) women are oppressed first and foremost because they are women. And as MacKinnon has passionately insisted, feminist politics must rage against this oppression—rather than rage against the categorical coherence of “woman” itself. Methodological approaches aside, for radical feminists—as ontologically oriented feminists came to be known—sexual revolution consists in overthrowing patriarchy.

Prostitution surfaced in this period as an especially worthy rallying cause for radical feminism; in the eyes of radical feminists, prostitutes were victims of patriarchy par excellence. For them, as Evelina Giobbe writes, “The prostitute symbolizes the value of women in society. She is paradigmatic of women's social, sexual, and economic subordination, in that her status is the basic unit by which all women's value is measured and to which all women can be reduced” (1990, 77). Instrumental to the rise of prostitution as the measure of woman, I would argue, was the way in which Rubin and MacKinnon persuasively and heavy-handedly translated Marxism into feminism. In the process, they wrote out and wrote over class as a theory of privilege and oppression—as a dynamic, antagonistic relation between labor and capital that is always already a social relation under capitalism, structuring and being structured by other forms of privilege and oppression that need not necessarily be ranked in order to be considered (Allman, McLaren, and Rikowski 2005).³ Inasmuch as both theorists not only turned away from Karl Marx but turned on him as well, feminism was dramatically declassified—much to the detriment of those struggling under the weight of not only capitalism and patriarchy but also sexual apartheid.⁴ And in

³ Shannon Bell makes a similar argument, albeit in a different way. Isolating MacKinnon's role in this struggle, Bell argues that MacKinnon “superimposes her theory over Marx's primary concepts” (1994, 80). Rubin escapes critique entirely in Bell's analysis. Rosemary Hennessy rises to this occasion in her later *Profit and Pleasure: Sexual Identities in Late Capitalism* (2000). However, Hennessy does not mention MacKinnon or broach the subject of sex work, focusing instead on the lesbian (179–89).

⁴ I use the term “declassified” to suggest that in the wake of this theoretical move, feminism was, broadly speaking, significantly less concerned with historical/dialectical materialism and the class constitution of sex, gender, and most especially, sexuality.

keeping with Nancy Fraser's recent work on the coarticulation of late capitalism and second-wave feminism (2009), this declassification of feminism has worked hand in glove with the popular uptake of neoliberal free-market ideologies, which have for some time now championed the promotion of (some) women's cultural inclusion at the expense of (many) women's economic exclusion—giving rise to today's seeming paradox wherein some women and girls proudly wear “Girls Rule” shirts made by other women and girls in sweatshops (Klein 2001).

In large part, this essay seeks to answer the question Wendy McElroy poses in her 1999 “Prostitution: Reconsidering Research”: “If the feminist stance on prostitution was based on observable fact, how could the same act be liberating in the mid-seventies and enslaving a decade later?” More specifically, I seek to scrutinize the fallout of a period characterized by Siobhan Brooks as one in which “mainstream, white, middle-class feminists of the 1960s and 1970s dominated the discussions on feminism and defined the feminist issues of the era. As a result, sex work was primarily viewed as something that objectified and dehumanized women” (1999, 181). I subject this period to close scrutiny also in the interest of defusing the present-day political minefield on this topic—wherein “the public discussion on prostitution has become an ideological brawl in which both sides bend research to promote political agendas and to slander opponents” (McElroy 1999).

To this end, I trace the contemporary feminist debate on prostitution to the period in which Rubin and MacKinnon deemed Marxism inadequate to the task of theorizing women's oppression. In seeking to surmount this perceived inadequacy, both thinkers counterposed alternative theoretical frameworks for analyzing women's oppression that nonetheless relied upon certain central tenets of Marxism. In a reliance that took the form of strikingly similar translations of Marxism into what came to be known as radical feminism (in the case of MacKinnon) and queer theory (in the case of Rubin), both theorists problematically render class as, respectively, gender and heterosexuality. And while these translations have launched many a powerful critique of patriarchy and heteronormativity, they structurally foreclose the possibility of their adherents' comprehension of sex work as a site of “the metamorphosis of the commodity itself,” wherein Marx located “the most abstract form of crisis” under capitalism ([1861–63] 1969, 507–10).

Thus, while a genealogy of second-wave feminism reveals Marxism to be a foundational theoretical pillar, it is a pillar of salt inasmuch as the way in which feminism looks back at Marxism—vis-à-vis Rubin and MacKinnon—prevents the two movements from working together to analyze and overcome

women's oppression under late capitalism. Grounding its relationship to Marxism in the logic of analogy, rather than, say, contiguity, feminism loses a certain ability to think gender, sexuality, and class together.⁵ As a site of the metamorphosis of the commodity, sex work is critical to an analysis of the lived intersectionality of capitalism and patriarchy in individual and collective lives. Missing this analysis, feminists typically frame their discussions of sex work—including those that are ostensibly pro-sex worker—in terms of gender and sexuality rather than class. I argue that this flattening of sex work—predicated upon MacKinnon's and Rubin's translation of class as identity rather than as a dynamic, antagonistic relation between capital and labor—has facilitated feminism's and queer theory's unwitting complicity with capitalism, manifested in a lack of attention to women's privilege and oppression not as women and sexual minorities per se but as workers, commodities, and even capitalists. Absent Marx's conceptualization of class as a dynamic relation under capitalism, feminists writing about sex work in the wake of MacKinnon and Rubin generally fail to distinguish between woman-as-laborer and sex as "the particular product of individual labor" (Marx [1861–63] 1969, 509). Instead, feminists tend to conflate the two, everywhere seeing prostitutes as victims who always happen to be women (or girls) but never workers.

In contrast, I seek to excavate the intersectional, agentic subject of sex work from beneath the ideological brawl that has for decades dominated all discussion of prostitution. I am not proposing that feminism's attention to gender and queer theory's attention to sexuality are anything less than indispensable to critical consciousness-raising about sex and work, both within and beyond the sex industry. But I am proposing that these are not sufficient—moreover, that they produce engagements with sex work that are sadly, tragically "misguided, dangerous and wrong"—when they stymie critical consciousness of sex work as a specific relation under capitalism.⁶ I seek to heed Marx's injunction to mark the crucial difference between the labor involved in production for direct consumption and the labor involved in production for commodity exchange under capitalism. If we mark this difference as specific to the labor involved in the production of sex, privilege and oppression—which have nothing to do with the sex of prostitution per se but rather with labor's relation to the means of production under the political economy of capitalism—become visible. Understood in this way, sex work lifts the mask covering the extraction of surplus value from all

⁵ For more on the pitfalls of analogy, see Joseph (2002).

⁶ "Misguided, Dangerous and Wrong" is the title of testimony submitted by Rubin to a 1986 hearing on pornography by the National Organization for Women; see Rubin (1993).

laboring bodies, thereby denaturalizing the gendered and sexualized tensions and inconsistencies that remain irresolvable under capitalism.

Whose Marx? (I): Gayle Rubin's post-Marxism

In 1975, Rubin published "The Traffic in Women: Notes on the 'Political Economy' of Sex," wherein she seeks to explain sexual inequality. She prefaces her essay with the caveat that "it lies outside the scope of this paper to conduct a sustained critique of some of the currently popular explanations of the genesis of sexual inequality," among which number "the attempt to extract all of the phenomena of social subordination from the first volume of *Capital*" (Rubin 1975, 158). Rather, Rubin wants to "sketch some elements of an alternate explanation of the problem [of sexual inequality]" (158). Immediately following this caveat, however, Rubin herself turns to Marx. Quoting Marx's 1847 *Wage-Labor and Capital*, Rubin frames her alternate explanation of the problem of sexual inequality: "Marx once asked: 'What is a Negro slave? A man of the black race. The one explanation is as good as the other. A Negro is a Negro. He only becomes a slave in certain relations. A cotton spinning jenny is a machine for spinning cotton. It becomes capital only in certain relations. Torn from these relationships it is no more capital than gold itself is money or sugar is the price of sugar'" (158). That Rubin takes sexual inequality to be a "phenomen[on] of social subordination" (rather than a phenomenon of, say, biology) becomes clear with her paraphrased interpretation of Marx's question: "What is a domesticated woman? A female of the species. The one explanation is as good as the other. A woman is a woman. She only becomes a domestic, a wife, a chattel, a playboy bunny, a prostitute, or a human dictaphone in certain relations. Torn from these relationships, she is no more the helpmate of man than gold in itself is money . . . etc." (158). With this translation of Marx, Rubin reveals the theoretical cards with which she will play out her alternate explanation of the problem of sexual inequality: first, sexual difference precedes sexual subordination (the species is sexed male and female before it is gendered, or "domesticated," woman and man); second, gender subordination (but not sexual difference) is the consequence of "certain relations"; and finally, these "certain relations" are social but not necessarily economic.

While Marx's question homes in on the metamorphosis of the commodity under capitalism, whereby the black man "becomes" a slave, the spinning jenny "becomes" capital, gold "becomes" money, and sugar "becomes" its price, Rubin's question homes in on the transformation of the woman into various incarnations of the helpmate of man. In other words,

Rubin's paraphrase elides Marx's enumeration of the equivalent metamorphoses of the black man, the spinning jenny, gold, and sugar into commodities. Thus, where for Marx it is specifically the "certain relations" of capitalism that transform material objects (including human beings) into commodities, Rubin's heretofore unspecified certain relations transform human beings (who for her happen to already be women) into the domesticated helpmates of men. Partitioning off the relations that transform women into helpmates of men from the relations that transform (other) material objects into commodities under capitalism precipitates Rubin's call "for such a concept" as a "sex/gender system"—a call further necessitated by what Rubin perceives to be "the failure of classical Marxism to fully express or conceptualize sex oppression" (1975, 159–60). Clearly, Rubin does not intend in this essay to regard women as commodities under capitalism, and her translation of Marx will be limited to the level of analogy.⁷ To capture the distinction, for Rubin:

- Marxism: "Certain relations" = an economy = capitalism
 (and under these relations, a spinning jenny becomes capital)
- Feminism: "Certain relations" = a sex/gender system = patriarchy
 (and under these relations, a woman becomes the helpmate
 of man)

Before turning to Sigmund Freud and Claude Lévi-Strauss in search of what seems to her a better locus of articulation for an explanation of the problem of sexual inequality, Rubin further elaborates upon this "failure of classical Marxism," lamenting that "there is no theory which accounts for the oppression of women—in its endless variety and monotonous similarity, cross-culturally and throughout history—with anything like the explanatory power of the Marxist theory of class oppression" (1975, 160). For this reason, Rubin counterposes her "sex/gender system," which she defines as "the set of arrangements by which a society transforms biological sexuality into products of human activity, and in which these transformed sexual needs are satisfied" (159). Where Marx defines the transformation of the natural conditions of human existence (which may or may not include what Rubin characterizes as "biological sexuality") into products of human activity as labor, Rubin disaggregates women's oppression and class: society does the work of transforming already-sexed bodies into hierarchically gendered people.

The disaggregative move Rubin makes here foregrounds not only her 1975 attempt to explain women's oppression but also her later attempt, in

⁷ For more on this, see Ebert (1996, 46).

her 1984 sequel essay “Thinking Sex,” to explain the oppression of sexual minorities. Rubin’s declassified sex/gender system sets the stage for the vast majority of feminist and queer theory written in the wake of her essay and cannot easily be dismissed as mere lack of attention to intersectionality (Crenshaw 1995) or multiple jeopardies (King 1988). Rather, what Rubin does in positing Marxism’s and feminism’s externality to each other is to assert that women’s oppression is not always necessarily also class oppression and to analytically separate the certain relations of women’s oppression from those certain relations of capitalism that have rendered black men, spinning jennies, gold, and sugar into commodities. According to Rubin, “We need to understand the relations of its [sex/gender] production, and forget, for awhile, about food, clothing, automobiles, and transistor radios” (1975, 166). In other words, we need to forget about the way in which women and their labor become commodities under capitalism in order to understand the way in which women become the helpmates of men, for these are products of two distinct systems of oppression (1975, 203; see also Hennessy 2000, 181).

The wedge that Rubin drives between capitalism and patriarchy provides feminism with a working definition of class as an ontological, static category rather than an epistemological, dynamic relation; henceforth, “class” will serve as a reified identity marker on par with race, sex, sexual orientation, and so on, a stand-in for “socioeconomic status”—which in small part it was for Marx, but not only or simply so. “The Traffic in Women” also definitively (and dangerously) establishes women’s oppression as a phenomenon of social subordination that can conceivably be gotten rid of without getting rid of capitalism (see Fraser 1997, 285). Notwithstanding her excision of feminism from Marxism and of women’s transformation into the domesticated helpmates of men from “the metamorphosis of the commodity itself” under capitalism, Rubin concludes her essay with a call for “a Marxian analysis of sex/gender systems . . . along the lines of Marx’s discussion in *Capital* of the evolution of money and commodities” (1975, 204–5). And yet it is precisely this line of inquiry that Rubin forecloses in her postulation of the sex/gender system as a process whereby human beings are transformed into the helpmates of men but not into commodities.

Whose Marx? (II): Catharine MacKinnon’s post-Marxism

In 1982, MacKinnon published the hallmark essay “Feminism, Marxism, Method, and the State: An Agenda for Theory.” She begins this essay with a radical rearticulation of Marxism that has by now, more than a quarter of a century later, become nearly synonymous with a substantial subset of

feminist theory: radical feminism. MacKinnon writes: “Sexuality is to feminism what work is to Marxism: that which is most one’s own, yet most taken away. . . . Work is the social process of shaping and transforming the material and social worlds, creating people as social beings as they create value. . . . Implicit in feminist theory is a parallel argument: the molding, direction, and expression of sexuality organizes society into two sexes—women and men—which division underlies the totality of social relations” (515–16). MacKinnon further analogizes Marxism to feminism:

Capitalism: “Class is its structure, production its consequence, capital its congealed form, and control its issue.” (515)

Patriarchy: “Heterosexuality is its structure, gender and family its congealed forms, sex roles its qualities generalized to social persona, reproduction a consequence, and control its issue.” (516)

Moreover, in a footnote, she substitutes the “desire” of sexuality for the “value” of work, as “that substance felt to be primordial or aboriginal but posited by the theory [Marxism] as social and contingent” (516). But as Joan Acker and Kate Barry note in their “Comments on MacKinnon’s ‘Feminism, Marxism, Method, and the State,’” where Marx takes care to delineate the historically contingent composition of value (e.g., “surplus value” under capitalism), MacKinnon’s analogous rendering of radical feminism’s “desire” as Marxism’s “value” transcends the specificity of (sexual) desire under capitalism and thereby “elevates this meaning of sexuality to the level of a pan-historical constant” (Acker and Barry 1984, 177).

To more slowly unpack the string of terms MacKinnon here so elegantly collapses: sexuality stands in for work, heterosexuality stands in for class, gender and family stand in for capital, and reproduction stands in for production (as a “consequence” of structural inequality). Following classic analogical structure, however, MacKinnon leaves “control” in place as the verb propelling both ensembles of (ostensibly equivalent) nouns. Like Rubin, MacKinnon thus reveals from the outset the theoretical cards with which she will play out her own explanation of the problem of gender inequality: first, sexuality and its embodiment as sexual difference is prior to—it “underlies”—society; second, sexuality, inasmuch as it is “most one’s own,” is innate rather than acquired, developed, or constructed; and, finally, heterosexuality, as the gateway through which sexuality is channeled into reproduction, gender, and family, is parallel to, but not mutually imbricated in, class as the gateway through which work is channeled into production and capital. To capture the distinction, for MacKinnon:

- Marxism: control exercised through class produces capital
(which process “creates, organizes, expresses, and directs”
value; 516)
- Feminism: control exercised through heterosexuality reproduces gender/family
(which process “creates, organizes, expresses, and directs”
desire; 516)

Critically, MacKinnon delimits Marxism’s class to capitalism’s structure rather than taking class to be the dynamic, antagonistic relation between labor and capital born of an ongoing struggle for control of the means of production. For her, production, as a consequence of the class structure through which work is channeled into capital, is an end for capitalism rather than the means by which surplus value is extracted from labor. Despite MacKinnon’s professed retreat from “the debate over which came (or comes) first, sex or class” (1982, 527), her explanation of sexual inequality requires that her reader accept the premise that heterosexuality and class are mutually exclusive, rather than mutually constitutive, structures of inequality; sexuality—“that which is most one’s own”—is like work but is not itself work (515).⁸ As analogous to class-as-structure-of-capitalism, heterosexuality is impervious to the dynamic, antagonistic relation between labor and capital. Furthermore, although MacKinnon defines “work” under Marxism as “the social process of shaping and transforming the material and social worlds,” as a substitute for work, sexuality will be limited in its influence upon the material world to the way in which it “organizes society into two sexes” (515). Thus, as Acker and Barry note: “MacKinnon’s definition of sexuality is not parallel to the Marxist concept of work. Work is the process of creatively transforming the material world; sexuality is the process of creating desire. This is a particular concept of sexuality, rooted in a psychological and ideological realm” (1984, 178). In other words, for MacKinnon sex is not work and work is not sexual. As for Rubin, Marxism functions solely at the level of analogy.

In contrast to Rubin, however, MacKinnon evinces no sense of patriarchy as one possible sex/gender system among many; there is for her similarly no sense of capitalism as but one possible political economy (mode of production)—an idea essential to Marx’s theory of revolution. While MacKinnon elsewhere acknowledges that Marxism is not monolithic (1982, 527 n. 23), a severely truncated, ahistorical version of Marx’s theory of class privilege

⁸ MacKinnon poses the following rhetorical questions: “Is there a Marxist method without class? a feminist method without sex?” (1982, 527). More germane questions in this context might have been, “Is there a feminist method without class? a Marxist method without sex?”

and oppression serves for MacKinnon as Marxism's quintessential definition of class, which she subsequently translates into the structure of heterosexuality as gateway to bipolar gender (533). Where for Marx both class and capitalism are subject to and programmed for abolition ([1847] 1963, 161), for MacKinnon "male power produces the world before it distorts it"; for her, heterosexuality (and the sexual inequality it perpetuates) "is a closed system" (1982, 537). Only through this apocryphal inheritance of a naturalized, closed-system understanding of class from Marx is MacKinnon able to posit as analogous a naturalized heterosexuality structuring sexual inequality.

MacKinnon concludes with a call to arms for feminism: "As Marxist method is dialectical materialism, feminist method is consciousness raising" (1982, 543). Here again, however, MacKinnon reduces Marxism to a straw man. Ignoring the long-standing debate within Marxism not only over what dialectical materialism is but also over whether or not it is a method and, if so, of what, she elides the class-consciousness-raising central to any and every rendering of Marxist method. MacKinnon's dismissal of dialectical materialism in favor of feminist consciousness-raising as a means of fighting sexual inequality hangs upon her rejection of a severely truncated and therefore distorted definition of dialectical materialism.⁹ And while it is impossible to overestimate the achievements of feminist consciousness-raising, this method's intrinsic difference from and superiority to dialectical materialism is not self-evident.

Further inscribing an artificial opposition between feminist method and Marxist method, MacKinnon lauds the capacity of feminist consciousness-raising to perceive gender relations as not only personal but also political and laments Marxism's inability to perceive class relations as not only political but also personal—as if to imply that Marxism is somehow oblivious to the way in which one's relation to the means of production (e.g., where we fall in the division of labor) shapes both our subjectivity and our relationship to others similarly or differently related to the means of production. This is perhaps best evinced by that foundational precept of *The Communist Manifesto*: "The bourgeoisie has torn away from the family its sentimental veil, and has reduced the family relation to a mere money relation" (Marx and Engels [1848] 1986, 50). In making this move, however—MacKinnon closes with the claim that feminism, as Marxism's "final conclusion and ultimate critique," turns Marxism "inside out and on its head"—MacKinnon posits a post-Marxist feminism wherein the history of women's oppression is most

⁹ See Marx ([1847] 1963). For more on this as specific to MacKinnon, see Halley (2006, 238–42).

decidedly both not only and not also a history of class struggle (1982, 544). Like Rubin, MacKinnon theorizes women's oppression as a phenomenon of social subordination that can conceivably be gotten rid of without getting rid of capitalism.

MacKinnon versus Rubin

In their initial essays, both Rubin and MacKinnon understand class as one vector of women's oppression beneath an overarching umbrella of patriarchy. While for Rubin, patriarchy is but one possible "sex/gender system" of many, for MacKinnon it is the lens of hierarchy sine qua non through which all relationships of domination and subordination are intelligible. Both counterpose to Marxism a systematic theory of sexual inequality grounded in the social relations between two separate "classes" of men and women analytically disaggregated from what Rubin refers to as "the areas of social life for which it [Marxism] was originally developed—class relations under capitalism" (1984, 308). In other words, it is possible under both articulations of feminism to determine whether an individual is male/dominant or female/subordinated before or beyond that person's relation to the means of (economic) production, according to that person's position with respect to what Rubin calls "the social structure of gender" (1984, 309) and what MacKinnon calls "sexuality as the primary social sphere of male power" (1982, 529). Thus, it comes as no surprise that when Rubin opens "Thinking Sex" with the assertion that "the realm of sexuality has . . . its own internal politics, inequities, and modes of oppression" (1984, 267), one hears echoes of MacKinnon's definition of sexuality in "An Agenda for Theory": "Sexuality is that social process which creates, organizes, expresses, and directs desire, creating the social beings we know as women and men, as their relations create society" (1982, 516). For both theorists, sexual value has no originary relation to Marx's concept of value, and vice versa.

It is, then, from the common ground of a sexuality unhinged from the (economic) means of production that Rubin and MacKinnon write the two essays that (respectively) follow "The Traffic in Women" and "An Agenda for Theory." With their sequel essays, Rubin and MacKinnon meet in the arena of an almost entirely declassified feminism—in the sense that both have divorced themselves from what Heidi Hartmann has famously characterized as "the unhappy marriage of Marxism and feminism" (1981, 1). Although the two dramatically part ways in these sequel essays ("Thinking Sex" reads as a heated response to "Toward Feminist Jurisprudence"), as we have just seen, the severely truncated Marxist foundations upon which their sequel arguments rest are strikingly similar. Notably, MacKinnon cites Rubin's first essay

favorably in her own first essay, as one of several “attempts at synthesis” of Marxism and feminism that does not “cast feminism, ultimately, as a movement within Marxism” (1982, 524 n. 17). So well do Rubin and MacKinnon argue in these first essays for viewing patriarchy and capitalism, feminism and Marxism, as mutually exclusive hermeneutic categories and trajectories of oppression, that in their wake, “any analysis that engages the material conditions of gender and sexuality is thus dismissed as supplying Marxist answers to feminist questions, as if feminist questions are somehow outside the history of relations of production” (Ebert 1996, 47).

Widely considered a contestation of MacKinnon’s radical feminism, Rubin’s “Thinking Sex” first appeared in the 1984 collection *Pleasure and Danger: Exploring Female Sexuality*. Dismayed by radical feminism’s neglect and perpetuation of forms of sexual oppression not easily or at all intelligible as gender oppression, in this essay Rubin advocates radical sexual pluralism as a challenge to erotic chauvinism. In so doing she argues for a specific theory of sexual oppression as distinct from gender oppression. In section 6 of “Thinking Sex,” titled “The Limits of Feminism,” Rubin pointedly takes MacKinnon to task for having “made the most explicit theoretical attempt to subsume sexuality under feminist thought” (1984, 308).¹⁰ Rubin argues not only against this attempted subsumption but also against MacKinnon’s “definitional fusion” of sex and gender, on the grounds that “lust” both precedes and exceeds this fusion (1984, 307–8; see also Ebert 1996, 51). And while Rubin made a similar claim with respect to gender (as a social construct distinct from the biological given of sex) in “The Traffic in Women,” she now makes this move with respect to sexuality (as distinct from gender) in her sequel essay. Recapping her earlier excision of feminism from Marxism, Rubin reminds the reader of “Thinking Sex” that “there is an instructive analogy in the history of the differentiation of contemporary feminist thought from Marxism. Marxism is probably the most supple and powerful conceptual system extant for analyzing social inequality. But attempts to make Marxism the sole explanatory system for all social inequalities have been dismal exercises. Marxism is most successful in the areas of social life for which it was originally developed—class relations under capitalism” (1984, 308).

Having deployed the analogy of her earlier derivation of feminism from a truncated version of Marxism in order to make a powerful case against

¹⁰ Rubin later explained: “She [MacKinnon] wanted to make feminism the privileged site for analyzing sexuality and to subordinate sexual politics not only to feminism, but to a particular type of feminism. On the grand chessboard of life, I wanted to block this move” (Rubin and Butler 1994, 71).

MacKinnon's (similarly truncated version of) feminism, Rubin now posits sexual apartheid as a form of social subordination that can conceivably be gotten rid of without getting rid of capitalism or patriarchy. Just as "Marxism is most successful in the areas of social life for which it was originally developed—class relations under capitalism," and "feminism is the theory of gender oppression," Rubin's new "radical theory of sex" will address areas of social life either immune to, or somehow otherwise beyond the purview of, both class relations under capitalism and gender relations under patriarchy (1984, 309). Truncating a feminism derived from a truncated Marxism to "the theory of gender oppression," Rubin demonstrates the need for a "theory of sexuality." Where she earlier posited gender as a transhistorical object of social subordination, she now posits lust as a transhistorical object of social subordination. And while her call for a Marxian analysis of the sex/gender system at the conclusion of "The Traffic in Women" evinced the epistemological tension in her translation of Marxism into feminism, in "Thinking Sex," Rubin now dispenses entirely with class as a theory of privilege and oppression: "*Like* gender, sexuality is political. It is organized into systems of power, which reward and encourage some individuals and activities, while punishing and suppressing others. *Like* the capitalist organization of labor and its distribution of rewards and powers, the modern sexual system has been the object of political struggle since it emerged and as it has evolved. But if the disputes between labor and capital are mystified, sexual conflicts are completely camouflaged" (1984, 309; emphasis added). Sexuality is no longer for Rubin analogous to work (as for MacKinnon); rather, it is "a human product as are . . . forms of labor . . . and modes of oppression. [Further] it is not . . . understandable in terms of class" (1984, 277, 293; see also Ebert 1996, 64; Hennessy 2000, 185). In marked contrast to "The Traffic in Women," economy does not appear as a conceptual apparatus in "Thinking Sex," except as an afterthought to the realm of sexuality. Gone is class as a dynamic, antagonistic relation between labor and capital encompassing within its scope such sexual containers as the family; mystified disputes between labor and capital are not camouflaged sexual conflicts, or vice versa, for Rubin.

In contrast, MacKinnon argues in "Toward Feminist Jurisprudence" that sex and gender are synonymous and that there is no such thing as "ungendered reality or ungendered perspective" (1983, 636). While Rubin's essay is a litany of arrests, sanctions, deployments of antiquated sex law, police crackdowns, censorship, restrictive ordinances, omnibus legislation, zoning laws, licensing and safety codes, sentencing increases, and myriad other forms of the legal codification of sexual oppression (1984, 270–71), MacKinnon's essay is a cutting indictment of the state as inherently male, as

nothing more and nothing less than the legal codification of male supremacy. Rubin argues that “sex law is the most adamant instrument of sexual stratification and erotic persecution” (1984, 288); MacKinnon argues that “the law sees and treats women the way men see and treat women, . . . embodying and ensuring male control over women’s sexuality at every level, occasionally cushioning, qualifying, or de jure prohibiting its excesses when necessary to its normalization” (1983, 644). MacKinnon’s reading of the law as the normative arm of patriarchy is for her analogous to Marx’s reading of the law as the normative arm of capitalism, complete with the distinction many Marxists make between formal and structural freedom under capitalism.¹¹ Like Marx’s worker who is free to do anything she or he wants but choose a different relationship to the means of production, MacKinnon’s woman is free to do anything she wants but render true consent.

Feminism’s marginalia

In a footnote to her now classic essay “Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence against Women of Color,” Kimberlé Crenshaw admits to having fallen prey to the sort of bracketing off of significant trajectories of privilege and oppression to which I suggest Rubin and MacKinnon fell prey in their watershed essays written in the period leading up to Margo St. James’s emigration—wherein one sees sex workers increasingly alienated by feminism. Crenshaw turns a self-critical eye upon her own work, observing that “in mapping the intersections of race and gender, the concept [of intersectionality] does engage dominant assumptions that race and gender are essentially separate categories. By tracing the categories to their intersections, I hope to suggest a methodology that will ultimately disrupt the tendencies to see race and gender as exclusive or separable” (1995, 378). She further adds that “while the primary intersections that I explore here are between race and gender, *the concept can and should be* expanded by factoring in such issues as class, sexual orientation, age, and color” (378; emphasis added).

But instead of tracing the categories of sex, gender, and class to their intersections, and acknowledging and grappling with the class constitution of gender and sexuality (or, alternately, with the gendered and sexual constitution of class), Rubin and MacKinnon render class struggle that “which can only be thought—when it can” in terms of “exclusion, erasure,

¹¹ Wherein formal freedom means the freedom to work for a wage, while structural freedom means the freedom from want.

violent foreclosure, abjection” (Butler 1993, 8). As such, class struggle manifests as a “disruptive return” (Butler 1993, 8) to the systematic theories of sexual inequality they derive from a Marxism turned “inside out and on its head” (MacKinnon 1982, 544). And one of the places this obfuscation of class struggle becomes most noticeable is in the widespread exclusion, erasure, violent foreclosure, and abjection of sex-working women’s voices and choices from what St. James loosely characterized (from afar) as “the women’s movement.” Moreover, in the decades since Rubin and MacKinnon rewrote Marxism as feminism and queer theory, it has grown exceedingly difficult for feminists and queer theorists to describe the individual factors condensed in the global crises of late capitalism in terms of class—much less in terms of sex, gender, and sexuality. In this sense, the marginalization of sex workers functions as a placeholder for feminism’s broader marginalization of class as a theory of privilege and oppression. For feminists, the movement of the contradictions between exchange value and use value, and between money and commodity, wherein Marx located the real drivers of the most abstract form of capitalist crisis contained in the metamorphosis of the commodity, has stalled (Marx [1861–63] 1969, 509–10). And it is my contention that the discursive hegemony consolidated by Rubin and MacKinnon over feminist and queer theory—at Marxism’s expense—has by and large stymied, rather than fostered, feminist and queer critiques of capitalism, including and especially critiques from which those struggling under the weight of capitalism, patriarchy, and sexual apartheid stand to benefit most. But should we as feminists and sex workers learn to recognize the common threads of our historical marginalization under capitalism, we might choose to leave behind our ever-trenchant tendency to see gender and sexual inequality as somehow extricable from economic inequality—rather than choose to leave behind our sisters and brothers in their differently envisioned and waged struggles for social justice. Making this choice, we both invigorate feminism as a formidable critique of capitalism and ensure that feminism’s finish line is not a lonely place.

Inviting class into the feminist debate on prostitution

In the interest of beginning to reckon with what we have lost in the translation of class from a theory of privilege and oppression into an identity analogous to gender and sexuality, I want to perform a bit of a hermeneutic experiment: I want to see what comes into focus when we invite a Marxist theory of class into the feminist debate on prostitution. To this end, I take up Rosemary Hennessy’s (2006) articulation of cultural oppression as a “second skin” that capital uses against the worker in order to extract surplus value

(profit) from him or her.¹² Also to this end, I take up Crenshaw's aforementioned concept of intersectionality as an important tool with which we may more accurately identify the myriad forms of cultural privilege and oppression both before and beyond gender—the various second skins that laboring bodies freely (at least, in the formal sense) offer up to capital in the marketplace—upon which economic exploitation is predicated. In so doing we see that the rhetoric of, alternately (and for many interchangeably) prostitution as the measure of woman and woman as the measure of prostitution (e.g., Giobbe 1990) leaves largely unexamined not only the mode of production predicated upon the mass exploitation of labor in the interest of profit (capital accumulation) but also the participation of feminism itself in the “microphysics of power” (Foucault 1995, 139) that constitute the macro-political oppression and exploitation of people in the sex industry.

Parsing sex work as the metamorphosis of the commodity through an intersectional second skin, we see that the plight of the prostitute—when, in fact, there is a plight (more on this below)—often lies not in her womanliness, *per se*, but rather in the degree to which her impoverishment, her gender, her race, her sexuality, her age, her religion, her legal status, her looks, or her ability (mental and physical) can be used against her in the extraction of surplus value (profit) from her labor.¹³ And the question of whether these can be used against the sex worker has little to do with the presence or absence of formal freedom between any given sex worker and her clients. Rather, the exploitation of the sex worker hinges upon any number of structural second skins of cultural oppression (such as patriarchy, white supremacy, heterosexism, ageism, religious chauvinism, nationalism, looksism, ableism, and so on) that both allow capitalists to slap a particular wage on a particular service provided by a particular body and establish that wage and its working conditions not in accordance with the principle “from each according to his ability; to each according to his need” (Marx [1875] 2010, 347) but rather in relation to other forms of labor available for sale and purchase at a particular moment in time.

Much like Chandra Talpade Mohanty's Western feminist who misses the veil as a marker of agency when she wears only her imperialist, oppression-seeking glasses (1991, 346–67), the feminist who sees only victims everywhere she or he looks at prostitution misses entirely the ingenuity and agency of the human being who chooses to work in the sex industry rather

¹² Hennessy uses the term to capture the constitutive or culturally ascribed inequality accompanying any given worker to his or her encounter with the capitalist in the marketplace (2006, 390).

¹³ With “legal status” I am referring to citizenship, work papers, and the degree of criminalization to which a given sex worker is subject.

than, say the sweatshop industry (or even, for that matter, the knowledge industry; see Anonymus, Ph.D. 1999), because the wages and working conditions are, to his or her mind, better. According to the prevalent feminist logic of prostitution as the measure of woman, Ashley Dupré is a better canary in the coal mine of gender inequality than Chun Yu Wang, and Eliot Spitzer is a better fit for the role of canary-killing cat than, say, Jack Abramoff.¹⁴ Hence, too, the often uncritical feminist embrace of a figure like *New York Times* columnist Nicholas Kristof, who rants and rages against the exploitation of female prostitutes halfway across the globe, even as he sings the praises of sweatshops. The faulty logic at work here—that closing sweatshops forces people into prostitution—not only problematically relies upon Kristof’s own moralizing determination that the sex industry unilaterally offers comparatively worse wages and working conditions than the sweatshop industry but also, incredibly, offers sweatshops as a solution to the problem of poverty driving many to work in any number of different capacities for very low wages in terrible conditions.¹⁵ Conversely, woman as the measure of prostitution misses entirely the exploitation that men can experience in the sex industry, not because they are women but because they are men, impoverished, gender nonconforming, of color, or gay, or young, or undocumented, or criminalized, non-English speaking, conventionally “ugly,” or living with physical or mental disabilities, and so on.¹⁶ Woman as the measure of prostitution misses, too, the exploitation that transpeople can experience in the sex industry, not because they are women but because they are trans, impoverished, of color, gay, young, undocumented or criminalized, non-English speaking, conventionally “ugly,” living with physical or mental disabilities, and so on (see Ryan 2006).

But lest the intersectionalization of some sex-working subjects’ oppression and exploitation inadvertently reinforce blanket stereotypes associated with the plight of the prostitute, I want to shift the focus of attention to the privilege—the agency—that also becomes visible when we invite class into the feminist debate on prostitution. For, once having grasped class as a

¹⁴ Chun Yu Wang is the author of *Chicken Feathers and Garlic Skin: Diary of a Chinese Garment Factory Girl on Saipan* (2009). During the mid-1990s, Abramoff successfully lobbied on behalf of Saipan sweatshop owners against the enforcement of laws restricting such abhorrent working conditions as forced abortions. See Goodman (2006).

¹⁵ Should Kristof and his followers train their sights on the International Monetary Fund, the World Bank, and other minions of neoliberalism and global capitalism, people might have choices other than survival sex work *or* sweatshop labor, upon release from geopolitical debt bondage.

¹⁶ This is particularly evident in the (straight) porn film industry, wherein men are notoriously paid significantly less than women.

theory of privilege and oppression, one begins to see that both within and beyond the sex industry some women are more equal than others (to paraphrase George Orwell). Taking seriously both privilege as the flip side of the coin of oppression and the complex intersections of these two along any number of axes of cultural privilege and oppression that Crenshaw and others in her wake have theorized as constitutive of intersectionality, we see that privilege along one axis can mitigate oppression along another, even within the sex industry itself. As Siobhan Brooks (quoted in Soldano 2010) succinctly puts it, “Not everybody can sell their sex equally.”¹⁷ Taking seriously both privilege as a mitigator of oppression and class as a dynamic, rather than reified, relation between labor and capital, we also see that the selfsame person may be today’s woman-as-laborer, selling sex as “the particular product of [her] individual labor,” and tomorrow’s woman-as-capitalist, buying and selling sex as “the particular product[s] of [other] individual[s]’ labor”—and vice versa (Marx [1861–63] 1969, 509). One might think here of former nude model and stripper Danni Ashe, aka “the billion download woman,” who is now an Internet entrepreneur overseeing a “stable” of more than one hundred women and reportedly grossing more than \$300,000 in monthly revenue (Russell 1998), and former stripper and “queen of porn” Jenna Jameson, who recently sold the highly profitable Internet pornography company she created in 2000 to Playboy Enterprises. Moreover, as Angela Davis (1983, 17) has observed, intimate labor of all sorts has throughout history served for many women as an exploitative means to a liberatory end.¹⁸

Last but not least, through the lens of class analysis one begins to see the mutually imbricated privilege and oppression structuring what Laura Agustín has recently theorized as “the rescue industry” (2007) and Jo Doezema describes as “Western feminists’ ‘wounded attachment’ to the ‘third world prostitute’” (2001), whereby a radical abolitionist feminist such as Donna Hughes makes an excellent living as an endowed women’s studies program chair with her research funded by the State Department, while the women and men employed in the massage parlors she helped shut down in Rhode Island (a state with one of the highest unemployment rates in the nation) endure forcible unemployment, detainment, deportation, and incarceration.¹⁹ In this vein, and in one of the English language’s greater ironies,

¹⁷ Indeed, as Cynthia Enloe has observed, white privilege can mitigate the (variously structured) oppressions of sex work to such a degree that white women selling sex to white men are often not seen as prostitutes at all; in contrast, racism can exacerbate the oppressions of sex work by rendering women of color hypervisible as prostitutes (2000, 84).

¹⁸ For more on this, see Kempadoo (2001).

¹⁹ For more on this, see *Happy Endings?* (2009).

the “abolitionist” feminist seeking the aid of the police state (rather than, say, the welfare state) in his or her fight against prostitution is frequently if unwittingly at cross-purposes with the prison abolitionist feminist, who sees the criminalization of sex work as but one more poverty-to-prison pipeline and the police themselves as no small source of oppression for sex workers.²⁰ One begins to see here, too, the widely divergent relationships to labor and capital structuring the “will to empower” (Cruikshank 1999) of *New York Times* columnists Bob Herbert, who tried to rescue an unnamed young woman selling sex on Atlanta’s Metropolitan Parkway in 2006, and Kristof, who has in recent years tried to rescue women selling sex in Cambodia. Selling the stories of these women as “reality porn” (Debbie Nathan quoted in Broeske 2006), Herbert and Kristof participate in what Katha Pollitt recently described as “a long tradition of privileged men rescuing individual prostitutes as a kind of whirlwind adventure” (2004). In so doing, they earn wages for “the particular product of [their] individual labor” (Marx [1861–63] 1969, 509–10) and a profit for the *New York Times*, but in the wake of these stories, the women they seek to rescue merely return to what are, to their minds, the best wages and working conditions available to them: sex work.

Conclusion

If we as feminists are to honor the central tenets of the feminist standpoint epistemology that gave rise to women’s studies as the academic arm of feminism—that knowledge production is never objective and must always be checked against dissenting perspectives—then we must check the feminist debate on prostitution against the dissenting perspectives of the sex-working subjects about whom so much has been and is being said. By taking sex workers’ choices and visions of liberation at least as seriously as our own choices, we stand to realize that the exploitation endemic to some sex work is not just something that happens to prostitutes; rather, it is part and parcel

²⁰ On the welfare state, Davis observed that “the dismantling of the welfare system under the so-called welfare reform law will probably lead to further expansion of the sex industry” (quoted in Brooks 1999, 183). In contrast to the prison abolitionist feminist’s suspicion of and resistance to the police state, Take Back the Night events frequently feature the police as champions and protectors of women’s nights. For more on this relation, see Williams (2007) and Hoffman (2008). This irony is of course underscored by the contemporary co-optation of the legacy of nineteenth-century slavery abolitionists in order to silence people working in the sex industry who do not consider themselves to be slaves. See Enloe (2000, 2003) and White (2007) for transnational engagements with the police state as provocateur, often in savior’s clothing, of the oppression and exploitation of sex workers.

of everything that happens under the sign of capitalism. Radical-feminism-cum-abolitionist-feminism has too long masked its disavowal and dislocation of the economic exploitation endemic to capitalism as heteropatriarchy. Sex work has become one of neoliberal feminism's favorite scapegoats, whereby many of us can deny the reality that under the current political economy, "what has been repressed, the idea of sin, is capital itself" (Benjamin [1921] 1996, 289). To seek to save one's soul by saving prostitutes is thus to imagine that, under capitalism, all privilege is not purchased at the expense of another's exploitation. It is to imagine that some of us are above the law of capital and that capitalism is not an adversarial, zero sum system.

Feminist and queer theory that rolls right past or right over the intersectional, agentic subjectivity of sex workers is premised in the falsehood that atonement—rather than "guilt pervasive"—is possible under capitalism (Benjamin [1921] 1996, 289). To proclaim that prostitution harms all women, everywhere, is to cover over the harm that we all do every day, to varying degrees, as participants in our political economy. To overlook our own complicity, as producers and consumers, in the pricing of sexual services and the construction of cultural hierarchies that enable economic exploitation in every labor sector is to refuse to flip the intersectional coin. Inasmuch as sex work functions as feminist and queer theory's imaginary outside, whoromyopia is in no small part a means of preserving the fantasy of an imaginary outside to capitalism—the fantasy that some of us living under capitalism have ingeniously managed to finagle a way of not selling out.²¹ It is to trade the farsighted feminist project of expanding the range of meaningful choices available to human beings for the shortsighted project of taking one choice away from them—whether by evacuating the choice to work in the sex industry of all meaning by dismissing it as false consciousness, or by so criminalizing this choice that to make it is to find oneself squashed beneath the iron heel of the prison industrial complex. Whoromyopia is thus also predicated upon the fantasy that some of us have somehow managed to get a special purchase on a true consciousness about sex work (miraculously uninflected by our own relations to the means of production), while others of us have, sadly, fallen prey to false consciousness about sex work.

To correct for whoromyopia is to give the lie to the notion that equality—including but not limited to gender and sexual equality—is pos-

²¹ I use the term "whoromyopia" to describe the limited view of sex work and sex workers held by feminists who have lost class as a theory of oppression. I am indebted to Kent Brintnall for this formulation.

sible under capitalism. And if we truly want to be more than “merely cultural” (Butler 1997)—if we are to seize heteronormativity by the roots rather than by its offshoots—then we must challenge the political economy that has taken and continues to take advantage of anything it can, including feminism, in order to take advantage of millions. We must find a way to recontextualize the various second skins that, for so many of us, capital turns against us into instruments of our own exploitation. We must, instead, turn these second skins into instruments of solidarity with all workers under capitalism, including sex workers. Failing this, we may rest assured that capital will proceed unchecked in the appropriation of gender and sexual oppression—and any number of other forms of cultural oppression it can appropriate—to both further entrench and mask the direct correspondence between those who enjoy the freedom to choose their own relationship to the sexual body as a means of production and those who enjoy freedom from want (an infinitesimal percent of the global population at best) and to have us fall for the ruse that desire could somehow ever be autonomous from need. Together, we can do better than this. The time has come to radically reread class into the feminist debate on prostitution and to reckon with all that we—“whores, housewives, and others” (among others)—have lost in translation.

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