

BEYOND THE MARKED WOMAN:
THE NEW SEX WORKER IN AMERICAN POPULAR CULTURE, 2006-2016

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This dissertation argues that between 2006 and 2016, in a context of rising tolerance for sex workers, economic shifts under neoliberal capitalism, and the normalization of transactional intimate labour, popular culture began to offer new and humanizing images of the sex worker as an entrepreneur and care worker. This new popular culture legitimatizes sex workers in a growing services industry and carries important de-stigmatizing messages about sex workers, who continue to be among the most stigmatized of women workers in the U.S. These new representations challenge stereotypical portrayals of sex workers – as immoral criminals or exploited victims – that support conservative and patriarchal ideologies. Drawing upon feminist theories of sex work, labour theory, and feminist media studies methodology for exploring the nexus of gender, sexuality, and popular culture, this dissertation examines feature films, TV series, and TV and online documentaries that depict five sex work occupations – erotic dancers, massage parlour workers, webcam models, call girls, and sex surrogates – to illustrate the new figure of the sex worker as entrepreneur and care worker under neoliberal capitalism. By emphasizing sex workers' agency to choose their work, dignifying their skills, underscoring sex work as a means of economic mobility, and highlighting the positive contributions sex workers make to their clients' lives, these popular culture representations challenge the anti-sex work position espoused by conservative patriarchal ideology and prohibitionist feminists. Some of these new representations, however, intertwine with a neoliberal post-feminist sensibility that frames empowerment as realizable through individualism and the market alone, rather than in collective ways, and pose few concrete solutions to the challenges faced by sex workers today, namely criminalization. Even so, this dissertation argues that these emerging twenty-first century representations of the sex worker as entrepreneur and care worker are progressive and mark a growing social tolerance for the idea that, for some women, sex work is legitimate work.

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Introduction: The New Sex Worker in American Popular Culture, 2006-2016

Popular culture has been the greatest purveyor of images of sex workers for over 100 years. Since 1896, sex workers have appeared as main characters in over 1,400 films, most made in Hollywood (Campbell, 2006). From epics like *East of Eden* to romantic comedies such as *Breakfast at Tiffany's* to dramas like *Klute*, American popular culture has made sex workers iconic, and more actresses have won Oscars for playing sex workers than for any other role (Parish, 1992).¹ Yet, for over 100 years, the U.S. has also criminalized and stigmatized sex workers; today, they continue to be criminalized in 49 out of 50 U.S. states. During this time, popular culture has contributed to this criminalization and stigmatization by recycling stereotypical representations of sex workers as femme fatales or fallen women and, at times, stoked moral panic (Alexander, 1988). As Weitzer (2007) notes, “the continuing stigmatization of sex workers has made it difficult for the public to view [sex work] as work” (p. 143). But recently, the status of the sex worker in the U.S. has become the subject of intense public debate, which has resulted in change. Sex work is increasingly being understood as legitimate work and an issue of human rights. This dissertation examines how popular culture registered shifting social attitudes about sex workers between 2006 and 2016, a period of historical debate, friction, and change.

Between 2006 and 2016, American popular culture shifted in its representation of sex workers. Where it was once the norm for popular culture to stereotype sex workers as deviant criminals or exploited victims, in a new context of rising tolerance for sex workers, economic shifts under neoliberal capitalism, and the normalization of transactional intimate labour, popular culture is now humanizing sex workers as entrepreneurs and care workers in a growing service industry. Drawing upon feminist theories of sex work, labour theory, and feminist media studies methodology for exploring the nexus of gender, sexuality, and popular culture, this dissertation examines popular culture – feature films, television series, and television and online documentaries – that depict five sex

¹ Janet Gaynor twice won an Oscar for playing a sex worker in *Seventh Heaven* (1927) and *Sunrise* (1928); Helen Hayes won for *The Sin of Madelon Claudet* (1931); Anne Baxter for the *Razor's Edge* (1946); Donna Reed for *From Here to Eternity* (1953); Jo Van Fleet for *East of Eden* (1955); Susan Hayward for *I Want to Live!* (1958); Shirley Jones for *Elmer Gantry* (1960); Elizabeth Taylor for *Butterfield 8* (1960); and Jane Fonda for *Klute* (1971) (Parish, 1992, p. xiii).

work occupations – erotic dancers, massage parlour workers, webcam models, call girls, and sex surrogates – that portray the new figure of the sex worker as entrepreneur and care worker. By emphasizing sex workers’ agency to choose their work, dignifying their skills, underscoring sex work as a means of economic mobility, highlighting the positive contributions sex workers make to their clients’ lives, and distinguishing sex workers from trafficked women, these popular culture representations challenge dehumanizing sex worker stereotypes and the anti-sex work position espoused by conservative patriarchal ideology and the prohibitionist feminist perspective.

These new representations mark a positive break with past stereotypes, yet at times they also intertwine with a neoliberal post-feminist sensibility that equates individual entrepreneurship and empowerment, emphasizes freedom as realizable through the market alone rather than in collective ways, and poses few concrete solutions to the challenges faced by sex workers today, namely criminalization and stigmatization. Even so, this dissertation argues that the new representations of the sex worker as care worker and entrepreneur are far more inclusive, humanizing, and progressive than what came before, and mark a growing social tolerance for sex workers and the idea that, for some women, sex work is legitimate work.

Historical and Social Context: From Pornification to Sex Worker Rights

Some context of the history and growth of the sex industry helps situate the rise of the new representation of the sex worker as entrepreneur and care worker in popular culture today. In the last fifteen years, American culture at large has become more sexualized, while tolerance for once marginal sexual practices and identities has grown (Hakim, 2010). Internet technologies have changed the way we consume information and images and relate to one another. At the same time, the production and consumption of services now trump the production and consumption of tangible goods as the driver of the economy (Harvey, 2007). In turn, the nature of work has also changed: the full-time jobs that once defined American society under Fordism have been supplanted by jobs that

are part-time, flexible, and contractual (Duggan, 2004; Power, 2009).² Neoliberal discourses, meanwhile, celebrate workers as “freelancers” and “entrepreneurs” in a new and precarious gig economy where everybody has to be a hustler.

These social transformations have coincided with the increased production, distribution, and consumption of sexually explicit material and what critics have called the “sexualization” (Attwood, 2005), “porno chic-ification” (McNair, 2002), and “pornification” (Gill, 2008) of contemporary culture. From pole-dancing fitness studios to sex worker memoirs that crown bestseller lists, to models in fetish wear slinking down haute couture runways, this “pornified” culture blurs the line between pornography and popular culture, making the distinction between the two, at times, moot (Della Giusta & Scuriatti, 2005; Dines, 2011; La Ferla, 2017; Shteir, 2005). While some see this escalation in sexual imagery as a backlash against feminism, others call it a long-awaited moment for women and those of non-mainstream sexualities to see their stories reflected by popular culture (Coy et. al, 2011; Dunn, 2010). At the same time, sexual practices (like pre-marital sex) and sexual diversity (like same sex marriage), once considered taboo, are becoming normalized (Heineman, MacFarlane & Brents, 2012). While American culture has become more sexualized, the sex industry has also grown.

The sex industry encompasses all of the businesses that sell images and experiences of sex including erotic dance clubs, massage parlours, escort agencies, brothels, peepshows, webcam model websites, and pornographic film companies (Spector, 2006). Between 2006 and 2016, the sex industry grew exponentially by expanding established areas and branching out into new ones. According to a U.S. Department of Justice study by the Urban Institute, the sex industries in each of the eight major American cities – including New York City and Atlanta – are more profitable than the drug and gun trades put together (Thompson, 2014). From downtown streets to suburban plazas, 3,500 strip clubs across the U.S employ roughly 400,000 erotic performers who dance to the tune of over \$3 billion in

² Fordist economics supported trade regulations, collective responsibility, a large welfare state, and financial regulation; post-Fordism or neoliberal economic policies emerged in the 1970s and became dominant in the 1980s. According to Harvey (2007), neoliberalism “proposes that human well-being can best be advanced by liberating individual entrepreneurial freedoms and skills within an institutional framework characterized by strong private property rights, free markets, and free trade” (p. 22).

annual revenue (Heineman et. al., 2012; Victoria's, n.d.; Weitzer, 2012). Massage parlours now number over 4,790, an all-time high, and earn revenues of over \$1 billion a year (Hamilton & Kemsley, 2015; Lowrey, 2014). The webcam modeling industry, but a science fiction dream two decades ago, now draws profits of over \$3 billion a year – one third of adult entertainment revenues (Comella, 2016). The pornography industry has also exploded. Pornographic material now accounts for 30% of all data transferred on the world wide web and, in 2016, drew a profit \$14.6 billion – more than Hollywood, the NBA, the NFL, and Major League Baseball combined (Huffington Post, 2013; Prostitution Numbers).

In a context in which culture is becoming more sexualized, and the sex industry is booming, the sex workers' rights movement agitating for the decriminalization and destigmatization of sex work has also grown. A once marginal movement comprised of sex workers, academics, and feminist allies is gaining momentum and, for the first time, has the broad support of some very powerful organizations. In the last five years, the non-governmental organizations UNAIDS (Joint United Nations Programme on HIV/Aids) and the World Health Organization, as well as the prestigious medical journal *The Lancet*, have aligned themselves with the decriminalization movement (Cooper, 2014; Everall, 2016). In 2015, a watershed moment came when Amnesty International formally backed sex workers in their fight for the decriminalization of sex work. Citing how the fear of criminal prosecution compels sex workers to conduct their business underground, where they become more vulnerable to violence and social stigmatization, Tawandah Mustafah, Amnesty International's Director of Policy, wrote that sex workers are receiving "no, or very little, protection from the law or means for redress" which "interferes with...[their] human rights " (as cited in Mortimer, 2016). By putting its weight behind decriminalization, Amnesty International has helped place the long-marginalized sex workers' rights movement on the mainstream cultural map.

This newfound legitimacy has also rippled into the news media, which, for the first time, is starting to portray sex workers in a humanizing light. This marks a seismic change from the past. The news media, as scholars have noted, have long painted sex workers as a seedy and dangerous stratum of society and associated them with trafficked women, contagious diseases, organized crime, public

nuisance, child abuse, violence, and ugly objects like condoms and needles (Hallgrimsdottir, Phillips & Benoit, 2008; Lowman, 2000; Strega et. al. 2006). These images have reinforced “negative perceptions of women in sex and [did] little to alleviate the social and economic disadvantageous such women face” (Van Brunschott et. al., 1999, p. 67). Recently, however, the news media has begun to publish empathetic and nuanced stories about sex workers that trade moralism for empathy, and condescension for respect. In 2016, *The New York Times Magazine* ran its first-ever cover story on sex workers, which affirmatively framed the sex workers’ rights movement as a “rebellion against punishment and shame” and a demand for “respect for a group that has rarely received it” (Bazon, 2016). Later that year, *New York* magazine’s cover story asked “should sex work be decriminalized?” and ultimately affirmed that decriminalization deserved serious consideration. These publications, read and respected by millions, triggered a cascade of similarly humanizing and respectful stories. Numerous high-profile publications including *The Atlantic*, *Harper’s Bazaar*, *Huffington Post*, *The Independent*, *Vanity Fair*, *Vice*, and *The Village Voice* have published non-moralizing and nuanced stories about sex workers in the last several years. Capturing this change, one journalist writing in *The Daily Dot*, a popular website that tracks trends in news media, declared 2015 the “year sex work dominated in the news” and noted that, for the first time, “journalism about sex workers was generally respectful, even laudatory” (O’Hara, 2015, n. pag.).

Activists and celebrities have also joined the chorus calling for the decriminalization of sex work, galvanizing mass public support and fighting stigmatization by leveraging their large platforms. In 2015, the actress and comedian Margaret Cho, in her most personal tweet ever, condemned the shaming of sex workers: “I was a sex worker when I was young,” she wrote, “it was hard but well paid. There’s no shame in it” (Burana, 2015, n. pag.). At the 2016 Women’s March in Washington, D.C., writer, transgender activist, and former sex worker Janet Mock rallied a crowd of 500,000 people to support “the sex worker fighting to make her living safely” (L’Heureux, 2017, n. pag.). While public figures use personal narrative to push for change, sex workers are also organizing through collective action. In 2012, in a watershed moment for the labour rights of sex workers, erotic dancers won a

Federal class action suit against their employer for \$13 million dollars of unpaid back wages (Gira Grant, 2012, n. pag.). In 2017, RWDSU, the largest retail labour union in the U.S., welcomed sex shop workers into its ranks (Abrams, 2016, n. pag.). Meanwhile, sex worker activist organizations like The International Union for Sex Workers, The Sex Workers Project, and The Red Umbrella Project³ organize for political change at the local, state, and national levels, and mount public campaigns for their main argument: whether or not one approves of sex work from a moral or personal standpoint, criminalizing it makes women's lives unsafe by forcing them to conduct their business underground, denying them access to legal and labour protections, and increasing their stigmatization.

These social transformations, the increase in positive news media coverage, and the budding and fierce activist movements calling for the de-stigmatization and decriminalization of sex work have appeared alongside notable shifts in public opinion. In a U.S. national poll in 1981, only 30% of respondents thought prostitution should be decriminalized (Weizter, 2009). But that number has been rising. In 2012, 38% of Americans said they would support the decriminalization of prostitution (McClelland, 2016). By 2016, that number had jumped to 44% (ibid.). As Rubin (1984) observes, "sex is always political. But there are historical periods in which sexuality is more sharply contested and more overly politicized. In such periods, the domain of the erotic life is, in effect, renegotiated" (p. 143). Sex work has clearly become a site of intense debate, politicization, and renegotiation. This dissertation focuses on how popular culture – feature film, television, and documentary – produced between 2006 and 2016 registered these renegotiations through what I argue is a new representation of the sex worker as an entrepreneur and care worker. Where it was once axiomatic to stereotype sex workers as immoral criminals or helpless victims, I argue that today's popular culture is offering new, humanizing, nuanced, and complex images of sex workers, legitimizing them in a growing sexual

³ The sex workers' rights movement has become more visible and vocal in the past 20 years. As Arthurs (2004) notes, like LGBTQ activists in the 20th century who used the tactics of public demonstration to call for the decriminalization of their lifestyles and the right to make choices about their own sexual practices, sex workers today are galvanizing people to "turn the secrecy of shame into the public display of pride" (p. 100). In their battle for legitimacy, sex workers now have the benefit of using the democratic tools of social media to advance their cause and the zeitgeist of a revived feminist movement which more than ever supports individual choice and sexual diversity. As Ferris (2015) points out, this moment of post-industrial capitalism has "created a potentially emancipatory space for sex workers" (p. 3).

services industry, and implicitly contributing to the movement to decriminalize sex work. These new representations tell nuanced stories – of sex workers’ struggles and achievements, agency and disempowerment – that trouble the tired binary positions on sex work within feminism, and offer new insights into how sex work is a multi-faceted terrain, one in which sex workers have experiences as diverse as those of women engaged in other forms of service work.

I focus on the period of 2006-2016 because the popular culture it produced about sex workers was different from that of the past in terms of content, genre, and the feminist positions they stake out. Specifically, I argue that these new portrayals humanize sex workers by focusing on the *work* of sex work in a way that is different from before. In the following chapters, I examine popular culture’s new sex worker between 2006 and 2016 to answer the following questions which drive this dissertation: what is the new image of the sex worker in popular culture and how is it different from the past? According to popular culture, who are sex workers and why do they choose their work? How does popular culture illuminate the *work* of sex work? How might these portrayals help to destigmatize sex workers? What side do these new representations take in ongoing feminist debates about sex work? In what ways do these portrayals, despite their progressiveness, at times support neoliberal and postfeminist ideologies? And finally, what does this popular culture leave out? In answering these questions, I follow Weitzer (2012) and recognize that the sex industry is a stratified one in which women work on a spectrum between empowerment and disempowerment. I focus on representations of sex workers engaged in indoor consensual sex work, while recognizing that this representation is but a slice of a larger picture to which I hope to contribute with this work.

From Virgin/Whore to Entrepreneur: Literature Review

Over the last 20 years, scholarship on sex work in society has crossed disciplines. Today, “sex work studies” cover a range of fields and areas including sex work and trafficking (Farr, 2005; Halley, 2006; Jeffreys, 2008); sex work and public health (Widom & Kuhns, 1996); indoor sex work (Bungay, Halpin, Atchison & Johnson, 2011; Buschi, 2014; Weitzer, 2011); outdoor sex work (Cohen, 1980; Lowman, 2000); feminist theories of sex work (Kissil & Davey, 2010; Rubin, 1984); sex worker activism (Jeffrey &

MacDonald, 2006); postcolonial sex work (Kempadoo & Dozema, 1998; Zi Teng, n.d.); neoliberal responses to sex work in a Canadian context (Ferris, 2015); sex work and the military (Enloe, 2000); sex tourism (Brennan, 2004; Cabezas, 2014); grounded sex worker research (Shaver, 2005; van der Meulen, 2011); sex work and stigma (Koken, 2012; Weitzer, 2018); digital sex work (Cunningham & Kendall, 2011; Doring, 2009; Jones, 2015; Sanders, 2005; Senft, 2008); the representation of sex workers in news media (Hallgrimsdottir et. al. 2006; Van Brunschot et. al., 1999) and, especially significant to this dissertation, the representation of women sex workers in popular culture.

This dissertation's identification of a new sex worker in popular culture – the sex worker as entrepreneur and care worker – engages with and extends feminist media studies scholarship on the representation of sex workers in film, television, and documentary. Using textual analysis, scholars have identified two ways that popular culture has tended to represent the sex worker and shown how both align with dominant patriarchal ideologies: the sex worker as the disreputable “other” in contrast to the “reputable” woman – as the “whore” within the virgin/whore dichotomy – and the sex worker as a neoliberal post-feminist subject.

Sex workers have long symbolized the disreputable “other,” a foil for patriarchy's idealized women (Firestone, 2003; McLaughlin, 1991; Sterry & Martin, 2009).⁴ In *The Second Sex* (1947), Beauvoir

⁴ Religious, scientific, and state discourses have long constructed sex workers as immoral, unruly, and hyper-sexual women in contrast to the idealized image of the moral, compliant, and chaste wife. Biblical stories portrayed sex workers as the embodiment of moral vice (Kishanty, 1982). Deuteronomy 22:21 advises men to stone prostitutes to death. Leviticus 21:9 tells the story of a priest's daughter who became a prostitute and was burnt to death (Prostitutes in the Bible, 2016). The Old Testament blames sex workers for misfortunes from crop failure to making bad investments to the fall of the entire kingdom. As Roberts (1993) notes, religious leaders established “the doctrine that...women's unfettered and uncontrolled sexuality, as personified by the whore, was evil...” (p. 11). Evans (1979) further notes that the Church “looked for a scapegoat on which to unload their guilt...the subordinate sex became the despised sex, and most despised of all were the ones who openly flaunted their femininity” (p. 53). By the 6th century A.D, the Catholic King of Spain decreed that any children born of free prostitutes were to be whipped 300 times and expelled from the town (Evans, 1979). In the Middle Ages, stories characterized sex workers as social evils and prostitutes were blamed for calamities from crop blight to venereal disease (Bullough, 1978). The Botticelli painting, “The Mystical Crucifixion” (1500), depicts a wolf emerging from under the skirt of Mary Magdalene, associating her genitals with hidden vice. Law legislated violence against prostitutes. Medieval French statutes allowed any attacker of a prostitute to shout “whore” right before he pounced, which legalized his violence (Ringdal, 2004). In Toulouse, any woman found guilty of prostitution was marched naked to a river, placed in a cage called an *accabussade*, and submerged. When the woman's thrashing ended, the cage was pulled up and the nearly dead woman revived. This process was repeated three times before the woman was finally carried off to jail. Similar episodes occurred across Europe (Sanger, 1938). Writers have drawn on these discourses to create two popular sex worker typologies: the fallen woman or the femme fatale. As Greenwald & Krich (1960) write: “The overwhelming proportion of writing on this subject...is cheaply sensational, distorted by prejudice, uninformed, often all three” (p. 1). The courtesan was the subject of literature starting in the 16th century (Kushner, 2013; Ringdal, 2004). But it was Zola's famous novel, *Nana* (1880, 1972), that made her infamous. In the epic, the prostitute's body itself becomes a symbol of grotesque destruction, a “force of nature who corrupts Paris between her snow-white thighs” (p. 187). The figure of the fallen woman appeared in Victorian visual art and literature and illustrated the consequences of a woman losing her virtue (Mills, 2015, n.pag.;

argues that patriarchal society affirms male superiority by constructing the female as the inferior “other” to man. While men are constructed as active creators, conquerors, and rulers, women are constructed as passive, dull, and powerless. While “respectable” womanhood became associated with roles that reproduced patriarchy – wife, daughter, and mother – the female body itself became linked to chastity and reproduction, allowing “the middle-class lady to maintain the purity essential to her role as society’s heart” (Twigg et. al., 2011, p. 178). When women strayed too far outside the role of domesticated virgin symbolic of “respectable” womanhood – from their roles as daughters, wives, and mothers who reproduced the patriarchal order – they faced stigmatization, and even death. In the nineteenth century, sex workers became symbolic threats to the patriarchal order, the bad “other” contrasted with the “good” wife in patriarchy’s powerful virgin-whore dichotomy (Arthurs, 2004). As Bland (2001) notes: “Behind the veneer of the dominant nineteenth-century ideal woman – the domestic ‘angel in the house’ – lurked the earlier representation of sexualized femininity: the Magdalene behind the Madonna” (p. 58). Sex workers threatened patriarchal power because of their engagement in “non-reproductive, non-monogamous...sex in exchange for money” (McLaughlin, 1991, p. 252).

The construction of the sex worker as “other” to the “good” and “chaste” woman supported patriarchy by deterring women from becoming sexually and economically independent from men (ibid.) Whether as a libidinous and venal “whore” (in contrast to the chaste mother) or as the “fallen

Nead, 2015, n. pag.; Sanchez, 2008). Stephen Crane’s realist novel, *Maggie: A Girl of the Streets* (1893), told the story of a young woman who “blossomed in the mud pile” before falling into prostitution, suffering rejection by her family, becoming sick with venereal disease, growing ugly, and drowning in a river (as cited in Hussman, 1984, p. 93). Novelists Maupassant, Huysmans, Dostoyevsky, and Tolstoy all wrote about sexually outsized courtesans. But as Walz (1998) notes, the prostitute’s compulsory death by novel’s end reinforced the idea that male sexuality was normal, while female sexuality outside of marriage was deviant and punishable. *The Contagious Diseases Act* (1863) blamed sex workers for the spread of venereal disease in Britain and gave police impunity to harass, arrest, and subject suspected prostitutes to invasive genital examinations; few but the reformer Josephine Butler defended prostitutes at this time (Butler, 1909; Barry, 1995). Meanwhile, some writers cast prostitutes as creative aphrodisiacs. Flaubert, a lifelong visitor of brothels, constructed the prostitute through a nexus of orientalism and erotic fantasy in his account of visiting an Egyptian brothel: “I go down with Saphiah-Zougairah, a very corrupted woman, a writhing and ecstatic little tigress. I stain the divan” (Mader-Lin, 2016, n. pag). Baudelaire, the archetypal “flâneur,” considered the prostitute a creative muse and saw some of himself in her outsider status, noting in 1856 that “all writers are prostitutes” (as cited in Sante, 2015, p. 24). But, as Buck-Morss (1988) astutely points out, while Baudelaire and his salon-associated brethren whimsically loitered and observed, pencils in hand, women who worked as prostitutes were criminalized and “seen as whores” (p. 120). These literary images, as Hirschman & Stern (1994) note, formed “the framework of cinematic images of prostitutes” that would dominate for the 20th century (p. 233). While exceptions certainly exist, literature and popular culture have tended to portray the prostitute in binary terms: as a helpless victim or as a dangerous, “abnormal” woman against whom “respectable” women are compared. Few representations have cast the prostitute as a legitimate worker.

woman” (in contrast to the restrained wife), patriarchal society has portrayed the sex worker as a deviant and outcast in order to enshrine the social contract that “if women were ‘good’ (i.e., sexually circumspect), men would protect them; if they were not good, men could violate and punish them” (Vance, 1984, p. 2).

Scholarship on twentieth-century popular culture representations of sex workers reveals the pervasiveness of the virgin/whore binary. In the 1920s, before the Hollywood Production Code forbid depictions of “impure love on screen” (Parish, 1992, p. xi), sex workers were sometimes strong, independent, and rounded characters who could initiate sex without being stigmatized or punished, as in *Shanghai Lily* (1932), where Marlene Dietrich is not only an unrepentant sex worker, but lives happily ever after out of wedlock (Haskell, 1989; LaSalle, 2001). Parish’s (1992) comprehensive *Prostitution in Hollywood Films* reveals a number of feature films that offered complex portrayals of sex workers, notably during the 1970s. But, as Alexander (1988) notes, “the male-controlled media” has “largely constructed an unreal image of the prostitute” along binary lines: “‘the whore with the heart of gold’ and the ‘sex goddess’ and ‘the depraved, degraded prisoner, the sexual prisoner’” (p. 186).

Hirschman & Stern’s (1994) insightful analysis of American films made between 1960 and 1988 found that sex worker characters conformed to one of four typologies – “good-evil” and “punished-unpunished” – on the virgin/whore spectrum (p. 267). The most common was the “good but punished” sex worker – the latter-day fallen woman – whose descent served the regulatory function of reminding women that the pursuit of sexual pleasure was unlikely to end well – indeed, in three quarters of the films, the sex worker winds up in a coffin. Other scholars have identified in Hollywood films the virgin/whore dichotomy that establishes an opposition between “bad” sex workers and “good” wives, the latter exaggerating the former’s venal nature and the former exaggerating the latter’s banality, which undermines both women, while the male figure emerges as whole (Collins, 2000; Haskell, 1989; Johnson, 1984). Similarly, McLaughlin (1991) perceptively argues that television’s sex workers functioned “primarily within the terms of restrictive binary oppositions” (p. 257), and Gallego’s (2010) analysis of twentieth-century Hollywood films found that sex worker characters embodied the

patriarchal division between “good” and “bad” women (p. 64). Likewise, Campbell’s (2006) astute and wide-ranging *Marked Woman* examines portrayals of sex workers in 300 global films produced between 1896 and 2005 and draws on psychoanalytic theory to show how the screen “symbolically contains” the sex worker’s threat to patriarchy by restricting her to rigid typologies that conform to the virgin/whore dichotomy, and limiting her character arc to a finale of marriage or death.

While popular culture continues to produce stereotypes of sex workers, in this dissertation I show how popular culture is departing from the representation of the sex worker as either virgin or whore through the emergent figure of the sex worker as entrepreneur and care worker. Furthermore, while scholars have tended to focus on historical feature films, I focus my inquiry on contemporary film, television, and documentary in a period of historic social change and within the context of feminism, neoliberalism, and post-feminism.

As such, my approach is aligned with recent feminist media scholarship that has shown how representations of sex work in popular culture convey neoliberal and sometimes post-feminist sensibilities by glamourizing the commodification of one’s sexuality as the fast route to empowerment (Dines, 2012). This emerging “post-feminist sensibility” (Gill, 2007), “porno chic” (McNair, 2002), “raunch culture” (Levy, 2005), “ho chic” and “self-objectification” (Coy et al., 2011) infuses many of popular culture’s representations of sex workers in films, television shows, and documentaries that depict the sex worker as an ideal type of empowered woman. Divested of the collective fight for gender equality, and focused on individual liberation through the marketplace, politics in post-feminist popular culture is relegated to individual acts of self-improvement and self-care through market transactions that take the “we” out of feminism.⁵ Coy et al. (2011) argue that this imagery is spurious on two counts: first, it makes the sex industry seem empowering through a falsely glamorous image and

⁵ Coy et al. (2011) have described this mainstreaming of sex work aesthetics as “ho chic,” a trend in which sex work is connected positively to everyday objects and activities, fashion and language, through the lens of empowerment. Della Giusta & Scuriatti (2005) similarly found that the pretend act of prostitution has been an effective marketing gambit to sell clothing and, in their content analyses, found that luxury designers such as Gucci and Luis Vuitton both presented advertising campaigns in which models were made to look like stereotypes of sex workers. Attwood (2008) examined contemporary advertising and found that images associated with sex work and pornography are being used to market consumer products to women. Taken to its most absurd heights – and blurring the line between sex work and consumerism – a 2006 British TV show called *Respectable* depicts two young women who become sex workers to bankroll the purchase of new pairs of shoes (Coy, et al., 2011).

second, by way of Roach (2007), it does not in any way lead to greater social acceptance of and increased rights for sex workers. In fact, as Della Giusta & Scuriatti (2005) argue, the appropriation of sex work aesthetics by non-sex workers “puts back into circulation the dichotomy of the virgin/whore which has informed the construction of femininity in western culture for thousands of years...a dangerous tenet that essentially defines women in relation to their bodies” (p. 38). Similarly, Arthurs (2004) has argued that while documentary has the *potential* to counter sex worker stereotypes by giving sex workers the stage to speak for themselves, it often abides by the exigencies of fictional media, that is, to titillate audiences. Similarly, Boyle (2008) contends that “docu-porn” often verges on advertising for the sex industry by portraying only the “sell side” of the sex industry in the form of interviews with sex workers in their costumes and workspaces, while failing to represent or interrogate the “buy” side of sex work – the male consumers. Dunn (2012), more optimistically, has written that the sex work documentary carries the potential to portray sex workers who have “chosen their work, are comfortable with their sexuality, provide a service for their customers, and are economically rewarded for their choice” (p. 105). These feminist media scholars, who have shown how representations of sex work in popular culture convey neoliberal and, sometimes, post-feminist sensibilities, rightly critique popular culture for its reconstitution of patriarchal ideology as post-feminism.

My dissertation works in the tradition of these scholars and draws on the critique of the neoliberal post-feminist sensibility by showing how certain popular works represent sex workers as self-commodifying subjects and prop up the idea that in a capitalist society, fortune and success are driven by individual agency alone. I show how such representations of sex workers ignore structural barriers – such as classism, racism, and sexism – and economic changes that have occasioned some women’s entry into the sex industry. But I do not agree with feminist media scholars who contend that sex work is, without a doubt, and in every case, the capitalist-patriarchal exploitation of women. For some scholars, any popular work that does *not* depict sex work as brutalizing and degrading is immediately judged as idealizing and distorting the “real” lived experience of sex workers (Gallego, 2010; Haskell, 1989). Dalla (2000), for example, criticizes films like *Pretty Woman* (Milchan & Marshall,

1990) for failing to represent the “hopelessness” and “drug use” that they claim is the fare du jour of the sex worker’s lived experience. Similarly, Haskell (1989) calls the labour-focused film about indoor sex workers, *Working Girls* (Borden & Borden, 1986) “a feminist fantasy” and contends that no woman could escape prostitution with her “soul intact” (p. 298).

While I share with feminist critics a deep concern for the superficial conflating of sexual self-commodification – the assigning of value to goods previously outside the marketplace, like sex – with empowerment, I do not assume that all sex workers are exploited victims or complicit with capitalist patriarchy. Rather, in this dissertation I shed light on popular culture representations that paint a more complex picture of women who choose to engage in and benefit from sex work. While it is undeniable that women have long been economically oppressed under patriarchal capitalism, and that sex work involves varying degrees of agency and empowerment, women still make decisions within these structures; as Hochschild (1983) argues, while women have historically had a lower “social shield” they “do not accommodate passively” (pp. 163-167).⁶ In this dissertation, following Hochschild, I do not assume that sex work and women’s sexual self-commodification is automatically an expression of their victimhood or internalized misogyny. Accordingly, I move away from theorists who read positive – and more labour-focused – popular culture representations of sex workers as mystifications of the “real” experiences of sex workers. While I critique representations that dovetail with neoliberal ideologies, I agree with Jones (2016) who writes that “critiques of neoliberal feminism” must still

⁶ Until the fourteenth century, when the spinning wheel was invented, unmarried women had only three ways of supporting themselves: by marrying, joining a convent, or becoming a sex worker (Alexander, 1988). Well into the twentieth century, the legacy of these three options made it seem axiomatic that women engaged in sex work because of few other viable choices. “In my opinion, the greatest single factor is poverty,” wrote Polly Adler (1953), the most noted American Madam (p. 271). Yet, it is also true that women have chosen sex work as a means of escape from other, lower-paid, forms of work. A 1921 study in London asked prostitutes why they had entered the sex trade: 26% cited economic reasons, but 25% said they did so “because it suited them,” suggesting they chose the work from other available options, however constrained as they were (Evans, 1979, p. 193). Socialist Emma Goldman had an especial insight into sex work, having laboured as both a factory worker and a sex worker during her life. Steeped in the lived experience of both, Goldman saw the convergence between workers’ rights and those of sex workers as early as 1908. Noting that factory workers earned a pitiable \$6 a week, Goldman did not see prostitution as a vice, but as “the direct result, in many cases, of insufficient compensation for honest labour” (1969, p. 180). Similarly, the functionalist sociologist Kingsley Davis (1937) placed prostitution principally in an economic context, viewing it as one of among many “exchanges” people make in capitalist society. Davis explained prostitution as a way by which women could gain advantages in a competitive capitalist society; thus, for a woman without the protection of marriage, Davis saw prostitution as an understandable choice. He conjectured that some women even liked the work, or at least found it highly convenient because it required no subservience to a boss and no capital startup. Davis argued that the most pressing question was “not why so many women become prostitutes, but why so few of them do” (p. 750).

explore “the potential benefits of such ideologies for the feminist subjects who adopt them” (p. 251). I am therefore interested in shedding light on how popular culture is registering and affirming growing support for a woman’s right to capitalize unconditionally on her sexual performances to her own advantage by engaging in sex work.

In this dissertation, I thus read popular culture outside of an anti-sex work paradigm by recognizing the various degrees of agency and exploitation within a highly stratified sex industry. While many of the stereotypes of the sex worker persist in present-day popular culture, the new figure of the sex worker I investigate is multi-faceted and benefits from her work. Here, sex workers are students, mothers, wives, entrepreneurs, and care workers who reap benefits and face challenges, yet defend their right to choose their work. While historically women have been the least likely beneficiaries of capitalism, and as earlier popular culture framed sex workers as passive victims of the capitalist system, these new representations depict sex workers as legitimate workers and agents who choose and benefit from their work. As well, these new popular culture representations stake out decisive positions within ongoing feminist debates about sex work today.

Feminist Theories of Sex Work

In addition to showing how new popular culture about sex workers is countering the virgin/whore dichotomy and, at times, neoliberal depictions, my dissertation also highlights how popular culture is taking a position vis-à-vis ongoing feminist debates about sex work. To provide a theoretical context for the popular culture representations I examine, it is useful to consider the feminist paradigms with which they align most closely, and depart from, and their respective strengths and blind spots. Two paradigms dominate the field today: the prohibitionist/oppression paradigm and the labour/empowerment paradigm.⁷

⁷ These feminist positions have been broadly shaped by legal perspectives on sex work, which can be organized into three approaches: prohibition legislation, social control legislation, and pro-labour legislation. Sagade & Forster (2018) offer a useful explication of each. The prohibitionist approach, the dominant framework in the U.S., contains two subsets. The first, the “public nuisance” model, tolerates sex work as long as it occurs away from residential areas, enforces only minor penalties on sex workers and clients, and makes no distinction between voluntary and forced sexual labour (p. 30). Buttressed by moral conservative ideas, this model understands sex work as a threat to family values, communities, and public health. It sees sex work as an unchangeable reality, seeks to minimize its visibility and impact on the community, but does not aim to stamp it

By portraying sex workers as entrepreneurs and care workers, the popular culture I examine in this dissertation stake out positions that largely align with the labour/empowerment paradigm and oppose the prohibitionist/oppression paradigm.⁸

The Prohibitionist/Oppression Paradigm

Feminist prohibitionists – who use the term “prostitution” rather than “sex work” – view prostitution as the principal tool of patriarchy, a system of male domination that ensures women’s subordinate status in society (Barry, 1979; Dworkin, 1993; MacKinnon, 2005; Millett, 1971). This perspective is also sometimes called the “oppression” paradigm (Weitzer, 2012). While this paradigm dovetails with moral conservatism in its objection to the very existence of prostitution, rather than see it as vice, it considers it a form of modern slavery; for this reason, some prohibitionist feminists call themselves “abolitionists” to draw an implicit consonance between their struggle to end prostitution and that of the 19th century abolitionists fighting to end slavery. Specifically, feminist prohibitionists argue that patriarchy oppresses women by slashing their earning power and subordinating them to the sexual needs of men, which leaves some women with the “non-choice” of becoming prostitutes (Dworkin, 1982). Barry (1995) calls prostitution “the foundation of women’s oppression...normalized” (p. 1).

In particular, prohibitionists argue that prostitution reproduces patriarchy by representing women’s bodies in society at large as consumable objects – commodities – that men then have the right to buy through “the male sex right” (Pateman, 1988). When men hold this “sex right,” women

out. The second subset is rooted in the abolitionist feminist position that sex work is exploitation, the patriarchal oppression of women’s civil and human rights; accordingly, it perceives all sex workers as “victims” and supports the continued criminalization of all forms of prostitution. The second legal model, “social control legislation,” uses laws to regulate the sex industry, including zoning bylaws and public health measures such as mandatory testing for sexually transmitted diseases (p. 31). This model, like the prohibitionist model, views sex work as a social nuisance and seeks to contain it through laws, policies, and bylaws. The last model, the labour model, regards sex workers as workers deserving of the same employment rights and legal protection as other service workers (p. 32). The principles underlying this model are that decriminalization reduces stigma and violence against sex workers who, with legal and employment rights, will be in a better position to negotiate and set the terms of their employment. The two dominant feminist positions on sex work – the prohibitionist paradigm and the labour/empowerment paradigm – largely stem from these legal models.

⁸ Various names have been given to these opposing feminist factions over the past 30 years: Radical Feminists vs. Pro-Sex Work Feminists; Sex Positive Feminists vs. Anti-Sex Work Feminists; Abolitionists vs. Sex Positive Radicals; Prostitutes Rights vs. Feminists Against Systems of Prostitution (Kissil & Davey, 2010; Sutherland, 2004). While feminist thought on sex work is complex and irreducible to binary distinctions, for the sake of consistency in this dissertation, I refer to those who oppose the decriminalization of prostitution as “prohibitionists” and/or the “oppression paradigm” (Weitzer, 2012) and those who support the decriminalization of sex work as the labour perspective and/or the labour or “empowerment” paradigm (ibid.).

become disposable objects upon which men “act out their sexual dominance” (Carter & Giobbe, 2006, p. 28). Prohibitionists assert that in the past three decades, just as women have won greater labour and reproductive rights, the sex industry has expanded to re-install the sexual and economic exploitation of women and to normalize the sexual objectification of women through the rhetoric of “empowerment” (Jeffreys, 2008). The goal of prohibitionists is to end prostitution and forge a new system of political power that privileges women’s experiences; in lieu of that, their goal is to remove women from prostitution and heavily criminalize male buyers of sex (Simmons, 1999).

Prohibitionists do not regard prostitution as legitimate work, but a tragic result of the collusion of patriarchy and capitalism (MacKinnon, 1988). Since patriarchy is based on unequal gender relations, prohibitionists believe that no woman consents to her own exploitation; rather, a woman turns to prostitution because she has no other options (Dworkin, 1978). According to this paradigm, any woman’s “choice” to enter prostitution is illusory, embedded in “non-choices” structured around exploitation (Farley, 2004). For prohibitionists, as long as women continue to be educationally and economically marginalized, prostitution will attract a ready pool of workers, who, duped by the idea that prostitution is lucrative, will be left no better off financially.⁹ Prohibitionists further assert that prostitutes do not have or use professional skills as exploited women (Jeffreys, 2008). Consequently, they shun terms like “sex work,” which suggests a consonance between prostitution and non-sexual forms of labour, and use terms like “prostituted woman,” “slave,” and “survivor” (as cited in Spector, 2006, p. 5). Dworkin (1993) calls sex workers simply “exploited women” (n. pag.). For prohibitionists, prostitution is the commodification of the entire self, rather than the selling of a service or one’s time.

Prohibitionists likewise view prostitution as inherently violent and dangerous (Banyard, 2009; Jeffreys, 2008; Silbert & Pines, 1981). Coerced by miserable conditions, and forcibly confined by pimps

⁹ Prohibitionists reject the claim that sex work can be a profitable enterprise for women. Weisberg (2003) found that most street-based sex workers teeter on the brink of financial ruin, and that “women and girls in prostitution suffer even greater economic marginalization than in the ‘licit’ market where they were already marginalized as workers” (as cited in Baldwin, 2006, p. 111). She rejects the proposal that were laws changed, more women would become managers and owners, and reap greater financial rewards. Citing Miller’s study of street prostitutes in Milwaukee, Baldwin argues that for many women the cash earned from prostitution has a particular meaning as “fast money: as dead, useless, as phony, as demeaning to hold, as the trick” (p. 138). This is one of among many reasons prohibitionists reject the notion that prostitution is financially empowering.

and procurers, they argue that prostitutes are victims of physical assault and frequently raped because of the inherently dangerous nature of the sex industry (Barry, 1979; 1995). Over the last 20 years, scholars have found that street-based prostitutes are exponentially more likely to be raped and assaulted, and five times more likely to be murdered than women in the general population (Stark, 2006). These figures in part are what cause prohibitionists to characterize male buyers of sex – “johns” – as captors and buyers of “rape for money” (Carter & Giobbe, 2006).

The prohibitionist perspective is also inclined to emphasize that prostitution is a psychologically dehumanizing experience for women. They tend to make this claim, as Comte (2013) notes, based on the assumption that there is an inextricable link between a woman’s sexuality and sense of self. They further argue that engagement in prostitution causes or worsens existing mental illnesses, including post-traumatic stress disorder, amnesia, borderline personality disorder, and clinical depression (Banyard, 2009; Dworkin, 1993). Moreover, they posit that women with pre-existing mental illnesses and traumas are more likely to enter prostitution, having been taught early on that their bodies are sites of pain and exploitation. Farley (2004) has argued “a large part of the ‘emotional work’ of prostitution is the construction of measures to enable a disassociation of mind from body in order to survive the abuse” (p. 21)¹⁰ while Barry (1995), similarly, remarks on the “hollowing out” effects women in prostitution experience stemming from the “distancing” strategies they use in their work.

For these reasons, prohibitionists consider prostitution dangerous and exploitative, and view women who say they “choose” their work as victims complicit with patriarchy. Dworkin (1982) goes so far as to call prostitutes “counterfeit female sexual revolutionaries, gullible liberated girls [there] to serve the men who enjoy them” (p. 57). Some prohibitionists, as McClintock (1993) has noted, take an even harder line against dialoguing with sex workers and have refused to appear on panels with them

¹⁰ Numerous prohibitionists have remarked on the “hollowing out” effects of prostitution and the strategies of “not being there” they argue sex workers use, which Baldwin compares to those “employed by women and girls to avoid the trauma of rape and incest” (p. 143). Barry (1995) proposes that the performances sex workers engage in to do their jobs – including the donning of costumes and stage names – make disassociation a veritable job requirement. Carter & Giobbe (2006) sum up the effects as follows: “The process of becoming a prostitute entails the systematic destruction of an individual woman’s ideas, beliefs, feelings and desires...A good prostitute is devoid of a unique and personal identity” (p. 25).

“on the grounds that [sex workers] are too poor, too victimized, and too prone to false consciousness to be able to represent themselves objectively” (p. 5).

All in all, prohibitionists oppose measures to decriminalize prostitution, arguing that slackened laws will place women at greater risk of harm, do little to end violence or improve working conditions, or halt sex trafficking (Farley, n.d.). Prohibitionists make no distinction between forced and voluntary prostitution (Barry, 1979; MacKinnon, 1988). In consonance with this position, the U.S. government views prostitution as sexual exploitation and considers criminalization – especially of the “buy side” of prostitution, as seen in the increasingly popular “Nordic Model”¹¹ – the only way to protect women from harm (Urback, 2014). Today, prostitution is criminalized in every U.S. state except for in certain counties in Nevada.¹²

The Labour/Empowerment Paradigm

Deeply embedded as prohibitionist thought is within the feminist movement, it has not gone unquestioned. The labour paradigm calls for the decriminalization of sex work and the recognition that sex workers, like other workers under capitalism, have agency, and focuses on securing their legal and employment rights (Augustin, 1997; Ditmore, 2006; Durisin, et. al. 2018; Queen, 1997; Willis, 1992). While the labour perspective concedes that women face oppression at increased levels in patriarchal society, and make decisions within the constraints of race, class, sexuality, and gender, it views sex workers as agents who are trying to work through and transcend those conditions (Cole, 2012;

¹¹ One of the most globally publicized changes to sex work legislation occurred in 1999, when several Scandinavian countries – first Sweden, then Norway, then Iceland – adopted new laws around sex work that came to be known as a “the Nordic model.” According to the Nordic model, all women involved in sex work are victims of patriarchal violence and predatorial pimps and johns and wish to exit the sex industry. Given that the Nordic model views women as victims, it criminalizes only the “buy” side of the transaction (purchasers of sex). The goal of the model is to curb demand for commercial sexual services, but sex workers and advocates in these countries argue that the new laws have simply pushed sex workers further underground to meet clients in clandestine locations, where they become even more vulnerable to violence (Ferris, 2015; Okyere & Thesslund, 2018).

¹² Nevada’s permissive attitude towards prostitution dates to the days of the Gold Rush when the state’s “tradition of pragmatism” and reliance on male migrant labour made it practicable for legislators to legalize prostitution to ensure the male workforce employed in the mining industry remained compliant; furthermore, the large size of the state and its sparse rural population made the presence of brothels in rural areas less objectionable to the public (Bullough 1978, p. 224). Prostitution was officially legalized in Nevada in 1971. Mustang Bridge Ranch, eight miles outside of Reno, became the first fully licensed brothel in the U.S. in 1971, gaining a license at a cost of \$4,500 per quarter (Evans, 1979). Today, 21 legal brothels operate in rural areas of Nevada (Ash, 2018).

Goldstein, 1983; Petro, 2006; Phoenix, 1999; Wagner, 2014). The goal of the labour perspective is to reduce the stigmatization of sex workers, place sex workers at the centre of the decriminalization debate as “legitimate sources of knowledge about their work” (van der Meulen et al., 2013, p. 1), make distinctions between consensual sex work and sex trafficking, re-conceptualize sex work as legitimate labour, and decriminalize it (Gira Grant, 2014; Massey, 2014). Rather than seek to directly dismantle patriarchal capitalism, the labour/empowerment paradigm hopes to make it easier for sex workers to function and thrive within it by articulating a “rights-based frame to counter the ‘victim frame’ that conflates sex work and trafficking” (Jackson, 2016, p. 27).

According to the labour/empowerment paradigm, sex work is a choice. It is not coercion or lack of opportunity that leads women to sex work, they argue, but the advantages they find in sex work when compared with other available options (Comte, 2013; Rivers-Moore, 2010). While the labour perspective acknowledges that women face poverty and job discrimination at exaggerated levels in capitalist society, it understands sex work as a way of deliberately moving beyond these constraints and highlights an array of reasons why women enter and remain in sex work: high wages; the potential to earn a great deal of money in a short time (leaving one free to pursue creative practices or other vocations); flexible scheduling (especially convenient for mothers); becoming disenchanted with “straight” jobs; the need to pay tuition; curiosity and the desire for adventure; meeting interesting people; breaking mores; reversing economic sexism; the empowering feeling of being paid for sexual services; and because they like sex work and are good at it (Burana, 1998; Hollander, 1974; Katz, 1973; Lucas, 2005; Stein, 1974; Venkatesh, 2009). The labour/empowerment paradigm holds that some women choose, enjoy, and benefit from sex work.

Taking its cues from sex positive feminism, “sex radicals” (Chapkis, 1997) – a more identity based contingent of the labour perspective – argue that sex work can foster women’s independence by offering opportunities for self-expression and non-conformism, which have the potential to “change the balance of power in society” (Spector, 2006, p. 144). These “sex radicals” conceptualize sex work as a potentially subversive act in two ways: first, it gives women the opportunity to confront capitalism

and sexism by selling emotional and sexual services to men who expected to receive them for free (Pendleton, 1997). By monetizing their sexual and emotional labour, sex radicals hold that some sex workers stage a feminist challenge to the “male sex right.” Second, by engaging in sex work, sex radicals argue, women may unshackle themselves from the patriarchal double standard that empowers men to be libidinous, while condemning the same behaviour in women (Allison, 1984; Dimen, 1984). For sex radicals, the oppression of women is rooted in the patriarchal control of women’s sexuality, which forces women to be sexually passive while permitting men total sexual freedom (Nagle, 1997; Queen, 1997). Women who do not accept these hypocritical rules are labeled “sluts” and face social stigma (Comte, 2013). Further, they argue that by delineating what is sexually expressible for women, anti-sex work feminists participate in the very virgin/whore binary they critique (Rubin, 1984). Against sexual puritanism, sex radicals view sex work as a potential tool of re-appropriation, seeing women’s full participation in the sexual realm as a foundational act of feminism. The feminist cultural critic Willis (1992), who coined the term “sex positive feminism,” considered sexual liberation to be an intrinsic part of the feminist movement and criticized prohibitionists for marginalizing sex workers in the same ways nineteenth-century patriarchal society separated women into two categories: respectable, idealized “virgins” and disreputable “whores.” For the labour perspective’s sex radicals, sexual self-determination is a central goal of feminism (Delacoste & Alexander, 1988).¹³

The labour paradigm furthermore asserts that sex work can be rewarding and remunerative and challenges the notion that sex work is intrinsically dangerous or damaging to women. While it does not refute that violence occurs in the sex industry, it contends that violence is experienced predominantly by outdoor – street-based – sex workers, not indoor sex workers, who, they argue, work in safer conditions, have the opportunity to screen their clients, and use safety precautions like security

¹³ Hartley (1997), a well-known pornographic actress, frames her decision to enter the sex industry alongside her contemporaries’ involvement in counter-cultural movements of the 1960s. The liberatory potential of sex work is described by Chapkis (1997) in *Live Sex Acts: Performing Erotic Labour*. Chapkis, a sociologist, conducted 50 interviews with sex workers in Amsterdam and San Francisco to make sense of their positions as “politicized whores” (p. 13). Many of the women Chapkis interviews consider sex work “erotic labour” and align themselves with “sex radical feminism” (p. 40). For Chapkis, sex work and gender equality are not fixed areas, but terrains of struggle.

cameras and drivers (Weitzer, 2012). Furthermore, the labour/empowerment paradigm argues that the alarming statistics cited by prohibitionist feminists vis-à-vis traumatic childhoods and mental illness endemic among sex workers are collected from the most desperate (and incarcerated) sex workers and are not representative of sex workers as a group (McNeill, 2014; Wilson & Widom, 2010). Overall, the labour /empowerment paradigm argues that whatever dangers sex workers do face largely stem from the criminalization of sex work and the social process of stigmatization – what Pheterson (2004) has called “whore stigma” – that compels sex workers to conduct their business underground where they become far more vulnerable to violence. This paradigm is also troubled by the one-dimensional ways in which prohibitionists characterize male buyers of sex – “johns” – as violent and misogynistic. On the contrary, the labour/empowerment perspective asserts that men buy sex for complex – often emotional – reasons and only a minority (consistent with the general population) are violent (Atchison, Fraser & Lowman, 1998; Davidson, 2003; Monto & McRee, 2005; Sanders, 2008).

The labour paradigm also challenges the assertion that by “selling” their bodies, sex workers dehumanize and psychologically damage themselves. Rather, this paradigm understands sex work as the selling of a service, the performance of heterosexual femininity – what Gira Grant (2014) calls “playing a role” (p.90).¹⁴ Through the overt assumption of the feminine role, the labour perspective holds, women produce and sell a commercial service to a customer like any other service provider does in the marketplace (Pendleton, 1997). The labour paradigm also focuses on the specific labour skills sex workers draw on in the commission of their work, from emotional labour to body work to entrepreneurial skills such as marketing and bookkeeping and highlights the positive contributions they make to their clients’ lives (Ericsson, 1980; Lucas, 2005; Wolkowitz, 2002).

The labour paradigm’s reframing of sex work from vice to labour was made possible by the sex workers’ rights movement in the 1970s (Chateauvert, 2013; Jenness, 1990), which turned away from

¹⁴ In the well-regarded anthology, *Sex Work: Writings by Women in the Sex Industry* (1988), sex workers frequently liken their work to a performance of sexuality more akin to play or sport than sex itself. Pendleton (1997) states: “Much of what sex workers do can be described as mimetic play, an overt assumption of the feminine role in order to exploit it” (p. 79). Writings by lesbian sex workers featured in the collection elaborate further on how sex work is a performance – even of heterosexuality itself (ibid.).

understanding sex work in purely gendered terms (i.e., as governed by patriarchy), and toward newer inquiries into how capitalism structures sexual labour (van der Meulen, et al., 2013).¹⁵ The term “sex work” was coined by Carol Leigh at a 1979 activist convention to underscore the centrality of labour/work and the economic motivations and implications involved in the sale of sexual services (Benoit et. al., 2017). As well, the term “sex work” better described the array of labour practiced by a diversity of women in the sex industry. As Petro (2011) notes, “anything from working as a phone sex operator or being an erotic dancer to working in porn or working as a prostitute could be classified as ‘sex work’” (n. pag.). Focusing on the different types of labour performed by women in the industry – rather than on their subject positions as “prostitutes” – united women on a platform that emphasized their labour – and their choice. This shift, in turn, opened up a space for sex workers to be viewed as workers (Queen, 1997). As van der Meulen (2013) notes, Marx was the first to understand sexual labour as a form of work, writing that “prostitution is only a specific expression of the general prostitution of the labourer” (p. 17).¹⁶

¹⁵ The sex workers’ rights movement found its major goal in advocating for the self-representation of sex workers. The first sex workers’ rights organization, COYOTE (Call Off Your Old Tired Ethics), was established in 1972 by San Francisco sex worker Margo St. James, and aimed to improve working conditions for sex workers, reduce the hostility and violence faced by sex workers, and rally for the decriminalization of sex work (Spector, 2006). Ultimately, COYOTE wanted to move the conversation away from the exploitation or victim narrative towards an understanding that many women choose sex work. To reflect this agency, sex worker activist Carol Leigh coined the term “sex work” at a 1979 activist convention to describe the array of labour practiced by a diversity of women in the sex trade (van der Meulen, 2013, p. 17).

¹⁶ In the footsteps of Marx, feminist author and activist Emma Goldman, in 1910, argued that it was necessary to stop labeling sex workers as moral retrogrades for choosing their work, which, in her opinion, was a logical choice in a society that exploits all workers in a system of industrial slavery: “We must rise above our foolish notions of “better than thou,” and learn to “recognize the prostitute as a product of social conditions. Such a realization will sweep away the attitude of hypocrisy and ensure a greater understanding and more humane treatment” (1911, n. pag.). Against the grain of criminological understandings, socialists saw prostitution as a motivated act within a capitalist system and were the first to challenge dominant conceptions of prostitutes as victims or evil women by drawing a consonance between prostitution and marriage. In the *Origin of Family, Private Property and the State* (1894) Engels argued that marriage was in fact nothing more than a socially sanctioned form of prostitution and that married woman “differed from an ordinary courtesan only in that she does not hire out her body, like a wage worker, but sells it into slavery once and for all” (Kishanty, 1982, p. 47). Historically, this argument bears much weight. As Alexander (1988) points out, before the invention of the spinning wheel in the thirteenth century, only three modes of survival were available to women: marriage, the convent or prostitution. The novelist and feminist philosopher Mary Wollstonecraft, writing in 1790, called prostitution the more honest alternative to what she called “legal prostitution” – marriage (as cited in Pateman, 1988, p. 51). For Engels, monogamous marriage was a symptom of the capitalist system’s “bourgeois social order, where chastity is proscribed and adultery punished, marriage becomes monogamous for women but not men” (as cited in Hirschman & Stern, 1994, p. 230). By the turn of the 20th century, Emma Goldman, likewise saw prostitution as no different from women’s most socially sanctioned form of survival, writing that “it is merely a question of degree whether [a woman] sells herself to one man, in or out of marriage, or as to many men” (ibid). Goldman had experience as both a factory worker and a sex worker and saw convergences between the struggles of sex workers and workers in labour struggles at large. For Goldman, the pitiable wages of factory work explained why some young women chose to engage in sex work. Goldman argued that for some women sex work represented the only way out of servitude to a factory foreman, or its alternative, marriage. In the late nineteenth century, the influence of socialist thought increased mainstream understandings of prostitution as an issue related to capitalism, as well as a woman’s individual choice (Bullough, 1978).

The labour paradigm makes a compelling case for the decriminalization of consensual sex work by providing a rationale in four parts. First, they contend that the criminalization of sex work is not a deterrent to women who sell sex for socioeconomic reasons; criminalizing sex workers does not remove those burdens. Second, they argue that sex work is a victimless crime; third, that the policing of sex work places a huge financial burden on the justice system that could be better used to curtail sex trafficking; and fourth, that the greatest risk to sex workers are not violent clients, but the legal prohibitions that force the sex industry underground and compel women to offer their services in clandestine locations to avoid arrest (Jeffrey & MacDonald, 2006). A growing body of scholarship supports this argument (Bruckert, et al., 2013; van der Meulen, et al., 2013). In the U.S., police continue to arrest far more sex workers than johns; women sex workers comprise 97% of all prostitution arrests, proof that the state, though purportedly protecting women, almost unanimously punishes women (Gira Grant, 2014). Women of colour are disproportionately charged with prostitution (ibid.). The pervasive fear of arrest makes it unlikely for sex workers to report violence to police for fear of being arrested themselves (Silbert & Pines, 1981). While the labour paradigm concedes that some women in the sex industry are exploited, it holds that existing laws could protect trafficked women, while sex workers who choose their work could be collectively better off if sex work were to be decriminalized.¹⁷

Feminist Debates about Sex Work: Critiques of Both Sides

The prohibitionist paradigm makes a hard-hitting critique of the worst facets of patriarchal capitalism and the ways in which a lack of economic opportunities structure women's lives – and may prompt them to enter sex work in absence of other viable options. The all-out assault, however, it makes on the sex workers' rights movement is rigid and occludes the voices of sex workers who do choose and benefit from their work. Condemning women for profiting from their sexuality is also problematic as it reproduces what Monet (1997) calls "mainstream feminism's insistence that certain kinds of consensual

¹⁷ A common prohibitionist argument is that all forms of prostitution must remain criminalized in order to protect women from being sex trafficked. Yet, under U.S. law, there are separate provisions for trafficking, forcible confinement, organized crime, sexual assault, and extortion, meaning that current laws that criminalize consensual sex work do not need to exist in order for trafficked women to be protected and for their exploiters to be brought to justice (Simmons, 1999).

sex are degrading to women [and] reinforces the belief that women are property who lose value with use or at least certain kinds of use” (p. 221). A further problem is the conflation of sex work and sex trafficking. According to prohibitionists, a call girl in Manhattan charging \$1,500 an hour is theoretically identical to a trafficked woman. In the name of speaking for the collective of all women, prohibitionists erase important class, race, gender, and occupation-based differences between sex workers. This paradigm’s focus on trauma stories about sex workers who suffer from mental illnesses elides the fact that many sex workers are not mentally ill and rationally choose their jobs. All in all, the prohibitionist focus on capitalist and patriarchal power relations is crucial to the feminist project, but their sweeping condemnation of sex workers’ experiences, negation of sex worker agency, and their inattention to the stratifications within the sex industry, make their paradigm inadequate.

The labour paradigm is a valuable feminist counterpoint to the prohibitionist paradigm. It stresses sex worker agency and carves out a space to understand sex work as labour deserving of the same rights and protections as other work. This paradigm positively recognizes the agency of sex workers who choose their jobs, a reality that is shored up by decades of first-person accounts by sex workers and sociological inquiry (Cousins, 1936; Bruckert, 2004; Greenwald, 1959; Stein, 1974). As Comte (2013) notes: “for many women in the Western world, it is not lack of work skills or the need for survival that leads them to...sex work, it is rather because they find advantages in doing so, compared with other work opportunities” (p. 205). The labour paradigm has been instrumental in showing that decriminalization is most likely to keep sex workers safe. Yet, at times, the less labour-focused contingent of this paradigm may over-emphasize the agency of sex workers. This is especially true of the “sex radicals,” whose stress on individual sexual expression at times draws on neoliberal postfeminism and is naïve about the capitalist social relations that shape every type of labour (Jeffreys, 2008; Satz, 2012).¹⁸ Pateman (1988), for example, warns that placing “freedom of choice” at the

¹⁸ Weitzer (2009) has been critical of the less labour-oriented and more neoliberal conceptions of sex work which romanticize it outside of the structures of patriarchy and capitalism. Razack (1998) has been vocal of “tourist tales,” in which middle-class women who “transgress” bourgeois sexuality, then return to the safety of their class position, from where they write about their empowering experiences. O’Neill (2013), writing about Nagle’s *Whores and Other Feminists*, is critical of the empowerment paradigm’s reluctance to contend with the foundational prohibitionist argument that lack of economic opportunity continues to structure some women’s entry into the sex industry. Yet, sex workers who speak publicly are hardly a homogenous group

foundation of the empowerment paradigm fails to address the climate of systemic gendered oppression in which many women, every day, act.

Yet, it is also true that sex workers have good reason for embracing what might appear on the surface to be the rhetoric of choice feminism. Patriarchal society has long used the discourse of female victimhood to vindicate the criminalization of sex work under the banner of saving sex workers from themselves. Bearing this double-barrelled weight of assumed victimhood, sex workers have often had to make loud, simplified, and strident arguments, and to deny the existence of oppression within the sex industry, bar none, in order to assume the mantle of authority to speak about their own work. Gira Grant (2014) describes this rhetorical double bind: either embrace mainstream victim ideology proffered up by prohibitionist feminism or virulently deny any problems or negative feelings associated with sex work to defend against “whorephobia”:

When the public is groomed to expect a poor, suffering whore, it’s appreciable why some sex workers who do come out would take pains to provide a counter-narrative and never look like a prostitute. They are asked only to talk about how empowering it all was or about how much of a survivor they are. They have to convince audiences how much they have their shit together (p. 80).

Along the same lines, Burana (2001), a journalist and former erotic dancer, writes of the pressure she felt to be unequivocally rosy about her work, lest she be accused of being a victim or a handmaiden of patriarchy. Looking back on this defensive rhetorical stance, she writes:

Sure, I want to show the world that erotic dancers can be capable, thinking, feeling people, able to set boundaries, care for other people and ourselves. But taken too far, such emphasis on

today. In fact, in many first-person accounts, sex workers – who are neither white, nor middle class – describe how they confront patriarchal capitalism by becoming self-employed workers and owners and illuminate how their engagement in sex work is a means of economic mobility.

the positive casts me as a Paglian caricature — all triumph and no clue. When I think of all the times I huffed out, testily, ‘I’ve never been degraded! I’ve never been exploited!’ I wish I could reach back in time and put a hand over my own stupid mouth (as cited in Karen D., 2009)

Following Burana, my own position is that sex work is a stratified form of work, distinct from trafficking, and that sex workers deserve the same legal rights and employment protections as other workers under capitalism. While recognizing that exploitation occurs within the sex industry, I view laws that criminalize sex workers as ineffective at stemming the violence they purport to protect women from. Thus, I follow Bernstein (2007), and recognize that while sex work may sometimes be rooted in inequitable social conditions, it may also “constitute an attempted means of escape from even more profoundly violating social conditions” (p. 16).

Popular culture can be a site of political contestation between various factions of feminism, and the popular culture representations of sex workers as entrepreneurs and care workers I examine in this dissertation tacitly take a political position in these ongoing debates. In the portrayals I explore, sex workers choose their work, achieve a measure of economic mobility and, at times, feel empowered by their jobs. But they also face challenges in the form of criminalization and stigmatization as well as occupational hazards ranging from emotional burnout to the constant threat of being outed to family and friends. Overall, the popular culture I analyze opposes the prohibitionist/oppression paradigm and supports the labour/empowerment paradigm and, at times, the polymorphous paradigm.

The Polymorphous Paradigm

In addition to supporting the labour/empowerment paradigm, the most nuanced representations I examine in this dissertation align with what Weitzer (2012) has termed the “polymorphous” paradigm. This paradigm conceptualizes sex work according to hierarchies already present in society and the sex industry, and attempts to understand the many layered issues within the sex industry such as “victimization, exploitation, agency, job satisfaction, self-esteem and other dimensions as variables...[rather than] constants” (p. 32). Drawing on the labour/empowerment and polymorphous

paradigms, some of the popular culture I analyze highlights the complex interplay between structure and agency, invites the viewer to abandon the dichotomous construction of the sex worker as altogether exploited or agentic, and addresses both the challenges and benefits of sex work. By validating the labour/empowerment and, at times, polymorphous paradigms, the popular culture I analyze breaks away from the oppression paradigm, but in doing so, often links with the ideology of neoliberalism.

Sex Work as Entrepreneurship: Sex Work Under Post-Fordist Neoliberalism

By examining popular culture about sex workers from 2006 to 2016, within a context of feminism and neoliberalism, I answer the call made by Jones (2016) who writes that “the neoliberal turn has not been explored sufficiently by feminists writing about sex work” (p. 249). How popular culture represents the labour of sex work under neoliberalism – read through a feminist media studies lens – is a further focus of this dissertation.

The popular culture representations of the sex worker as entrepreneur and care worker that I examine in this dissertation respond to and paint a vivid picture of neoliberalism, a philosophical doctrine and dominant political-economic ideology (Illouz, 1997; Monbiot, 2016; Rottenberg, 2018).¹⁹ Neoliberalism promotes “free-market fundamentalism,” the idea that humans reach their potential through what Harvey (2007) calls “entrepreneurial freedoms” within an economic and governmental system that privileges unregulated markets, individual property rights, individual liberty and free trade (p. 22). By viewing all forms of state intervention as meddlesome, neoliberals champion the market as the universal and supreme site for the expression of human freedom. Beginning in the 1970s, post-Fordist neoliberalism gradually became the dominant mode of governance in the U.S., replacing

¹⁹ Scholars have understood neoliberalism as a philosophical doctrine that fundamentally shapes how we view society and our place within it (Vallas, 2012) and as a political ideology so pervasive that it has become our way of life (Monbiot, 2016). While debate about the exact definition of neoliberalism is ongoing, scholars agree that since the 1990s we have been living in a neoliberal society. Harvey (2007) suggests that neoliberal ideologies are so deeply imbedded within society that they are “taken for granted without question” (p. 24). Monbiot (2016) argues that neoliberalism is so pervasive and enmeshed in North American society that “we seldom even recognize it as an ideology” (n. pag).

the Fordist economic principles and welfare regimes of a previous age.²⁰ The Fordist system had supported trade regulations, collective responsibility, a large welfare state, and financial regulation; post-Fordist neoliberalism policies vaunt free markets, individual freedom, a shrinking welfare state, privatization, and deregulation (Edgell, 2012). Post-Fordist neoliberalism has restructured the way that governments, corporations, and people conduct themselves, and has promised freedom and equality for all. Yet, it has not delivered on that promise: since the 1970s, the income gap between the top 1% and the rest of the populace has widened, while working people in the U.S. have endured “depressed wages, job insecurity, and a steep rise in the number of hours worked for wages” (Diamond, Varney & Amich, 2017, p. 3). The standard employment relationships of the previous age (i.e., full-time jobs with benefits and pensions and the assumption of generational upward mobility) has been disrupted and replaced by part-time, low-waged service jobs without benefits and what has been coined recently as “the rise of downward mobility” (Samuleson, 2018, n. pag.). Braced by neoliberal ideologies, post-Fordist service industries have flourished and precarious employment – often under the celebratory banner of “entrepreneurship” – has proliferated.²¹

In this altered political-economic context, Power (2009) reminds us that “no discussion of the current fortunes of women can take place outside of discussions of work” (p. 17). Jones (2016) notes that “feminist theorizing around contemporary sex work should be attentive...[to] a greater reliance on

²⁰ Neoliberalism emerged in the mid-1970s in response to an economic slump that brought widespread unemployment and skyrocketing inflation. According to Harvey (2007), “discontent was widespread” (p. 27). A new strategy was necessary, and neoliberal policy makers, buoyed by the banking industry, stepped in to promote a regime which quickly grew under the Carter but especially the Reagan administrations. Neoliberalism replaced Fordist economic principles that had dominated for 100 years and upon which the 20th century American economy was built.

²¹ As of 2016, 6.4 million Americans held multiple part-time jobs involuntarily, an all-time high in 30 years, and a 44% increase since 2007 (EPI, 2016). At any given time, millions of Americans are searching for new part-time jobs in anticipation of their current (and multiple) part-time jobs ending. 25% of part-time workers live in poverty (Gillespie, 2016). However, under the celebratory discourses of neoliberalism, this constant search for work is often framed as “opportunity” and “reinvention” while job-seekers are portrayed as “flexible entrepreneurs.” McGuigan (2014) argues that neoliberalism has created an “ideal neoliberal subject” who is “penalized harshly not only for personal failure but also for sheer bad luck in a highly competitive and harshly social environment” (p. 234). Gill & Kanai (2018) further note that under neoliberalism “when rights to employment and social safety nets are continually under attack, media are increasingly implicated in calling forth subjects who are ‘resilient,’ ‘creative,’ ‘flexible,’ and ‘positive’” (p. 320). Since the 1990s, the proportion of Americans who are middle-class has steadily declined, the income gap between the sexes increased, trade unions have been decimated, and poverty has spiked. As Harvey (2007) notes, while upbeat neoliberal discourses celebrate the unbridled opportunities of entrepreneurship, neoliberalism can be more accurately described as “a radical reconfiguration of class relations” bent on restoring “ruling class power” (p. 35).

neoliberal ideas” (p. 4). In this dissertation, I am interested in how these new representations of sex workers as entrepreneurs and care workers link with post-Fordist neoliberal ideologies. These affirmative representations are a double-edged sword. Although they positively humanize sex workers and dignify their right to choose to do sex work as an escape from low-waged service work that dominates the neoliberal economy, by representing sex workers as flexible entrepreneurs who embrace “reinvention,” they elide collective solutions to the widespread inequality all women – and women sex workers – disproportionately face under post-Fordist neoliberalism. In many ways, popular culture is producing new sex worker character types who live and work as post-Fordist neoliberalism’s ideal subjects: “entrepreneurs” in a service-based economy in which hustling is the new norm. Nonetheless, popular culture’s new portrayals valuably draw our attention to the *work* of sex work – its labour processes and daily grind, its benefits and challenges.

Popular Culture: Showing the Work of Sex Work

Work is often a blind spot in feminist media studies (McLaughlin, 2009), and the actual labour processes of sex work have been largely ignored by popular culture (Hallgrimsdottir, Phillips & Benoit, 2006).²² In fact, what little scholarship there is on the nexus of sex work and labour has been concentrated in sociological studies (Bleakley, 2015; Jones, 2015). But as Lucas (2005) rightly observes, sex work is “a rich site in which to explore the meaning of work” (p. 514). In erotic dancing clubs and massage parlours, hotel rooms and private homes, and on personal computers, these new jobs – immaterial, precarious, and emotion-based – are emblematic of post-Fordist neoliberalism’s precarious service economy; they rely “heavily on communication” and draw on “workers’ communicative, cognitive, intellectual, and affect capacities in more intensified ways” (Cohen, 2017, p. 29). In this dissertation, I take popular cultural representations of sex work to be a site through which to explore the changing nature of work in the twenty-first century. I argue that popular culture’s figure

²² Historically, popular culture has seldom explored the boons and drawbacks ordinary people working at ordinary jobs. As Pauline Kael, the *New Yorker*’s first film critic, observed in 1974, “work is rarely treated in films. It’s one of the peculiarities of the movies. You hardly see a person at work” (as cited in Terkel, 1974, p. 155).

of the sex worker as entrepreneurial care worker is both an emotional labourer and creative entrepreneur engaged in transactional, service oriented, and personality driven work. By conversing, massaging, teaching, performing, coaxing, marketing, and empathizing, the characters and subjects in these popular works epitomize this new type of twenty-first century worker. By focusing on the *work* of sex work, this new popular culture invites us to glean new insights into the hidden labour processes of a clandestine job and build empathy for sex workers' experiences and recognition of their skills.

Given my emphasis on how popular culture represents the labour processes of sex worker entrepreneurs and care workers, six key concepts fundamental to the labour of work in the sex industry are useful to my interpretation: entrepreneurship; erotic capital (Hakim, 2010); emotional labour (Hochschild, 1983); care work (Haines, 2017); body work (Wolkowitz, 2002); and aesthetic labour and display work (Mears, 2014; Mears & Connell, 2016).

Entrepreneurship

The sex workers in the popular culture I examine are all entrepreneurs, individuals who take on personal financial risk to start businesses, often independently with minimal start-up capital.²³ The number of self-identified entrepreneurs has been rising since the early 1980s when the U.S. entered “an entrepreneurial age” brought on by the downsizing of Fortune 500 companies and workers who found “cubicle life stifling and were bold enough to take risks” (Tice, 2007, n. pag.).²⁴ In the twenty-first century, entrepreneurs increasingly establish businesses that offer services which sometimes entail the manufacturing of feelings and self-commodification,²⁵ the “process of assigning market value to goods

²³ The first thinker to use the term “entrepreneur,” Cantillon, in the seventeenth century, defined the entrepreneur as “someone who exercises business engagements in the face of uncertainty” (Thurik & Wennekers, 1999, p. 31).

²⁴ The growth of women’s entrepreneurship in the U.S. between 2006 and 2016 has been significant. Women-owned businesses increased 45% in comparison to 9% for male-owned businesses. Revenues at women-owned businesses have increased by 35%. As of 2016, there are 11,313,900 women entrepreneurs in the United States (American Express, 2017).

²⁵ In the early 1950s, the radical sociologist C. Wright Mills predicted that in the new American economy “fewer individuals would manipulate things” and “more would handle people and symbols” (as cited in Cohen, 2017, p. 31). Beginning in the 1970s, this proved true as manufacturing jobs were replaced by service jobs that increasingly relied on workers’ intellectual, interpersonal, emotional, and communicative skills. This shift entailed the worker bringing more of their personality and feelings into their job – a process that involved transferring emotion from the personal sphere into the market, which Mills suggested would result in the commodification of workers. “In the shift from manual skills to the art of selling and servicing people, personal traits of employees are drawn into the spirit exchange and become commodities in the labour market,” Mills wrote (as cited in CrimethInc, 2012, p. 65). Although Mills was not referring to sex workers, the new employment relations he

that previously existed outside the market” (Constable, 2009, p. 50). The popular culture I examine reflect the ways in which sex workers are self-commodifying entrepreneurs who assign exchange values to time-based access to their sexual services, feelings, personalities, and performances of eroticism, who operate entrepreneurially by marketing and branding themselves, identifying niche markets, building and maintaining consumer bases, and striving to turn a profit. While past popular culture representations of the entrepreneur sex worker were blithe sketches of a businesswoman “type,” these new portrayals represent in detail the work that sex worker entrepreneurs engage in every day.²⁶

Erotic Capital

Hakim’s (2010) theory of “erotic capital” proposes that women can strategically use a constellation of personal qualities – including beauty, sex appeal, charm, energy, humour, and self-presentation – for personal economic mobility. Drawing upon Bourdieu’s (1987) concept of cultural capital, which theorizes that taste (and consumption patterns) reinforce existing class hierarchies and divisions, Hakim argues that erotic capital is self-made, not class-bound, and is particularly useful as an equalizing strategy for women born without class privileges and those in “occupations [that] allow women to...get commercial value from [their work] i.e. erotic dancers, burlesque artists, erotic dancers, lap dancers, call girls, night club hostesses, and waitresses” (p. 510). While Hakim’s theory neglects to illuminate the barriers to using and the limits of erotic capital (as I explore in the following chapters), it does usefully shed light on how patriarchal society hypocritically teaches women that using erotic

prophesied – freelance labour, driven by affect and personality as much as skills – sounds remarkably and paradigmatically like the sex workers in popular culture of the twenty-first century who “handle people” (as cited in Cohen, 2017, p. 31).

²⁶ The sex worker as “businesswoman” type, popular in many Hollywood films of the 1980s, was not an entrepreneur or feminist character, but a product with specific “use values” (McLaughlin, 1991, p. 258). Films like *Risky Business* (1983) and *Night Shift* (1982), observes Johnson (1984), portrayed supposedly empowered sex workers entering into business partnerships with middle-class white men, thereby suggesting a congruency between sex work and banking; however, in both films, when the young men become wealthy (with the help of their sex worker friends), they enroll in Ivy League universities, while the sex worker’s economic situation remains unchanged, endings that uphold white male interests. Furthermore, these depictions elide the fact that sex workers go to prison far more often than bankers do, earn less money, and are not venerated in a capitalist society. Ultimately, the equivalency drawn between sex work and high status white-collar professions was less about dignifying sex workers, or showing their work, than it was about affirming capitalism (a theme, incidentally, evinced by *Pretty Woman* [1990], in which sex worker Vivian says to her banker client Edward: “You know we’re not all that different...we both screw people for money” [Milchan & Marshall, 1990]).

capital in non-commercial ways – to date and in marriage – is conventional while doing so for money is “dirty” (p. 505). Hakim’s theory also helps explain why many sex workers in the popular culture analyzed by this dissertation describe the stigma and disdain they face for choosing to monetize their erotic capital. This disdain, Hakim argues, stems from the ideological collusion of patriarchal ideology and prohibitionist feminism, which together teach women that if they are smart they “cannot also be sexual” (p. 510). As evidence of the pervasive deprecation of women’s erotic capital, Hakim cites the widely circulated stereotypes of sex workers “as victims, drug addicts, losers, incompetents, or as people you would not wish to meet socially” (p. 510). This dissertation engages with and extends Hakim’s theory by examining how popular culture represents women’s use of erotic capital within the sex industry, while also pointing out its blind spots and limitations.

Emotional Labour

Hochschild’s concept of “emotional labour” (1983), first developed through interviews with flight attendants and later published in her book, *The Managed Heart: Commercialization of Human Feeling*, posits that women service workers regularly engage in the performance of “feeling” at work in which “the emotional style of offering the service is part of the [very] service itself” (p. 5). These performances include “surface acting” (faking smiles and laughter) and “deep acting” (drawing on memory and imagination to block unpleasant feelings like irritation and anger and to produce useful feelings like delight). What makes the performance of feelings under the altered conditions of neoliberal capitalism more challenging, Hochschild argues, is the consumer’s wariness of phoniness and concomitant desire for authenticity, or what she calls “the unmanaged heart” (p. 190). To meet this demand, Hochschild argues that workers must now draw even more from “its opposite – the managed heart” and work harder at their performances of “worked up warmth” or manufactured positive feelings (pp. 85, 190). The popular culture representations I examine in this dissertation portray sex workers as paradigmatic emotional labourers who use surface and deep acting to lacquer their performances with the patina of “authenticity.” These representations register the growth of new forms of affective-based sex work in

the twenty-first century that privilege the simulation of the “unmanaged heart.” These portrayals highlight how intimacy and sexual services are becoming increasingly enmeshed in the marketplace under neoliberal capitalism, yet also concealed and euphemized through the sex worker’s performances of feeling (Bernstein, 2007).

In addition to performing feelings for the customer, Hochschild argues that workers manage the demands of their jobs (and their own feelings about their jobs) by adopting one of three “emotion management” strategies: identifying “wholeheartedly” with their work; identifying “cynically” with their work; or developing a “healthy estrangement of self from role” while taking pride in one’s skills as “an illusion maker” (pp. 187-188). Hochschild suggests this third strategy is most likely to lead to effective emotion management, and many of the sex workers in the popular culture I examine regularly use this performance strategy. While prohibitionists like Barry (1995) argue that sex workers are traumatized and cope with the emotional demands of their jobs by disassociating, many representations I examine show sex workers rationally adopting emotion management strategies not to disassociate, but to deliver their services more effectively and to retain personal boundaries. At the same time, however, Hochschild theorizes that performing emotional labour places a woman at risk of “alienation” from herself (p. 183), and some of the works I examine depict sex workers facing the challenges – such as fatigue and the constant maintenance of boundaries – of performing emotional labour. While Hochschild contends that economic oppression and women’s “low social shield” train women to “give all the heart” from an early age, she does not view women as passively accepting their lot. In this dissertation, I examine popular culture’s new image of the sex worker-emotional labourer who does work that is challenging yet often personally and financially rewarding.

Care Work

Over the past two decades, scholars have studied “intimate labour” (Boris, Gilmore & Parrenas, 2010) “care work” (Haines, 2017) and “relational work,” (Zelizer, 2005). While scholars have traditionally classified care work as labour that takes place within the family and home, in the twenty-first century it is increasingly clear that care work “is no private issue” (Dowling, 2017, p. 18). Haines (2017) defines

“care work” as the labour of helping others “develop [to] their fullest human capacities” (p. 525).

Drawing on theories of “care work” with respect to sex surrogates, professional sex workers who work with clients with disabilities and dysfunctions, I analyze popular culture’s newest representation of the sex worker as care worker. While Campbell (2006) theorizes a “nurse” typology that has appeared in films like *Leaving Las Vegas* (1992, Figgis) – the nurse as Oedipal fantasy, half mother, half sexpot – she is not the professional care worker represented by the popular culture I examine. The sex workers I analyze in this dissertation are not titillators, but teacher-like figures who work according to strict professional protocols. These works shed light on the role sex workers might play in helping people overcome or manage sexual dysfunctions that impair their lives and foreground the valuable – even paramedical – service sex surrogates offer society. Indeed, physicians have advocated for the acceptance of sex work as a “helping” profession for almost a century (Evans, 1979). The representations I examine in this dissertation illuminate the care work of sex work and offer a humanizing new portrayal of the sex worker as care worker.

Body Work

Wolkowitz (2002) describes body work as the labour involving “intimate, messy contact with the (frequently supine or naked) body” (p. 497). This work entails handling, assessing, and manipulating the body, and may be involved in a variety of fields including massage therapy, personal support work, barbering, and practical nursing (Twigg et. al., 2011). Conceptualizing sex work as a form of body work, Wolkowitz proposes, allows us to broaden our considerations of the various ways that sex workers use their bodies in the commission of their work. Furthermore, conceptualizing sex work as a form of body work also plays an important de-stigmatizing role: it shifts attention away from the moral status of sex workers to the physical labour they perform and unites them with other body workers such as massage therapists and occupational therapists. In this dissertation, I examine popular culture representations that depict sex workers who use their bodies in skillful and creative ways to provide pleasure, instruction, and affection, while exhibiting stamina, grace, and strength.

Aesthetic Labour and Display Work

Given the highly visual nature of physical attraction and sexual arousal, sex workers invest considerable time and energy into producing their appearances. Edgell (2012) defines aesthetic labour as one's observance of "certain dress codes, hairstyle rules, and clothing prescriptions" (p. 121). Mears & Connell (2016) describe display work as the preparatory labour that models, actors, and sex workers engage in to become "overtly sexualized bodies for sale...on display" (p. 333). The popular culture I examine portrays sex workers engaging in aesthetic labour and display work by donning costumes, styling their hair, applying make-up, conspicuously consuming designer clothing, and choreographing on-stage and in-person performances. These representations lay bare Beauvoir's (2011) notion that "one is not born, but rather becomes, a woman" (p. 12). They also reveal how sex workers are savvy participants in their own self-commodification, performers who stage masquerades of ideal heterosexual femininity, which can be highly remunerative. While feminists traditionally understand the "production" of femininity as a chore imposed by patriarchy upon women, some aesthetic labourers may find in the work "pleasure and empowerment" (Mears, 2014, p. 1339). In the popular culture I examine, some sex workers delight in performing aesthetic labour, yet also see their bodies as products and their labour as commodity maintenance, making aesthetic labour and display work a double-edged sword.

In the coming chapters, I examine popular culture's portrayal of sex workers' entrepreneurship, erotic capital, emotional labour, care work, body work, and aesthetic labour and display work, and draw on these concepts to guide my interpretations of the works. By foregrounding the *work* of sex work, as I argue, these emergent popular culture depictions offer a new image of the sex worker as an entrepreneur and care worker.

Occupational Distinctions

In addition to showing the *work* of sex work, in this dissertation I also attend to how popular culture registers the occupational distinctions present in the sex industry, a subject that has received

surprisingly little attention from media studies scholars. Following Weitzer (2012), who contends that sex work must be understood according to its existing stratifications, I examine popular culture not according to typologies, but with respect to sex work occupations. This approach allows me to explore how popular culture registers the granular specificities of sex work occupations in all their diversity. More than 25 types of sex workers were identified by Harcourt & Donovan (2004) in their groundbreaking 30-year longitudinal study: from street-based sex workers to massage parlour workers, phone sex operators to girlfriend experience call girls, attendants at triple-X cinemas to webcam models and sex surrogates, “stratification within prostitution mirrors stratification in the larger society” and “work experiences vary widely from one stratum to another” (Lucas, 2005, p. 515). Currently, no studies of popular culture images of sex work examine the differences in representations according to sex work type, a blind spot considering the radically different work experiences of sex workers according to the location of their work and its social and legal status. Street-based sex workers, for example, account for 97% of prostitution charges (Bayswan, n.d.), while erotic dancers are not criminalized. By focusing on five types of sex work labour – erotic dancing, massage parlour work, webcam modeling, escorting (i.e., call girls), and sex surrogacy – I show how recent examples of popular culture explore the occupational diversification of sex work as labour.

Methodology: Doing Feminist Media Studies

Given that my dissertation examines popular culture, some definitions are in order. Williams (1977) describes culture as that which is “well-liked by many people” (p. 198) and by “popular culture” I mean movies, TV shows, and documentaries that are distributed and consumed on a massive scale (Szeman & O’Brien, 2016). I have chosen to focus on popular culture because of its vast patterns of consumption in the twenty-first century, which make it, as bell hooks (2006) has observed, the “primary pedagogical medium for masses of people” and “where the learning is” (p. 2). The massive consumption of popular culture entertainment makes it the form most likely to reveal how society is registering the social transformation of sex work’s meaning, especially with respect to the new representations of the sex worker as entrepreneurial care worker.

My dissertation follows the key tenet of cultural studies scholarship – that popular culture exerts influence over our lives through a process called representation (Friedan, 1963; Kellner & Hammer, 2008; Storey, 2006; Wood, 2008). As Hall (2005) observes, mass media “produces representations of the social world, images, descriptions, explanations and frames for understanding how the world is and why it works as it is said and shown to work” (p. 20). By representing only select elements of reality, while rendering others invisible, popular culture conveys and reproduces relations of domination and subordination in society – or ideology – that upholds and sometimes challenges the values and interests of capitalism (Lull, 2002). While popular culture gives particular identities and practices “legitimacy,” it also involves “marginalizing, downgrading, or de-legitimizing” others (Hall, 2005, p. 63) through stereotypes that can be resilient to change (Dyer, 1984). In this dissertation, I work within the cultural studies tradition and consider how ideologies – such as patriarchy and capitalism – shape popular culture in light of gender, power, sexuality, and work. I use a cultural studies lens to analyze what Boris, Gilmore, & Parrenas (2010) call the “techniques of identity making” (p. 132) and interpret popular culture as a site of contestation and reconfiguration of ideologies about sex workers.

My dissertation is also deeply engaged with feminist media studies and shares its investment in critiquing how popular culture upholds patriarchal ideologies through the underrepresentation, misrepresentation, and stereotyping of women. Beginning in the 1960s, feminist media scholars examined and critiqued representations of women in popular culture and argued that their rigidity held women back from realizing their potential in life (Friedan, 1963; Spigel, 1992; Tuchman, 1978; Wood, 2008). In linking representation to outcomes, feminist media scholars posited a connection between what we see and who we become. While first wave feminist media scholars engaged in content analyses to count representations and theorize typologies,²⁷ and even as popular culture

²⁷ Feminist film theorists were the first to take an interest in and study movie representations of women using what is now known as “Images of Women” theory. Using content analysis, these scholars viewed films and searched for common types they believed reinforced male dominance and female degradation (Friedan, 1963; Gerbner, 1978; McRobbie, 2009; Rowbotham, 1974; Tuchman, 1978; Wood, 2008). Scholars found that popular culture frequently offered one-dimensional portrayals of women as either “good” or “bad,” with deferential, subservient, and self-sacrificing women portrayed as “good” and independent, sexually expressive, and agential women portrayed as “bad” (Haskell, 1989). Accordingly, popular culture has historically constructed sex workers within the good/bad or virgin/whore dichotomy (Hirschman & Stern, 1994).

continues to represent sex worker “types” within the virgin/whore dichotomy, and to depict sex workers in other simplistic ways, the increasing sophistication of popular culture in the twenty-first century has brought forth new representations, including the sex worker as an entrepreneur and care worker. I examine this new sex worker figure to show how popular culture, as well as being a status quo affirming force, is also a site of ideological complexity and resistance that is registering social changes around the identities and struggles of sex workers in society today.

To examine the popular culture under discussion in this dissertation, I use the cultural studies method of narrative analysis, the close reading of popular culture texts to unearth their “imbedded” ideologies and understand how these ideologies communicate meaning about and shape the experiences of individuals and groups in society (Stokes, 2003). As opposed to content analysis, which counts the quantitative number of representations, or typological approaches, which can be limiting, narrative analysis allows me to examine the “overall pattern of the stories or narratives of text” (Stokes, 2003, p. 57) and unpack “ideological intent” (Stokes, 2003, p. 67). Although popular culture has produced dozens of representations of the sex worker as entrepreneur and care worker in the last ten years, I have selected films, TV shows, and documentaries that have garnered critical acclaim and/or commercial success to offer what Cooper (1998) calls a purposive sample, while drawing on a number of generic popular culture theories to elucidate how form (i.e., genre) and content interact (Arthurs, 2004; deVilliers, 2017; Smail, 2009).

First, I draw on feminist film theory that posits that feature films are artifacts about how society regards women. As de Lauretis (1984) notes, the “representation of woman as spectacle finds in narrative cinema its most complex expression and widest circulation” (p. 4). In examining feature films that portray the sex worker as entrepreneur and care worker, I am guided by feminist film theory’s imperative to study how film both perpetuates gender inequality and produces progressive (and at times even feminist) representations. My dissertation is indebted to the foundational scholarship of feminist film scholars whose sociologically-rooted analyses focused on tropes or types in cinema (Haskell, 1989; Rosen, 1973). Their identification of the most enduring stereotype – the woman as either

virgin or whore – provides the original model from which my analysis of today’s new sex worker as entrepreneur and care worker branches. I also engage with Mulvey’s (1999) theory of “the male gaze” and point out instances where sex workers are indeed passive objects of the “gaze,” yet I more readily suggest that many new representations interrupt the patriarchal production of visual pleasure through semiotic elements such as camera angles and the use of space, pacing, lighting, and sound. By using feminist film theory to examine these new sex worker representations, I take as axiomatic that “in cinema the stakes for women are especially high” (Haskell, 1989, p. 9).

Second, I am guided by television theory in my analysis of the new sex worker in popular culture as both a progressive, yet limited, figure. While I do not quarrel with Gerbner’s (1978) contention that television is an ideology transmission machine that conducts “images fitting the established structure of social relations” (p. 47), I follow Newcomb & Hirsch (1983) who maintain that television offers “a cultural forum” for society’s “most prevalent concerns or deepest dilemmas” (p. 45). While recognizing television’s propensity for promoting capitalism (and neoliberal narratives of upward mobility and individualism), I also align myself with third wave feminist media scholars and see television as a generative site for new representations that challenge the status quo and, following Fiske (1993), serve up counter-narratives about “subordinated and disempowered” social groups (as cited in Szeman and O’Brien, 2016, p. 11), in this case sex workers.

Finally, to explore the documentaries in this dissertation, I engage with documentary theory. Documentaries are non-fiction films or what Grierson has called the “creative treatment of actuality” (as cited in Eitzen, 1995, p. 82). They are especially important barometers of social change considering that currently “documentary is enjoying unprecedented levels of public attention on screens large and small” (Winston & Vanstone, 2017, p. 1). The documentary’s creative combining of veracity and formal innovation invites the viewer to regard the world from fresh angles. As Nichols (2001) notes, documentaries “challenge assumptions and alter perceptions” and, at their finest, offer viewers greater insight and awareness (pp. 1, 40). The 20th century’s gold standard documentary form was the “social issues” documentary, which took on political and socially-minded subjects from an argumentative

point of view, relying heavily on rhetoric and what Nichols calls “discourses of sobriety” (p. 87). The social issues documentary principally relied on the “expository” mode, which privileged narration and argued a particular viewpoint to a conclusion. In this mode, the narrator introduced the viewer to a social problem and then proposed a solution. Content was stressed over form, and historical veracity privileged over personal memory. The principle that the public deserved to know the “truth” about a certain phenomenon drove expository documentaries and gave them their investigative tone. Individuals were often portrayed as “types” to represent a particular phenomenon in standard ways rather than rounded or realized people. According to Nichols, this mode was limited by its didacticism and its lacking attention to subjectivity. Since the 1990s, however, the expository social issues documentary has been supplanted by other forms, including the “personal portrait” documentary.

Following Nichols (2001), I classify a number of documentaries herein as personal portrait documentaries. The “personal portrait” form highlights the personal over the political and seeks to enlarge the audience’s subjective understanding of a “marginalized” sexual identity or experience (Nichols, 2001, p. 158). Nichols argues that marginalized groups such as the LGBTQ community have found in the personal portrait documentary new ways of exploring gender and highlighting the “performative aspects of sexuality” (p. 157). Unlike the social issues documentary, the personal portrait documentary is not an overt tool for social justice. Rather than identify a political issue and argue for or against it, the subjects within personal portrait documentaries tend to “attest or implicitly live out the underlying issue without even necessarily identifying it” (p. 164). Nichols argues that in the personal portrait documentary, people speak for themselves, gaining agency over their representation. The documentaries I examine in this dissertation are personal portrait documentaries that give sex workers a chance to speak for themselves. As Olson (2006) notes, sex workers in documentary often seize the opportunity to challenge stereotypes perpetuated by narrative cinema (p. 164).

By engaging with documentaries about sex workers, I join scholars like Arthurs (2004) who argue that documentaries may counter stereotypes in how they “celebrate [sex workers’] economic success and their ability to explore their sexuality free from ignorance and shame” (p. 98). At the same

time, I highlight how some documentaries contain less progressive elements and ignore inequalities within the sex industry and society at large, making the sex worker documentary a double-edged sword worthy of investigation. Cultural studies and feminist media studies provide me with the methodological tools for examining the new sex worker in popular culture.

Terminology and Scope

I use the term “sex worker” throughout this dissertation to describe characters and documentary subjects who engage in “sex work,” the “payment of money for sexual services between two consenting adults” (Sanders, 2008, p. 439).²⁸ I focus particularly on representations of what Bernstein (2007) describes as a growing contingent of middle-class, or aspiring-to-middle-class, sex workers who incorporate emotion, performance, and authenticity into their work. These are *indoor sex workers* – erotic dancers, massage parlour workers, webcam models, call girls, and sex surrogates – who solicit business online and work in indoor spaces – as opposed to *outdoor* sex workers – who solicit and work in outdoor spaces – because they comprise the majority of the sex industry today, an estimated 80% (Weitzer, 2009). As Weitzer notes, indoor sex workers as compared to outdoor sex workers face exponentially fewer risks, are better able to screen clients and less vulnerable to arrest, and have the benefit of working in stable locations with peers where there is greater potential to implement safety measures. These work conditions make indoor sex work more amenable to the practice of entrepreneurship, and appropriate to my study of the sex worker as entrepreneur and care worker.²⁹

²⁸ The power of language to perpetuate – but also to reduce – sex worker stigma is well-documented within feminist literature. The word “prostitution” derives from the legal system and a long history of prohibition against and punishment of sex workers, which sex workers rights groups – and those who support decriminalization – believe imbue the word with negative connotations (Spector, 2006, p. 5). As Ferris (2015) notes, “The word ‘prostitute’ invokes a historically informed moral repugnance toward female sexual transgression” (p. xvi) and “reflects two thousand years of patriarchal Judeo-Christian and colonial investment in the regulation of women’s bodies” (ibid.). In this dissertation, I use the term “sex worker” when speaking in the present and “prostitute” when I am speaking in a historical context – to reflect accurately how it would have been used at the time – and when discussing the ideas of prohibitionist feminists, who use this language to reflect the ways in which they regard sex work not as work but exploitation.

²⁹ Popular culture continues to portray outdoor sex workers as victims and conflate their bodies with urban decay reinforcing, as Arthurs (2004) notes, “a class hierarchy” between middle-class (indoor) sex workers and poorer (outdoor) sex workers (p. 100). My focus does not endorse this binary, but rather, recognizes the ways in which popular culture represents it.

My examination of the popular culture portrayal of the sex worker as entrepreneur and care worker is, by design, a limited one. While many portrayals of sex workers appeared between 2006 and 2016, I confined myself to examining only those which were widely distributed and seen. The TV series, films, and documentaries I examine in this dissertation all reached massive audiences, either through the backing of major networks (such as CNN and Lifetime) and by appearing in prime-time spots, or through Internet platforms such as YouTube and Vimeo. Almost all of these representations reached audiences in the millions, many received critical acclaim – including an Oscar nomination – and several were directed or hosted by well-known media entertainment industry figures. Whereas smaller budget, independent productions also appeared at this time – and are worthy of further study – I selected these portrayals precisely because of their vast reach, and their likelihood of illuminating the zeitgeist of what popular culture communicated to mass audience about the new sex worker as entrepreneur and care worker from 2006 to 2016.

As such, I exclude popular culture representations of sex trafficking victims³⁰ and street-based sex workers (which tend to advance a prohibitionist feminist perspective), women in euphemized forms of sex work (such as sugar babies),³¹ male sex workers, phone sex operators, and performers in filmed pornography. While I mention in passing for the sake of historical context popular culture representations of the sex worker produced before 2006, my temporal focus is 2006 – 2016.³² Finally, I

³⁰ The most pressing issue in the global sex industry remains trafficking, the unlawful transportation, confinement, indenture, and exploitation of women and children for the purpose of sexual enslavement. Sex trafficking, as Brock & Thistlewaite (1996) note, is “the institutionalized sexual use by more powerful members of the male-dominated societies of the less powerful” (as cited in Kim & Sherry, 2006, p. 1436). Trafficking is a criminal act that affects 700,000 to two million women each year (Bayswan, n.d.). Recently, a number of feature films have explored trafficking: *The Jammed* (2007), *Trade* (2007), *The Whistleblower* (2010), *Eden* (2012), and *Trade of Innocents* (2012), and the documentaries *Nefarious: Merchant of Souls* (2011), *The Price of Sex* (2011), and *Tricked* (2013). While these films are outside the scope of this dissertation, they deserve further attention.

³¹ A “sugar baby” engages in transactional sex that is less formalized than sex work and which is euphemized as a relationship. The difference between sex workers and sugar babies (or women engaged in other forms of transactional sex) is that the former sets a predetermined price for her services, whereas the latter does not and receives remuneration in the form of cash pegged to specific expenditures and framed as “gifts” (rent money or tuition) or consumer goods like clothing, technology, or jewellery (Sales, 2016). Ditmore (2006) notes that “sugar daddy relationships” are those in “which a woman is supported or given presents by a man with whom she has sex. Participants in such exchanges may not identify as prostitutes or sex workers” (p. 499).

³² In confining myself to studying American representations of indoor sex work produced from 2006 – 2016, I take to heart Haskell’s (1989) contention that “decades are artificial divisions, full of contradictions, particularly in film where there is always a partial lag” (p. 45). While many interesting films representing sex work as labour did appear before 2006 and continue to appear today, I contend that the period of 2006-2016 is an especially interesting one in light of rising public interest in sex work, the crisis and continuity of neoliberalism, and the ways in which sex work has come into mainstream society with a degree of tolerance unseen before.

include representations made in the United States exclusively due to its rich and long history of producing popular culture images of sex workers.

Chapter Outline

In chapter one, “Dancing to the American Dream: The Erotic Dancer as Entrepreneur in “Road Strip: Life of a Stripper”, *P.O.P.*, and *Magic City*, I focus on three personal portrait documentaries – “Road Strip: Life of A Stripper” (2014), *Life of a Stripper: P.O.P.* (2012), and *Magic City* (2015) – that represent erotic dancers as entrepreneurs who use their dancing skills, performances of heterosexual femininity, and emotional and aesthetic labour to achieve economic mobility. Far from the Hollywood stereotype of the virgin or whore, the victim or criminal, these dancers savvily use their erotic capital to escape low-waged service jobs, raise their families’ standard of living, and attain economic mobility. In this chapter, I examine how three “personal portrait” documentaries privilege erotic dancers’ subjective experiences, dignify erotic dancers’ labour – including emotional labour and aesthetic and display work – and oppose what Mulvey (1999) has called the woman on screen’s “to-be-looked-at-ness.” By giving erotic dancers the stage to speak for themselves, these documentaries challenge stereotypes and humanize erotic dancers as hardworking, skilled performers. While the personal portrait documentary’s generic convention of emphasizing the personal over the political at times limits exploration of structural inequalities within the erotic dancing industry, overall these documentaries offer a powerful rejoinder to traditional narrative cinema images of erotic dancers and a new and positive image of the twenty-first century erotic dancer as entrepreneur.

In chapter two, “Massage Parlour Mothers on Prime Time: Reconstituting the Fallen Woman as Mompreneur in *The Client List*,” I examine *The Client List* (2012-2013), the first prime time TV series with a sex worker mother protagonist. In contrast to the most recognizable sex worker mother archetype – the pitiable fallen woman – and earlier popular culture portrayals of massage parlour workers as deviant criminals – in this chapter I argue that *The Client List* humanizes protagonist Riley Parks into an entrepreneurial subject of twenty-first century capitalism and presents a new lens through which to rethink the binary between sex work and motherhood. The series portrays Riley

becoming a successful massage parlour entrepreneur soon after the Financial Crisis that began in 2008 and dignifies her as an intelligent entrepreneur and an expert body worker. By harmonizing the figure of the mother and the massage parlour worker, *The Client List* undermines the virgin/whore dichotomy and reconfigures the fallen woman as a twenty-first century massage parlour “mompreneur.” By respectfully affirming Riley as a mompreneur who uses her erotic capital to raise her family’s standard of living, *The Client List* tacitly endorses the decriminalization of sex work and Riley’s right to work with the dignity and legal protections of other waged workers. At the same time, *The Client List* advances a rigid conception of ideal motherhood in the form of what Hays (1996) calls “intensive mothering” and affirms neoliberal ideology by framing massage parlour work as a viable way for single mothers to move towards prosperity, regardless of society’s structural inequalities.

Chapter three, “The Twenty-First Century Peepshow: Webcam Models and Feminist Entanglements in *CamGirlz*” examines *CamGirlz* (2015), another personal portrait documentary about webcam models that intervenes in recent feminist debates about sex work. Far from victims or criminals, the webcam models in *CamGirlz* are entrepreneurs who conduct their businesses with professionalism, practice emotional labour and display work, build brands, express their creativity, and draw on sex positive feminism to describe the delight they take in the sensual aspects of their work. Moreover, *CamGirlz* depicts the work of webcam modeling as a way for women to escape from low-waged jobs, grasp opportunities to become entrepreneurial, exercise control over their labour process, own their media content, perform and create subversive pornography, experience pleasure, develop self-confidence, and achieve economic mobility. I contend, though, that *CamGirlz* also conveys what Gill (2007) calls a “post-feminist sensibility,” an “entanglement” of feminist and neoliberal ideas that makes individualism rather than collective change the feminist goal (p. 9). Nevertheless, *CamGirlz*’s representation of the webcam model as an entrepreneur dignifies sex workers as media producers and offers a humanizing new image of the sex worker as entrepreneur and body worker.

In chapter four, “Sex and Self-Commodification in the City: Sex Work as Intimate Business in *The Girlfriend Experience*,” I examine Steven Soderbergh’s *The Girlfriend Experience* (2009), a film that

captures the zeitgeist of transactional intimacy under neoliberal capitalism that is the “girlfriend experience” (GFE) call girl’s métier. In this chapter, I argue that *The Girlfriend Experience* portrays New York City call girl Chelsea as the paradigmatic self-commodifying emotional labourer in twenty-first century neoliberalism. By unglamorously portraying Chelsea’s everyday work tasks – especially her emotional labour or “bounded authenticity” – the film is free of sentiment and sensationalism and does not pass moral judgment on Chelsea’s life or work. In fact, *The Girlfriend Experience* normalizes Chelsea’s labour by suggesting the congruencies between sex work and other forms of precarious and embodied service work under neoliberal capitalism. At the same time, the film depicts Chelsea’s tedious and often alienating emotional labour and the effort demanded by self-commodification to illuminate the emotional stress she experiences as she carries out her work. *The Girlfriend Experience*’s Chelsea emblemizes the new sex worker as entrepreneur and care worker, and sheds light on the workings of performing “bounded authenticity.”

Chapter five, “Sexual Healers: The Sex Surrogate as Care Worker in *The Sessions* and *She’s Lost Control*,” delves into popular culture representations of sex surrogates, professional sex workers who work exclusively with people facing sexual dysfunctions and disabilities. Through an analysis of two feature films – the Academy Award-winning *The Sessions* (2012) and the critically acclaimed *She’s Lost Control* (2014) – this chapter explores how these new representations portray sex surrogates as skilled emotional labourers and care and body workers who conduct their businesses with therapeutic professionalism, enrich the lives of people living with disabilities and dysfunctions, take pride in their work, and see it as a vocation. These representations, the most affirmative of all in this dissertation, normalize sexual labour as a paraprofessional vocation. At the same time, both *The Sessions* and *She’s Lost Control* highlight the challenges of emotional labour, while making a compelling case for why sex surrogacy – and all forms of consensual sex work – should be decriminalized to ensure the safety of all women and to legitimize a service that enriches people’s lives.

Finally, in the conclusion, I sum up the new figure of the sex worker as entrepreneur and care worker, highlight the contributions I make with this dissertation to feminist media studies, discuss its limits, and suggest areas for future research.

Why These Representations Matter: From the Personal to the Political

Television talk shows of the 1990s introduced me to sex workers in stretchy leopard print dresses who tottered onto soundstages to the jeers of “slut” and “hoe” and became my first lesson into who were regarded as society’s “bad girls.” As the designated “bad” women, these sex workers were frequently seated next to “good” wives” who accused them of “stealing their men.” These sex workers were represented as one-dimensional homewreckers without humanity, the uncouth “whores” to the “virgin” wives in the twin sets who sat nearby. That these portrayals were extreme became even clearer a few years later as I came of age at the height of millennial girl power proselytizing in popular culture, epitomized by pacifier shaped jewelry and “lad” magazines like *Maxim* which pictorially portrayed porn stars in glorying ways like human statues of liberty. My dichotomous understanding of a sex worker as either bad girl or goddess might never have been corrected had I not, in university, met sex workers who were nothing like either typology and, moreover, were articulate about their occupation. Talking to sex workers who described both the benefits and drawbacks of their job challenged me to think about and question the veracity of my own idea of the “sex worker,” which, like most everybody else, I cobbled from pornified culture and the dominant feminist idea of sex workers as victims.

Around this time, I wrote a book review of the sex worker memoir *Belle De Jour: The Story of a London Call Girl* for *NOW*, a Toronto alternative weekly newspaper. Though hailed as a “feminist” memoir, I felt unenlightened by the bestseller’s uber-glamorous lifestyling of sex work and did not give the book a positive review: “C for Chick Lit and F for feminist theory.” It bothered me that the stories of ordinary sex workers – students, mothers, and daughters – were subsumed under glamourized narratives and images of size 0 porn stars with fake tans and the pervasive tale of exploited trafficked women. Moreover, the hegemony of these images made the real life goals and struggles of the sex workers’ rights movements largely invisible. It seemed increasingly clear to me that

the most visible popular culture about sex workers was not really about sex workers at all, but about reinforcing the virgin/whore binary, celebrating blithe self-sexualization, and selling merchandise. Around 2005, however, I began to notice a change in popular culture about sex workers and, while initially skeptical, the closer I looked, the more curious I became as to how these new, seemingly more complex images might trouble – and perhaps reconstitute – the virgin/whore binary I had learned growing up, and furthermore, de-stigmatize sex workers. As I began this research a few years later, I discovered that these new representations improved on those of the past because they removed sex workers from the binary stereotype, stepped outside of micro-feminist debates to explore the benefits and drawbacks of sex work, and were less focused on dismissing sex workers as neoliberal subjects than on exploring them and – most importantly – humanizing them.

The timing of this more humanized, nuanced popular culture about sex workers was especially noticeable. At this time, in British Columbia, the serial killer Robert Pickton was going to trial for the murder of more than 20 sex workers. It was clear that the systemic stigmatization and demonization of street-based sex workers had contributed to the generalized police apathy in investigating sex worker disappearances and, in some part, to Pickton going unapprehended for more than ten years, thereby allowing his killing sprees to continue (Lowman, 2000). It made me think about how, if society could see sex workers as ordinary women, some of those women might still be alive.

The stakes of popular culture representations of sex workers are high. Sex workers are the most stigmatized of all women workers and remain criminalized as they were 100 years ago, when the first Hollywood movies about sex workers appeared. Approximately one million sex workers in the U.S. work without civil rights and are vulnerable to arrest, violence, and stigmatization (Campbell, 2006; Havoscope, n.d.; Lubin, 2012). Sheriffs' departments' websites across the U.S. routinely publish mug shots of women arrested for prostitution – along with their full names – placing them at risk of losing their jobs and custody of their children, and stripping them of dignity (Miller, 2016; Mugshots, n.d.). John TV, a website run by a reactionary conservative sex work prohibitionist, is built upon a format of ambushing clients and sex workers in cars, recording their activities, and posting humiliating

videos online. Women employed in diverse sectors from teaching to journalism have been fired from their jobs when their pasts as sex workers surfaced (Greenslade, 2012). As twenty-first century media remains “the key element in promoting the discourse of fear” (Altheide, 2002, p. 177), it is important to critique and understand denigrating and moral panic inducing popular culture representations of sex workers. These images have taught us not to regard sex workers as normal women. Instead of rousing feelings like curiosity and empathy, the most stereotypical images of sex workers invite only pity, titillation, and condemnation, and confirm that sex workers are inherently “different” – more damaged, less capable, more dangerous – than ordinary women. As Goffman (1968) reminds us, stigma – which comes from the Greek and means to mark one apart from the group as “bad” and “amoral” (p. 1) – occurs when “we believe the person with a stigma is not quite human” (p. 5). More sex workers are murdered in the U.S. than in any other country in the world, their murders receive few police resources, generally go unsolved, and elicit next to no media attention (Baldwin, 2006; Mirk, 2014; Pelisek, 2017).³³ The humanization – and decriminalization – of sex workers depends in part upon changing popular culture representations about them.

The popular culture I examine in the coming chapters is important because it begins this work of humanizing sex workers as ordinary women and challenging longstanding sex worker stereotypes. Scholars have shown that indoor sex workers hail from a diversity of backgrounds and include housewives, nurses, teachers, college students, secretaries, writers, and single mothers, and are irreducible to stereotypes (Berlatsky, 2014; Burana, 1998; Sanders et al., 2010; Snow, 2015). Beginning in the Great Recession in 2007, and continuing today, university students are taking up sex work and “shattering societal misconceptions” about who sex workers are (Aaron, 2017, n. pag.). As McNeill (2011) notes, if you want to see a sex worker, “look around” (n. pag.). Even so, stigma compels many sex workers to remain closeted about their work; thus, popular culture is often the only site through which people knowingly see and learn about sex workers, giving these images a disproportionate power to

³³ Prohibitionists have written extensively about how murdered sex workers symbolize the sanctified hatred of women in patriarchal society writ large (Barry, 1995; Carter & Giobbe, 2006). As Baldwin (2006) notes, murdered sex workers are invisible to both the media and the public: “when their bodies are found, and even tagged with names, these women in death are still not ‘real women’” (p. 125).

influence public opinion (Hallgrimsdottir et. al., 2006). In light of sex workers' historical and continuing social, legal, and economic marginality, the stakes of these representations are high.

This dissertation explores the new and comparatively positive popular culture representations of sex workers as entrepreneurs and care workers that appeared between 2006 and 2016, a time of increased social change around the meaning and morality of sex work in the U.S. It challenges the contention that popular culture has failed to offer nuanced representations of sex workers, as the current literature predominately argues. By portraying sex workers in humanizing and, often, complex ways that align with the labour/empowerment and polymorphous paradigms, this new popular culture counters the patriarchal image of the sex worker as virgin or whore and challenges earlier Hollywood stereotypes of the sex worker. While these new and complex representations at times elide the deeper structural factors that continue to perpetuate women's inequality in society, and sidestep the struggles for rights that sex workers are engaged in today, by asking viewers to regard without condescension the ways that sex workers live and work, they mark significant advances that are worth examining within a theoretical framework of neoliberalism and feminism. Unlike the stereotype of the virgin or the whore, popular culture's emerging sex worker is not a concept, a threat, or a moral lesson, but a human being with dignity who goes to work.

Chapter 1: Dancing to the American Dream

The Erotic Dancer as Entrepreneur in “Road Strip,” *Life of a Stripper: P.O.P.*, and *Magic City*

“It is difficult to be a stripper and resist internalizing the negative stereotypes, i.e. they are abused, come from broken homes, abuse drugs and alcohol, lead violent lives, and are forced into the sex industry out of desperation.” (Sundahl, 1988, pp. 177-180)

“The stigma is starting to come off the word ‘stripper.’” (Diamond, *Magic City*, 2015)

“The image that is portrayed in TV and movies, that strippers are prostitutes or crackheads, or strippers don’t care about themselves or anybody else, is not true,” says Gigi Maguire in the documentary, *Life of a Stripper: P.O.P.* (Power of Pussy) (Jenkins & Jenkins, 2012). Gigi, an erotic dancer-turned-entrepreneur, is pictured in Pole Fan Addicts, a dance studio with shiny blonde wood floors, gleaming brass poles, and mirrored walls. Gigi opened her studio two years ago, having saved enough money from working as an erotic dancer at Magic City, a thriving Atlanta club. Younger erotic dancers now train at Gigi’s studio, perfecting their climbing, inversions, and spins, pole moves that require endurance, athleticism, and sensuality. Like Gigi, they take pride in their work and see it as skilled labour. “This is our power, what you use to get the independence you need,” Gigi says, pointing to the pole. To uninitiated audiences, the pole is a stage prop, but *P.O.P.* suggests that for Gigi and the other erotic dancer entrepreneurs, it is a symbol of economic mobility. The climb is steep, the risks immanent, but the rewards potentially plentiful.

P.O.P. is part of a new wave of popular culture that humanizes erotic dancers as hardworking and talented entrepreneurs who use the stage and pole for economic mobility. Between 2006 and 2016, new and dignifying images of erotic dancers have appeared in feature films such as *The Wrestler* (Harfield & Aronofsky, 2008), *Afternoon Delight* (Chaiken & Solway, 2013), and *We’re the Millers* (Thurber & Bender, 2013), TV series like *The Sopranos* (Chase, 1999-2007), and documentaries like *Magic City* (Greenfield & Evers, 2015), *Life a Stripper: P.O.P.* (Jenkins, 2012), *This is the Life with Lisa Ling* “Road Strip” (Burke & Leiter, 2014), *League of Exotique Dancers* (Rau & Barreveld, 2015) and *Life as a Truckstop Stripper* (Leite & Roxo, 2014). This popular culture about erotic dancers is different from that of the past

because it trades moralism for empathy, condescension for attention, and builds understanding for erotic dancers by giving them a chance to represent themselves. These new works encourage audiences to abandon the virgin/whore characterization of erotic dancers and see them as entrepreneurial strivers. This invitation to view erotic dancers anew also involves a re-consideration of language. While many terms are used to describe erotic dancers – “stripper,” “exotic dancer,” and “nude dancer” – and dancers refer to their work in various ways, in this chapter I use the term “erotic dancer” exclusively to recognize the break from stereotypes this new popular culture makes, and to emphasize the skills and labour central to these womens’ jobs as entertainers.

In this chapter, I examine three personal portrait documentaries – “Road Strip,” *P.O.P.*, and *Magic City* – that represent erotic dancers as entrepreneurs who use their bodies, dancing skills, and emotional labour for economic mobility. Whereas the Hollywood stereotype of the erotic dancer is a meretricious deviant or a coerced victim, these documentaries depict erotic dancers who use what Hakim (2010) calls “erotic capital” to escape low-waged service jobs, raise their families’ standards of living, and attain economic mobility. By portraying agential erotic dancers who choose and benefit from their work, “Road Strip,” *P.O.P.*, and *Magic City* endorse women’s use of erotic capital, validate erotic dancing as a safe and lucrative job, and humanize erotic dancers as hardworking women.

Furthermore, *P.O.P.*, and *Magic City*’s portrayal of successful Black erotic dancer-entrepreneurs forging friendships, fighting stigma, and staging collective performances challenges the prohibitionist feminist notion that the sex industry is inevitably and altogether pernicious for women of colour, a claim that leaves little room for the agency of erotic dancers. At the same time, these documentaries occasionally overstate the empowering potential of “erotic capital” while downplaying its limitations including aging out of the business, and racism within the erotic dancing industry. Thus, while these documentaries provide positive and long overdue stereotype-busting portraits of erotic dancers, I share Borland’s (2005) view that within any documentary about women’s labour – in this case, the labour of erotic dancers – “a political vision of the structural conditions that lead to particular social

behaviours” (p. 64) is still needed. Nevertheless, these documentaries offer important new images of erotic dancers that counter stereotypes.

I begin this chapter by contextualizing erotic dancing historically (in burlesque as a form of upward mobility and in the history of popular culture about erotic dancers) and conceptually (with regard to erotic capital). I then highlight four ways that “Road Strip,” *P.O.P.*, and *Magic City* represent erotic dancing as a form of entrepreneurship. I conclude by pointing out the limits of these representations.

Contexts: History, Popular Culture, Theory

To fully appreciate the novelty of “Road Strip,” *P.O.P.*, and *Magic City*, it is useful to look back at how women have historically used erotic dancing as a mode of economic mobility. Erotic dancing originates in burlesque, a form of musical theatre from the mid-nineteenth century that drew on elements of vaudeville, minstrelsy, and the music hall, and included dancing, singing, and elaborate stage sets.³⁴ Female performers used colourful lighting, live music, and ribald humour driven by obscene stereotypes to stage striptease shows that offered more teasing than nudity. Women striptease artists, many of whom hailed from the working class, found on the burlesque stage a degree of economic mobility unavailable to other women of their social class. As Shteir (2005) notes, “striptease was radical in the sense that it allowed women to climb the economic ladder” (p. 339). One striptease artist of the 1940s, Gypsy Rose Lee, described how striptease offered an escape from the proscribed role as wife or factory worker, a chance to “hurl herself...into the American dream” (p. 339). Striptease, as Shteir observes, was one of the “only ways out of the grueling demands of housework and the toil of the sweatshop, monotonies that reformers, being mostly men, generally only theoretically understood” (p. 235). Indeed, striptease made some women wealthy. In the mid-1940s at the height of her career,

³⁴ Burlesque shows were associated with working class (downtown) audiences, while theatre was linked to upper class (uptown) audiences. Although affordable, burlesque promoters aestheticized burlesque shows with the trappings of American luxury to capture the aspiration (and money) of working-class audiences. At Carroll’s, seat backs had candy dispensers and stage shows frequently featured “bubbles, marble statues, rainbow lights, mosaic glasses, friezes of metal, bars of gold, subterranean fog, feathers, chandeliers, and bejeweled ruffles” (Shteir, 2005, p. 76). By the 1920s, on the heels of a new sexual expressiveness, striptease ascended as the naughtiest, but also the most curiosity inspiring art and vice.

striptease artist Rose LaRose earned \$2,500 a week (equivalent to approximately \$21,000 in 2018 dollars) (p. 237).

Striptease performers identified as professional artists – they belonged to unions and paid union dues – and took pride in their stagecraft. They wove dramatic narratives into their choreographed routines and incorporated a variety of dance forms, music, costumes, and well-timed nudity (or the anticipation of it) to build spectacles of eroticism and mischievousness. Their artistry was so fine that it roused the admiration (and imagination) of poet E.E Cummings, who said of one burlesque artist in 1929: “When Miss St. Clare walks, she walks. But when she does something else, she very easily becomes all the animals who ever came out of the ark, rolled into one” (Shteir, 2005, p. 123). Through the twentieth century, euphemistic striptease developed into a more overt sexualized form of entertainment; by the 1980s, full nude table dancing and lap-dancing were the fare du jour at most American erotic dancing clubs. While these clubs became more explicit (and began to offer services that were more hands-on) than they were in the days of burlesque, erotic dancers continue to share with burlesque and striptease artists a keen sense of stagecraft, knowledge of how to use teasing nudity to seduce, and a wide repertoire of dancing skills.

Despite erotic dancing’s history as a form of skilled labour, popular culture has tended to sideline this narrative in favour of moralistic and salacious storylines. As Smaill (2009) notes, early cinematic portrayals of striptease artists did not explore these women’s lives; rather, the women on screen were simply sexualized bodies – lures for a green movie-going public that learned to associate moving pictures with titillation. In their heyday after World War II, striptease films like *A Night at the Follies* (Sonney & Cornell, 1947) and *Striptease Girl* (Sonney & Sonney, 1952) offered little exploration of the inner lives of erotic dancers, much less their technical skills or artistry. On show instead were silent, sexualized women, which amounted to the “staging of...a fantasy about female erotic life” (Shteir, 2005, p. 287). Through the 1950s, Hollywood portrayed erotic dancers as gold diggers, empty-headed starlets, or materialistic crybabies, overall as “a morally corrupting force” (Shteir, 2005, p. 296).

Erotic dancing clubs were hugely popular in the U.S. in the early 1960s. Yet the popularity of erotic dancing did not prompt any new representations on the screen. In the early 1960s, exploitation films used erotic dancer characters to articulate moralizing tales about women's sexual naiveté and docility that rationalized – in the age of women's liberation – the imperative for re-installing women in the home. Emblematic is *Girl in Trouble* (Chase & Chase, 1963), the story of a runaway teenage girl who is systematically exploited and abused by several nefarious figures in a New Orleans erotic dance club. The film ends with the contrite erotic dancer's *mea culpa*: "I have committed the most terrible of sins. It never would have happened if I had been wiser at the start."³⁵ By the 1970s, feminist film theories of spectatorship, such as Mulvey's (1999) probing of the "male gaze," suggested that undressing women on screen symbolized the disempowerment of women at large (p. 58). What was lost in all of these narratives and theories was that for many women, erotic dancing was and remains a job.

By 1991, almost half of Americans believed that strip clubs should be made illegal (Weitzer, 2012). As Lee-Wright (2010) points out, the *modus operandi* of reality television in the early 1990s was upping the ante. Talk shows like *Jerry Springer* exploited negative stereotypes about erotic dancers in episodes that featured them as jealous and petty competitors ("Stripper Showdown," 2009), betrayers ("You Slept with My Stripper Sister!," 2011), sexual showboats ("Lesbian Stripper Threesome...Oh Yeah!," 2013), victims of violence ("High End Stripper Smackdown," 2015), and greedy manipulators ("Strippers Milkin' It," 2017) (Consiglio and Klazura, 1991 -).³⁶ Meanwhile, in *Grand Theft Auto*, one of

³⁵ The generalized disregard for the skills of erotic dancers is encapsulated well by the story of Gypsy Rose Lee, a striptease performer whose career spanned four decades. At the height of her career during the 1930s and 1940s, critics revered her stage artistry. In 1957 she wrote *Gypsy*, a memoir about her career. But when it was adapted for the stage in 1959, all references to the time she put into her choreographies – and her skills, talent, and virtuosity – were omitted. Instead, the play framed Lee as a washed-up farce, a "woman deceiving herself about who she really was" (Shteir, 2005, p. 304). The Hays Code had prevented Gypsy Rose Lee from erotic dancing on film and even using her stage name on screen (Shteir, 2005, p. 185). Undeterred, Lee went on to transform herself into a writer, eventually publishing two novels, a play, and short stories that appeared in *The New Yorker*. Nevertheless, "critics wrote off her literary output as attention getting novelty" (Shteir, 2005, p. 191). Lee challenged stereotypes about striptease artists and proved that erotic dancers could be multifaceted and intelligent.

³⁶ The "making over" of the individual from an "unruly" subject to a neoliberal ideal of the self-managing individual became a TV trope in the 1990s. Oullette & Hay (2008) argue that beginning in that decade, reality TV became increasingly focused on "transforming so called 'at risk' individuals' into successful managers of their lives and futures" (p. 63). The most "authoritarian" of these formats sought to portray out of control, incorrigible, or helpless individuals, and then "tame" them with the help of experts such as psychologists, nutritionists, and audiences who were invited to weigh in directly with comments and advice (or indirectly through shouts or jeers). For Oullette & Hay, these shows were cynical because they were packaged as a public service, yet sold advertising and profited by framing the most disenfranchised people in society as damaged goods.

the bestselling video games of all time, first released in 1997, the ultimate coup is to manipulate an erotic dancer into having sex for free. On *The Sopranos* (Chase, 1997-2007), the murder of pregnant erotic dancer Tracee is one of the television series' most gruesome. Crime television shows like *CSI: Crime Scene Investigation* (Zuiker, 2000-2015) portrayed erotic dancers as woebegone babies and dead girls in chalk outlines (with camera-ready cleavage). These degrading representations showed erotic dancers as necessary victims and perpetuated the negative stereotype that erotic dancers – as women and as workers – were inherently different from other women. In 2007, 30% of Americans believed erotic dancers were of below average intelligence, 55% thought erotic dancing was an unacceptable job for women, and 73% felt erotic dancing industry exploited women (Roach, 2007). Yet that is changing. The U.S. Bureau of Labour Statistics now include erotic dancers in a category with other professional entertainers including ballet dancers and choreographers (Green, 2016).

The documentaries I explore in this chapter register this burgeoning acceptance of erotic dancers through the “personal portrait” form. The “personal portrait” documentary, as Nichols (2001) notes, is particularly adept at capturing individual human experiences and bringing attention to “a marginalized sexual experience or identity” (p. 157) which is “most vividly displayed in relation to issues of sexuality and gender” (p. 158). Germane to the portrayal of erotic dancers, the personal portrait documentary mode tends to highlight the “performative aspects of sexuality” (Nichols, 2001, p. 157). Personal documentaries privilege the personal over the political and may “attest or implicitly live out the underlying issue without even identifying it” (Nichols, 2001, p. 164). The shift from the Griersonian social issues documentary to the personal portrait documentary occurred in tandem with the neoliberalization of North American culture. As Mascaro (2012) notes, “the greater the national emphasis on the marketplace, the less likely it is for commercial documentaries to excel as craft or grapple with complex problems or suggest social action” (n. pag.). McLachlan & Goldman (2000) have noted that since the 1990s there has been within non-fiction media “a greater stress on the personal and private at the expense of the public and structural” (as cited in Arthurs, 2004, p. 101). The personal portrait documentaries in this chapter dignify erotic dancers who use what Hakim (2010) calls “erotic

capital” for economic mobility and personal power rather than for any political end.

That men exchange economic assets for access to women’s beauty is an established sociological phenomenon (Beauvoir, 2011; Hakim, 2010). More than 200 years ago, this trade-off worried Mary Wollstonecraft: “Taught in infancy that beauty is woman’s sceptre,” she wrote, “the mind shapes itself to the body, and, roaming round its gilt cage, only seeks to adorn its prison” (p. 226). In her theory of “erotic capital,” however, Hakim (2010) suggests that Wollstonecraft’s fear is actually the golden key to women’s empowerment. Hakim’s theory of “erotic capital” is central to the perspective of the documentaries I examine in this chapter. According to Hakim, erotic capital is a “personal asset” made up of seven elements including beauty, sexual attractiveness, social grace, liveliness, social presentation, sexuality, and emotional labour that women can use as an economic strategy (pp. 500-02). While the social class into which one is born often determines one’s cultural and economic capital, Hakim argues that women can actively cultivate and use their erotic capital as an economic strategy for “social mobility” (p. 499). Hakim, an economist, argues that in the twenty-first century erotic capital is “crucially important [in] certain occupations...[including] strippers, burlesque artists, erotic dancers” (p. 510). Hakim proposes that erotic capital “is a key factor in women’s changing status in society and the economy” (p. 512). She argues that erotic capital is a “major asset” for women, who have heightened erotic capital since men have more enduring sexual interest over a lifetime (p. 499). Therefore, Hakim argues, erotic capital may be women’s secret trump card and a solution to the problem of gendered economic inequality.

In examining Hakim’s argument, one may wonder if she is inflating the latent economic advantages in a woman’s untapped erotic capital. After all, women have been exploiting (and have been exploited for) their erotic capital in one way or another since Ancient Babylonia (where the first record of a sex worker was found), and through marriage, yet they are still an economically oppressed group. Would this not suggest that the key to women’s advancement lies elsewhere? Hakim addresses this very question. While she concedes that women have always had and used erotic capital, she contends that their use of that erotic capital has been severely limited by patriarchal proscriptions

around using that capital outside of the mating market or marriage, and certainly from using it for her own economic mobility as an independent woman. According to Hakim, in the past, women who deigned to use their erotic capital outside of marriage have been punished by “moral ideologies...including patriarchal and feminist discourses that stigmatize its use by women, be it in the boardroom, the bedroom, or the brothel” (as cited in Green, 2012, p. 138). Hakim contends that this stigma is rooted in an unintentional collusion between patriarchal ideology and prohibitionist feminism, which effectively compels women to choose between being smart or sexual; that is, women who wish to be “smart” must shun their sexuality, for fear of being labeled “slutty” (p. 510). This binary, Hakim posits, divides feminists and opposes feminism’s foundational tenets of inclusion and self-determination by marginalizing erotic labourers like erotic dancers:

The “moral” opprobrium that enfolds the commercial sale of sexual performance and sexual services extends to all contexts where there is any exchange of erotic capital for money or status. Occupations such as stripper or lapdancer are stigmatized as lewd, sleazy, meretricious and prurient...surprisingly, feminists have supported this ideology instead of seeking to challenge and overturn it (pp. 510-512)

Today, however, Hakim argues that women are becoming increasingly free to harness their erotic capital “to achieve economic and social benefits” (p. 499). In the following sections, I examine how each documentary offers a positive new image of the erotic dancer by highlighting her deployment of erotic capital through her dancing skills, her performances of femininity – through what Mears & Connell (2016) call “display work” – and her provision of what Hochschild (1983) terms “emotional labour.” Together, these personal portrait documentaries depict erotic dancing as a legitimate form of work that takes practice and talent to pull off.

“Road Strip”: Erotic Dancers as Travelling Entrepreneurs

“What people don’t understand is what difficult labour this is.” With this phrase, journalist Lisa Ling opens “Road Strip,” a personal portrait documentary about seven American erotic dancers between the ages of 20 and 38 who travel the country with their ambition, impressive work ethic, and G-strings.³⁷ With its non-judgmental tone, emphasis on the women’s striving natures and skill sets, and its elegant and un-sensational camerawork – including sensitive on-screen interviews – “Road Strip” flips the script of the traditional erotic dancer narrative. Neither Jezebels nor angels, the erotic dancers in “Road Strip” are professionals who use their erotic capital for upward mobility.

“Road Strip” makes its support for erotic dancers explicit in the opening montage. Ling, in voice-over, explains that “because of what [erotic dancers] do – taking off their clothes for money – erotic dancers have been and likely will continue to be some of the most stigmatized members of society.” “Road Strip” challenges this stigma by showing in the opening montage images of women packing suitcases and gliding down highways in cars and counting piles of \$20 bills. These images suggest lifestyles of economic mobility. Further cementing this idea, the opening voice-over informs us: “This is the one industry where women make more than men.” At the same time, “Road Strip” does not glamourize the erotic dancers, since it also uses its opening montage to portray erotic dancers as down-to-earth women whose identities go far beyond the stage. In one scene, a group of erotic dancers cook dinner together in the home they share while travelling; in another scene, an erotic dancer talks to her children on the telephone: “Goodnight Monkeyhead!” comes the child’s squeaky voice through the speakerphone. By opening with these intertwined images of erotic dancers’ professional and personal lives, “Road Strip” makes clear that erotic dancers are multifaceted women who cannot be contained within a stereotype, nor defined by their jobs alone.

³⁷ *This Is Life with Lisa Ling*, a CNN television documentary series launched in 2014, promised to take viewers on a “gritty, breathtaking journey to the far corners of America” (IMDB, n.d., Lisa Ling, 2018). “Road Strip,” a 60-minute episode from season one, exemplifies the series’ mandate to explore various subcultures and social issues through the lens of ordinary American people whose experiences have been marginalized. (Season one also included episodes on gay rodeo performers, painkiller addicts in the Mormon Church, and women working in the male dominated oil fields of South Dakota). As of 2018, its fourth season, the series remains hugely popular. It drew an average weekly audience of 321,000, making it the most watched non-fiction television series among the 25-54 demographic for the 10:00 pm slot across all networks (Katz, 2017).

Having established this frame, “Road Strip” goes on to offer a new and positive image of erotic dancers in five ways. First, it represents erotic dancers who choose their work as an escape from low-waged service jobs; second, it depicts erotic dancers as agential entrepreneurs; third, it shows erotic dancers as skilled entertainers; fourth, it lays bare how erotic dancers stage performance of idealized heterosexual femininity; and finally, it uncovers the emotional labour erotic dancers engage in to produce illusions of intimacy.

Erotic Dancing: An Escape from Low-Waged Service Jobs

“Road Strip” offers a new and positive image of erotic dancers who use their erotic capital to escape low-waged service jobs. Just as burlesque artists at the turn of the twentieth century stripped to escape the crushing factory job or the penury of wifedom, erotic dancers under twenty-first century neoliberal capitalism choose erotic dancing to dodge stressful precarious work, poorly paying and stultifying service jobs, or unemployment. As Wald (2000), an erotic dancer and writer, puts it: “I’d rather strip than waitress, or temp, or work as a receptionist. I’ve done all the above and found them equally degrading, far less lucrative, and not nearly as interesting” (p. 4). Ethnographic research and life writing reveals that erotic dancers include single mothers, students, aspiring artists, and women who work full-time and wish to supplement their incomes (Crane, 2014; Downer, 2016; Reed, 1997).

In “Road Strip,” the erotic dancers similarly describe choosing erotic dancing as an escape from unsatisfying jobs in the retail and restaurant industries, where they had little autonomy and no hope for professional advancement. “Road Strip” juxtaposes these low-paying jobs with erotic dancing. Depending on the club at which they work, their clientele, experience, age, and skill, erotic dancers can earn anywhere from \$47,000 to \$180,00 a year (Greenwood, 2014; Stripper Salary, n.d.). In addition to high earnings, “Road Strip” suggests, erotic dancing offers women flexible schedules, control over their labour processes, freedom from management, and the chance to operate as independent workers. In voice-over, Ling affirms the agency of erotic dancers who choose their work as a personal financial strategy: “One thing is present in all of them: ambition. For some women, erotic dancing allows them

to make more money than other day jobs. Some dancers use the money to put themselves through school...others take advantage of the flexible schedule, like mothers who want to spend more time with their children.”

“Road Strip” further humanizes erotic dancers by delving into the more personal reasons they have chosen to take to the stage, while bucking docu-porn’s formal convention of situating interviews exclusively in spaces of sex work which invites a voyeuristic gaze (Boyle, 2008). Instead, “Road Strip” takes the viewer into the erotic dancer’s domestic worlds. In one scene, twenty-one-year-old Iman, a single mother to a three-year-old girl, is interviewed on camera wearing jeans, a plain sleeveless T-shirt and minimal make-up. Sitting at a kitchen table in a modest rented house where she and the other travelling erotic dancers stay when on tour, she articulately describes her plan to strip until she reaches the age of 30; then, she intends to invest and live off the proceeds of real estate, while focusing on giving her daughter “a good life.” Chyna, another erotic dancer, describes her goal of establishing her own housecleaning business, which she envisions expanding nationwide. Antonia Crane, a writer, has a pragmatic reason for erotic dancing. Because she can earn through one night of erotic dancing what would otherwise take two weeks of full-time work to clear, she chooses erotic dancing, which enables her to devote more time to her true vocation of writing. In *Spent*, the memoir she published in 2014, Crane persuasively explains her economic motivation:

Dancing has helped many of us through our adult lives – paying for school, families, fledgling careers as creatives...lack of education or work experience, single motherhood, no child support or college-bound kids...This work provides us with a way forward. Despite the circumstances, the women I work with are resourceful and clever (n. pag.)

By giving thoughtful women a stage to speak for themselves and explore why they choose erotic dancing, “Road Strip” illuminates how, for some, erotic dancing is an ideal work situation because it is lucrative and helps convey them to their larger life goals.

“Road Strip” also shows how some erotic dancers – in addition to being future oriented – are driven by earlier experiences of financial hardship. Iman describes becoming a mother at 17 and juggling three jobs – an exhausting routine which left her little time to see her daughter. Chanel tells the story of growing up with five siblings and a single mother. Watching her mother struggle instilled in Chanel the goal to become educated and enter a lucrative professional field: “I had high hopes. I wanted to be the first to go to college. I wanted to set the bar.” “Road Strip” suggests that Chanel is working towards that goal by saving for tuition the money she earns at the strip club. By representing erotic dancers who articulate their long-term goals, “Road Strip” challenges the stereotype of the wayward and naïve erotic dancer and suggests that this work offers some women an escape from low-waged service jobs and a way to exert more control over their work and personal lives.

“An Entirely New Type”: The Erotic Dancer as Entrepreneur

A further way “Road Strip” offers a positive new image is by portraying erotic dancers as ambitious entrepreneurs. For several days every month, the erotic dancers in “Road Strip” travel to cities (such as Myrtle Beach, North Carolina, where huge golf tournaments are held, and Hurley, Michigan, a popular site for recreation vehicle rallies), where large numbers of men converge. Ling’s voice-over narration celebrates the erotic dancers’ entrepreneurial spirit: “The point is to make as much money in the least amount of time”; “On the weekends they drive six hours to cash in on a once-a-year business opportunity”; They work the room all night “with one thing on their mind: the bottom line”; “That’s kind of the goal here, to get men into private rooms, because that’s where the money is made”; “It can be lonely being an erotic dancer, but the cold hard cash keeps them in the game.” By placing emphasis on the women’s entrepreneurial attitudes, “Road Strip” brings the erotic dancer from the fringes of society into the centre, where her entrepreneurship is vaunted as a noble American pursuit.

“Road Strip” draws on neoliberal discourses of entrepreneurship that celebrate the benefits of being a self-employed entrepreneur who is in control of her affairs and has the agency to make decisions. In this regard, it understands the erotic dancer as an entrepreneurial subject under neoliberal capitalism. Rottenberg (2018) notes that neoliberalism is responsible for constantly and

“normatively constructing and interpolating individuals as entrepreneurial actors” (n. pag.). On LinkedIn.com, the business networking website, one financial analyst writes in laudatory tones about the similarity between entrepreneurs and erotic dancers:

I told her I worked in finance. She told me she was a erotic dancer. I asked her the same questions I would ask a startup and her answers were smarter and more authentic than any CEO I'd ever interviewed. The pure economics of her business are a thing of beauty: predictable cash-flow (less than 5% variability from forecast), high barriers to entry (most women won't strip), low cyclical sensitivity (when times are tough, men need erotic dancers more). (Larkin, 2016, n. pag.)

Similarly, the director of “Road Strip,” Heidi Burke, cites her discovery of this “new type” of entrepreneurial twenty-first century erotic dancer as having inspired her to make the documentary:

The idea [for making “Road Strip”] came from an online article that a dancer wrote about her own experience traveling to a booming oil town to make money. These dancers were *an entirely new type*...We had never seen anything on these entrepreneurial women...before and I wanted to capture what this lifestyle was like (Part2Pictures, 2014)

If entrepreneurship is the process of singlehandedly assuming risk and establishing businesses, “Road Strip” represents erotic dancers as entrepreneurs who turn their own bodies into businesses by drawing on their erotic capital. “Road Strip” portrays how erotic dancers are paradigmatic neoliberal entrepreneurs who use their own bodies and performances of heterosexual femininity as capital assets through carefully choreographing and executing stage shows.

Performing Heterosexual Femininity: Erotic Dancing as Aesthetic Labour and Display Work

“Road Strip” makes clear that the performance of gender is central to the success of an erotic dancer’s stage show. While popular culture of the past often conjured erotic dancers as more naturally sexual, lithe, or buxom than other women, “Road Strip” illustrates Beauvoir’s claim that women are made, not born, by showing the labour of performing heterosexual femininity, from choreographing stage shows to selecting enticing costumes to the emotional labour of hustling to sell lapdances. In her compelling work on erotic dancers, Roach (2007), by way of Butler, argues that if gender entails a performance of idealized femininity, then erotic dancing simply lays that performance bare by owning up to the construction of it. Hakim (2010), likewise, points out that

sexuality is a performance...in particular the performance of femininity and female beauty is often highly valourized...beauty and sex appeal...are a creation, a work of art, which can be achieved through training. Women have more erotic capital than men because they work harder at personal presentation and the performance of gender and sexuality (p. 504)

“Road Strip” takes as axiomatic that heterosexual men like to look at attractive women and shows in detail the labour erotic dancers engage in to become the idealized objects of their gaze. In the last 15 years, scholars have theorized this labour of self-presentation as “aesthetic labour,” what Edgell (2012) has described as abiding “by certain dress codes, hairstyle rules, and clothing prescriptions” (p. 121). Mears (2014) defines “aesthetic labour” as work in which individuals are compensated for their body’s “looks and affect” (p. 1332). This work has also been theorized as “beauty work” (Kwan & Trautner, 2009). In “Road Strip,” erotic dancers draw attention to and exaggerate the features most associated with femininity – in stiletto heels legs appear elongated, glossy lips seem pouty, and push-up bras or implants exaggerate breasts. Here, erotic dancers wear make-up and false eyelashes, costumes and a variety of high heels. They also spend time styling their hair, one of the most potent sexual signals, as Etcoff (2007) points out. “Road Strip” represents erotic dancers engaging in considerable aesthetic

labour to create personae that conform to male idealizations of femininity. “The ability to transform oneself,” as Schweitzer (2000) notes, predicts success, as the best erotic dancers are “conceptually...a physical manifestation of an idea resident in the minds of men” (p. 68). While the erotic dancers in “Road Strip” certainly groom themselves to conform to various ideal “types” not entirely of their own invention, “Road Strip” aligns with the labour perspective by suggesting that erotic dancers engage in aesthetic labour agentically with very specific financial goals in mind.

Because they perform in public, erotic dancers engage in “display work,” the specific form of aesthetic labour concerned with preparing one’s body for visual consumption. As Mears & Connell (2016) note, “consumers pay for the opportunity to watch display workers’ performances of athleticism, eroticism, beauty, and artistry. Display workers invest heavily in their appearances” (p. 335). In “Road Strip,” erotic dancers perform display work by self-commodifying into visual attractions customers will pay to watch perform. While “Road Strip” briefly shows erotic dancers putting on costumes, it is implicit that erotic dancers do work behind the scenes by modifying their own bodies through diet, exercise, manicures, hair extensions, shaving and waxing of their body hair, and some may undergo breast augmentation surgery (Roach, 2007). Performing this display work is so crucial to their success that erotic dancers may write off these costs on their income tax returns (and are legally allowed to do so in the United States) (ibid.). In this regard erotic dancers conform to and create themselves as idealizations of feminine heterosexuality, yet there are still many varieties of this fantasy figure: the busty blonde in the body-hugging lycra dress; the approachable girl-next-door in the standard bikini; and the gamine Lolita in the tartan skirt, to name but a few of the personae that erotic dancers craft and translate into a range of stage shows (Interview, n.d.).

“Road Strip” represents the stage as a performance frame in which erotic dancers dance, pose, strut, slink, and seduce. As Ling informs us: “A good erotic dancer is skilled in many art forms that go beyond taking off her clothes.” “Road Strip” makes clear that one cannot overestimate the amount of physical strength and emotional resiliency it takes to put on an excellent erotic dancing show.

In the first instance, an erotic dancer needs to feel comfortable disrobing on stage, beneath hot

lights and under the scrutiny of strangers whose behaviour and way of looking cannot be controlled. This requires ego strength that takes months or even years to master – and which some never master at all. “Road Strip” also makes clear that erotic dancers must be excellent performers with impeccable technical skills. As scholars have pointed out, successful erotic dancers create choreographies (in three- to seven-inch heels) that entail a mixture of ballet, jazz, and aerobics (Bruckert, 2004; Roach, 2007). In “Road Strip,” Chyna, Iman, Chanel, and Antonia execute stage routines that demonstrate their dancing skills, strength, and endurance. Adeptness at “pole work,” the erotic dancer’s interaction with the upright poles that rise from floor to ceiling on every strip club stage, is a must. As Chyna says, “pole work is a lot of hanging upside down...and all of the blood’s rushing to your head.” “Road Strip” uses Chyna to illustrate how erotic dancers must diligently work at developing their pole routines. While scholars have critiqued the docuporn genre for its voyeuristic imagery, “Road Strip” emphasizes the craft of these performances by focusing on technique. Chyna, who is newer to the stage, has “taught herself how to make her body entice.” After months of practice in the club, she undertakes a stage show to the tones of saxophone music. She twirls, hoists, flips, climbs, and opens her arms in balletic V-shapes, movements that bring to mind the grace and daring of a gymnast, elegant and hazardous moves. Using close-up camera-work, “Road Strip” demonstrates the technical skills Chyna uses to achieve erotic effect – from the feline pole climbing to the spinning to the waterfall her hair makes on the stage floor. By deconstructing her routine into its constituent parts (which are choreographed to produce the illusion of ideal femininity), “Road Strip” emphasizes the performance skills of erotic dancers that go far beyond just taking off their clothes.

“Road Strip” reinforces the idea that erotic dancing is a performance of sexuality (Highleyman, 1997). As Gira Grant (2014) has noted, “sex work is not simply sex; it is a performance, it is playing a role...within a set of professional boundaries” (p. 90). Author and former erotic dancer Mattison articulates the importance of this illusion-making well: “Nothing was what it appeared. Most of these women took multiple names, matching their multiple personalities. Image, reality, manipulation, it was a sea of deception” (as cited in Schweitzer, 2000, p. 66). While prohibitionist

feminists have argued that the performances sex work may involve – like taking on a new name, pretending interest, and wearing costumes – are traumatic and have “hollowing out effects” (Barry, 1995), “Road Strip” takes another tack by suggesting that erotic dancers glean psychological rewards from putting on these performances.

For one erotic dancer named Sarah, using a stage name is psychologically freeing; of her leggy, exhibitionistic and sparkly G-string wearing alter ego, she notes wryly, “Clara doesn’t have stage anxiety.” In “Road Strip,” Sarah describes how her bold stage persona helps her overcome insecurity stemming from the bullying she experienced as a teenager when she was called “ugly” and put down for being poor. By wearing beautiful costumes, high heels, and make-up, Clara practices becoming a more confident person, a woman “who doesn’t care about anything and gets told she’s pretty many times every evening.” While being complimented on her looks is not the goal of every woman, “Road Strip” non-judgmentally affirms that it is what Sarah wants. Wald (2000) similarly describes the aspirational personal empowerment some erotic dancers gain from their performances: “The stage names the girls choose for themselves have such fire and colour, such a poignant and hopeful poetry: Ambrosia. Blaze. Clementine. Delicia. Electra. Fantasia/ Gypsy. Harlowe. Isis. Jade. Keiko. Lolita. Magdelane. Nikki. Odessa. Precious. Queenie. Ruby. Sapphire. Tabitha. Una. Vixen. Wanda. Xiola. Yasmine. Zora” (2000, n. pag.). Through Sarah, “Road Strip” suggests that the stage is a potentially powerful space of self-actualization and validation, where assuming an alter ego may help some women shed inhibitions rooted in the societal shaming of female sexual expression.

Sex positive feminists locate the root of women’s oppression in the subjugation of female sexuality and sexual expression. As the feminist writer Ellen Willis has argued, “it is precisely sex as an aggressive, unladylike activity... an exercise in erotic power... that has been taboo for women” (as cited in Campbell, 2006, p. 257). The sexist and hypocritical provisos that compel women to tame or bury their sexual desires lest they be mistaken for “sluts,” observes Dimen (1984), have deprived women of “pleasure” and a sense of “sexual at-one-ness both of which are necessary to self-esteem” (p. 140). By unashamedly using their erotic capital, the erotic dancers in “Road Strip” align themselves with sex

positive feminism and suggest that their performances are a form of entrepreneurship *and* self-expression, what Chapkis (1997) calls “a liberatory terrain for women” (p. 1). While women become erotic dancers almost invariably for the pay cheque, “Road Strip” also shows how erotic dancing can be a site to play out fantasies of “transformation” and achieve “fundamental sexual restructuring” (Pendleton, 1997, p. 79). Empowering “transformative” personal benefits include erotic dancers feeling increased “comfort with their bodies” (Dudash, 1997) and enjoying the “sheer pleasure” (Roach, 2007, p. 207) of performing. In “Road Strip,” long-time erotic dancer Antonia supports this sex positive view of erotic dancing and characterizes her work as self-actualizing: “I think it’s hot and empowering. Our culture tells us that it is bad and degrading, but I don’t subscribe to that. Our bodies are gorgeous and our sexuality is beautiful.” The women in “Road Strip” suggest that erotic dancing is empowering and locate that power in their monetization of their performances of heterosexual femininity.

But does the personal portrait documentary’s goal of giving viewers an educational experience, and “Road Strip’s” imperative to capture these “hot” and “empowering” performances, conflict? What do images of erotic dancers in G-strings under tutti-frutti coloured lights or erotic dancers strutting in stretched string bikinis in states of what Mulvey (1999) would call “to-be-looked-at-ness” have to do with female agency? While “Road Strip” certainly makes the concept of sexual self-expression a key theme, it does not photographically objectify the erotic dancers. Given that the documentary is set in an erotic dance club, this is something of a feat, one that I want to suggest is intended to counter previously noted limitations of what Arthurs (2004) calls “docu-porn (p. 94).” As Arthurs has noted: “The power of speech is illusory when sandwiched between the erotic appeal of lingering shots of gyrating bodies on late night television, turning the woman’s assertion of empowerment into the familiar relations of voyeurism” (p. 98). “Road Strip,” however, assiduously avoids such voyeuristic close-ups by focusing its camera less on women’s bodies in titillating motion than on artistic static images: the heel of a shoe, the red tip of a cigarette, the awed or sleepy expressions on the faces of the customers – giving the scenes a sociological rather than sexual effect. And while there is certainly some “sandwiching” of titillating imagery and voiceover, the sequences of erotic dancers dancing on

stage are brief compared to the interviews, which add a layer of subjectivity and complicate the imagery. For example, in one scene, Chyna leans in to talk to a customer; she appears fascinated by him. In voice-over, she describes the workaday routine of conversing with customers, which depletes the image of its titillating content. Boyle (2008) has noted that in the docu-porn genre, women are often interviewed in their places of work, thereby ratcheting up the sexual aspects of purportedly “candid” interviews. In contrast, in “Road Strip,” the erotic dancers are interviewed in the rental home in which they live. In interviews, they wear modest, everyday clothing and, often, little make-up. “Road Strip” does not frame the erotic dancers as exotic sexual creatures, but as erotic entrepreneurs.

The documentary’s camera angles also work against objectification. In Western painting, it is commonplace to sexualize the woman’s body with full-frontal images. As Berger (1972) points out in *Ways of Seeing*, this full-frontal vantage point gives the viewer a sense of ownership over the woman’s entire body. In “Road Strip,” the camera does not offer such full-frontal images; instead, it homes in on specific non-erogenous parts of the body engaged in the execution of technical moves – an arched leg, a fingertip, a smile – to highlight the labour of erotic dancing. It also uses artistic close-ups of the environment – drinking glasses, cigarette embers, other dancers moving about the floor – to convey experience from the point of view of the erotic dancer on stage. In doing so, “Road Strip” moves away from the erotic dancer as an object to a subject and a skilled erotic entrepreneur.

Pretending Interest, Feigning Desire: Erotic Dancing and Emotional Labour

A further way “Road Strip” offers new and complex images of erotic dancers is by showing how they engage in emotional labour. Successful erotic dancers wear emotional masks. They must be inquisitive, energetic, and sexy confidantes, retain and maintain the customer’s attention and arousal, read his needs quickly and accurately, be a subtle yet convincing salesperson, and make him feel uniquely desirable (Crane, 2014; Dudash, 1997; Roach, 2007; Ronai & Ellis, 1989). Customers who feel sexually desired are more likely to pay for private dances. Erotic dancers thus manufacture the illusion of desire through sophisticated emotional performances of “feelings” to simulate intimacy, and rouse desire, all while managing their own feelings that may include tiredness, boredom, and apathy.

As “Road Strip” shows, these emotional performances entail dancers strolling around the club and approaching customers for impromptu conversations as though drawn to an attractive stranger in a bar. Erotic dancers must be, as Roach (2007) notes, “conversation specialists” (p. 52). The erotic dancer’s job is to manufacture “counterfeit intimacy” which masks the mutually “exploitative interaction” that characterizes the encounter (Ronai & Ellis, 1989, p. 272). As is the case with any salesperson and customer, the erotic dancer and her customer know they are engaging in a mutually beneficial (or exploitative) transaction, but together play at sustaining the illusion of authenticity, the condition which makes the erotic dancer’s goal of selling lap-dances realizable.

“Road Strip” suggests that selling a lap-dance is a subtle art that begins on the stage when the erotic dancer makes eye contact with a customer and begins the process of manufacturing the illusion of sexual tension. Regardless of whether the erotic dancer takes an interest of some sort in the customer – or feels only apathy – her job is to persuade him – first with her eyes, then with her words, later with her touch – that she finds him uniquely desirable (when, in fact, he may simply look lonely or affluent). She must convince him that she specifically has chosen him because she wants him singularly. As the documentary makes clear, erotic dancers are performers and salespeople who simulate brief “intimate relations” that are affectionate and physically proximate (Constable, 2009). To sell their product (the lap-dance), they use a variety of emotional and interpersonal tactics to make the customer feel special, handsome, attractive, and different from the other men in the club.

The solicitation of lap-dances that “Road Strip” portrays is an example of what Hochschild (1983) calls “emotional labour,” the interpersonal performances women service workers compulsorily perform in jobs where “service becomes the service itself” (p. 8). Hochschild draws on feminist labour studies, performance studies, and the sociology of work to argue that in many service industries women engage in performances to please (and extract the desired response) from their clientele. That women create performances of feeling as part of their work, Hochschild argues, is an economically impactful aspect of labour which is “seldom recognized by those who tell us what labour is” (p. 197).

By showing erotic dancers soliciting lap-dances, “Road Strip” underscores the emotional labour of erotic dancing. As Chyna jokes with one customer and Antonia leans over and whispers into the ear of another, the documentary illuminates how erotic dancers manufacture “authenticity” as an entrepreneurial strategy within a mutually satisfying transaction. While the erotic dancer earns money and feels accomplished for having done her job well, and may even enjoy interactions with certain customers (especially regulars), customers feel desirable, experience titillation and the pleasure of being in the company of a seemingly interested, attractive woman.

Hochschild’s theory of emotional labour further posits that service workers engage in two types of performances: “surface acting” and “deep acting.” In surface acting, one manages facial expressions (by smiling falsely and feigning interest, for example); in deep acting one represses negative emotions or draws on positive memories to counteract feelings such as disgust or anger that could interfere with their performances. “Road Strip” depicts erotic dancers using surface acting techniques with customers: they raise an eyebrow, smile warmly, cock their hips and lean over to suggest interest, excitement, arousal, and admiration. As Hochschild (1983) has noted, when surface acting, women are aware of “putting on” their emotions and do not feel them as “part of the self.” Erotic dancers also engage in “deep acting” to build rapport with clients, what Hochschild has compared to Stanislavski’s method acting in which the actor is encouraged to enter the scene “of fantasy, of subconscious and semiconscious memory” (p. 40).

To do this, the erotic dancer must draw on her memories to find authentic feelings to graft onto the scenario unfolding at hand and “must believe that an imagined happening is really happening now” (p. 42). This entails using intuition to discern what a customer needs (humour, sympathy, coyness) in order to “play the part” that will maximize her earnings. Bruckert (2004) describes the erotic dancer’s emotional work as “routinized charades...[of] illusion of a novel interaction with a ‘special’ person. In short, erotic dancers’ daily labour involves not only continual performance – playing the role of an erotic dancer – but also adopting other personas, in effect playing a number of roles” (p. 122). As “Road Strip” shows, erotic dancers perform lap-dances in a curtained

booth — either on a customer's lap or standing close; touching is allowed in certain jurisdictions and at the erotic dancer's discretion. The privacy of these encounters places greater pressure on erotic dancers to deep act and pretend arousal and interest. While "Road Strip" does not show these private dances, it makes clear that they require the erotic dancers' performances of feeling.

Customers at erotic dancing clubs jaded by phony interest place a high premium on "realness" (Frank, 2006). It is not uncommon for customers to entreat an erotic dancer to "drop the routine" and show her true self (Ronai & Ellis, 1989, p. 278). As Bernstein (2007) notes, despite knowing that erotic dancers wear make-up, high heels, and may even have breast implants, customers still wish to feel they are getting to know an erotic dancer on an authentic level and frequently state a preference for "the girl next door" who will engage in conversation. In "Road Strip," erotic dancers do even deeper acting when customers request that they "drop the routine." As Hochschild (1983) notes, the transactional quality of late capitalism places "an unprecedented value on spontaneous 'natural' feeling" or "the unmanaged heart" (p. 190). While erotic dancers may appear to be obliging, in actuality they are simply putting on another act staged to seem different from the previous one (Ronai & Ellis, 1989). To uphold the pretense of authenticity, erotic dancers must be mindful not to use the same lines on the same customers twice or to offer contradictory information. "Road Strip" suggests that such deep acting is potentially subversive in that it monetizes traditionally unpaid women's emotional labour. It portrays erotic dancers who understand the emotional demands of their jobs, rise to the challenge of them, and adopt an attitude toward their work that is resourceful and aspirational.

Erotic Dancing Challenges: Emotional Labour, Uncertainty, and Stigma

In *Live Sex Acts* (1997), Chapkis argues that sex workers who perform emotional labour do not lose anything "essential" to themselves; in fact, receiving payment for their emotional labour and thinking of that labour as a "job" allows sex workers to maintain boundaries with clients (p. 75). Some sex workers even report gaining "greater control" over their lives by performing emotional labour since "emotion was no longer something that simply happened to them, they felt practiced in also creating and controlling it" (ibid.). In "Road Strip," one erotic dancer named Sarah illustrates this separation

between self and work. Sitting barefaced in her living room playing video games, there is no trace of her stage persona, Clara, who loves exhibitionism and attention. “Road Strip” suggests that by practicing emotional labour, Sarah/Clara draws a strong line between her private self and her stage persona and retains a healthy balance between her work and personal life.

Hochschild (1983), too, argues that the emotional labour strategies of surface acting and deep acting – from smiling to feigning interest, performing empathy, and concealing fatigue and irritation – may help the worker manage the demands of her job. Surface acting and deep acting provide a script, or, at least, a set of procedures to follow if one wishes to emotionally disengage while continuing to perform the required tasks of her work. Yet, at the same time, Hochschild cautions that the imperative to manufacture and perform feelings as part of her job may place a woman under extreme stress and at risk of “alienation” from herself (p. 183). In keeping with its “personal portrait” form, “Road Strip” does not make this alienation explicit, but only suggests it. As Nichols (2001) notes, the personal portrait documentary often raises concerns about the documentary subject “without actually identifying” those concerns explicitly. Indeed, through subtle observational camerawork in scenes in which erotic dancers interact one-on-one with customers on the floor, “Road Strip” raises the spectre that the erotic dancers’ high earnings may come at a price: emotional exhaustion and self-abnegation.

One scene, for example, suggests that erotic dancers may feel obligated to downplay their ambition and intelligence, and pretend naïveté, in order to play the pleasing stereotypical feminine role for which customers show a preference. In the scene, Chyna sits on a customer’s knee and banters with him, unfurling the subtle sales pitch that is geared towards the sale of a lap-dance. In a moment of “dropping the act” – an instance of deep acting – Chyna tells the customer about her goal of one day opening a large-scale house cleaning business. Chyna, “Road Strip” suggests, knows that her career as an erotic dancer has a limited timeframe, and has intelligently sketched out her next move. She explains her business idea to her customer with excitement and in some detail. After she finishes, the customer looks at her, dumbfounded, and dismissively suggests she forget about her idea and stay “right here.” The camera’s focus on Chyna’s tight smile emphasizes her compulsory silence in the face

of this condescending dismissal and suggests that the “performance” of a successful erotic dancer involves, to some degree, the suppression of one’s personality and responses. In her performance of docile femininity (a woman without aspirations beyond the club), Chyna is at odds with the independence and entrepreneurship with which she actually lives. “Road Strip” suggests that erotic dancers who perform emotional labour must strike a deal with themselves to conform to whatever fantasy of idealized femininity the customer desires, an action that fills their bank accounts but requires the repression of their emotions.

While repression and the performance of feelings is a requirement of nearly every job, Hochschild (1983) argues that only women emotional labourers are expected to play *contradictory* roles: the dual role of resourceful mother and clueless ingénue, emotion expert and reasonless dummy, buxom sexpot and gamine baby-doll. Writing specifically about the hiring preferences of airline companies, Hochschild notes the ideal candidate is a smart woman who “can also cope with being considered dumb, someone who is capable of giving emergency safety commands but can also handle people who can’t take orders from a woman, and someone who is naturally empathetic but can also resist the numbing effect of having that empathy engineered” (p. 98). “Road Strip” highlights this paradox: although the erotic dancers earn their money pretending to be enthralled by men, in their personal lives they do not rely financially on any men at all. The tension between performing as a docile woman and living as an independent woman is not lost, although in keeping with the personal portrait documentary form, “Road Strip” implies rather than makes this tension explicit.

“Road Strip” highlights a further challenge of erotic dancing: the economic uncertainty inherent to service-based precarious work. While some of the erotic dancers like Antonia work at upscale venues like the Playboy Club and may earn up to \$1000 nightly, others are employed at less well-heeled establishments outside of urban centres where the amenities are lacking and the clientele less resourced. What happens when nobody is buying? In a mostly deserted and decaying bar in Minnesota one night, Clara finds no takers for her lap-dances, for which she charges \$25. Growing desperate, she lowers her price to \$10. With still no takers, she entreats one man at the bar: “One

dollar? You can't even buy a soda pop for one dollar." When he ignores her, she moves on to the next: "Will you give me a dollar to see my boobies?" Another erotic dancer smokes a cigarette and laconically says, "the other night, I literally left with one dollar." A close-up image of Clara's mascara-stained face leaves no need to explain through voice-over her understandable humiliation, frustration, and even anger. This moment complicates the documentary's premise of erotic dancing's potentially high earnings and invites the viewer to consider how erotic dancers, like other precarious service workers under neoliberal capitalism, must constantly hustle, without any guarantees.

"Road Strip" also explores the social stigma that attaches itself to erotic dancers through the prevailing assumptions that erotic dancers are amoral, insecure, and unworthy of respect (Hopkinson, 2016, n. pag.). Erotic dancers contend with these assumptions in the form of alienation from family and friends who judge them negatively for their jobs. In the two years since Missy, an erotic dancer from Mississippi, began dancing, her family has distanced themselves. Missy says: "I'm pretty much on my own. It's pretty lonely." In keeping with the personal portrait form, "Road Strip" neither pathologizes erotic dancers as social problems, nor offers solutions to their challenges. Indeed, the closest "Road Strip" comes to assessment is through Ling's intermittent observations – "I don't think people realize how hard the work is"; "She was disappointed, but trying to be peppy" – that are more empathetic than judgmental and allow viewers to draw their own conclusions. "Road Strip" explores in detail the benefits and some of the drawbacks of erotic dancing yet validates a woman's choice to use her erotic capital for upward mobility, a new and important representation that trades moralism for empathy.

An Erotic Dancing Sisterhood: P.O.P.

While "Road Strip" was produced by CNN, a major network with responsibilities to advertisers, *P.O.P.*, released in 2014, is a 34-minute independent documentary made by a young Atlanta filmmaker named Artemis Jenkins. Released on YouTube, the documentary found huge audiences – as of 2017, a total of two million unique page views. While "Road Strip" followed itinerant entrepreneurial erotic dancers who moved across the U.S. and worked the pole independently, *P.O.P.* portrays eight erotic dancers centralized at one club, Magic City, in Atlanta, who perform in a collective to help each other reach

their professional goals. Within this community, erotic dancers gain confidence, use their collective strength to combat stigmatization, and challenge each other to raise the artistic bar of their performances. *P.O.P.* represents erotic dancers as sex positive strivers who use their erotic capital for economic mobility. In *P.O.P.* erotic dancing is a potentially rewarding job, but one with challenges.

Magic City is a nationally-famous hub for Atlanta's thriving hip-hop and rap music scene. Aspiring music artists network at the club and hope to get discovered by the many record label executives who visit the club to scope for new talent. The erotic dancers at Magic City play a major role in determining which artists will get a shot at fame. As *P.O.P.* shows, aspiring male hip-hop and rap artists give Magic City's disc jockeys their demo tapes. If an artist is talented, or lucky, a DJ will play one of their songs during an erotic dancer's stage show. The stage show is a make-or-break testing ground for new music: if the erotic dancer can bump, pole-climb, twerk, and grind to it, the song will likely have traction on the music charts and record label executives are keen to find songs with these hit qualities. *P.O.P.* portrays the club as a creative milieu where aspiring music artists put their best songs forward, erotic dancers stage artistically innovative shows, established commercial artists and music industry moguls experience visual and auditory pleasure, and money and music flow. Music is an intrinsic part of the personal portrait documentary. According to Nichols (2001), music often sets the tone for a documentary film, and in *P.O.P.* music is a constant backdrop. Through spoken word, thumps, crackles, samples, and grooves, original music by aspiring Atlanta artists feature prominently alongside images of the erotic dancers' performances to suggest the creative synergies between Magic City's erotic dancers and music artists. *P.O.P.* portrays Magic City as a creative hub where many share the goal of making it as commercial entertainers.

What is most novel about *P.O.P.* is its representation of Black erotic dancers working in one of the few all-Black strip club in the U.S. This is a new representation. While Black erotic dancers have long worked the stage, within the burlesque industry, and the erotic dancing industry after it, popular culture has long defined these arts almost exclusively through its white performers. As Downer (2016), an erotic dancer and writer, notes: "Just Google 'erotic dancer' and what do you see? A sea of blonde

hair, blue-eyed women with huge breasts in 10-inch heels. Strippers of colour are poorly portrayed in the industry.” Yet, popular culture representations like *P.O.P.* have recently begun to portray new images of Black erotic dancers that are nuanced and affirmative. “The momentum has recently grown for erotic dancer visibility,” Downer writes, “especially for women of colour” (n. pag.). *P.O.P.* is part of this new trend. It counters the stereotype of the white erotic dancer – the “blonde hair, blue eyed woman” – by representing a group of strong and articulate Black erotic dancers who work collectively towards their goal of financial independence. *P.O.P.* suggests that Magic City is a goldmine, a place where erotic dancers can earn thousands of dollars a night.

From Minimum Wage to Feminist Collectivity: Escape and Opportunity

Like “Road Strip,” *P.O.P.* portrays erotic dancing as a form of economic mobility, and *P.O.P.*’s star, Gigi Maguire, is the film’s symbol of that promise realized. Enterprising and articulate, Gigi is an erotic dancer and entrepreneur who moves with poise that comes only from years of practice on the stage. But *P.O.P.* makes clear that struggle was the crucible of Gigi’s self-possession. As a single mother, Gigi turned to erotic dancing to support her family; after ten years, she had amassed the capital to open her own business, Pole Fan Addicts, a training school for younger erotic dancers and a site of community building. Gigi’s entrepreneurial story is the rhetorical heartbeat of *P.O.P.*, the proof to the prospect that erotic dancing is a highway to economic independence. As a woman who did life’s hard work on her own, Gigi endorses a woman’s decision to use her erotic capital to better her life and options.

Similarly, the seven erotic dancers in *P.O.P.* – Simone, Cali, Ms. Molly, Pebbles, Nunu, Kitty, and Virgo – are all in their 20s and share the experience of choosing erotic dancing as an escape from low-waged service jobs. While prohibitionists argue that sex work and erotic entertainment is not remunerative, “Road Strip” suggests that it can be. In on-camera interviews in the club’s dressing rooms, the women describe their work as an escape from the penury of double shifts, thankless bosses, and low-waged precarity. Cali, 22, talks about how she used to work at Kentucky Fried Chicken, where she earned only minimum wage. Pebbles, also 22, worked two jobs for 12 hours daily and made only \$70 per day. Most of the erotic dancers describe coming from poor or working-class backgrounds.

Many admit that erotic dancing is not their career goal, but a stepping-stone. Some declare that they chose erotic dancing at a time when they saw no other options. One erotic dancer confides: “I believe you strip because you have to. I don’t believe you strip because you want to. My situation was, I didn’t have any money, I came from nothing, erotic dancing is a way out. I gotta be honest.” Another discloses that she would not want her daughter to grow up to be an erotic dancer; nevertheless, she is pragmatic about her job and committed to excelling at it. “If you’re going to do it,” she says, “you got to learn how to do it right.” Far from celebrating it as a cure-all for financial hardship, *P.O.P* portrays erotic dancing in a nuanced light and dancers as pragmatists, clear-eyed tenacious strivers whose self-reliance and survival instinct has led them to the stage. As one erotic dancer explains: “I have something a lot of other girls don’t have...the will to survive. I am fighting for it.” While *P.O.P*’s erotic dancers arrived at this work because they wanted to escape poorly paying jobs, they now take erotic dancing seriously and see it as an art.

P.O.P. makes clear that erotic dancers are artists who take pride in their stage shows. While the erotic dancers in “Road Strip” more conventionally performed on stage alone, the women in *P.O.P.* practice and perform collectively in a troupe they call the Snack Pack, a self-organized erotic dancing sisterhood. Through the Snack Pack, the young women have grown close and are now collaborators and friends. They practice several times a week at Pole Fan Addicts, the studio owned by Gigi Maguire. *P.O.P* emphasizes the artistic and technical seriousness with which they train for their stage shows. It is this collaborative dedication to practising and choreographing, *P.O.P.* suggests, which distinguishes the Snack Pack as performers and artists. Standing in her gleaming dance studio, Gigi explains:

There is a difference between a stripper and an entertainer...a stripper is going to get on stage, two steps, booty shake, and get naked...an entertainer is going to work the pole, give you a show, and you’ll be so amazed at the show you aren’t even going to realize that you didn’t see no titties or coochie because she didn’t take her clothes off. But you wouldn’t even care because the show you saw is so much better.

Contra prohibitionists, who have suggested that erotic labourers have no specific skill sets, Gigi's comments associate erotic dancers' labour with the theatrical teasing and craft that characterized burlesque artists of the first half of the twentieth century, who were also working-class women who parlayed their acrobatic skills into enthralling stage shows. Whereas "common" erotic dancers hurry through their routines without building anticipation, Gigi emphasizes that entertainers have physical strength and self-possession, confidence, and gracefulness. Downer (2016) concurs:

Beyond the stigma of stripping being dirty or wrong, there are serious misunderstandings about what stripping entails and what kind of labour it requires. Just like any other job, stripping is difficult to get into, it's labour intensive, and it requires a lot of training. It is so frustrating for me when people treat stripping like it is grimy and easy (n. pag.)

P.O.P. paints a vivid picture of the Snack Pack's erotic dancing as a form of skilled display work, the presentation of sexualized body capital in exchange for wages (Mears & Connell, 2016). Display work is a form of visual self-sexualization that erotic dancers engage in along with models and, to a degree, actors, all of whom perform for "consumers [who] pay for the opportunity to watch display workers' performances of athleticism, eroticism, beauty, and artistry. Display workers invest heavily in their appearances" (p. 335). The camera follows the erotic dancers into the dressing room of Magic City to show them "investing" in their appearances through preparatory grooming: sitting before Hollywood style mirrors ringed with yellow light bulbs, the dancers apply make-up – foundation, mascara, lipstick, false eyelashes, sparkles – with the attention of artists adding details to landscape paintings. Watching this conscious fabrication of femininity makes clear that erotic dancing is performative – a financially remunerative drag show in which women play to idealized notions of femininity, a pageant that places on display this work of self-transformation.

P.O.P. uses close-up camerawork to capture the on-stage display work of the Snack Pack, whose knowledge and execution of spins, inversions, climbs, and other pole moves are matched only by their keen understanding of Magic City's sightlines. The names for the more than 200 unique pole techniques suggest power and motion and zing with poetry: the "trapeze hang," the "advanced Z-seat," the "double stargazer," the "rainbow," and the "rubber double elbow," to name just a few (Pole Dance Moves, 2018). Watching The Snack Pack perform these acrobatic feats makes appreciable that erotic dancing is physically demanding, technically challenging work that calls forth the erotic dancers' rhythm, focus, and precision. In silken movements that conceal the exertion required to pull them off, the Snack Pack climb the poles, cling by crossed and braided legs, clench their abdominals to perform upside down sit-ups, and move their hands along their own bodies sensually. Heels on the floor, they perform a move referred to as "popping their butts," bending at the waist, gripping their haunches, and vibrating their buttocks. These moves have an economic imperative: dancers earn the lion's share of their incomes by performing private dances in private rooms, making these on-stage performances enticements for what the erotic dancers hope to later upsell. While these images are undoubtedly sexual, the documentary keeps returning to the economic imperative that drives this display work.

As much as these performances are feats of technique and skill, *P.O.P.* suggests that they are even more so an act of community building between the members of the Snack Pack. As *P.O.P.* shows, Gigi Maguire not only teaches erotic dancers how to use their bodies to seduce and entice; she also shows them how to manage some of the challenging emotions that come with their jobs. Gigi remembers well the anxiety she felt as a rookie erotic dancer with no formal training or a manual for learning pole moves. Inhibition and a steep learning curve made Gigi's debut as a erotic dancer more challenging than it would have been had she had support from other dancers. Now in her mid-30s, Gigi offers novices wise and warm mentorship and facilitates a form of feminist collectivity. This family-like structure of The Snack Pack, *P.O.P.* suggests, helps erotic dancers support one another in a male-centred business where they may feel objectified inside the club and stigmatized outside of it.

Although erotic dancing is legal in every U.S. state, erotic dancers are still stigmatized for using their erotic capital for economic mobility. For erotic dancers, this stigma can be far more damaging to their self-confidence than any of the challenges inherent to the work itself. As Hopkins (2016) notes, “I could, by and large, control my exploitation and maintain my boundaries and self-worth. The constant judgment, often from people who had never been inside a strip club, left me excluded from normal life” (n. pag). Like “Road Strip,” *P.O.P* depicts the stigma erotic dancers regularly face for monetizing their sexual performances. In an on-camera interview, one erotic dancer says family members distanced themselves because of her job and now view her as a “slut” and a “prostitute.” Others say they are judged negatively by people who have never asked them questions about their jobs or even tried to understand why they choose them. *P.O.P*’s erotic dancers view this stigmatization as unwarranted; one dancer, who describes how she does “honest work” adds “we don’t even dance on Sunday,” while lamenting the public’s assumptions about her: “everyone thinks that erotic dancers are hos, doing it with everybody.” Nunu adds: “I want people to appreciate it, instead of looking at it in a negative light.” These sequences express the sex radical critique of patriarchal society’s sexual double standard that encourages women to passively receive the male gaze, but simultaneously shames them for claiming their own sexual agency, or using their erotic capital to monetize it.

P.O.P. emblemizes the personal portrait documentary’s imperative to give “form to cultures and histories that have remained ignored or suppressed beneath the dominant values and beliefs of society” by giving the erotic dancers the stage to speak back to stereotypes (Nichols, 2001, p. 153). In defending their agency to choose their work, *P.O.P* tacitly challenges the prohibitionist feminist characterization of sex workers as victims, which re-instantiates the bad girl/good girl binary feminism purportedly opposes. As Schweitzer (2000) argues, erotic dancers are “othered” by both feminists and patriarchal society because of their sexual iconoclasm: “Most threatening about erotic dancers, more than their supposed low class, stupidity, or superficiality, is their defiance of conventional systems of order” (p. 69). For Schweitzer, a woman who monetizes her sexuality moves from the role of passive female “other” to active “centre” in a form of gender role reversal. Both she and Hakim argue that

women such as erotic dancers are not compromising themselves by capitalizing on their sexuality; rather, they are proudly and shamelessly capitalizing on their assets through sexual performances. *P.O.P.*'s very title – *P.O.P.* stands for Power of Pussy – makes clear that exploiting one's performances of sexuality is not objectifying but a calculated business move that comes from a place of strength.

P.O.P.'s portrayal of agential Black erotic dancers enjoying and benefiting from their work may also complicate the prohibitionist claim that the sex industry pivots on the most pernicious racist stereotypes. As Barry (1995) has argued: "A woman of colour in prostitution is expected to sell not only a sexed body, but a 'coloured' one also" (p. 35). It is indisputable that women of colour are more frequently sexualized and objectified, which makes it all the more noticeable that none of the dancers mention race and the documentary itself is mute on the politics of the racialized body. Instead, the documentary seems to imply that the women are working against the age, race, and class-based disadvantages they face in society by staging lucrative stage shows within a supportive community. Feminist researchers have found the existence of sisterhoods in many strip clubs. As Roach (2007) notes, one study of "African American women found that the clubs facilitated cultural bonding, consciousness raising, and empowerment among the Black women involved" (p. 9). By representing erotic dancers who support one another, *P.O.P.* accomplishes several things: it makes visible the existence of Black erotic dancers (and thereby challenges the dominant stereotype of the white erotic dancers); it portrays Black erotic dancers as agential, talented, smart, and self-possessed; and it represents a symbiotic sisterhood in which erotic dancers enjoy close-knit, supportive friendships in an environment that is congenial to their mutual growth. By showing women drawing strength from working collectively, *P.O.P.* does not address the politics of race or class, but it does offer a nuanced image of the erotic dancer as a creative striver-entrepreneur working in a supportive creative milieu.

While erotic dancing is undoubtedly a performance, *P.O.P.* also suggests that it might also be an art. In *P.O.P.*, erotic dancers are sex positive strivers who take pride in using their erotic capital to put on creatively inspired stage shows. Stripping is not a vice, but a job, and erotic dancers are not victims, but legitimate artistic workers. As Gigi Maguire says: "I want people to appreciate us, instead

of holding us in a negative light.” *P.O.P.*, as a piece of personal portrait documentary filmmaking, challenges stereotypes about erotic dancers by portraying a community of women who support each other in their work. While making clear that erotic dancing has its challenges, *P.O.P* emphasizes that the erotic dancers in the Snack Pack are not victims, but agential entrepreneurs who choose their work because it conveys them to their personal goals.

Magic City: The Glamour, Cash, and Aspiration

The promise that erotic dancers can attain economic mobility is also at the heart of *Magic City*, a 20-minute documentary commissioned by the magazine *GQ* and directed by the acclaimed photographer and director Lauren Greenfield. Released on YouTube, as of 2017, it had a total of nine million unique views. Greenfield, whose previous work includes the feature documentary *The Queen of Versailles* (2013), is an artist deeply interested in new forms of American conspicuous consumption, the pursuit of the American Dream under neoliberal capitalism, and its elusive (and infrequent) attainment. At only 20 minutes, *Magic City* is a quick and visually lush submersion into the erotic dancing scene, rather than a languorous deep dive, but nevertheless paints a dignifying portrait of erotic dancers and offers a microcosmic illustration of how documentary in the 21st century is shifting from traditional, moralizing portrayals of erotic dancers to ones that legitimate them as workers.

Magic City was critically acclaimed. *Entertainment Weekly*, reviewing *Magic City*, suggested it was effective at showing “a reality you’ve never really had much thought of past a night of partying” (Sorensen, 2014). In the feminist publication, *Jezebel*, Shepherd (2015) writes: “I’ve never seen a profile that focuses on the dancers’ lives and minds and day-to-day more closely” (n. pag.). In light of being commissioned by a men’s magazine, *Magic City* unsurprisingly does include voyeuristic close-ups of women’s bodies, but thanks to director Greenfield’s artistic judgement foregoes outright salacious camerawork for a compelling portrayal of hardworking women who hope to find in erotic dancing a path to prosperity. At the same time, it points out the limits to erotic dancing as a path to that dream.

Magic City, like *P.O.P.*, takes place at Magic City, Atlanta's bustling erotic dancing club and focuses on a group of striving erotic dancers (some of whom also appear in *P.O.P.*). Similar to *P.O.P.*, *Magic City* portrays the fertile interchange between ambitious strip club scenesters: aspiring rap artists, DJs, and erotic dancers, who all converge at the club with the goal of becoming wealthy and eminent. "The money's green and this is what it's all about," says the rapper Future in the opening scene, auguring the documentary's main themes: power, ambition, and the pursuit of wealth and the American Dream. Like *P.O.P.*, *Magic City* uses observational camerawork in the club and off-site interviews with the aspiring rap stars and erotic dancers to paint a picture of the artistic synergies between these two enterprising performers. In these interviews, both rap artists and erotic dancers describe their dreams of fulfilling their artistic potential, becoming wealthy, and achieving what one rap aspirant refers to as his "American Dream." Greenfield portrays Magic City as not simply a strip club, but a dream factory, a salon of ambition, entrepreneurship, creativity, and networking. For the rap artists, Magic City is literally an audition suite with a doorway to stardom. The DJs make or break careers: "If your record isn't playing in Magic City, it isn't cool in the streets," notes one aspiring rapper. The erotic dancers, who perform to these potential hits, are instrumental in deciding whether a song sinks or soars. Says one DJ: "The dancers are like the A & R (Artists and Repertoire) people." Another rapper comments, "It's like Motown was in the 70s, with groups on every corner, same in Atlanta, except it's rap," alluding to the community and sound produced in Detroit in the 1960s and the many Detroit artists who became legends. A number of now-prominent rap artists were discovered at Magic City and their realized American Dream narratives seem to serve as proof of the attainability of success for the many undiscovered young musicians who aspire under Magic City's silver mirror balls. The aspiring musicians and erotic dancers share this ambition.

Magic City humanizes erotic dancers by exploring how many chose their work as escapes from the low-waged service jobs that dominate the post-2007 economy. In on-screen interviews, an erotic dancer in her early twenties named Virgo describes growing up without money; Simone, also in her 20s, is using her earnings to pay tuition. One erotic dancer named Secret says she made \$15,000 in her

first week at Magic City. Whereas “Road Strip” focused on the labour processes of erotic dancing, and *P.O.P.* on the entrepreneurial techniques and felt experiences of the dancers, *Magic City* centres far more on the financial returns. As Nichols (2001) notes, in the personal portrait documentary, style and form take on equal importance to “social purpose” (p. 166). Opulent panning shots of the stage covered in carpets of dollar bills repeat and suggest the bountiful earnings of some of the erotic dancers.

Since the personal portrait documentary shows the world from a particular perspective, Nichols (2001) further argues that much of its meaning is visual. It “stress[es] subjectivity and experience” and assigns “enduring worth to specific moments” (p. 166). *Magic City* uses rich, colour saturated close-up imagery of specific moments to represent the prosperity and glamour associated with the club. The opening shots show *Magic City*’s elegant-looking white stucco exterior and the illuminated neon pink sign whose sensual cursive lettering spell out Magic City. A white horse-drawn chariot drives by, followed by a BMW, suggesting the possible collision of old and new world prosperity. The camera also captures the interior of the club – velvet banquettes, gold accented tables, and shiny floors – as handsome and wealthy men in tailored tuxedos mingle and watch the erotic dancers on the stage. Describing this scene, the manager of *Magic City* wryly notes: “it’s chicken wing bones on the floor, cash everywhere, and money, the American Dream.” Visually, *Magic City* suggests that erotic dancing is a world in which money is free-flowing and erotic glamour ubiquitous. Indeed, the documentary features so many images of cash that it becomes a character unto itself and invites the viewer to vicariously imagine earning and spending such sums. Close-up shots lit by baby pink and violet lights show the erotic dancers’ pole moves, and men throwing wads of dollar bills, and make clear that the making, spending, and flaunting of cash is the engine that drives Magic City. At the end of the night, the erotic dancers, wearing sequined bikinis, climb on stage to collect their money, dragging black garbage bags stuffed with all the bills they scoop up. One erotic dancer describes the experience of walking on thick piles of cash as feeling like “a plush carpet.” Another describes going home with stuffed bags “like Santa Claus.” One DJ comments: “The erotic dancers are the movie stars.”

Magic City paints an image of erotic dancers as glamorous micro-celebrities who enjoy their work, reap massive rewards, and revel in the attention they receive from well-heeled customers. As Hakim (2010) points out, erotic and cultural capital have long been interconnected. Japanese geishas and Italian courtesans during the Renaissance employed erotic capital for financial gain, using “lavish dress, flirtatious conversation, grace, and charm to ensure an agreeable social encounter” (p. 501). *Magic City* portrays erotic dancers as savvy entrepreneurs who use all the elements of erotic capital: beauty, sexual attractiveness, skills, grace, and charm, liveliness, social presentation, and sexual confidence. The images of the erotic dancers performing gracefully shore up writer and erotic dancer Sundahl’s (1988) contention that “it is an insulting misconception that anyone in a drunken uninhibited state can strip. It takes practice and talent to be able to pull off an entertaining and truly erotic performance” (p. 177). Through its new images, *Magic City* challenges the stereotype of erotic dancers as de-skilled sex objects and portrays them as savvy and skilled performers.

Magic City normalizes the women’s use of erotic capital and frames their stage shows as skilled performances. Accordingly, the dancers in *Magic City* are entrepreneurs who speak of their inventory of erotic capital – their own bodies – as assets which they use in deliberate ways to maximize their earnings. In the same way that a poster of James Dean sells an image of youthful rebellion to alienated arty teens so too does the erotic dancer sell a highly constructed and idealized image of heterosexual femininity to men who like that image. Hakim (2010) notes that erotic capital entails “social presentation” through one’s “style of dress, face-painting, perfume, or jewelry, or other adornments, hairstyles and various accessories” (p. 500). With the same attention to detail with which they plan their stage shows, *Magic City* shows erotic dancers who use cosmetics, costumes, clip-on locks, heels, and Hollywood style strips of eyelashes to create themselves as models of ideal femininity, cosmetic masks they pair with choreographed moves. In the club, one erotic dancer climbs the pole, shakes her hair down, and wiggles her bum: “my money-making move,” she explains. Another erotic dancer explains her approach to the work: “It’s like a corporation,” she says, “only you make money for free.”

Magic City is aligned with the empowerment paradigm. By affirming women for using their erotic capital for economic mobility, it rejects the virgin/whore dichotomy. Indeed, it suggests that erotic dancers are sex positive strivers who reject scripts of compulsory female docility by monetizing their assertive stage shows. Furthermore, by making men pay for what they might have expected to get for free – the pleasure of looking at an attractive woman – *Magic City* suggests that these erotic dancers are perhaps even reorganizing the conventional looking relations between men and women. As Schweitzer (2000) explains:

Strip clubs provide one of the few outlets in which women exercise unchallenged command over their bodies. Women freely express their sexuality in an environment that upholds their authority over it. Beneath much of the rhetoric against topless bars lies a fear of women realizing their sexuality while simultaneously holding complete control over it. Stripping and modeling are among the only legal female dominated careers in which women earn as much as men who work in traditional, respected professions (p. 72)

Whereas *P.O.P.* emphasized the collectivity of erotic dancers through the Snack Pack, *Magic City* depicts erotic dancers as paradigmatic neoliberal entrepreneurs who strive solo with eyes fixed on the bottom line. But it also questions whether the brass pole is a viable route to financial freedom – from low-paying jobs, professional dead zones, anonymity, and double shifts that leave no time to see one’s children. But more than the other documentaries, it raises the possibility that few of the aspirants in the club will succeed in the leap to stardom which is their goal. What does the future hold for these talented erotic dancers who haul home bags of cash each night? All of the subjects in *Magic City* express their own version of what “making it” would look like – nice homes, good lives for their children, financial freedom – goals that pivot on financial stability, even wealth. But will everyone be able to make it? The manager of Magic City is unsure. In an on-screen interview in the office of the club, he suggests that the best move an erotic dancer can perhaps make is to “get out early” with her

money. Some erotic dancers, he says, “get addicted to the pole.” He ponders the divide between the fantasy of the resplendent American Dream in the club and the workaday reality of most people’s lives: “people have a hard time separating reality from entertainment. But there is a line, a thick line.”

Both *P.O.P.* and *Magic City*’s portrayals of erotic dancers as striving erotic entrepreneurs performing for the sake of attaining economic mobility suggests that erotic dancing – and, in this case, the particular labour of Black women erotic dancing – may be an empowering and emancipatory experience for women, a catalyzing act that is freeing and lucrative. Downer (2016) suggests that “for too long Black women have practiced a politics of containment wherein we have been instructed to conceal our bodies for fear that they will work in service of imperialist white supremacist capitalist patriarchy. But fear and shame do not encourage resistance” (n. pag.). The women in *Magic City*, in this vein, suggest that by becoming erotic entrepreneurs in service of bettering their futures, they are breaking the politics of containment. Says one dancer named Diamond: “Being average has never been an option for me. My goal is to become a bigger entertainer.”

Yet, does erotic dancing convey the women of *Magic City* to wealth, the promised American Dream? In a later scene, a rising star DJ named Esco, who is about the same age as many of the erotic dancers, takes the documentary crew to his home, a hilltop hacienda with a swimming pool and a stellar view of the pastel Atlanta skyline. As the camera follows Esco around his impressive property and shows its various amenities, one ponders the interiors of the erotic dancers’ homes, which the documentary does not show, an elision that raises this consideration: while Esco has connections to other powerful and wealthy rap artists and record company executives, and a lucrative career that age will not derail, the erotic dancers, most of whom are in their twenties, face uncertain futures as long as their bodies remain their sole capital assets. Intelligently, *Magic City* de-stigmatizes and validates erotic dancers, yet at the same time, suggests potential limits to this empowerment. At one point, an aspiring rapper throws dollar bills on an erotic dancer who undulates below him, striking sexualized poses. “It’s not about money,” he calls out, over the music, “it’s about power. I could throw this money on her ass and I don’t even care! She doesn’t even care! It’s a rush.” Yet, do the erotic dancers have this power?

In keeping with the personal portrait documentary form, which does not explicitly address social issues, or the politics of race, class, or gender, *Magic City* does not critique the power relations in this charged moment, in which a man pays a woman to silently act out the role of compliant sexual object below him while he stands above her, speaks, and literally holds the money. Would this not mean that men are willing to support women in roles which draw on the rhetoric of empowerment only if they do not re-organize the unequal balance of power in society? By exploring the subjectivities of erotic dancers who know *why* they are acting out these roles and what they gain from it, *Magic City* challenges the stereotype of the erotic dancer as “slut” or “ho,” as lamented by Gigi Maguire, and offers a new image of the erotic dancer as an entrepreneur. While *Magic City* makes clear that erotic dancing is not a direct route to economic mobility, it suggests that it may be an escape from low-wage jobs, and a calculated venture that can convey women to other life goals, whether they be artistic (like Antonia, who becomes an author) or entrepreneurial, like Gigi, who, in illustration of the American Dream story, has invested her earnings and become the owner of her own studio. No longer an erotic capitalist, Gigi is simply a capitalist, and the documentary champions that as her most powerful move.

Critique: The Limits of Erotic Capital

“Road Strip”, *P.O.P.*, and *Magic City* represent new, positive, and de-stigmatizing images of erotic dancer entrepreneurs who draw on their erotic capital as a strategy for economic mobility. They suggest that erotic dancing is a craft, an empowering subversion of compulsory female docility, a way of monetizing men’s entitlement to regard women as objects, and a viable career for women who are not born with other forms of capital. These representations also de-stigmatize erotic dancers by reminding viewers that dancers are also mothers, students, aspirants, friends, and business owners, dynamic people, not sexual objects. At the same time, the documentaries’ relative muteness on the limits of erotic capital, the structural inequalities that still affect women disproportionately, and the racism that is documented in the erotic dancing industry, warrant some exploration.

First, while the documentaries represent erotic dancers who sexualize themselves for pay, rather than for validation, it is still undeniable that images of women’s deliberate and extreme self-

sexualization perpetuate the patriarchal idea that women's primary value lies in being sexually attractive (Douglas, 2010; Levy, 2005; McRobbie, 2009). Hakim (2010) proposes that erotic capital may be women's secret trump card and a way of remediating gender inequality. But what are the limits of women using erotic capital to achieve economic mobility? Stripping is characterized by high pay but relatively short careers. As Mears (2014) notes, Hakim's theory of erotic capital "typifies a neoliberal philosophy of the personal imperative for self-improvement and a disregard for systemic power relations that unequally distribute capitals across populations" (p. 1334). In their astute critique of Hakim, Green (2012) points out that erotic capital is controlled by many extrinsic factors. Because our society is ageist and links women's youth to sexual attractiveness, erotic dancers start losing capital assets at a precipitous rate in their late thirties but also literally, from their first day on the job. While the erotic dancers in the documentaries suggest this limit by detailing plans for their futures, the documentaries do not delve into the problematic of an industry in which a worker's value begins to plummet from her debut. Ageism and unrealistic beauty standards are endemic to display work and the entire entertainment industry, but, given the primacy of display work in erotic dancing, it is noticeable that the documentaries are quiet on the limits to one's use of erotic capital, and its unequal distribution. Hakim (2010) calls her theory of erotic capital "a manifesto" for women (2010), and the documentaries similarly affirm the benefits of erotic dancing, but it remains a crucial point that while erotic capital may help individual women – who have the right look – attain economic mobility – for a time at least – erotic capital is neither a collective feminist strategy, nor will it ever be.

Second, in offering a sex-positive affirmation of the erotic dancers' agency to choose their work as an escape from low-wage service jobs, the documentaries at times frame erotic dancing as an ideal solution to low wages, the gendered wage gap, and the lack of state support for single mothers. In doing so, they do not examine the economic structures behind this state of affairs. "Road Strip," *P.O.P.*, and *Magic City* represent erotic dancing as an escape from low-waged service jobs which, under neoliberalism, women hold at unprecedented rates, but do not delve into why such poor-quality jobs have proliferated under neoliberalism. Why is erotic dancing the best – or perhaps only – route to the

American Dream, if it is at all? While the erotic dancers in these documentaries seem generally pleased with their work, other women dislike erotic dancing but bear it out because they have few other options. In 2014, one erotic dancer writing in *The Guardian* described how her day job as a cafeteria worker in the U.S. senate does not pay enough to support herself and her son: “While my customers give speeches...promising to deliver the American dream to hard-working people, they aren’t lifting a finger to help the workers like me who serve them every day; not everyone has another job, but it’s almost impossible to support a family without one” (Kim, n. pag.). “Road Strip”, *P.O.P.*, and *Magic City* may also at times over-emphasize the empowerment of erotic dancing over the simple dignity (and health benefits and steady pay) that come with a full-time job. “Road Strip”, *P.O.P.*, and *Magic City* use the personal portrait documentary form to portray erotic dancers as ideal neoliberal entrepreneurs. As Mascaro (2012) observes, “the greater the national emphasis on the marketplace, the less likely it is for commercial documentaries to excel as craft or grapple with complex problems or suggest social action” (n. pag.). As such, in “Road Strip”, *P.O.P.*, and *Magic City*, there are no feminist critiques of power. As Cruikshank notes, neoliberal popular culture offers solutions to “social problems...by waging a social revolution, not against capitalism, racism and inequality, but against the order of the self and the way we govern the self” (as cited in Oullette & Hay, 2008, p. 75). The documentaries’ telescopic focus on individual choice mutes discussion of inequality and collective feminist goals, or social action to improve the conditions of their work – for example, unionization, which is occurring right now in certain strip clubs across the United States.

Third, the documentaries skirt the well-documented racism within the erotic dancing industry. Implicitly, *P.O.P.* and *Magic City* suggest that by working in an all-Black strip club, Black erotic dancers avoid this discrimination, yet some discussion of race and erotic dancing would have been useful (Jeffords, 2013, n. pag.). In 2007, for example, a Houston erotic dancing club was sued by the Equal Opportunity Employment Commission after asking Black waitresses and dancers to stay home when a high-spending, racist customer was due to arrive, lest the women’s presence hurt profits (Hartmann, 2011, n. pag.). A subtler, no less pernicious form of racism pervades in clubs that forbid disc jockeys to

play rap or hip-hop music, a tactic managers institute to disincline Black male customers from visiting (Shepard, 2013). Brooks (2010) found that “erotic capital is affected by variables such as weight, skin colour, speech patterns, gender presentation and hair texture” (as cited in Jones, 2015, p. 792). A consequence of the discrimination within the erotic dancing industry, Downer (2016) writes, is that Black women work harder than other erotic dancers for less respect and lower pay.

In the documentary *Live Nude Girls Unite!* (2000), director and erotic dancer Julia Query chronicles the battle she and her fellow erotic dancers fought, in 1999, to form the first-ever labour union for erotic dancers in San Francisco. The collective’s list of grievances included one of the most odious at The Lusty Lady erotic dancing club where on each shift – typically staffed by about 12 erotic dancers – only one woman could be Black. If an erotic dancer had to miss a shift, she was permitted to get another dancer to fill in for her, but the club’s policy dictated that the substitute had to have a lighter shade of skin and breasts that were the same size or larger. *Live Nude Girls Unite!* is a unique documentary because it places collective action alongside sex positive feminism, creating a valuable bridge between radical feminism and postfeminist sensibilities or what Green (2012) calls “the poststructural valorization of personal power through sexuality” (p. 138). It shows that there is a way to portray erotic dancers respectfully while also examining power and inequality.

Having said this, I want to suggest that by not dealing directly with issues of power and inequality, “Road Strip”, *P.O.P.*, and *Magic City* make a deliberate – and, I would argue, sound – artistic choice in the delicate matter of representing marginalized figures like erotic dancers through documentary. Nichols (2001) asks: “How may we represent or speak about others without reducing them to stereotypes, pawns, or victims?” (p. 139). In asking this question, Nichols introduces an important ethical dimension to documentary making about marginalized people, that is, the involvement of what he calls “politics and ideology” (p. 139). To represent an already marginalized group – erotic dancers – as an oppressed group that is powerless in the face of inequality would reproduce erotic dancer stigma and take away from the obvious strength, tenacity, and agency of the erotic dancers; at the same time, by focusing explicitly on setbacks and problems, the documentary

could appear paternalistic or as an attempt to rouse pity from the audience, what Nichols calls “a politics of charitable benevolence” (p. 140). Nichols points out that such representations deny the subject status equal to the filmmaker and turn the subject into an object of pity. Yet, to not draw attention to the social inequities facing a subject would seem to present a partial and scrubbed version of her reality. The documentaries explored in this chapter, while eliding some of the structural issues surrounding the erotic dancing industry, nevertheless come close to achieving a balance between structure and agency. If the personal portrait documentary is, in the end, about fostering understanding about a marginalized subject, the challenge will remain having to make a choice between re-stigmatizing or risking glorifying a subject. Ultimately, “Road Strip”, *P.O.P.*, and *Magic City* resonate with this tension, but succeed in portraying an image that lies somewhere between these poles by representing erotic dancers as entrepreneurs whose work involves benefits and drawbacks, which is, in itself, a deeply humanizing image.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I have examined three personal portrait documentaries that offer new images of erotic dancers as entrepreneurs, skilled entertainers, performers of heterosexual femininity, and emotional labourers on a path they hope will lead to the attainment of the “American Dream.” “Road Strip,” *P.O.P.*, and *Magic City* challenge conventional wisdom that erotic dancing is a desperate choice made by unskilled women and replace an edifice of earlier popular culture with new and humanizing narratives. All three documentaries reflect to various degrees the labour perspective and Weitzer’s (2012) “polymorphous” paradigm by highlighting how erotic dancing can be lucrative and satisfying, as well as demoralizing and exhausting, and time-limited due to the ongoing sexist ageism in our society. By pointing out the drawbacks and the advantages to erotic dancing, “Road Strip”, *P.O.P.*, and *Magic City* evince how erotic dancing both “subverts and replicates patriarchal norms” (Roach, 2007, p. 25).

As personal portrait documentaries, “Road Strip”, *P.O.P.*, and *Magic City* represent the subjective experience of erotic dancers, dignify their skills, and portray them as entrepreneurs who

improve their lives by using their erotic capital. The final words in “Road Strip” (Ling’s voice-over as images of women counting money and driving home in the dark flash on screen) sends this message strongly: “This is not a glamorous job. I don’t know if people realize how hard the work is. You definitely have to have a certain set of skills that go way beyond just taking off your clothes.” Through the personal portrait documentary form, “Road Strip”, *P.O.P.*, and *Magic City* offer a non-judgmental portrait of hardworking, entrepreneurial women who, despite the challenges inherent to their work and the uncertain directions of their fortune, are climbing the economic ladder.

Taken together, “Road Strip”, *P.O.P.*, and *Magic City* represent a changing tide in the representation of erotic dancers in twenty-first century American popular culture. These portrayals can be explained through the increased social tolerance for sex workers and the neoliberal valorization of entrepreneurship, which has in turn normalized precarious service workers like erotic dancers who perform emotional and aesthetic labour. While “Road Strip”, *P.O.P.*, and *Magic City* are apolitical in the strictest, capital “p” sense of the word, they make important contributions to the de-stigmatization of erotic dancers – and indeed all women – who use their erotic capital for economic mobility. Content-wise, these works veer from stereotypical narratives in which erotic dancers were unhappy, drug-addicted, wayward women to portray erotic dancers as ambitious entrepreneurs. Rather than show erotic dancers dying or getting punished for what society deems their sexual transgressions, these works embrace a sex positive feminist ethos and show erotic dancers who use their personal qualities, dancing skills, and performances of heterosexual femininity to improve their lives and that of their families. These documentaries together challenge longstanding stereotypes of erotic dancers perpetuated by narrative cinema, moral conservatism, and prohibitionist feminists, and are potent examples of how popular culture in the 21st century has begun to offer new and humanizing images of sex workers.

Chapter 2: Massage Parlour Mothers on Prime Time Reconstituting the Fallen Woman as Mompreneur in *The Client List*

“Mothers involved in sex work [have had] their lives, perspectives, material conditions, and voices...neglected and ignored for far too long, and readers, policymakers, thinkers, theorists, and governments need to imagine them as subjects with agencies, not just objects of abjection or rescue, and to listen to their diverse needs, their desires, and their wants” (Bromwich & DeJong, 2015, pp. 31-32)

“Success [under neoliberalism] is defined as facing obstacles with resilience, initiative, and creativity, one’s aspirations being ‘limited’ only by one’s own hunger, drive, passion, and execution” (Rottenberg, 2018, n. pag.).

While the last chapter focused on three documentaries that challenged sex worker stereotypes through humanizing images of erotic dancers who hustle with emotional labour and technically impressive stage shows, in this chapter I focus more intimately on how a recent television series, *The Client List*, challenges stereotypes about sex workers through a quieter, yet arguably more provocative portrayal of the long-stigmatized figure of the sex worker mother. *The Client List* launches a bold defense of the sex worker mother who improves her life, and that of her family, by entering – and thriving in – the business of sex as a resilient 21st century neoliberal mompreneur.

The neologism “mompreneur” – a portmanteau of “mother” and “entrepreneur” – appeared in the first decade of the 21st century and was widely circulated in magazines and on the Internet. Not long after, in 2012, Lifetime Network installed a billboard in Los Angeles for *The Client List*. The billboard pictured an attractive 30-something woman in a plunging bustier surrounded by male mannequins arranged to appear as though they were crawling towards her in frantic lust. The woman’s cleavage and the billboard’s tag line – “simply irresistible” – primed viewers for a series about decadent sex. But when *The Client List* aired a few weeks later, viewers met bubbly protagonist Riley Parks who actually found her main interest not in sex, but in entrepreneurship and mothering. For two seasons, *The Client List* followed Riley – massage parlour entrepreneur by day, super mom by night. While the pilot brought in 1.2 million viewers (IMDB, n.d.), critics, like one at *The New York Daily News*, dismissed it as “delicious trash” (Hinckley, 2012).³⁸ Yet, in doing so, they missed why the series was so historical as the

³⁸ It was also called “deliciously trashy” by *Variety* (Lowry, 2012, n. pag.) and “ultra soft porn...softer than Charmin” by *Slate* (Patterson, 2012, n. pag.).

first prime-time television series to refashion the socially outcast figure of the fallen woman into a twenty-first century massage parlour mompreneur.

The Client List is part of a new wave of popular culture emergent since the 2000s that represents massage parlour workers as twenty-first century sexual entrepreneurs. Between 2006 and 2016, new images of empowered and entrepreneurial massage parlour workers have appeared in feature films like *Feel* (Grasso & Mahurin, 2006) and *Inherent Vice* (Anderson, 2014), documentaries such as *Happy Endings* (Hurley, 2009), the TV movie *The Client List* (Bauman & Laneuville, 2011), and the TV series *The Client List* (Love-Hewitt, 2012-2013). At the same time, a raft of new popular culture has appeared that challenges traditional and homogenous conceptions of motherhood. Whereas the traditional image of the mother pivoted upon patriarchal proscriptions about women's compulsory chastity and docility, *The Client List's* Riley Parks occupies the roles of mother *and* sex worker to undermine the virgin/whore dichotomy itself.

In this chapter, I argue that *The Client List* offers a new and positive representation of the sex worker as massage parlour mompreneur – thereby positing harmony between these historically antithetical two roles. In contrast to the most recognizable sex worker mother – the fallen woman who is a socially reviled pity case – *The Client List* makes Riley into an entrepreneurial subject of twenty-first century capitalism who retains custody and capably cares for her children, thereby refuting the criminological construction of the sex worker as the apocryphal anti-mother. Hardly a moral lesson, *The Client List* makes Riley into a savvy entrepreneur who finds in massage parlour work an opportunity to escape low-waged service work, practice skilled labour, gain autonomy and satisfaction, and provide a stable life for her children. *The Client List's* characterization of Riley is an example of a break with the virgin/whore dichotomy or what Dunn (2012) calls the “reform-punishment discourse” and demonstrates how popular culture is offering new, more complex and positive images of the sex worker in the twenty-first century. Most provocatively, Riley is not punished. In fact, *The Client List* tacitly endorses the decriminalization of sex work and Riley's right to work with dignity and the same legal protections afforded to other workers.

By harmonizing the figure of the mother and the massage parlour worker, Riley challenges sex worker stereotypes, yet simultaneously occupies another stereotype – that of the ideal mother who practices what Hays (1996) calls “intensive mothering” (p. xi). Specifically, *The Client List* elides how neoliberalism has exacerbated gendered economic inequality and suggests through Riley that individualism and entrepreneurship are viable ways that single mothers can prosper, while remaining mute on how one out of two new businesses in the U.S. fail and 41% of single female-led families live below the poverty line (Hargreaves, 2012; Kessler, 2014). Thus, *The Client List* is a double-edged sword: while it provocatively challenges sex worker stereotypes it also affirms neoliberal ideology.

In the first section of this chapter, to provide context for the virgin/whore binary to which *The Client List* responds, I provide a brief history of the social construction of massage parlour workers and sex worker mothers. In the second section, I show how *The Client List* proposes to challenge stereotypes about the sex worker mother, while concluding with this representation’s limitations.

Contexts: History, Popular Culture, Theory

Massage parlours – in-call establishments where women provide the erotic services of nude massages and manual masturbation – have existed in the U.S. for over 100 years.³⁹ Massage parlours proliferated in the U.S. in the 1960s in response to returning American GIs who had enjoyed massage parlour services while on furlough during the Vietnam War and brought the demand back with them (Velarde, 1975). By the early 1970s, massage parlours boomed in American cities in a legal grey zone between licit entertainment and illicit vice, as cities licensed them but did not sanction their services (Hodge, 1975; Mermey, 1972; Young, 2014). This changed in the mid-1970s, however, as rising conservative values and political platforms built on purity campaigns prompted outcries from special

³⁹ Massage parlours have been a front for sexual service establishments for more than one hundred years (Armstrong, 1978). In 1894, *The British Medical Journal* published an inflamed editorial calling for a stop to “amoral prostitutes” tarnishing the reputation of therapeutic massage by passing their establishments off as hospitals (Nicholls & Cheek, 2006, p. 2336). The term “massage parlour” became argot in 1895, when the *Journal of the American Medical Association* posited a distinction between massage parlours “where the sick and injured are treated” and the host of other parlours cropping up all over the U.S. (Mills, 2011). Two years later, in *United States v Dunlop*, a newspaper publisher was charged with obscenity after printing advertisements placed by “impure” women offering massage (ibid.). Dunlop was jailed for 21 months for the crime of having “depraved public morals” (ibid). Kneeland (1913) visited 75 of the purported 300 massage parlours in existence in New York City and found that all were “vice resorts” (as cited in Armstrong, 1978, p. 118). But these establishments did not hang shingles and operated discreetly away from public eyes.

interest groups and, later, campaigns to shut down the massage parlours (Variety, 1971; Ross, 2014). At the same time, the news media stoked public outrage by framing massage parlour workers as seedy criminals and flashy ne'er-do-wells with links to organized crime and the parlours themselves as vectors of urban vice (Ross, 2014). One national magazine story, published in 1977, reverberates with this disdain: "Call her Josie. In the work-a-night world of commercial sex real names don't matter...Josies...run to a type: young, undereducated, flashily attractive, greedy and, like most whores...lazy as sin" (as cited in Brock, 1998, p. 40). The news media's perpetuation of stereotypes about massage parlours re-marginalized an already marginal group of women, and paved the way for even more demeaning popular culture portrayals (Katz, 1973). As Brock (1998) notes, "the media was not simply a vehicle for expressing public outrage; it served to mobilize a moral panic" (p. 37). Meanwhile, popular culture churned out its own negative stereotypes about massage parlour workers.

Movies at this time portrayed massage workers as promiscuous *bon vivants*, sleazy criminals, and deserving victims of crime. While a full tour of massage parlour movies is beyond the scope of this chapter, a few examples will illustrate the trend. *Madame Olga's Massage Parlour* (1965), an exploitation film, portrayed a wolfish massage parlour Madame who tortures her female workers "in a variety of brutal ways" – as the movie poster promised – and suggested not only the depravity of the massage parlour as a workspace but also the sadomasochistic relations between women workers (read: no feminist solidarity here). *Massage Parlour Murders* (1973), persisting with themes of women's victimhood, told the story of a rampaging serial killer in Times Square who murders massage parlour workers with wanton sexualized glee. With its close-ups of perky breasts and bludgeoned faces, the film eroticized violence and excoriated massage parlours as debased places where women wait for death like dehumanized prey. In *Massage Parlour Wife* (1975), a softcore cuckolding fantasy, an unfaithful wife moonlights as a massage parlour worker for the sheer thrill of it; by the end, to show contrition for her wanton ways, she joins her husband in a *ménage à trois* before resuming her wifely duties in the kitchen and the marriage bed, a heteronormative finale and salute to the virgin/whore dichotomy. But the most widely circulated depiction of a massage parlour worker was in *Full Metal*

Jacket (1976), in which a Vietnamese massage parlour worker tells an American G.I. in broken English – her only lines in the film – “Me so horny, me love you long time baby. Me sucky sucky, me love you too much” as she pantomimes oral sex, a portrayal that would become a racist stereotype and a crude punch line.⁴⁰

While these salacious images banked dollars for movie studios, they hid the experiences of actual massage parlour workers, who were ordinary women irreducible to crass stereotypes. Ethnographies show that massage parlour workers came from a range of backgrounds and included mothers, daughters, students, and career sex workers; most emphasized how they spent the majority of their time with clients talking and providing emotional support (Bryant & Palmer, 1975; Velarde, 1975; Velarde & Warlick, 1973). As one massage parlour worker told a journalist in 1974: “When I consider the kind of services I perform at times, I think of myself as a sort of social worker” (Katz, 1973, n. pag.). But on screen, whether infantilized or murdered, racialized or objectified, popular culture painted massage parlour workers as victims or criminals, “good women” or “bad women,” not multi-faceted people. And certainly none suggested that massage parlour workers could be mothers.

In *Mothering and Sex Work* (2015), Bromwich & DeJong discuss two kinds of labour long considered antithetical: “sex work” and “mother work” (p. 2). Mothers who are sex workers rarely appear in popular culture, even less so as agential protagonists on network prime time television. Yet, motherhood is a reality for many sex workers. As John-Fiske (2013) notes, upwards of 80% of all sex workers are mothers. Mothers and sex workers also share the historical experience of being discursively constructed in one-dimensional ways. In fact, the patriarchal discourses about sex work and motherhood have long reinforced one another “in a way that re-inscribes and maintains a patriarchal social order” (Bromowich & DeJong, 2015, p. 1). In *Motherhood and Representation*, Kaplan

⁴⁰ While the 1960s brought tolerance for explicit depictions of sexuality in literature and film, women of colour – especially sex workers – continued to be sexualized as innately libidinous (and compliant lovers for Western men). In Richard Mason’s novel *The World of Suzie Wong* (1960) – later made into a film – a Chinese brothel worker leaves Hong Kong for Western society in London. For what the novel attempted to accomplish by entering the subjectivity of a sex worker, it also reinforced in east-west stereotypes and essentialist ideas of the exotic “other” by portraying Suzie as an innately sexual being without rationality or free will, a libidinous sex object ruled by impulse. Reflecting on her decision to become a sex worker, Suzie says: “I wondered vaguely why I had done it; I suppose it was just a reversion to type” (as cited in Hughes, 1984, p. 110).

(1992) argues that in the nineteenth century, the figure of the mother was enshrined in the public imaginary as the keeper of the family – the angel in the house. While the mother was portrayed as submissive and sacrificing, and signified goodness and asexual purity, her opposite, “the whore” was painted as depraved and callous, and connoted sexual monstrosity and hardheartedness – the apocryphal anti-mother.⁴¹ This binary characterized good women as asexual outside of marriage (and within marriage as sexual for procreative purposes only), while “bad women” were sexual outside of marriage, but “controlled or punished” for their sins (p. 107). By restricting women to these roles, the “good girl/bad girl” or “virgin/whore” binaries foreclosed on the possibility of women – but especially mothers – embodying contradictory traits and being complex individuals with multiple drives and desires, libidinous and nurturing impulses – in short, the opportunity to be equal to men. In *The Dialectic of Sex* (1970), Firestone explains:

One cultural development that proceeds directly from...[this] dichotomy is the good/bad women syndrome...those who resemble the mother are “good,” and consequently one must not have sexual feelings toward them; those unlike the mother...are sexual and therefore “bad.” Whole classes of people, e.g. prostitutes, pay for their lives with this dichotomy (as cited in Campbell, 2006, p. 26)

The stereotype of the sex worker mother as “fallen woman” as McNeill (2000) has observed, can be traced to the earliest written documents in the English language. As a sexually active woman who

⁴¹ Victorian criminology supported this binary between “angelic” mothers and “nefarious” prostitutes. Writing in the late nineteenth century, the Italian physician Lombroso (2004), father of the pseudo-science of eugenics, argued that all women, but more so prostitutes, were natural born liars (caused by menstruation) and particularly susceptible to vanity (caused by an inability to form major ideas). He measured the body parts of hundreds of prostitutes and argued that their thighs – “bigger than a normal woman in proportion to her calves” – were outer signs of inner corruption (p. 123). By placing emphasis on the prostitute’s deviant sexual appetite and body, patriarchal society buttressed the notion that respectable women – epitomized by the mother – lacked corporeality and sexuality, a view fortified by the medical establishment. It was not uncommon for nineteenth-century physicians to advise married women not to engage in sexual intercourse more than once a month, while their husbands were advised to do so every four days. Women, it was argued, were far more interested in mothering than engaging in sexual relations, and the two activities were seen as mutually exclusive (Ringdal, 2004). As Brewis & Linstead (2000) note, in the nineteenth century, conventional wisdom maintained that wives were frigid; therefore, men were within their rights to patronize prostitutes, although they “affected in public to deplore” these same women (p. 192).

becomes pregnant out of wedlock, the fallen woman epitomized the danger of a woman stepping outside of the proscriptions of the virgin/whore dichotomy – she was the virgin who became the tragic whore. Although Victorian novels and paintings often treated the fallen woman sympathetically as a victim of circumstance, they seldom showed her rejoining society, almost never saw her retaining custody of her children, and most frequently portrayed her dying from either disease or suicide as a result of her transgression.⁴² As McNeill (2000) notes, the death of the fallen woman served to “draw boundaries around ‘respectable’ female sexuality as well as demonize prostitutes” (as cited in Brewist & Linstead, 2000, p. 192) and to signal the impossibility of an unmarried woman – especially a prostitute – caring for and raising a child. The figure of the fallen woman reinforced patriarchal prohibitions against women’s sexual expression and illustrated the consequences of women’s sexual agency, affirming the edict that women remain in a subordinate role and rely for their survival on men. Fallen women were sexual deviants, the foil to the asexual mother.

In the twentieth century, the legacy of the fallen woman is observable in the figure of the single mother, who has been roundly characterized as an unfit parent (Ross, 2016).⁴³ What she and the fallen woman share is the experience of having their sexualities scrutinized as evidence of their unfitness for parenting. In this reformulation of the virgin/whore dichotomy, good mothers are married and asexual, while bad mothers are single and sexualized. As Feltmate & Brackett (2014) point out, “sexuality and motherhood” continue to be “entangled” and “inherently problematic” and mothers who do not fulfill the tenets of ideal motherhood – asexuality chief among them – are

⁴² The binary between the “good mother” and “bad whore” has lent novels, paintings, and cinema voltage for hundreds of years. While the fallen mother drew sympathy from male Victorian writers, with few exceptions she was not allowed to re-enter polite society (Hapke, 1989; Horn & Pringle, 1984; Kishanty, 1982). Victor Hugo, in *Les Misérables* (1862), wrote poignantly of the prostitute mother Fantine as a victim of capitalism, a system steeped in inequality: “What is the history of Fantine? It is society buying a slave” (p. 154). Nevertheless, as was typical for the prostitute mother figure in Victorian novels, Fantine dies. In iconic paintings of the same period, such as Rossetti’s *Found* (1854) and Watson’s *Found Drowned* (1850), the fallen woman mother lies along the bottom of the canvas, prostrate on her back, having met a miserable end. In O’Neil’s *A Mother Depositing Her Child at the Foundling Hospital in Paris* (1855), a mother in a scarlet dress symbolizing her transgression, eyes downcast in shame, deposits her infant (Jesus-like, in a basket) on the steps of a church. Literature and visual art have offered few examples of the successful mother prostitute. In *Marked Woman* (2006), Campbell argues that the cinematic mother prostitute as “martyr” or fallen woman embodies “altruistic devotion to others.... [and] engages in prostitution not to benefit herself, but as the only way she knows of helping someone...often... her child” (p. 133-134). In traditional cinema, martyrs or fallen women typically despise their work and often die for their transgressions. *The Client List* departs from the image of sex worker mother as martyred fallen woman by showing Riley enjoying and thriving in her work.

⁴³ According to Pew Research (2018), 24% of American mothers are “solo moms” or single parents (Pew Research, n. pag.).

portrayed as deviant or unfit (p. 553). Thus, married mothers are associated with goodness and asexuality, while single mothers become linked to monstrous sexuality and deviance. The ongoing demonization of sex worker mothers illustrates the pervasiveness of this dichotomy. Sex worker and mother Fitzgerald (2018), the author of the first-ever children's book about sex work, describes how her

desire to destigmatize sex-working mothers came at a price: I received death threats, strangers have called Child Protective Services on me, and I've even been accused of practicing Satanic witchcraft in order to coerce children into the sex industry. I'm not alone—the juxtaposition of sex work and parenting makes a lot of people uneasy...This punishing stigma will continue to flatten the full personhood of *all* mothers until we eradicate the racist, sexist, ableist, classist, and heteronormative cultural perceptions of what constitutes the perfect mother (n. pag.)

While popular culture continues to idealize heteronormative asexual motherhood, *The Client List* is an example of how it has also begun to characterize mothers in new ways. As Podnieks (2012) argues, representations of motherhood are contradictory, and draw on traditional discourses of motherhood (the chaste and docile mother) but also “confront and challenge norms, break taboos, and empower mothers with agency and control” as mothers negotiate new “roles and identities” (p. 12). *The Client List* represents such a confrontation by blending the figures of the “good” mother (the virgin) and the “bad” mother (the whore) into harmony in Riley Parks, a massage parlour “mompreneur.”

The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines a “mompreneur” as “a woman who sets up and runs her own business in addition to caring for her young child or children” (Mompreneur, n.d.).⁴⁴ In celebratory discourses of mompreneurship, “women are simultaneously hailed as resourceful providers, reliable micro-entrepreneurs, [and] cosmopolitan citizens” efficiently navigating the

⁴⁴ The term was popularized in 2006 with the launch of Mompreneursonline.com, a networking forum that quickly saw traffic of up to seven million visitors a month (Maritz & Thongprovati, 2010). Since then, the term has appeared with increasing frequency in magazines, websites, books, and in academic articles (Bryson & Dempsey, 2017; Carrigan & Duberley, 2013; Jean & Forbes, 2012).

business world according to capitalist market logics while devoting copious amounts of time to mothering (Hawkesworth, 2006, as cited in Cornwall, et al. 2008, p. 3). By creating Riley Parks in the image of the mompreneur – who exists both inside *and* outside of the logics of the marketplace – *The Client List* activates Rivers-Moore’s (2010) contention that some sex worker mothers under neoliberal capitalism increasingly “make strategic choices about participating in the sex industry, based on an assessment of how much they can earn compared to other types of employment available to them” (p. 721). Given that more than half of all sex workers are mothers (John-Fiske, 2013), *The Client List* sheds light on how some in this large yet mostly invisible group may choose and benefit from sex work.

Unlike the pitiable fallen woman, who pays for her supposed transgression with plummeting social status – or her life – Riley thrives. By humanizing Riley as a smart, agential professional who chooses her work and uses the proceeds to provide for her children, *The Client List* rejects the over 100-year-old criminalization of massage parlour workers, overturns stigmatizing popular culture stereotypes, and harmonizes the antithetical figures of the mother and sex worker into a mompreneur who chooses her work, enjoys it, and uses the proceeds to provide for her children.

The Massage Parlour Worker as Mompreneur: The Client List

The Client List, an American television series produced by Lifetime Network, was based on a true story and ran for two seasons.⁴⁵ While the title refers to the clandestine book in which Riley Parks records the names of her clients, *The Client List* is really about sex workers and mompreneurship. It is a particularly sympathetic exploration of how one mother becomes a massage parlour worker – and later massage parlour owner – to support her children at a time of personal and financial duress. Turning away from the criminological framework, *The Client List* goes to great lengths to humanize Riley Parks. Broadly speaking, *The Client List* treats massage parlour work as legitimate work, rather

⁴⁵ *The Client List* TV series was developed out of *The Client List* TV movie (Bauman & Laneuville), which appeared in 2010 (Andreeva, 2011). Both, in turn, were based on true events in the life of a working mother turned massage parlour worker from Odessa, a small town of 92,000 in West Texas. As Vine (2005) writes in *Texas Monthly*, 22-year-old Lexus began working at Healthy Touch Massage Parlour after her husband lost his job and the bank threatened foreclosure on their family home. Very quickly, Lexus was earning \$1,000 a day in the storefront wedged between a Pentecostal ministry and a florist. As Vine (2005) notes, Lexus hosted clients from as far away as Switzerland. After she was arrested for prostitution, she divulged the names of her clients – the “client list” – plunging the town and some of its most prominent members into scandal (n. pag.).

than a vice or a moral failing, and makes emphatic massage parlour work's parallels to other types of embodied and affective service labour – work that requires physical stamina, business savvy, and therapeutic and interpersonal skills.

The Client List upsets the stereotype of the victim (virgin) or criminal (whore) sex worker and challenges the sex worker mother dichotomy in three ways: first, by portraying Riley choosing her work as an escape from unemployment; second, by likening massage parlour work to other forms of skilled labour in a therapeutic setting; and third, and most significantly, by portraying Riley as a competent mother whose mompreneurship helps, rather than hinders, the lives of her children.

Massage Parlour Work: An Escape from Low-Waged Service Work and Unemployment

Prohibitionist feminists suggest that engagement in sex work places women at risk for physical and psychological harm. But feminists who subscribe to the labour and empowerment paradigms argue that sex work can offer women greater control over their labour conditions, high income, scheduling flexibility, and increased confidence (Goldstein, 1983; Hoggard, 2014; Petro, 2006; Phoenix, 1999). Mothers with childcare responsibilities looking to re-establish themselves after divorce find this flexibility important (Hollander, 1974; Rivers-Moore, 2010). In this vein, *The Client List* frames Riley's work in the sex industry as an escape from low-waged service jobs and an opportunity to earn a living wage doing work that is flexible. Through her work, *The Client List* suggests, Riley gains greater control over her life and achieves the confidence that comes with being financially independent.

The Client List builds this case by setting the series in the wake of the Great Recession of 2008, in a spiral of job cuts, home foreclosures, and economic depression unparalleled since the Great Depression (Goodman & Mance, 2011). By 2011, a full 11% of Americans were unemployed (Power, 2009). When the pilot opens, Riley is one of the jobless masses having recently lost her position as a registered massage therapist at a local country club. The pilot's inciting incident occurs when Riley's husband abandons the family suddenly, a trauma that thrusts Riley into the role of breadwinner for her two children and onto the job market. *The Client List* represents the economic downturn job

market as a blighted place in which the few available jobs are precarious, deskilled, hyper-managed, and fail to offer a living wage. In this context, job seeking is less an act of aspiration than a race to the bottom of one's dignity. After being rejected from numerous massage therapist positions, Riley seeks out minimum wage jobs (on which she would be unable to support her family) yet is rejected from those too. *The Client List* avoids drawing on simplistic neoliberal rhetoric about choice by registering these constraints which compel Riley to become a massage parlour worker.

The Client List frames the massage parlour industry as an attractive alternative to and escape from the hopeless (yet licit) job market. As Fineman (2012) notes, it is not uncommon for workers to leave licit labour markets during recessions, which have failed to provide them with a living wage, and enter illicit ones, which do (n. pag.). Such were the constraints that impelled some women, including mothers, to become sex workers during the financial downturn (Mitchell, 2010; The Economist, 2009). When Riley secures a job at an upscale spa called The Rub, she believes she has solved her financial problems. Yet, upon learning that The Rub actually offers two tiers of service – non-sexual, therapeutic massages (which pay poorly) and sexual massages that involve the manual masturbation of the client (which are lucrative) – she faces a quandary that causes her to question her entrenched ideas about what constitutes appropriate female sexual expression – questions that find their roots in the binary between “good mother” and “bad whore.” Furthermore, Riley’s dilemma raises the question of what constitutes a good job for a struggling single mother during a financial downturn – the pay it offers or its socially constructed moral locus. Because Riley wishes to remain a “good mother” (and not a “bad whore”), however, she chooses to perform non-sexual massages in a bid to remain virtuous.

Yet, in a reversal of expectation, *The Client List* presents Riley’s non-sexual massage work as exploitative and demoralizing, thereby complicating our societally entrenched ideas about what constitutes a “good job” for a virtuous woman. Through vivid montages, *The Client List* shows Riley’s work as a therapeutic masseuse as a trial: clients treat her like an object, speak to her with contempt, and rarely leave her gratuities. The work is grueling and impedes her ability to mother. She returns home each night drained and sore, with barely the energy to cook supper, much less converse with her

children. By showing the unpleasant conditions of Riley's non-sexual massage work – the supposed “good job” – *The Client List* raises the question of whether what appears to be a “bad job” – a sex work job – might, in fact, be the more attractive option, given the constraints Riley faces. Whereas the fallen woman narrative would frame Riley's decision to engage in sex work as an error of judgment borne of tragic naiveté, *The Client List* suggests that Riley's decision to become a massage parlour worker is sound, or at least understandable, given her options. By showing the responsibilities Riley faces as a single mother and the disempowering conditions of doing non-sexual massages, *The Client List* builds empathy for Riley and consensus for her decision to change course.⁴⁶

Researchers who study the motivations and work patterns of indoor sex workers have found that many move in and out of the sex industry according to need and as a means to an end – whether that is paying tuition, supporting children, or themselves while pursuing a career in the arts (Bernstein, 2007; Burana, 1998; Gira Grant, 2014). *The Client List* draws on the labour and empowerment paradigm and considers the “diversity of life histories and personal circumstances that lead people to the sex industry” (McCarthy, Benoit, & Jansson, 2014) by portraying Riley's colleagues as a diverse group of affable strivers who choose massage parlour work to reach larger life goals. Selena, a feisty 30-something, aspires to own a horse farm; Nikki, a working-class 19-year-old college student and math whiz, intends to become a professional in the STEM field. She explains her decision to work at The Rub with frankness: “Tuition's expensive.” Other supporting characters, including a Black college student and a male masseuse, are equally ambitious. *The Client List* elicits empathy for Riley and her

⁴⁶ *The Client List* furthermore suggests that Riley's change of course may be rooted in the job requirement that she perform sexually oriented massages (that culminate in manual masturbation) rather than engage in sexual intercourse. The degree of physical contact required by sex work occupations varies tremendously, from none (like webcam modeling) to those which call on a sex worker's physical and emotional intimacies (as in the work of call girls). Rubin's (1984) concept of “charmed circle” intimacies provides us with a helpful explanation of why Riley may consider massage parlour work the most acceptable form of sex work. Rubin argues that certain intimacies are socially validated while others are not depending on their institutional history. The premise for Rubin's model is that heteronormative and reproductive intimacies (heterosexual, vanilla, monogamous) are legitimized against marginalized intimacies (sodomasochistic, fleeting, commercial). Within sex work, there are further “charmed circles.” As Satz (1995) notes, within sex work there are many hierarchies. Given that massage parlour work does not entail sexual intercourse, it may carry less stigma than other forms of sex work. Research by Bryant & Palmer (1975) and Velarde (1975) found that women massage parlour attendants occupied a tenuous place within the sex industry. On one hand, they worked in sex establishments, but on the other, they did not have intercourse with their clients. The women Bryant & Palmer (1975) interviewed seldom referred to themselves as sex workers (p. 239); instead, they called themselves entertainers, or physical therapists who rendered a “service to the public” (ibid).

colleagues by representing them as ordinary women who choose massage parlour work in an economy in which stable employment relations have dissolved and social safety nets are eviscerated. While *The Client List* is clear that Riley's preference would have been to retain her original job at the country club, it lauds her resourcefulness and adaptability and suggests that she and her colleagues have made sound decisions to step outside of the licit but foundering economy into illicit yet lucrative sex work.

From Worker to Owner: Massage Parlour Mompreneurship

According to *The Client List*, massage parlour work offers much more than an escape from unemployment and low-waged service jobs. It offers women a chance to become part of the owning class. In contrast to the image of the victim or criminal massage parlour worker perpetuated by earlier popular culture, *The Client List* portrays massage parlour workers as entrepreneurs who enter the sex industry with ambition. *The Client List* embodies this idea through Georgia, Riley's boss and the owner of The Rub. In season one of the series, Georgia is an American success story. A former massage parlour worker herself, Georgia spent a decade saving her money and single-handedly built The Rub into a profitable enterprise. As a full-time manager-entrepreneur, she now enjoys an excellent income and has assured herself financial stability through retirement.

It is significant that *The Client List* makes Georgia a 50-something Black woman entrepreneur. Georgia activates Hakim's (2010) notion that women can transcend barriers to economic mobility rooted in race-and class-based inequalities by using their erotic capital. Whereas other forms of capital (like social and economic capital) are determined by birth, Hakim argues, erotic capital is self-created and the most democratic of all forms of capital. *The Client List* represents Georgia as an enterprising woman who transcends barriers by using many personal traits including her intelligence, sexual attractiveness, grace, social skills, and charm. Yet, just as Hakim asserts that erotic capital is much more powerful when combined with intellect, *The Client List* emphasizes Georgia's wisdom as the true source of her success. "I got all of this," Georgia says, gesturing to her immaculate massage parlour, "because of this," she points to her head, "and not this," she finishes, pointing to her breasts. Through Georgia, *The Client List* supports the contention that women massage parlour workers can overcome

race-and-class-based marginalization and move from the working to the owning class. While this is an empowering idea, it elides the fact that women of colour are exponentially more likely to be arrested for prostitution due to systemic racism within the justice system, thereby suggesting that racism does not exist in the sex industry or society at large. Even so, by portraying Georgia's professional satisfaction and success, *The Client List* creates in her a strong leading Black female character and troubles the prohibitionist suggestion that all women of colour in the sex industry are victims.

The Client List also suggests through Georgia that female-run sex work establishments are not only better for women workers, but for business as well. While Georgia caters to male clientele within a traditionally male, capitalist system, her management style is distinctly collective and female-focused. A mother figure with a subscription to *Forbes*, she lives for her business and her proxy children (her employees): "I don't know how to do 'me' time," she says, "my place is here with you girls." As the "mother" to her employees, Georgia arranges social outings, offers personal and professional counsel, grooming tips, and is involved in her staffs' day-to-day-lives to a degree beyond any typical boss-employee relationship. Riley, Selena, Nikki, and the other workers at The Rub regard Georgia as a mother and affectionately call themselves "Georgia's Girls."

Georgia is also an equitable and caring boss. She pays her workers a fair cut of their earnings and allows them to choose their shifts so they can pursue other goals. Riley, for example, works only daytime shifts so she can pick her children up from school, while Nikki, a college student, works around her class schedule. By characterizing Georgia as a generous and kind entrepreneur and matriarch, *The Client List* conjures her opposite – the stereotype of the cruel pimp who exploits his women workers – and suggests that were sex work to be decriminalized, more establishments could resemble Georgia's, where women are treated with respect, assured safety, and paid well. Of course, the presence of a female owner does not guarantee that women workers are treated well, and Georgia still operates within a capitalist system where women remain economically oppressed, but in this

vision of a sex work business under ownership that is worker-focused,⁴⁷ *The Client List* raises the possibility that sex work establishments, without compromising profit, can be safe, comfortable, and convivial workplaces where women can achieve economic mobility and even thrive.

Yet, it is through Riley's ascent to the owning class that *The Client List* makes its most strident endorsement of massage parlour mompreneurship as a viable form of economic mobility. By the middle of the first season, Riley has bought The Rub from Georgia – who has met a romantic partner and decided to retire – and begins building it into an even more profitable enterprise. Riley's ascent from flailing single mother to empowered businesswoman in the space of approximately six months manifests Hakim's (2010) contention that "erotic capital...is distinctive in not being controlled by social class and status" (p. 510). By showing Riley's ascent, *The Client List* repudiates the image of the sex worker as victim or criminal and endorses Riley's work as a valid mode of economic mobility.

In doing so, *The Client List* takes a strong position against prohibitionist claims that sex work is a uniquely objectifying experience and categorically not work. Prohibitionist feminists argue that when men hold the "male sex right" to "buy" women's bodies, women become consumable, disposable, and ultimately worthless objects. As such, they argue that sex work cannot be considered work on several grounds: first, the intimate and physically proximate nature of sexual intercourse makes it unlike any other job; second, relatedly, the intimate nature of the work perpetuates male supremacy. As Day (2007) notes, even as "professionals in sex, prostitutes are nonetheless unlike all other professionals for they are still viewed as objects, be these public utilities or luxury goods" (p. 124, cited in Pettinger, 2011, p. 227). Pateman (1988) argues that prostitution can't be truly understood from a labour perspective because the buyer is not a capitalist but a worker himself; therefore, two workers cannot be said to be in a market exchange (as cited in Spector, 2006, p. 35). Similarly, Jeffreys (2008)

⁴⁷ Under current U.S. laws, it is a crime for sex workers to work collectively. Sex worker advocates argue that these laws increase sex worker vulnerability. Were sex workers allowed to work collectively and organize, they could advise each other about strategies and best practices, formalize a system through which to warn each other about bad dates (informal systems exist now), form co-operatives, work together, organize as businesses and operate visibly with the strength that comes from numbers rather than clandestinely and alone.

contends that the job requirements of sex work cannot be viewed as “skills,” as “youth and inexperience are the most highly valued aspects of a girl inducted into prostitution” p. 19).

The labour and empowerment paradigm, on the other hand, strives to focus on the work of sex work in order to shift the topic of conversation from vice and objectification to labour and choice. Taking its cues from liberal and socialist feminism as it relates to work, they highlight the ways in which sex work is no different from other forms of service work (Spector, 2006; Weitzer, 2009). In opposition to a victim frame, they argue that sex work is skilled labour that can foster women’s independence when exchanged for high payment for services. *The Client List* portrays Riley becoming entrepreneurial and using several forms of skilled labour to operate her successful massage parlour. By focusing on the *work* of massage parlour work, *The Client List* makes visible the congruencies between it and other businesses that offer transactional intimate services. It does so in three ways: first, by depicting the physical setting of The Rub as a professional workspace; second, by highlighting Riley’s entrepreneurial skills (in the business of transactional sex); and third, by showing how Riley’s provision of therapeutic massage and emotional labour constitute professional skills that deserve to be recognized as legitimate labour.

First, *The Client List* suggests massage parlour work’s congruency with other service industries through the professional setting of The Rub itself. While the stereotypical setting for sex work in popular culture is rife with images of exploitation – seedy-looking red-lit bars festooned with bedraggled people and alleyways where broken needles and condoms float in puddles of urban flotsam – Riley works in an elegant setting. The Rub, with its Rothko-esque wall art, potted orchids, and freshly laundered linens, resembles a five-star spa or an upscale dermatologist’s office. Client history forms affixed to clipboards stack the reception desk, Riley and her staff wear buttoned-to-the-neck starched white uniforms, use a computerized client booking system, and abide by a strict code of conduct similar to that of any paraprofessional who works closely with other people’s bodies; for example, it is forbidden to date clients. By portraying The Rub as professional workspace where staff abide by professional guidelines, *The Client List* suggests massage parlour work’s congruency with

other therapeutic services, like massage therapy, hairdressing, and tattooing, and normalizes the transactional sale of sex like any other commodity or service in the marketplace. Indeed, *The Client List*'s vision of sexual commerce occurring in a setting that could double as a spa suggests that massage parlour services are just the newcomer in a service saturated post-Fordist economy, in which an ever-diversifying range of services comprise a bulk of the U.S.'s national GDP – 57% – and daily life is increasingly marked by transactions between willing adults (Worstell, 2016).

Over the last two decades, scholars have written insightfully about the rise of neoliberalism and the attendant rise of transactional intimacies (Hochschild, 1983; Bernstein, 2007a). Illouz (1997) argues that late capitalism has transformed sexuality by re-shaping the once romantic affair into a mutually agreed upon transaction where the service is assured (as opposed to the romantic encounter, where the outcome is always contingent). This new model of transactional sex, according to Illouz, has several features: first, it takes place outside the setting associated with sex (such as the bedroom in the home), yet this space is nevertheless “permissive” (p. 95); second, an attitude of instrumental rationality guides these affairs, stripping them of transgressive elements and normalizing them as transactions; and third, such transactions are carried out by people “who are most proficient at switching between sexual pleasure and forms of economic activity” (p. 178, as cited in Brewis & Linstead, 2000). *The Client List*'s vision of transactional sex conforms to Illouz's model. The Rub is a beautiful and “permissive” setting, and its professionalized services and environment (intake forms, credit card payment, uniforms) certainly help to strip the encounters that occur within it of their transgressive elements. Riley herself epitomizes the entrepreneur who is “proficient at switching...between sexual and economic activity” (ibid.). Riley's excellent “switching skills” – being on one hand a mother and on the other a massage parlour mompreneur – form the very basis of her character. *The Client List* affirms Riley's entrepreneurial skills in the business of transactional intimacy.

The Client List illuminates the many skills Riley uses as a successful massage parlour mompreneur. In doing so, *The Client List* rejects the contention that sex workers have no occupational skills and aligns itself with the labour and empowerment paradigm, which seeks to highlight the hard

and soft skills sex workers draw on in their work (Weitzer, 2009; Peterson, 2003). *The Client List* portrays Riley becoming an entrepreneur and engaging in the same activities as any business owner: she does bookkeeping, orders stock, pays bills, and does banking. She builds a stable of regular clients, manages her staff with authority and kindness, and makes business plans. She institutes a new computerized booking system and, provocatively, hires a male masseuse for female clients (he is, contra the stereotype of the frigid woman/wife, always fully booked). Rather than set her sights on exiting the massage parlour industry as swiftly as possible or wish for rescue – as the fallen woman narrative suggests she would do – Riley embraces her role as massage parlour mompreneur and makes transforming The Rub into an even more profitable enterprise her vocation. By conveying Riley from worker to owner in a mere six months, *The Client List* suggests that massage parlour work is a path to economic mobility that any single mother in the U.S. can follow – and succeed at – if only she has the ambition and work ethic. At the same time, *The Client List* does not make Riley’s entrepreneurial undertakings look easy and shows the *work* of sex work.

Showing the Work of Massage Parlour Work: Body Work and Emotional Labour

In the first instance, *The Client List* focuses on Riley’s skills as a trained massage therapist. In numerous scenes set in dimmed rooms, *The Client List*’s camera captures through close-ups Riley’s hands pounding, kneading, and caressing her clients’ bodies in ways that make clear that her work requires the skill and knowledge of an expert body worker. Body work, as Wolkowitz (2002) has noted, is performed on the “naked and supine” bodies of others and may entail contact with genitals and body fluid (p. 497). Twigg et. al. (2011) notes that body work entails “assessing, diagnosing, handling, treating, manipulating, and monitoring bodies” (p. 171). Jervis (2009) argues sex workers are body workers in how they use their “own bodies” to serve their clients (p. 94, as cited in Dyer et al., 2008, p. 2032). As a worker who massages, moves, arranges, strokes, holds, rubs, cradles, and caresses her clients’ bodies, Riley is a “body worker.” *The Client List* makes clear that Riley’s body work requires skill, strength, and stamina. Her knowledge of human physiology, furthermore, allows her to provide her clients with

therapeutic services that relax and relieve pain and, in many scenes, she even diagnoses muscle ailments and sends her clients home with instructions on after-care. By portraying Riley as a skilled body worker, *The Client List* challenges the contention that sex workers have no discernable skills and asserts that despite its illegal status, massage parlour work is a skilled form of labour.

Because Riley's job is to produce feelings of pleasure in her clients, *The Client List* portrays her drawing from her vast storehouse of erotic capital, Hakim's (2010) term for qualities such as sexual attractiveness, charm, and social presentation that women may deploy in an entrepreneurial strategy for economic mobility. Riley uses her erotic capital to shapeshift into a variety of personae that have little to do with who she is outside of work. To this end, *The Client List* shows Riley engaging in "display work" (Mears & Connell, 2016). Riley uses seductive costumes, lingerie, make-up, and hairstyles to build a massage parlour persona that is separate from her mother self. "I can be whoever you want me to be," she tells one client with an insouciant grin. While prohibitionists argue that such work is potentially harmful (even traumatizing) to the sex worker's psyche, *The Client List* suggests that Riley's performances of sexuality are a matter of artful procedure, more akin to Hochschild's concept of "deep acting" than to sexual objectification. Indeed, Riley seems to enjoy the performative aspects of her work. She relishes shapeshifting, becoming a French maid ("is somebody teeklish?"), a geisha, a cheerleader, an angel with feathery wings, and a hula girl, treating each role as a performance. A master of compartmentalizing, she regards these roles as having little to do with her personal identity. "Making guys fantasies come true is our part of our job," she explains to a colleague.

At the same time, *The Client List* highlights the professional boundary she draws at the door of The Rub. At work, she dresses in Moulin Rouge-esque costumes; at home, with her children, she wears jeans or sweatshirts. Barry (1995) argues that everyday acts performed by sex workers, including the creation of emotional distance, and the donning of costumes and stage names, makes disassociation a veritable job requirement (p. 34). But by portraying Riley relishing her performances *The Client List* aligns with the empowerment paradigm view that sex work is what Gira Grant (2014) calls "a performance, it is playing a role, demonstrating a skill within a set of professional boundaries"

(p. 90). Far from traumatic, *The Client List* shows how aesthetic and display labour may come with “pleasure and empowerment” (Mears, 2014, p. 1339).

The Client List also highlights how Riley does emotional labour. While massage parlour workers offer physical therapeutic and erotic services, they are just as likely to offer affection, conversation, advice, and a listening ear (Evans, 1979; Katz, 1973; Velarde & Warlick, 1973). As Weitzer (2005) notes, sex workers – particularly indoor sex workers like Riley – are apt to engage in “emotional labour” (p. 217). The phenomenon known as “strangers on a train” – wherein a person is more likely to disclose personal information to a stranger than to a close friend or family member – helps explain why clients are likely to speak to sex workers about intimate emotional matters (Lucas, 2005). The prohibitionist feminist position is that male sexuality is violent, what Dworkin has called “the stuff off murder, not love” (as cited in Echols, 1982, p. 59). Yet ethnographic research has found that men who buy commercial sexual services at massage parlours are often the newly separated, divorced, or perennially single and lonely and often simply seek “conversation with a sympathetic listener” (Bryant & Palmer, 1975, p. 235). Indeed, Riley’s clients are emotionally vulnerable men who seek the comfort and validation that comes from being asked questions, listened to, and touched. Some of Riley’s clients struggle with sexual dysfunctions and the resulting feelings of shame. Other clients, single late-in-life virgins, the widowed, and the newly separated and divorced, seek affection and opportunities to practice being sexually intimate with a woman without the emotional risks or performance anxiety that may arise with a real-life date.

One of the strongest through lines in radical feminist thought on sex work is that men who buy sex are biologically inclined to harm and debase women. Writing about the culture shift brought on by pornified culture, Morgan argues that all men think “all women are really whores” (as cited in Echols, 1982, p. 62). Dworkin has called male sexuality “the stuff of murder, not love” (as cited in Echols, 1982, p. 59). *The Client List* challenges these strident stereotypes by humanizing and giving Riley’s clients poignant back-stories: a man whose marriage proposal – which he placed on a Jumbotron at a baseball game – was rejected before a crowd of 20,000; an awkward computer programmer seeking support as

he musters the courage to ask out his long-time crush; a rodeo stuntman who can entrance thousands yet fails to interest his own wife. Numerous scenes show Riley listening to her clients as would a therapist, offering comfort, validation, and gentle advice – often in excess of sexual services. *The Client List* troubles the blunt argument that men visit massage parlours to act out their misogyny. On the contrary, *The Client List* shows how Riley's clients are vulnerable and needy and treat the massage room as a therapy office and a confessional booth.

Emotional labour, which ranges from adjusting tone, to managing body language, to speaking the correct words of reassurance at the right times, comprises a vast portion of Riley's job. Hochschild (1983) argued that women service workers who provide emotional labour are at risk of losing the parts of themselves they subjugate to please their customers. For example, women service workers may have to suppress feelings of irritation and boredom to provide attentive and warm service. *The Client List*, however, suggests that Riley takes pride in offering her most emotionally involved services, activating Stacey's (2005) contention that some women service workers find emotional labour a meaningful experience, especially when they have autonomy in their work. Riley appears to enjoy feeling needed and receiving positive feedback from her clients. Many clients thank her for the positive impact she has had on them (and some later get in touch to say that they are in now in romantic relationships, thanks to the confidence they developed with her). As Riley explains to her best friend, she draws satisfaction from performing emotional labour:

This may be hard for you to grasp, but I'm not ashamed. I know you'll find this hard to believe, but I like my job. Something happens in those rooms. I help them with their problems. Sometimes it gets physical, but for the most part, it's much more important than that...I feel like I really made a big difference.

The Client List also suggests that Riley gleans from her work renewed feelings of confidence given that she has just been abandoned by her husband. While by no means a cure for heartbreak, or a means of

dealing with trauma, the veneration of many men is a much-needed tonic for Riley, not to mention a welcome distraction. In numerous scenes, she proudly wears figure-revealing costumes and teases and flirts with her clients in seeming enjoyment of her work. Being admired by appreciative men who compliment her and return for repeat visits (often becoming regular clients) renews Riley's self-confidence. Furthermore, *The Client List* suggests that as a newly single woman who had very little sexual or romantic experience before her marriage, Riley's work and its requirement that she don various erotic personae gives her an opportunity to experiment with various forms of sexual expression without the emotional risk that comes with dating for which she says she is not yet ready. While radical feminists argue that the commercial sex industry reproduces gender inequality by objectifying women into "things" (p. 329) *The Client List* paints Riley's work as a subjectively empowering opportunity to run a profitable business and gain sexual confidence.

The Client List too suggests that the massage parlour can be a supportive community for women. Like the sisterhood forged by erotic dancers of The Snack Pack in *P.O.P*, Riley finds in her colleagues support and care that she would be hard pressed to find elsewhere due to the stigma and secrecy of her work. Over the course of two seasons, *The Client List* shows Riley developing close connections with colleagues, some of whom become her friends. Popular culture portrayals of women sex workers in groups (apart from tawdry images of sex workers on street corners or in jail cells) are rare. On one hand, this rarity speaks to veracity: it is illegal for sex workers to organize as collectives, which fosters sex worker isolation and heightens their risk for victimization. Further, sex workers in groups suggests female camaraderie and solidarity, which threatens patriarchal dominance. By representing sex workers as isolated and highly sexualized, popular culture has perpetuated the notion of sex workers as objects to be used by men. *The Client List* counters the notion that sex work must be a lonely, frightening, and isolating experience by showing Riley having candid and warm friendships with fellow sex workers who support each another in their personal lives and work.

Furthermore, *The Client List* shows how Riley's job allows her to financially support her closest friends and her family. She lends her mother the down payment for the hair salon she has long dreamt

of owning; she is also generous with her female friends. Doing so gives her a sense of accomplishment. While some feminists have argued that sex work is a non-remunerative – what Baldwin (1996) has called “fast money,” quickly made and spent – Riley’s career path suggests the reward of long-term financial stability. By showing Riley operating The Rub in this entrepreneurial manner, while prioritizing her workers’ satisfaction and safety, and continuing to mother her children, *The Client List* evinces an empowerment paradigm view of sex work. While the archetypal fallen woman figure suffers for her decision to be a sexual being, in *The Client List* she thrives.

Harmonizing Sex Work and Mothering Through Intensive Mothering

A further way that *The Client List* depicts a new and positive image of the massage parlour worker is through harmonizing in Riley the figure of the mother (virgin) and the sex worker (whore). This harmony is rare. In *Marked Woman* (2006), Campbell argues that the cinematic mother prostitute is commonly depicted as a fallen woman⁴⁸ who embodies “altruistic devotion to others...[and] engages in prostitution not to benefit herself, but as the only way she knows of helping someone...often...her child” (p. 133-34). Typically, prostitute mothers are presented as fallen women who despise their work and die for their transgressions (often committing suicide out of shame and guilt). As Campbell (2006) points out, patriarchal cinema activates the Christian hope for redemption through the downfall of the fallen woman. The sacrificial fallen woman represents the incompatibility of motherhood and sexuality and reinstates the binary between virgin and whore. In *The Client List*, however, Riley is both a mother and a sexual being. She draws her greatest satisfaction from her children, whom she calls “a gift.” In *The Client List*, massage parlour work helps, rather than hinders, Riley’s mothering capabilities and improves the lives of her children.

The Client List frames Riley not only as a capable mother, what Winnicott (1973) calls “the good enough mother,” but as a selfless and preternaturally devoted mother *and* a successful market-driven

⁴⁸ The martyr prostitute first appeared in a poem called *Matilda, or the Dying Penitent* (1795), by a clergyman named George Reynolds. In the poem, he tenderly describes Mary Magdalene’s onerous trials and her “final ascent on angel’s wings towards heaven” (as cited in Campbell, 2006, p. 126).

entrepreneur – or that Hays (1996) calls the “intensive mother” (p. xi). Although building a thriving massage parlour business and dealing with the challenges that come with it, Riley is also a remarkably attentive and devoted mother who treats motherhood as an all-consuming practice. She spends copious amounts of time with her children, drives them to school each day, cooks their dinner, reads to them each night, and is active in their school lives, participating in parent-teacher and PTA meetings. Numerous interior shots of Riley’s home show the extent to which her life is organized around her children: lunchboxes line the counter, crayons spill on the floor, dolls and toy trucks perch on chairs, and little pairs of running shoes sit by the front door. She is frequently pictured with her children at her side, as they watch television or as she tucks them in at bedtime. Furthermore, Riley is emotionally available for her children to a fault. Despite her taxing work schedule, she strives and succeeds at maintaining the family’s routine despite the trauma of her husband’s departure. She assures her children that they are loved and safe: “I’m here for you. That’s what we do. We’re a family.”

The Client List portrays Riley providing her children with constant nurturance and attention, suggesting that it is this style of intensive mothering that gives Riley her greatest sense of self-worth and satisfaction – even at the expense of pursuing other personal goals. This ethos (and expectation) of automatic maternal self-sacrifice is on display in season one where it is revealed that Riley is a talented singer who has long harboured the wish to become a professional musician. In one remarkable scene, Riley foregoes an opportunity to perform for a record company executive interested in signing her recently reunited high school band after she receives a phone call from her daughter who has had a nightmare and wants her to return home. Rather than perform for a powerful executive – a once in a lifetime opportunity – and potentially secure a recording contract, she chooses to comfort her daughter. In another episode, she stays up into the early morning hours to bake cookies for her daughter’s school fundraiser (rather than buy them). In these and many more examples, *The Client List* shows Riley contributing to her children’s lives to an extent that would be impressive for a parent within a two-parent household. Yet, singlehandedly Riley runs her business and mothers with

exuberant energy and tireless aplomb. Rather than drain her, Riley's work energizes her and revivifies her commitment to her family, evidenced by her constant refrain: "I am doing this for my family."

Riley epitomizes what Hays (1996) calls "the intensive mother" (xi). As Hays (1996) argues, in late capitalism, mothers face conflicting demands: on one hand, they are encouraged to be individualistic and operate according to the logics of the marketplace; on the other hand, they are urged to be unselfish and nurturing and to devote themselves wholeheartedly to their children. According to Hays, this is "the cultural contradiction of motherhood" (p. xi). This contradiction leaves mothers with two options: to be the traditional stay-at-home mother who devotes all of her energy and resources to caring for her family – she cooks, sews, cleans, does the laundry – and focuses on providing round-the-clock nurturance and comfort to her husband and children; or be "the supermom" (p. 132) who is "expected to juggle both roles without missing a beat" (ibid.). Hays argues that the ideology of intensive motherhood dictates that if a mother wishes (or must) "participate in the larger world...she must then pay the price of an impossible double shift" (p. 149). *The Client List* casts Riley working such "an impossible double shift." Riley works at The Rub – seemingly seven days a week, at least at first – to learn and operate her new business; but she also works tirelessly at home as the sole caregiver responsible for all domestic duties from food preparation to cleaning to driving. *The Client List* normalizes Riley's job as it endorses intensive motherhood, suggesting that intensive mothering is a way by which a sex worker mother may gain acceptance in society.

But while *The Client List* reinforces a traditional notion of ideal motherhood, it also uses Riley's maternal characterization to challenge the stereotype of the dissolute sex worker mother. In particular, *The Client List* shows how her work allows Riley to provide her children with a high standard of living that would be impossible to replicate on the wages of a poorly paid service job. In this sense, it aligns with empowerment paradigm and opposes prohibitionists like Barry (2005) who has argued that sex work is emotionally damaging and unremunerative. The high pay and scheduling flexibility allows Riley to provide her children with necessities and luxuries – new clothes and braces for her daughter, karate lessons and a shiny bike for her son – that would be out of reach for many newly single mothers.

At the same time, she stocks her pantry and fridge with healthy food, maintains a new-looking car, and pays the mortgage on the family home. By portraying Riley as intensive mother and sex worker mompreneur, *The Client List* suggests that there need not be a conflict – moral or otherwise – between these two historically opposed roles. The framed photographs of her children she keeps on her desk at The Rub become a symbol of the apparent harmoniousness with which Riley balances these identities.

The Client List also affirms the harmony between mother and sex worker through Riley's relationship with her best friend. Lacey is trying to become pregnant, but several failed rounds of fertility treatment have left her demoralized. Riley is Lacey's supportive friend and often affirms the "holiness" of children: "I know the angels won't deny you the most precious gift of life." Later in the second season, Lacey has a miscarriage. *The Client List* contrasts Lacey's infertility with Riley's motherhood (and fertility) to suggest Riley's naturalness at mothering – despite her engagement in the sex industry – above her non-sex worker best friend. By depicting Riley as an intensive mother who deeply identifies with and excels at motherhood, *The Client List* challenges the mother-whore binary. By portraying Riley as a mother and successful sex worker mompreneur, *The Client List* updates the traditional typology of the fallen woman: she is now a massage parlour mompreneur who, after falling on hard times, thrives as a sex worker.

Massage Parlour Challenges: Criminalization, Custody, and Whore Stigma

For all of Riley's success, however, *The Client List* does not suggest that massage parlour mompreneurship is easy. With sympathetic detail, *The Client List* paints a picture of the challenges massage parlour workers face in their daily lives, including the criminalization of their work, the constant threat of losing custody of their children, and the whore stigma which contributes to their marginalization and increases their vulnerability to violence and harassment.

The Client List aligns with the labour and empowerment paradigm by portraying how the criminalization of prostitution in the U.S. makes the lives of massage parlour workers unsafe and stressful. Given that prostitution still carries a one-year prison sentence in the U.S., this stress is very

much founded (Cramm, n.d.). In season one, for example, an undercover police officer comes into The Rub for a massage; his session with Riley is friendly. Days later, however, the same officer stops Riley on the highway under the pretense of giving her a speeding ticket (when she was not in fact speeding at all) and threatens to expose her as a sex worker. “Does your family know what you do for a living?” he asks menacingly, before implying that she owes him a sexual favour in exchange for his silence. In this example, *The Client List* illustrates Riley’s vulnerability at the hands of a bullying police officer who improperly wields his power. If she were to report him, she would be implicating herself as a massage parlour worker. Ironically, Georgia and Riley must make regular payments to the police to secure protection, which, as the above example illustrates, is not even guaranteed. Complicating matters further, Riley’s brother-in-law is a police officer in training. Were he to learn of her work, Riley would not only be exposed, but also face the contempt of a family member whose vocation represents the criminalization of her work. *The Client List* portrays the criminalization of sex work as a hindrance, rather than a help, to mompreneurs like Riley whose only wish is to operate her business as would any other professional entrepreneur in the marketplace.

The Client List deftly shows Riley experiencing what Pheterson (2004) has called “whore stigma,” the “social and legal branding of women who are suspected of acting like prostitutes” (as cited in Ferris, 2015, p. 26). Riley internalizes a host of negative stereotypes and assumptions about her work that are perpetuated by media, police, and the church. As Bruckert & Parent (2013) note, the most common are the assumption that sex workers are diseased, criminal, dangerous, promiscuous, exploited and trapped in the sex industry, victims of abuse, and untrustworthy. Sex workers in countries that have decriminalized prostitution, like New Zealand, report that sex workers in fact have lower rates of sexually transmitted infections than do the general population).⁴⁹ Similarly, as Hakim (2010) points out, women who use their erotic capital for economic mobility face tremendous “disdain

⁴⁹ In New Zealand, which decriminalized sex work in 2003, 90% of sex workers reported that decriminalization had improved their safety and work conditions; 64% said it was now easier to refuse clients; 57% said “police attitudes towards them had improved” (Armstrong, 2017, n. pag.). When sex work is criminalized, victimized sex workers rarely report violence to the police for fear of implicating themselves in the illegal act of prostitution. But, as the case of New Zealand shows, decriminalization potentially protects and de-stigmatizes sex workers, and creates a strong deterrent to would-be violent perpetrators (ibid.).

and contempt” (p. 510). *The Client List* shows how whore stigma compels Riley and her colleagues to live double lives to avoid painful social (and legal) consequences. Riley knows that her friends and family would judge her harshly and even cut off relations with her were they to find out about her job; so, for the sake of preserving relationships, she keeps her work secret from most everybody she knows. Yet, when keeping any secret, one begins to feel as if few know the real them, and their relationships may begin to feel thin and falsified.

As Bruckert & Parent (2013) observe, sex workers who are closeted about their work may engage in behaviour modification such as monitoring speech and inventing fictional jobs as covers; yet, given the central role work plays in an adult’s life, hiding significant details of one’s current or former job causes extreme stress. In *The Client List*, Riley’s keeps her work secret yet is in a state of constant anticipatory anxiety about her friends and family learning of her work, which is draining and isolating. In season two, Riley reflects on this: “The work is fine, but leading a double life gets lonely.” Later Riley breaks down in tears and explains the pressure she is under: “I lie to my friends and family about what I do. I lie to everyone about everything and I hate it.” Researchers have noted that whore stigma is enduring, flexible, and porous. The stigma of having once been a sex worker continues to attach to women long after they have exited the industry and cases of employment discrimination based on one’s past as a sex worker have been widely noted (Greenslade, 2012). As *The Client List* shows, the pervasiveness of whore stigma leaves Riley little choice but to remain closeted about her work as a massage parlour mompreneur and the cost of remaining closeted is high.

The Client List also shows that whore stigma has tangible consequences. One afternoon, after work, Riley walks to her car where she is confronted by a scene of frightening vandalism: the word “whore” has been spray painted in two-foot-high scarlet letters across her windshield. This is the first time Riley faces whore stigma so concretely and in shame she breaks down in tears. Riley does not go to the police for fear of further stigmatizing herself – and outing herself as a massage parlour worker. But whore stigma most profoundly affects Riley’s relationships. When she reveals the nature of her work to Lacey, her friend is horror-struck: “I’m going to be sick,” Lacey says before demanding that

Riley leave her car. Lacey subscribes to the patriarchal and prohibitionist notions that sex workers are amoral and damaged. Although Lacey later reconsiders her position and accepts (and embraces) Riley, and stops passing judgements on her job, *The Client List* shows how painful this rejection is for Riley and how deeply she internalizes whore stigma. She dreams that her husband returns to the family and in disgust calls her a “whore.” Later, she has the dream again, but this time she manages to speak back: “You left me!” she cries out. “It’s the only way I could make money.” Although this is a dream, it nevertheless speaks to Riley’s deeply internalized belief that sex work is inherently “wrong. In season two, Riley internalizes whore stigma to the extent that she attends church to repent for her “sins.”

The Client List also explores how whore stigma chips away at the self-confidence of Riley’s colleague, Selena, who feels like a marked woman. Selena has resigned herself to the conclusion that most men will not date her because of her involvement in the sex industry; even if she were willing to exit the sex industry in exchange for a chance at love, she tells Riley, she is doubtful that any man would love and accept her due to her past and the stigma it carries: “You think I buy into the fairy tale? How can I even hope for it? With our jobs? The secrets? I’m not marriage material.”⁵⁰ Selena’s certainty that her job has marked her as “damaged goods” and made her ineligible for a loving relationship speaks to the very real ways that whore stigma negatively shapes sex workers’ self-perceptions. It also speaks to the persistence of the virgin/whore binary within heteronormative frameworks of courtship and romance where female virginity and chastity are still held at a premium.⁵¹

⁵⁰ Early research into massage parlour workers found they were aware of the stigma their work carried and felt its effects in their everyday lives. Many kept their jobs secret from family (Velarde & Warlick, 1973), were disturbed by the media’s negative portrayal of their labour, and felt umbrage at being labeled deviants, sluts, and whores (Bryant & Palmer, 1975). To contest this negative portrayal, many had taken to writing letters to local newspapers, defending themselves as participating in the “open marketplace,” and reminding readers to “judge not,” since customers came of their own volition (Bryant & Palmer, 1975, p. 239).

⁵¹ While Selena’s contention that few men would enter into a relationship with her given her past might seem exaggerated in our sexually liberal age, a cursory glance at Reddit.com, a social media hub and the world’s 6th most popular website, shores up Selena’s worst fear (Most Popular Websites, 2018). On Reddit.com, in response to the posted question “would you date or marry a former sex worker?” more than 100 responses from commenters from around the world expressed an almost unanimous “no” through sentiments ranging from the frank (“Automatic deal breaker for me”) to the misogynistic (“Say no to a ho” and “why would I trust a sex worker?”) (Anonomaxtacular, 2018; Vertueux, 2015). The socially marginal status of sex workers continues to be an accepted fact. As one YouTube personality put it in 2013 (in a video which garnered more than 18 million views) “if you are a prostitute...you are in the situation that we can refer to as social death” (TedXTalks, 2013).

While whore stigma affects all sex workers, it is “shaped by...the intersection of sex worker stigma...with other identities” (Bruckert & Parent, 2013, p. 71). Riley’s intersectional experience of being a massage parlour worker and a single mother places her in a specific and highly vulnerable category. *The Client List* shows how the criminalization of prostitution instils in Riley the constant fear of losing custody of her children. As scholars have noted, criminalization, and the pervasive idea that sex workers are bad mothers, make it more likely that mothers who work in the sex industry will have their children removed from their care, even if no evidence of abuse is found (Fitzgerald, 2018; Gira Grant, 2014; Sloan & Wahab, 2000). A 2016 Salvation Army print advertising campaign epitomizes the ongoing denigration of sex worker mothers. The advertisement featured a black-and-white image of a frightened looking six-year-old boy sitting alone against a wall in a filthy-looking room, his knees pulled up to his chest and his head bowed in a pose of dejection. The text reads:

I know now that my mother was a prostitute. She’d bring “clients” to our house and lock me in the bathroom while she did what she did. I hated that bathroom. There was no way out. The window was busted but up way too high. The toilet stinking of strangers. My mother was a prostitute. She would lock me in the bathroom. One day I found Mum’s old razor. Tried it against my skin. Pressed harder. Until the blood came...I was 5. (Sainty, 2016)

The Salvation Army advertisement perpetuates the stereotype that all sex worker mothers traumatize their children, endorses the virgin/whore dichotomy, and re-circulates the notion that sex workers are, in every case, neglectful, abusive, and unfit to parent. Such messages have troubling consequences for real sex workers. Within clinical settings, sex worker mothers conceal or minimize involvement in sex work because they fear their children being taken away (Kissil & Davey, 2010). When sex workers lose custody of their children, they may feel guilt, fall into depression, and experience grief (John-Fiske, 2013). Women who engage in sex work to support their children often report their children feeling ashamed of their work – “losing respect for them” – and even cutting off relations (John-Fiske, 2013, p.

60). *The Client List* portrays Riley responding to these threats through vigilance about her privacy – she blocks her addresses and number on her telephone so that customers do not learn where she lives and erects an iron boundary between work and home so that her children never learn the nature of her work. While Riley remains a steadfast parent and is never unlucky enough to lose custody of her children, *The Client List* shows how the constant threat of losing what is most precious to her lowers her self-esteem and erodes her quality of life.

Sex Work vs. Sex Trafficking: Elucidating a Stratified Industry

While prohibitionist feminists collapse voluntary and forced and agential and survival sex work into a single category, *The Client List* elucidates the distinctions between sex work and trafficking, as well as distinctions between better and worse sex work jobs in terms of location, safety, and wages; as such, it emblemizes Weitzer's (2012) "polymorphous paradigm." In season two, Nikki becomes a new employee at The Rub after fleeing Wild Nights, a strip club infamous for its poor working conditions. *The Client List* contrasts the genteel setting of The Rub with its well-lit and comfortable rooms and efficient staff in white uniforms with images of Wild Nights, a dreary dilapidated club where miserable looking erotic dancers strut hazily on a stage. It also contrasts The Rub's Georgia, a hardworking, shrewd, and benevolent Black woman who empathizes with her staff, with Carlyle, the manager of Wild Nights, an unpleasant, lazy, and entitled white man who exploits his employees and has contempt for all women. Through this juxtaposition between Georgia and Carlyle, *The Client List* vividly shows how sex work occurs along a spectrum of empowerment and exploitation, what Benoit et. al. (2017) call an "occupational continuum" (p. 2), based upon the workspace and labour conditions. By illuminating these stratifications within the sex industry, *The Client List* challenges the prohibitionist claim that abuse and exploitation inevitably occur at every level and in every type of sex work; rather, it shows that the determinants of exploitation are in the conditions of the work, rather than in sex work itself. This portrayal aligns with the labour and empowerment paradigms by suggesting that it is only through decriminalization and destigmatization that the labour conditions of

sex workers can be improved, allowing for sex workers to form collectives, invoke their labour rights, and even unionize.

Yet *The Client List* is not a blithe endorsement of all forms of sexual commerce. It makes a distinction between voluntary and forced prostitution in season two, when police launch an investigation into other massage parlours in neighbouring suburbs, where trafficked women from Eastern Europe and Thailand are forced into prostitution. But rather than paint the entire sex industry with a broad brush as many prohibitionists do, *The Client List* does not assume that the criminal justice system can help trafficked women by simply shutting the whole sex industry down. Through this storyline, *The Client List* posits a distinction between forced and voluntary prostitution and suggests through the trafficked women that as long as sex work remains criminalized, sex work will remain underground where such exploitation is a present danger. *The Client List* also suggests that if sex work were to be decriminalized, the criminal justice system and police could focus their resources on helping trafficked women who did not choose their jobs.

Overall, *The Client List* shows how the criminalization of prostitution imperils sex workers by forcing them to operate in the shadows, contend with the chronic stress of leading double lives, and exist in a constant state of anticipatory anxiety over the prospect of losing custody of their children. By showing how criminalization foists untold challenges upon sex workers, *The Client List* suggests that women like Riley do not become safer when consensual sex work is criminalized, a contention that is shored up by empirical fact. In North America, for example, police continue to arrest far more sex workers than clients (johns); street sex workers comprise 97% of all prostitution arrests, proving that the law almost unanimously targets and punishes women (Gira Grant, 2014, p. 54).⁵² The pervasive fear of arrest that sex workers experience creates a further safety risk; sex workers routinely say they are unlikely to report violence for fear of their own arrest. *The Client List* also gestures at the hypocrisy of

⁵² Noting the inequality between how sex workers and johns are treated by police, the poet Adrienne Rich remarked that “women have always been outside the (manmade) law...have been much more stringently punished than men for breaking the law, as in the case of prostitution” (as cited in Panofsky, 2010, p. 101).

sex work's criminalization. When her office is broken into, Riley does not phone the police but a local judge – who is ironically one of her most loyal customers.

For Georgia, who has spent half of her lifetime doing sex work that is criminalized, it is axiomatic that sex workers “need to operate in the shadows,” as she tells Riley. But through Riley, an industry newcomer who is 20 years younger than Georgia, *The Client List* suggests that the criminalization and prohibition Georgia has become accustomed to is not workable, and other ways of dealing with sex work are badly needed – and possible. By showing the constraints and prejudices Riley faces as a sex worker, *The Client List* implicitly asks viewers to have empathy for sex worker mothers and to think seriously about why women who sell sex should live unsafe lives because of society's morally based prejudices against women sex workers like Riley. By rendering Riley as a hardworking, sympathetic, and caring mother, *The Client List* critiques the unfairness of the current criminalization of sex work and proposes that, under different laws, Riley could be a tax-paying and legitimate business owner instead of a criminal. By offering a humanizing, complex portrait of Riley as a massage parlour mompreneur who finds in her work an escape from low-waged service jobs and unemployment, and by countering sex worker stereotypes, *The Client List* asks viewers to consider the struggles women continue to face – and to regard without condescension the ways in which marginal women, like single mother Riley, survive. While *The Client List* does not imply that massage parlour work is the ideal solution to financial duress, it does suggest that it is one solution and regards, without judgement, the agency of Riley and her colleagues to choose their work. The feminist limit of this portrayal, however, is a lack of critique around the economic inequalities that lead some mothers like Riley to sell sex in the first place.

Critique: Mompreneurs with Boundless Agency in a Neoliberal Society

The Client List positively frames sex work as a choice. It also advances a neoliberal view of Riley's boundless agency without exploring the constraints single mothers like her may face in their everyday lives. By celebrating Riley as a massage parlour mompreneur who overcomes her economic

subordination, *The Client List* advances a neoliberal ethos of self-responsibility and accepts without question the absence of a social welfare state. In this regard, *The Client List* endorses the massage parlour mompreneur, yet simultaneously transforms her into an ideal neoliberal subject. As Rottenberg (2018) notes, neoliberal discourses appear in popular books like *Lean In*, which encourage women to “take responsibility for their luck” and Ivanka Trump’s *Dressing for Success*, which encourages women to find opportunities in entrepreneurship by becoming “empowered,” “flexible,” and “creative” workers” who face “obstacles with resilience, initiative, and creativity, one’s aspirations being ‘limited only by one’s own hunger, drive, passion, and execution’” (n. pag.). In this vein, *The Client List* suggests that irrespective of structural inequalities, single mothers can seize control of their lives by making choices, engaging in entrepreneurship, presenting themselves sexually, and practicing self-sufficiency.

At times, *The Client List* downplays the gender-based economic inequalities that may motivate women to enter the sex industry. Riley’s commitment to pull herself up by her bootstraps – or, in this case, her bra straps – is emblematic of what McLaughlin (1991) describes as the tendency on the part of “realist narratives [to] place responsibility... on ‘individuals as social categories rather than on a problem’s social and political dimensions’” (p. 258). Rather than explore the economic conditions that led to the financial downturn –the disappearance of a living wage for the majority of American workers – *The Client List* quickly depicts Riley’s sudden poverty as a chance to prove her mettle in the marketplace. Infused into this storyline is the neoliberal tenet that all individuals, if only they try hard enough and come up with a sellable business model, can overcome great odds, achieve social mobility, and become successful. As Gill & Kanai (2018) note: “When rights to employment and social safety nets are continually under attack, media are increasingly implicated in calling forth subjects who are ‘resilient,’ ‘creative,’ ‘flexible,’ and ‘positive’” (p. 320). To be clear, some women do forge lucrative careers in the sex industry as Riley does, but neoliberal discourses that celebrate entrepreneurship and personal agency *outside* of discussions of capitalist social inequality pretend that factors like class are no longer determinants of one’s life chances. Although *The Client List* registers the economic downturn

as an inciting incident, it does not explore deeply how, as Satz (1995) writes, economic inequality motivates women to do sex work in the first place:

Inequalities in income and opportunity form an important backdrop against which prostitution must be viewed...[and] labour market inequalities will be part of any plausible explanation of why many women “choose” to enter into prostitution...women’s decisions to enter into prostitution must be viewed against the background of their unequal life chances and their unequal opportunities for income and rewarding work (pp. 76-77)

What is missing from *The Client List*’s exclamatory vision of empowered mompreneurship is the widespread gendered and class-based inequalities across North America that neoliberalism has exacerbated. As Duggan (2004) notes: “Inequality...within the U.S. continues to grow at a dizzying pace. In response, neoliberal politicians in the U.S. advocate yet more cuts in the budget for social services and public welfare and propose more increases in military and security spending. The twenty-first century is off to a frightening start” (p. 1). During the economic downturn, the Stanford Center on Poverty and Inequality reported that wage inequality in the U.S. grew to historically high levels and within the labour force at large, women continued to make 67 cents on every man’s dollar.⁵³ Suffering this rising inequality’s greatest blows were working-class women who continue to hold the most precarious and poorly paid jobs.⁵⁴ In the year *The Client List* appeared, 41% of single female-led families lived below the poverty line (Hargreaves, 2012). In the U.S., as of 2016, white women earn 80 cents for

⁵³ The researchers calculated the pay gap by measuring the ratio of income for “upper tail” earners – women who earn average salaries (in the fiftieth percentile) up to women who earn high salaries (the ninetieth percentile) – and “lower tail” earners who earn average and low salaries (in the tenth percentile). While “upper tail” earners have seen a slight increase in their wages since the 1980s, “lower tail” workers – women like Riley – have seen their incomes plummet catastrophically. At the same time, compensation for male CEOs has risen dramatically. The average CEO earned 24 times what one of their workers did in 1964. In 2007, just before the financial collapse, CEOs were earning 277.3 times that of their workers. By 2010, that number had fallen slightly to 185.3. Despite recent gains made by women entering the white-collar professions, women in the workforce at large continue to be disproportionately represented in low-waged jobs (Stanford Inequality, 2011).

⁵⁴ As Petroff (2017) reports on CNN.com, at the current rates, it would take 217 years to close the gender pay gap (n. pag.). Further, The Stanford Inequality study found that the number of what the authors termed “bad jobs” – jobs that are precarious and offer no benefits or health insurance – is rising. Additionally, as Satz (1995) notes, the “roles which women disproportionately occupy – secretaries, housecleaners, babysitters, waitresses, and saleswomen – will be far more significant in reinforcing (as well as constituting) a gender-segregated division of labour” (p. 77)

every dollar white men earn, while Hispanic/Latina women and Black women 63 cents and 54 cents, respectively (AAUW, n.d.). Despite making the economic recession that began in 2008 its inciting incident, *The Client List* elides the bigger and more difficult questions of why such massive inequality exists in the U.S. and how it can be addressed. By folding Riley into a neoliberal success story and making her into the ideal “empowered” and “flexible” worker, *The Client List* frames mompreneurship as “opportunity” and “reinvention,” in the same ways that neoliberalism, as Power (2009) notes, turns “precarity into a virtue” (p. 18). Whereas Riley’s previous job at the country club presumably came with a full-time salary and benefits, her new job as a massage parlour mompreneur comes with the potential to be entrepreneurial and creative, but also with stress and no guaranteed income – the two characteristics of jobs under Post-Fordist neoliberal capitalism. *The Client List* endorses neoliberalism by portraying massage parlour work as a single mother’s best option for survival. While a woman’s choice to sell sex must be normalized, and sex work decriminalized, there is a problem in our society when the best – and only – option for a single mother to earn a living wage during an economic recession is as constrained as it is in *The Client List*. Furthermore, *The Client List* neither agitates for a return to the standard employment relations of Fordism, nor puts the lie to the emancipatory banners of mompreneurship’s unbridled opportunities. As *Slate* writer Caplan-Bricker (2016) notes, behind the celebratory discourses of mompreneurship lie a great deal of inequality and “ugly constraints that force many women...into experiments that easily flop” (n. pag.). By celebrating Riley as a self-responsible entrepreneur, *The Client List* advances the neoliberal idea that social problems like single motherhood and poverty are best solved by individuals, not states.

The Client List also endorses a patriarchal notion of “intensive motherhood” (Hays, 1996) that many mothers, much less single mothers with scarce financial resources, would be hard pressed to replicate even under the most ideal conditions. In the last 20 years, scholars have argued that neoliberalism has intensified the experience of motherhood by freighting it with unreasonable expectations (Douglas & Michaels, 2004; Ross, 2016). Wilson & Yochim (2007) have argued that under neoliberalism, mothering “becomes ever more rife with anxiety and impossibility, as social

responsibility for family life comes to rest ever more squarely on mothers” (p. 34). Douglas & Michaels (2004) similarly contend that twenty-first century neoliberal discourses of motherhood, or the new “momism,” as they call it, is a “highly romanticized and yet demanding view of motherhood in which the standards for success are impossible to meet” (as cited in Wilson and Yochim, 2017, p. 35). Under “momism,” the holiest mantra is that women have choices and are but a decision away from prosperity. This focus on individualism neglects to imagine the role the state – the collective – has to play in facilitating the success of its citizenry through daycare programs, education, subsidies for single mothers, to name but a few forms of support that could benefit women like Riley. For this reason, Douglas & Michaels (2004) call momism “deeply contradictory” because it both “draws from and repudiates feminism” (p. 5).

Furthermore, while Riley’s use of her erotic capital positively supports the right of women to choose and benefit from sex work without moral repercussions, by locating Riley’s power within her sex appeal, *The Client List* at times engages with what Gill (2007) calls “post-feminist sensibilities” (p. 179). Indeed, one’s “sexy” body is an especially important site of “empowerment” under neoliberal post-feminism (Adriaens & Van Bauwen, 2014; Douglas, 2006; Gill, 2007). As a youthful, thin, busty, and glossy haired sylph, Riley typifies the Yummy Mummy popularized by the self-help bestseller *The Yummy Mummy’s Survival Guide* (Fraser, 2006), which advises mothers on how to be full-time fashionistas, expert homemaker-caregivers, and career women with effortless grace. As Ross (2016) observes, Yummy Mummy discourse (much like the discourse of intensive mothering) demands “perfection on all fronts” (p. 26). By constructing Riley in the mould of the Yummy Mummy and the intensive mother, *The Client List* also reproduces a gendered double standard widespread in popular culture: while out-of-shape fathers are affectionately teased for having “Dad bods,” and frequently have girlfriends and wives who are 20 years younger without mention of this age gap in the storyline, finding mothers on television whose stomachs do not double as ironing boards can be like a game of *Where’s Waldo*. Self-expression and self-actualization through one’s body is an especially important site of “empowerment” under neoliberal post-feminism and often the beauty ideals are highly rigid

(Adriaens & Van Bauwen, 2014; Douglas, 2006; Gill, 2007). As Cornwall, et al. (2008) point out: “in a variety of contexts, the practice of neoliberalism incorporates and reinforces these existing patriarchal relationships of power and selectively re-emphasizes patriarchal norms” (p. 3).⁵⁵ Further, if only the most conventionally attractive and uncommonly energetic women can be as successful as Riley, *The Client List* adds a caveat to its entrepreneurial premise: single sex worker mompreneurs can thrive during the financial downturn as mompreneurs, but only on the condition that they are in their twenties or thirties, conventionally attractive, big-breasted, and work double shifts.

Thus, while *The Client List* provocatively challenges the stereotype of the massage parlour worker as victim or criminal and erodes the dichotomy between asexual (good) mother and sexual (bad) sex worker to suggest that sex workers can also be competent mothers, in other respects the series also conforms to the status quo by papering over inequalities with an attractive veneer of neoliberal ideas and normalizing intensive motherhood. In this regard, I share a view with Diamond, et al. (2017) who note that, “the picture for feminism is decidedly ambivalent: hardworking women entrepreneurs are celebrated...as triumphal examples of postfeminism even as female poverty and income inequality increase” (p. 3). In *The Client List*, the massage parlour mompreneur is a phoenix rising from the ashes of the financial downturn with grit, hard work, and determination, but she is also working double shifts in high heels while driving a minivan with freshly-baked cookies in the passenger seat.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I have shown how *The Client List* challenges the stereotype of the sex worker mother as criminal or victim by representing Riley Parks as a likeable, agential massage parlour mompreneur. Contra the nineteenth century figure of the fallen woman who is punished for her “sin” and framed as an incapable mother, *The Client List* posits harmony between the historically antithetical roles while

⁵⁵ In the last 15 years, the incidences of eating disorders among women in their thirties, forties, and fifties has risen (Maine & Kelly, 2005). A new term for these mid-life eating disorders is plucked right out of the popular culture playbook: the “Desperate Housewives effect,” referring to the popular TV series in which “improbably thin women in their 40s prance around in short shorts” (Barton, 2011, n. pag.). While eating disorders are usually associated with teenage girls, according to the National Eating Disorders Association, “a growing number” of middle-aged women are developing anorexia and bulimia (ibid.)

critiquing conservative and feminist ideologies that attempt to discredit sex worker mothers based on their “deviant” jobs. In doing so, *The Client List* steps beyond traditional moral and ideological frameworks, suggests that massage parlour workers ought to have the right to work safely and without the burden of whore stigma, rejects morally driven stereotypes of the exploited and rescue-ready sex worker mother, and complicates rigid feminist positions that assume a lack of agency on the part of all sex workers, but especially mothers. In *The Client List*, while a mother’s decision to sell sex has serious impacts, it does not define her or determine her fitness for motherhood.

While *The Client List* is progressive in these ways, it also advances an ethos of self-responsibility, accepts without question the absence of a social welfare state, reinforces rigid beauty standards and, at times, reconstitutes patriarchal power through idealized conceptions of mothering. Choice, sexuality, and entrepreneurship are framed as viable actions that any woman can take in order to overcome poverty and grab at the brass ring. This vision leaves out the fact that in the years following the economic collapse of 2008 – the setting for *The Client List* – the unemployment rate in the U.S was 9.6% (Bureau of Labour, 2017) and many women were using food stamps, not feather boas.

Nevertheless, by portraying the first sex worker protagonist mother on prime-time television in such positive terms, *The Client List* disrupts the longstanding criminological framing of sex workers to suggest their legitimacy as workers. Without moralizing, *The Client List* represents Riley as a sympathetic (but not pitiable) and capable woman using “erotic capital” as a strategy of survival. By portraying an entrepreneurial massage parlour worker who is also a mother, *The Client List* humanizes sex workers as people who love and are loved, destigmatizes sex work, and undermines the virgin/whore dichotomy itself. By raising the possibility that a mother can provide a stable, loving environment for her children through the proceeds of sex work, *The Client List* represents a new and humanizing step forward in the portrayal of sex workers in popular culture, and suggests a growing societal comfort around the idea of consensual sex work as legitimate work in the twenty-first century.

Chapter 3: The Twenty-First Century Peepshow Webcam Models and Feminist Entanglements in *CamGirlz*

“The fact is that women have not looked at pornography, that women have not seen it...women have a visceral aversion to pornography.” (Dworkin, 1982, pp. 26-28)

“People think we’re just dumb sluts or something. But you need intelligence and drive and you have to be an entertainer. There are large groups of women who do this as a choice and feel empowered by it.”
(Webcam model in *CamGirlz*, 2015)

In the previous chapter, I focused on how *The Client List* challenges sex worker stereotypes by reconstituting the 19th century fallen woman into a 21st century mompreneur who improves her life, and that of her children, through the business of sex work. While *The Client List* updated the historical (and ossified) archetype of the fallen woman, in this chapter I turn my attention to a sex worker type without any precedent in history. In the last ten or so years, feminist debates about pornography have increasingly focused on webcam models, sex workers who live-stream erotic performances through the Internet for payment. Blending the interactivity of live peep shows with the image-rich raunch of porn, webcam modeling is now the fastest growing sector of the sex industry, generating profits of over \$3 billion a year – one third of adult entertainment revenues (Comella, 2016). On any given day, 20,000 webcam models communicate, titillate, and vibrate in virtual rooms for 60,000 unique customers who pay them with virtual tokens exchangeable for U.S. dollars (ibid.). Feminist critics of webcam modeling have called it salacious, prurient, and anti-feminist – a new form of porn with digital bells and whistles. On the popular website, Feministcurrent.com, one writer describes webcam models as “masturbatory tools” and “things whose value lies primarily in their ability to provide erections” (Murphy, 2015, n. pag.). In 2015, on a story on CBC.com, commenters referred to one webcam model as “a morally degenerate member of society” and suggested that “anyone this exhibitionistic has a mental health problem” (CBC News). Outlets such as *The Huffington Post* meanwhile report the dangers of webcam modeling and even tie it to child pornography (Bleakley, 2015).

Yet, popular culture has recently begun to produce new and humane images of the webcam model that trade moralism for depth, and which represent the webcam model as the empowered entrepreneurial subject of twenty-first century neoliberal capitalism. Between 2006 and 2016, new

images of empowered and creatively entrepreneurial webcam models have appeared in documentaries like *CamGirlz* (Coan & Dunne, 2015), *Hot Girls Wanted: Take Me Private* (Jones & Bauer, 2016), and *Hot Girls Wanted: Owning It* (Jones & Bauer, 2016 -), as well as in feature films such as *Teenage Cocktail* (Babin & Carchietta, 2016).

In this chapter, I show how one of these new works – *CamGirlz* (2015) – intervenes into the neo-feminist debates about sex work by presenting a positive portrayal of a diverse group of American webcam models. Far from the stereotype of the victim or criminal sex worker, the webcam models *CamGirlz* portrays are empowered entrepreneurs who conduct their businesses with professionalism, build brands, express their creativity and self-actualize, and delight in the sensual aspects of their work. Moreover, *CamGirlz* depicts the work of webcam modeling itself as a way for women to escape from low-wage jobs, grasp opportunities to become entrepreneurial, exercise control over their labour process and own their media content, perform and create subversive porn, experience pleasure, develop self-confidence, and achieve social mobility.

At the same time, however, I contend that *CamGirlz* conveys what Rosalind Gill (2007) calls a “postfeminist sensibility,” an “entanglement” of feminist and neoliberal feminist ideas that focuses on individualism rather than on inequalities or the need for collective change, and which increasingly plays out in popular culture (p. 9). *CamGirlz*’s image of the webcam model as an empowered entrepreneur largely ignores the structural factors that may occasion women’s entry into webcam modeling, the pitfalls of precarious webcam model work, and the experiences of models working in less affluent countries, where their experiences may be less celebratory (and camera-ready).

I begin this chapter by contextualizing the work of webcam modeling historically (as a modern digital form of the peepshow), technologically (as enabled by the Internet and World Wide Web), conceptually (with regard to feminist discussions of the webcam modeling industry), and economically (as a fast-growing subset of the contemporary pornography industry). After contextualizing the emergence of the cam-girl phenomenon and later, webcam modeling, I then highlight four ways that *CamGirlz* (2015) represents webcam modeling as an empowering form of work and creative expression, before probing the film’s “postfeminist sensibility.”

In March 2015, a young woman who went by the name “LillSecret” was asked to leave a library branch in Windsor, Ontario after being caught exposing her breasts to a camera on a library computer that streamed live video to a website called Chaturbate (Hopper, 2015). Viewers around the world watched and tipped LillSecret “tokens” for the public act, which, although witnessed by few, was daring enough to make headlines a day later and blaze across the Internet. “Webcam model streaming sex show at library caught in the act,” read one CBC.com headline. The story was minor in terms of newsworthiness, but pure gold click-bait as the vitriolic reader comments show: “She is a morally degenerate member of society... an abuser and a taker. A nobody, a nothing” read one comment (CBC, 2015). Another commenter offered this analogy: “she’s in the same category as a man who plants a hidden cam in a ladies’ toilet.” She received death threats. Yet LillSecret’s allegedly subversive antics actually had roots over 100 years old.

Webcam modeling is a digital peepshow. The first peepshow appeared in the late nineteenth century in the form of the Mutoscope, a wooden box inset with a magnifying glass through which the viewer peered to see short loops of sexually oriented film (Wolf, 2015).⁵⁶ By mid-20th century, live peepshows proliferated in large cities and consisted of an enclosed booth facing a darkened or curtained barrier, which, upon the deposit of coins into a slot, would rise to reveal a naked woman dancing on the other side of the partition (Delaney, 2015; Rhodes, 2012). While webcam modeling shares with the peepshow time-limited spectatorship (bought through tokens) and a glass screen, peepshows were not digitized, offered no interactivity in cramped booths, provided no privacy, and were associated with seediness.

In the early 1990s, the Internet brought an array of graphic and sexually oriented websites into millions of households across the U.S., which made the peepshow obsolete (Cunningham & Kendall,

⁵⁶ Popular peepshow film loops included 1903’s *What the Butler Saw*, which showed a woman undressing while the viewer ostensibly “spied.” Mutoscopes – not so different from webcam websites for their time – inspired a moral outcry. An 1899 letter in *The New York Times* called them “vicious and demoralizing” because they were “exhibiting under a strong light, nude female figures” (Mutoscope, n.d.). The opprobrium only fueled demand and Mutoscopes became a fixture at arcades and seaside resorts where women were also seen using them (Wolf, 2015).

2011; Rosen, 2012). From porn sites to sex worker webpages, the Internet became a wonderland of explicitness and raunch, where everyone was just a few keystrokes away from viewing whatever fleshy fascinations they could conjure. The ubiquity of sexually graphic imagery on the Internet, as Bernstein (2007) notes, eliminated “the biggest obstacles to the buying and selling of sexual services: shame and ignorance” and “shifted the boundaries of social space, blurring the differences between underworld figures and ‘respectable’ citizens” (p. 474). This shifting of space was also literal: while the threat of being seen exiting a triple-X cinema caused many would-be porn fans to stay home, the Internet’s affordance of anonymity emboldened consumer demand for digitized sex productions.

It was during this Internet growth spurt that the first cam-girl websites appeared, but in the 1990s, these websites had nothing to do with the sex industry. As Senft (2008) notes in her insightful history of the cam-girl phenomenon, young women began building personal websites-cum-diary-esque pages that consisted of text written in the conceit of journal entries, images, message boards, and live-streamed video. These early cam-girl websites were not business-oriented, but more akin to adolescent forays into self-exposure, experiments into the possibilities of harnessing technology to practice trying on and presenting an “authentic” self to the world, and bids for attention and kinship (Dobson, 2008). The low-fi technology required a degree of interactivity as webcams broadcast a series of stills on average once every five minutes; thus, viewers had to fill in the blanks between the images, constructing a story for themselves. Furthermore, early cam-girl websites constituted a digital feminist subculture, where cam-girls often discussed the personal and political issues that touched their lives (Senft, 2008). By discussing their private lives through a public forum, cam-girls made the personal political and developed an aesthetic that placed a premium on “authenticity.” The homemade websites, the unedited and raw quality of the live video, and the connections women forged with one another drew voltage from the 1990s Do it Yourself (DIY) movement that included zine culture and punk rock and celebrated authenticity and anti-consumerism.

Setting was also important. Because cam-girls tended to be teenagers still living in their parents’ homes, they broadcast by default from their bedrooms, settings that accentuated the

“authenticity” of their shows. With their stuffed teddy bears, posters of New Kids on the Block or Soundgarden, and ceiling glow-stars visible in the frame, these cam-girls not only presented themselves, but displayed a private slice of their lives as seen through their authentic habitats. Jennifer Ringley, who became a cam-girl of international renown, began broadcasting *The JenniCam*, the first live webcam show, from her dorm room at Dickinson College in 1996 (White, 2003). At the height of its popularity, *The JenniCam* drew 100 million viewers a week (Bleakley, 2015). Invoking her commitment to broadcasting authenticity, Ringley said she wanted to “show people that what we see on TV – people with perfect hair, perfect friends, perfect lives – is not reality – I’m reality” (as cited in Senft, 2008, p. 17). To this end, one day Ringley had sex with her boyfriend while the camera rolled. As Senft (2008) points out, this was the moment of “blurring life, art and porn” (p. 11). For the millions of viewers who tuned in, what made Ringley’s product so appealing was its differentiation from pornography. While traditional pornography fetishizes disembodiment and depersonalization, Ringley’s broadcast felt – as she put it – more authentic, more like “reality” (Senft, 2008, p. 17). Galvanized by Ringley, other cam-girls began offering erotic shows and monetizing their sites, setting in motion the growth of a full-fledged cam-girl industry, which would later become a subset of the booming porn industry.

The earliest feminist scholarship on cam-girls – who by then were also known as webcam models – drew implicitly on Mulvey’s (1999) theory of the “male gaze” to portray webcam models as teenage flaunters who subvert feminist gains by objectifying themselves into a state of “to-be-looked-at-ness” (p. 63).⁵⁷ In 2000, Dvorak called cam-girls “exhibitionists who position a cam on themselves to titillate young boys” (as cited in White, 2003, p. 10). To be sure, webcam models display themselves, sometimes salaciously, and give men (or whoever comprises the paying audience) the power to “buy”

⁵⁷ Laura Mulvey (1999) elaborates on the ways in which screen images reinforce patriarchy in “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema,” where she argues that cinema representations of women are controlled through the “male gaze.” Drawing on psychoanalytic theory, Mulvey argues that because women present a pervasive castration threat to men, the “male” screen neutralizes this threat by turning women into objects who appear on screen solely for the visual pleasure of men in a state of “to-be-looked-at-ness” (p. 63). Coining the term “scopophilia” – the taking of “pleasure in using another person as an object of sexual stimulation through sight” (p. 62) – Mulvey theorizes that women on screen exist in a limited range, “isolated, glamorous, and on display” (p. 64), eventually becoming the vulnerable, lovelorn property of the male star (p. 64). Mulvey’s analysis asserts that beautiful, seductive images of women on screen are never innocent eye-candy, but part of the entrenched, rhizomatic structure of patriarchy.

services and “watch,” but what early detractors neglected to explore was how webcam modeling’s production mode and digital form changed the power dynamics between industry and worker and between spectator and performer by shifting authorial control into the webcam model’s hands. First, while Hollywood actresses are hired by producers, commanded by directors, and aestheticized by lighting and make-up experts, webcam models are more autonomous, since they produce, direct, and design their productions and turn a profit from their own media images (Senft, 2008). Second, models are free to engage in other activities while on camera (like painting their fingernails, doing homework, performing non-sexual theatrical acts, etc.), which destabilizes the subject-to-object gaze Mulvey proposes. As White (2003) has noted, by actively looking back at viewers, webcam models refute some of the submissive aspects of being looked at as an object (p. 18). By broadcasting from their bedrooms and emphasizing their feelings, cam-girls remain within girl culture’s historically circumscribed position within the private space, but they also subvert the use of that space by making it public and marketable (Dobson, 2008).

The development of cam-girl websites from experimental DIY projects to monetized enterprises converged with the explosion of online pornography. Today, at this moment, thousands of models live-stream their productions on the world’s four largest camming websites: Live.com, Cams Creative, Cam Soda, and Chaturbate (The absolute best adult webcam sites, 2017). Webcam models can earn from \$10,000 a month (Jones, 2015) to \$75,000 a month (Rogers, 2015) from clients who pay through the currency of tokens to watch erotic shows (Bleakley, 2015; Jones, 2016). By talking, performing, and building intimacies with clients online, webcam models – like erotic dancers and massage parlour workers – perform emotional labour. Jones (2015a) has called this digital form of emotional labour “embodied authenticity” (p. 795). As of late, the cultural industries have picked up on and also cashed in on the webcam model phenomenon, producing and circulating a number of documentary and feature films about their lives and labours in the digital economy. The next section will probe the representation of this form of sex work in *CamGirlz* (2015).

CamGirlz: A Day in the Life of Sex Entrepreneurship

CamGirlz (2015) is a personal portrait documentary in which fifteen webcam models from the U.S. literally and figuratively take to the stage to represent themselves and their work of webcam modeling. With its high production values, smooth electro-synth soundtrack, and sensitive close-ups, *CamGirlz* is stylish. It is also intimate. Told through on-screen interviews and observational vignettes, and set mostly in bedrooms, the documentary takes a “day in the life” verité approach to its subjects and creates an experience that is immersive and sensitive to each woman’s story. At the same time, it argues a strong position while countering stereotypes. Visually and rhetorically, *CamGirlz* maintains that webcam modeling is legitimate work. *CamGirlz* suggests this through its opening montage, which paints a picture of webcam models starting their workdays by setting up their video equipment. With technical precision, they unravel power cords, clip cameras onto tripods, plug in computers, tweak lighting, apply make-up, fasten bras, select costumes, and prepare backdrops for the shows. By showing the workaday routines webcam models engage in, *CamGirlz* establishes webcam models as professional performers and webcam modeling as both a business and a media production. As one model says: “We’re normal people. It’s just a job.”

CamGirlz also uses this opening sequence to show webcam models interacting with their families to suggest that webcam models can have harmonious personal lives, which humanizes them. While stereotypes suggest that sex workers have broken personal lives, severed family connections, and violent and toxic relationships, *CamGirlz* shows numerous images of webcam models enjoying quality time with their families. One webcam model watches television with her partner; another kisses her son and husband goodbye as they leave for the day; another plays with her pet ferrets; several walk in nature, pick flowers, and enjoy a picnic. By opening with images of webcam models’ professional and personal lives, *CamGirlz* shows that webcam models are ordinary women who, like other women, seek a balance between work and leisure. By showing these family scenes, *CamGirlz* also humanizes webcam models as mothers, wives, and girlfriends and suggests that while their jobs do not define them, they do form a part of their lives.

In addition to normalizing webcam modeling as a job, *CamGirlz* advances a positive image of webcam modeling in four key ways. First, *CamGirlz* represents webcam modeling as a way for women to escape low-waged and exploitative service jobs and enter more empowering and autonomous work. Second, it depicts webcam modeling as a way for women to become entrepreneurs – mini media companies unto themselves where they practice as creative entrepreneurs. Third, it depicts webcam modeling as a creative and subversive sexual performance capable of countering pornography's dominant visual codes and a way in which webcam models express their authenticity. Finally, it frames webcam modeling as a catalyst for women's sexual self-discovery, sexual pleasure, and empowerment and as a means for women to renew their self-confidence. The following sections elaborate upon *CamGirlz*'s positive representations of the webcam model and her work.

Webcam Modeling: An Escape from Precarious Low-Wage Service Work

While the Hollywood stereotype of the sex worker is a coerced woman who falls from grace or a flashy Jezebel, *CamGirlz* represents webcam models who choose their work as escapes from poorly paying, exhausting, and sometimes even exploitative service jobs that are widespread under neoliberal capitalism. Through multiple on-screen interviews, models describe webcam modeling as a safe harbour in a storm of bad jobs, nasty bosses, and debt. In one scene, a young mother sits in her living room while her toddler squirms on her lap. She describes how before webcam modeling, she worked as the manager at a pizza restaurant, on-her-feet work in the blast of a hot oven; often, she worked double shifts. "Before camming I was at work more than I was at home. Home was a bed. I never got time to spend with my family and friends," she says. Now, as a webcam model, she works half the hours she once did, but earns much more. Another webcam model describes the relentless bullying she endured from her boss at a psychologically damaging job that led to a stress breakdown. "I hated my job. I would cry on the way to work. I would cry on my way home. I was miserable." Other models describe how webcam modeling has given them economic mobility. "I was living in a really bad area and making, like \$10 an hour waitressing," another webcam model explains. "We do this by choice,"

says another webcam model. One model describes how webcam modeling allowed her to complete her undergraduate degree debt-free; now, she plans to pursue graduate studies to become a therapist.

Thus, *CamGirlz* represents webcam modeling as a way out of mediocre low-waged jobs and toward *high-paying* work that enables women to achieve financial independence.⁵⁸ The CEO of one major webcam modeling website, Chaturbate, similarly describes webcam modeling as choice and opportunity, a way for women to escape low-wage work: “A lot of college girls cam their way through school, and a lot of single mothers are now able to provide for their families comfortably and spend more time with their children. It’s very empowering. They’re in control of what they do. And if anything gets too uncomfortable, they can just close the laptop and walk away” (Rogers, 2015). *CamGirlz* not only suggests that women increase their incomes through webcam modeling; it also shows they gain and exercise a great deal of agency while at work.

While prohibitionist feminists argue that sex workers choose their work from “non-choices” (Barry, 1995), *CamGirlz* emphasizes that webcam models set the terms of their work. As independent contractors, they choose their own schedules, determine how much they will charge, which sex acts they will perform, and how they will appear on camera. They also have the power to eject viewers from their virtual rooms. “I’m in complete control of everything,” one webcam model says. While some webcam models concede the possible conflict between men paying them to perform specific sexual acts and their purported agency, they insist they are in control because they can, at any moment, simply log off. Webcam models also cite the safety of their work relative to other sex work jobs. In the United States, webcam modeling is protected under the First Amendment and legal. The physical barrier between performer and client also makes it the “safest” form of sex work (Senft, 2008; Jones,

⁵⁸ Likewise, some feminist media scholars have been skeptical about the documentary as an instrument of political change. In particular, they have critiqued sex work documentary for promoting a “selective...liberal feminist discourse of agency, choice and empowerment” (Boyle, 2008, p. 40). *CamGirlz* certainly does present sex workers as choice feminists. But unlike reality documentary television of the 1990s which attempted to “make over unruly subjects,” *CamGirlz* uses the personal portrait documentary to explore the subjective experience of webcam models and the personal power webcam models claim to find in their work of performing sexuality. As Nichols (2001) notes, the personal portrait documentary “will repress the political in favour of a concept of the subject as a self-contained, self-determining entity” (p. 164). While *CamGirlz* does lack critique, it does offer what Jones (2016) rightly identifies as a key goal of sex worker representation, which is more exploration “around what people do with neoliberalism” (p. 252). *CamGirlz* realizes this goal by exploring how webcam models use their erotic capital to maximize their profits and attain economic mobility within the exigencies of neoliberal capitalism.

2015). While prohibitionist feminists and the Hollywood stereotype make sex work synonymous with gender inequality, *CamGirlz* suggests that webcam modeling actually offers women escape from low-wage service jobs and a way to exert more control over their work.⁵⁹

It's Just My Business: Webcam Modeling as Creative Entrepreneurship

CamGirlz represents webcam modeling as a positive opportunity for women to engage in entrepreneurship and gain greater economic control over their lives. The women in *CamGirlz* use phrases like “camming is my business” and mention entrepreneurial techniques such as “marketing to build a fan base.” They view their interactions as transactions and consider the services they sell as goods, while also regarding themselves as products. “You are selling yourself. At the end of the day, you are a product,” says one webcam model. *CamGirlz*’s focus on women’s agency draws from neoliberal discourses of entrepreneurship and an ethos of self-reliance: “That’s what being entrepreneurial is – depending on yourself. I’d rather have that than depend on someone else.” Other models describe liking the control entrepreneurship gives them over their work: “It’s my own time, my own rules. It’s like I have my own business.” They describe the benefits of entrepreneurship as being “your own boss” and having “no one control me.” Others discuss the positive feeling that comes with becoming an entrepreneur: “It’s just so empowering for me. I never thought I would be able to run my own business and manage my time the way I want to.” The webcam models describe themselves as inventive, passionate, and self-actualizing creative entrepreneurs.

The term “creative entrepreneur,” which has emerged in the last 15 years, describes a new kind of worker in twenty-first century capitalism who is flexible, creative, and self-employed and who produces and sells creative products and commodities on the open market outside of any institutional structure. Discourses of creative entrepreneurship and the identity of the “creative precariat”

⁵⁹ Webcam modeling has fewer barriers to entry compared to other forms of service work. As Jones (2015) has noted, webcam models require little startup capital beyond a computer and a camera, websites require no joining fees, and models are not subjected to onerous hiring processes, making it feasible to start webcam modeling immediately. Educational qualifications are immaterial and, to a degree, language barriers are reduced.

celebrate the benefits of having complete control over the product and production, being able to work on many projects at once, follow one's passion, innovate, create, and make decisions (de Peuter, 2014, p. 263). *CamGirlz* represents webcam models as creative entrepreneurs who operate as mini media companies unto themselves. They assume the roles of producer, director, production designer, marketing expert, and performer all at once.

CamGirlz represents webcam models as producers who oversee the logistics of production – from setting up computers and cameras and other technology – to envisioning the production as a whole. It also represents webcam models as marketing experts who build their personal brands by inviting clients into their personal worlds. Although they are selling intangible commodities – performances, images, time, and services – *CamGirlz* emphasizes the extent to which webcam models understand that their clients desire “authentic experiences” – what Hochschild (1983) calls the consumer's greatest wish in late capitalism stemming from a growing weariness with “phoniness.” As Hochschild notes, we now put “an unprecedented value on spontaneous ‘natural’ feeling. We are intrigued by the unmanaged heart” (p. 190). *CamGirlz* shows webcam models crafting online personas and participating in social media activities that accentuate their “authenticity” and build relationships with fans.⁶⁰ Many webcam models maintain Instagram, Twitter, and Facebook pages to help them connect to fans (Bleakley, 2015). Furthermore, some webcam models sell their phone numbers for off-line texting and, for a fee, will write the viewer's name on a piece of paper and post it in her room, a

⁶⁰ It is customary in “docu-porn” to privilege “the sell” side of the sex industry – sex workers – to the neglect of the “buy” side – the customers. As Boyle (2008) notes, “only by considering the relationships between women and men in commercial sex and its representation can we meaningfully acknowledge women's subjectivity” (p. 39). Neglecting to portray the “buy side,” Boyle argues, presents a decontextualized and partial view of the sex industry that obscures the economic and social relations between transactors. Innovatively, *CamGirlz* focuses on the buy side through on-screen interviews with several male clients. While prohibitionists have characterized male buyers of sex as misogynistic, *CamGirlz* represents them as ordinary men whose shyness, insecurity, and inexperience has left them lonely and craving sexual and emotional companionship. Several describe how their interactions with webcam models help them practice social skills they hope to carry into real life to form intimate (non-commercial) romantic relationships. The webcam models describe their empathy for their clients: “Most of them are too shy talk girls in real life. They go to work, come home, and first they want is to hang out with you.” “They're all really lonely and that can be debilitating. This can really build their confidence.” While the documentary does not probe the power relations between webcam models and clients, the very presence of these clients on camera is a progressive step towards portraying the entirety of the sex industry in more complex ways.

signification of the viewer's status in the performer's private "world" (Jones, 2015a, p. 784). *CamGirlz* shows how webcam models use creative entrepreneurship to connect with audiences.

CamGirlz also suggests that webcam models are directors and production designers who craft their sets and stages with intent to build strong personal connections to their audiences. The webcam models in *CamGirlz* seemingly draw on the legacy of the 1990s cam-girls and broadcast from their bedrooms where they create "displays" of authenticity. The concept of "display work" is useful for understanding how webcam models design their bedrooms to meet the consumer's desire for authenticity or the "unmanaged heart" (p. 190). Mears & Connell (2016) describe "display work" as that labour which focuses on self-display, sexualization, and performance in which "the primary exchange of bodily capital is for the purpose of visual consumption, either in image, video or direct contact for a wage" (p. 333).⁶¹ As *CamGirlz* shows, the models' bedrooms appear curated with personal effects that suggest the model's backstory and characteristics: books (studiousness), stuffed animals (youth and innocence), a ukulele (creativity, folksiness), and knickknacks (whimsy). Some webcam models have cats curled up near them. Through this entrepreneurial display work, webcam models give the viewer imaginative access to their private, "authentic" worlds. As a result, webcam modeling presents as more authentic and is differentiated from traditional pornography.⁶²

CamGirlz also represents webcam models doing display work through their webpages, which come to function as supplemental marketing tools. Like the original cam-girls, webcam models post their measurements, photographs in different fashion looks (swimwear, evening wear, sportswear), personal writings (brief autobiographical narratives), and inspirational quotations (Camsoda, n.d.). Like the DIY cam-girl websites of the 1990s – or the earlier *Playboy* centerfold questionnaires in which

⁶¹ While display work is similar to aesthetic labour, as described previously in regard to the erotic dancers in "Road Strip," *P.O.P.* and *Magic City*, it focuses especially on display that is mediated through a screen or via distance (such as when watching an erotic dancer perform on stage). As *CamGirlz* shows, webcam models are creative entrepreneurs who cultivate their "authenticity" by broadcasting from their bedrooms and doing display work – through set design – within their personal spaces.

⁶² *CamGirlz* also suggests that webcam models use sartorial strategies to augment their auras of authenticity. While some models wear clothing that is tight, short, and low-cut, many adopt less overtly sexualized styles by wearing ordinary clothes such as jogging pants and plain T-shirts. In her ethnography of webcam models, Jones (2015a) explains that by wearing clothes that they potentially "would go to the grocery store in" (p. 787), webcam models accentuate their authenticity and produce a fantasy of being a woman the viewer could potentially meet and get to know in real life.

models furnished answers about their favourite foods, hobbies, and dreams in their own purported (usually very girlish) handwriting – these webpages blend the personal with the mercantile and give the viewer further imaginative access to the model’s private world.

As *CamGirlz* shows, webcam models are also directors who make decisions as to how they will appear on screen. While the webcam models perform in their literal bedrooms, they simultaneously perform in “virtual” bedrooms in which they interact with clients through live video, text, and audio (Bleakley, 2015; Jones, 2015). It is in these “virtual rooms” where models sell a range of live services, from the overtly sexual (erotic dancing, using sex toys, masturbating) and the more niche and fetishistic (slurping noodles, applying make-up) to the everyday and companionate (conversation), in addition to video clips. The variety of erotic acts that webcam models offer is vast, but *CamGirlz* emphasizes that models choose which acts they will perform to accord with their own comfort levels, and set their own prices by posting lists of available sex acts. In *CamGirlz*, the offerings listed in one webcam model’s bedroom include the following:

Gold Shows	Website	Clips4Sale
• Ice show -tease	• Ice	• Floor scrubbing
• Shower – voyeur	• 100 spansks	• Tooth brushing
• Panty modeling	• Hot & Cold (ice + wax)	• Nose blowing
• Oil show	• Messy BJ (toy)	• Getting dressed
• Lotion show	• French Maid	• E-cig
• Spanking show	• Bound orgasm	• Sleeping

As *CamGirlz* shows, the premium placed on acts not typically associated with sex work like “floor scrubbing,” “toothbrushing,” and “nose blowing” reflect the extent to which customers desire (and will pay for) intimate access to the model’s life and the rising commercialization of what Hochschild calls “spontaneous natural’ feeling” or the “unmanaged heart” (p. 190). When the model has collected the stated amount from viewers, she will perform the show. *CamGirlz* represents these performances and creative entrepreneurship as a source of satisfaction for webcam models who feel that their work

reflects their authentic selves. Ultimately, it is the goal of every webcam model in a public room to entice at users to “take her private” (to a virtual private room) where her fees increase steeply and where they earn most of their income.

Webcam Modeling as Counter-Porn Performance Art

CamGirlz represents webcam modeling as a creative form of self-expression in which women subvert the visual codes of traditional pornography. To grasp the potentially subversive nature of webcam modeling, it is first necessary to consider those traditional visual codes. Coward (1987) suggests that pornography can be understood according to two key visual codes: fragmentation and submission. Pornography coded with fragmentation represents women as disembodied parts, suggesting that women lack in wholeness and are useful only as parts (which men can then use). In pornography coded with submission, violence and aggression link female sexuality with “romantic death” and even “murder” and characterize women as sexually passive and available, linking women’s arousal to force alone (p. 273). The most extreme examples of this coding occur in pornographic simulations of rape (the variations being: she succumbs to his force and begins to enjoy her rape or continues to resist and suffers through it). Either way, in such images, women are fragmented to orifices and epitomize lack of choice and control. In *CamGirlz*, webcam models reverse these visual codes by mounting shows that emphasize wholeness and agency, creativity and choice.

In *CamGirlz*, webcam models stage spectacles that showcase their theatricality and artistry, and their audacity and control. They adopt personas, craft narratives, and use props, costumes, choreography, and music to disrupt the conventions of pornography and transform it into performance art. In these shows, the sexual act is a culminating act, the after-dinner aperitif rather than the entrée. One webcam model’s stage persona is a pierrot: she performs in striped shorts, a white blouse, a red beret, and white pancake make-up, miming perfectly the staccato movements of the sad clown as she opens umbrellas, mimes hearts exploding from her chest, and plays the accordion. Another model performs as Darth Vader from *Star Wars* and wields a sword; one webcam model tours the cameraperson around her bedroom, which doubles as a soundstage and a dressing room. A dozen

wigs in rainbow colours hang on hooks and a clothes rack on wheels bursts with her elaborate camming costumes – red ball gowns, lacy parasols, and decadent shoes – a look that suggests 1980s prom queen meets Dadaism. Her ventriloquist act involves a dummy modeled on the Tim Burton character *Beetlejuice*. One model uses lime green coloured lights and steam to transform her bathroom into a marine-hued mermaid's paradise; like an X-rated Esther Williams – the 1950s movie star who wore mermaid costumes and performed in water – this webcam model performs from her bathtub. Other models dance, sing, and play instruments, and use their hobbies and quirks as springboards for their screen personas. Says one model: "I like the performance aspect of it. I like the idea of creating something very sexual." While many feminists would argue that appearing naked on screen is an act of self-objectification, *CamGirlz* represents webcam modeling as a form of creativity that is agential and even artistic. Unlike traditional pornography, which trades on fragmentation and simulations of submission, the webcam models place on show their entire bodies and myriad entertainment skills, in which their agency and creativity is unquestionable.

As *CamGirlz* suggests, webcam models are self-aware performers guided by artistic impulses. They describe their performances as spurred by inspiration and entrepreneurship: "I've always had the tendency to want to make everything I do special," the Pierrot model says. Bringing to their acts artistic skills they developed before becoming webcam models is an entrepreneurial strategy: "I didn't want anyone to watch me and think I was boring. It goes hand in hand with sexuality. Every girl out there has a vagina and two boobs and an ass and I figured I wanted to do something that would set me apart. Anything that was unexpected is something I want to do." One webcam model describes how her performances reveal her authenticity as an artist: "The thing about being a cam girl is that it reflects something essential about who you are and then comes back to you tenfold. It's a mirror." By showing their carefully considered and choreographed stage shows, *CamGirlz* suggests that webcam models are certainly not the victims of a one-way objectifying "male gaze," but rather, active, whole, and agentic artists who subvert the male gaze by using their stages to practice their art and express

themselves before a live audience, all the while monetizing their efforts.⁶³ By showing webcam models performing skillful, creative, and meaningful shows, *CamGirlz* represents webcam modeling as an opportunity for women to be creative and to subvert the visual codes of pornography.

Some webcam models in *CamGirlz* take things a step further by wearing costumes that boldly – and sometimes even aggressively – reject traditional notions of idealized femininity. One model wears a space suit and goggles; another a taco costume; yet another a plastic dinosaur head and a knapsack. Though it might seem that few viewers would pay to see a dancing astronaut or gyrating taco, these “erotic” acts start to make more sense in light of Hochschild’s (1983) assertion that, in late capitalism, the consumer’s growing weariness of phoniness has created greater demand for “authenticity” and “spontaneous ‘natural’ feeling” (p. 190). Compared to traditional pornography, these offbeat incarnations begin to make more sense as commercial products for the very reason that they are marked with the imprimatur of the quirky person who performs them online. And, of course, at a certain point both the space suit and the taco costume will unzip, the dinosaur head will pop off, and models will engage in more sexually explicit shows. In this regard, from *CamGirlz* it becomes clear that webcam models reconfigure the visual codes of pornography and even subvert the expectations of the paying audience by performing shows of their own design that are original. At the same time, however, this authenticity gives the audience what they want. Thus, *CamGirlz* suggests that webcam modeling contains subversive possibilities that are also lucrative.

⁶³ While prohibitionist feminists emphasize “male rapaciousness and female victimization” (as cited in Echols, 1984, p. 60), *CamGirlz* draws on the labour and empowerment paradigms to suggest that webcam models are agentic subjects rather than objectified victims. Probing further the definition of “objectification,” we can turn to Nussbaum’s (1995) definition which includes the following seven premises: “1. Instrumentality: the objector treats the object as a tool of his or her own purposes; 2. Denial of autonomy: the objectifier treats the object as lacking in autonomy and self-determination; 3. Inertness: the objectifier treats the object as lacking in agency, and perhaps also in activity; 4. Fungibility: the objectifier treats the object as interchangeable a) with other objects of the same type b) with objects of other types; 5. Violability: the objectifier treats the objects as lacking in boundary-integrity, as something that is permissible to break up, smash, break into; 6. Ownership: the objectifier treats the object as something that is owned by another, can be bought or sold, etc.; 7. Denial of subjectivity: the objectifier treats the object as something whose experience and feelings (if any) need not be taken into account” (p. 257). By representing webcam models who choose which acts they perform, set their own prices, who they will interact with, engage in acts that emphasize their “authenticity,” and use a screen as a barrier (which assures their safety) *CamGirlz* suggests that webcam models are far from objectified.

CamGirlz suggests that webcam models find through this creative self-expression a deep sense of satisfaction and experience the rewards of being “authentic” and expressing their “authenticity.” Citing the creativity they bring to their work, numerous webcam models in *CamGirlz* describe their work as “authentic” in the following ways:

- “The best thing to be is yourself and realize that not everyone is going to like you.”
- “You have to be able to be really real.”
- “You have to be willing to give a little of yourself.”
- “Authentic,” real,” and “honest.”
- “What is so appealing about it is that you’re a real person and you’re not acting. You can just be yourself and do whatever you want to do.”
- “They see me naked, they see me sad, they see me happy, they see the real me.”
- “Being a cam-girl you have to be able to give a little of yourself. Being honest about yourself...it’s nice being able to share like that with someone.”
- “I was watching porn one day and saw a pop-up ad for webcamming. I thought about how much money she was making. But she was being so real.”
- “This is an expression of myself.”

Like the original DIY cam-girls who used their websites as springboards for their artistic and political expressions, *CamGirlz* represents webcam models who use their live-streams to express their creativity, disrupt and subvert traditional notions of female submissive sexuality, and expand the audience’s understanding of what pornography might look like.

Webcam Modelling as Catalyzing Women’s Sexual Self-Discovery/Self-Actualization

The third way that *CamGirlz* represents webcam modeling positively is by depicting it as a catalyst for women’s sexual self-discovery, sexual pleasure, and empowerment. The webcam models channel the

empowerment paradigm and sex positive feminism to detail the many ways they inadvertently discover their sexual selves through their work. This is especially the case with webcam models in *CamGirlz* who describe coming from conservative Christian families, which taught them to shun their bodies and ignore their sexual impulses. One webcam model explains: “I was raised in a very Christian family. It was very repressive. I didn’t know I had a vagina until I was 11 years old. So, I kind of had to grow without my own sexuality. (She mimes removing her shirt and looking down at her breasts in mock surprise, as if channeling her Christian girl self). I was raised to think sex was dirty.”

Many webcam models describe their work as the crucible that burnished their sexual shame into self-acceptance and the capacity for pleasure. “I had never had an orgasm before this,” one webcam model comments. “I had my first orgasm on camera.” In *CamGirlz*, many models credit webcam modeling for their move from sexual shame to sexual enlightenment and self-discovery. Several emphasize that they had little to no sexual experience before becoming webcam models and suggest that, through their work, they received a kind of sex positive re-education. One model explains her pre-webcam modeling naiveté, having been sexually intimate with only her husband; by performing for audiences, she says she has enlarged her understanding of her body’s potential for sexual pleasure: “It’s really helped me discover what I like.” Another model, describing herself as a sexually repressed and docile teenager, sheepishly recalls how, with her first boyfriend, “it took, like, forever for me to go anywhere with him.” Juxtaposed against these voiced over admissions of sexual submissiveness, *CamGirlz* shows images of webcam models twirling around poles, sighing into their computer screens, handling vibrators, and going on picnics that turn into quaint looking lesbian sex shows, suggesting that through webcam modeling the women undergo transformations – erotic bildungsromans – in which they travel from sexual naiveté to sexual self-knowledge.

CamGirlz implicitly critiques patriarchal society for validating the sexuality of men (“sow your wild oats”) while shunning the sexuality of women (“be careful”) and suggests that webcam models are moving beyond these constraints by embracing subversive work that also brings them pleasure. They express how their work has unshackled them from a compulsory sexual submissiveness and made

them feel much more powerful and whole. Some say that through webcam modeling they have become responsible for their own sexual pleasure, which has made them feel more empowered as women to go after what they want. A number of models say sometimes they have orgasms while working, a phenomenon that scholars of sex work have found too (Nagle, 1997; Stein, 1974). While Jones (2016) argues that webcam models use sexual pleasure as an emotion management technique, *CamGirlz* suggests that webcam models glean authentic sexual pleasure by breaking free of repressive sexual tenets about women's sexuality and engaging in a subversive and taboo act.

This subversion can be understood in light of sex positive feminism. During the so-called feminist sex wars that began in the 1970s, radical feminists argued that sexual pleasure was immaterial to the goal of ending women's oppression (Barry, 1985; Dworkin, 1993; Morgan, 1977), but sex positive feminists contended that patriarchy was still operating through the repression of women's sexuality (Willis, 1992; Rubin, 1984). As Carole Vance (1982) has pointed out, "the traditional bargain women were forced to make with men (was): if women were 'good' (sexually circumspect), men would protect them; if they were not good, men could violate and punish them" (p. 2). One goal of sex positive feminism became the renunciation of sexual repression through the commitment to ongoing and open discussion of female sexual pleasure in all forms (Robinson, 1984; Webster, 1984).

The webcam models in *CamGirlz* draw on sex positive feminism when they move beyond individualistic claims about personal sexual expression to suggest the feminist utility of women having open conversations about sex and embracing sexual pleasure. "People are so afraid of sex. And if people would accept sexuality for what it is – that it's changing and evolving all the time – a lot of our problems would just start to disappear," one model says. Another webcam model laments how popular culture bombards people with sexualized imagery, yet frank conversations about sex are rare: "It's like we're not supposed to talk about it," she says, alluding to the U.S.'s morally conservative sex education programs. Yet others describe how through webcam modeling they came to the realization that American society continues to frame sex in reproductive, functional ways and they call for that to

end: “What if we were honest with our children, that sex is for pleasure rather than for making babies. I don’t feel like it’s something I should be ashamed of.” One webcam model says:

I was raised to think sex was dirty and that people who were promiscuous were bad people. It’s supposed to be behind closed doors. Even though it’s such a natural thing, like the need to eat, breathe, and sleep. Sexuality is beautiful. There is absolutely nothing wrong with it. I want my son to respect sex. This day and age, men and women are still close-minded about sex because we’re not educated about it.

CamGirlz’s portrayal of webcam models who take sexual pleasure in their work is a new representation. The portrayal of webcam models who enjoy sex is also bold, bolder than it might seem on the surface. Almost all of the popular culture I have examined in this dissertation has dignified sex workers by showing their emotional labour, body work, and aesthetic labour and display work in service to others, their nurturance as mothers and friends. While these images are new and important for countering the opposing stereotypes within the virgin/whore binary, they nevertheless still extol traditionally “female” nurturing qualities in ways that, to various degrees, align the “new” twenty-first century sex workers with old stereotypes about women. Put another way, works that focus on sex workers’ care work, while humane and important, do not trouble the status quo. *CamGirlz*, which shows sex workers who choose and benefit from their work, shows webcam models who also glean sexual pleasure from their work. In this regard, *CamGirlz* offers a new, more subversive image of the sex worker as a dauntless sybarite who is paid for her pleasure. Although one might argue that *CamGirlz*’s representation of webcam models enjoying their solo sex acts and performances dilutes the argument that sex work is a job, it is just as plausible to read the models’ positive responses as mirroring those of so many other professionals who openly enjoy the work for which they are paid. Furthermore, *CamGirlz* does not suggest that webcam models experience pleasure all the time; the

documentary shows that sexual pleasure is dependent on factors such as the webcam model's mood and the person with whom she is communicating.

Yet, given that orgasms are not cashable, what is the advantage of all of this sexual pleasure? According to *CamGirlz*, it is confidence. Being more sexually assertive, more erotically inclined, the webcam models say, has boosted their self-esteem and sense of self-worth. This is an argument that sex workers and scholars aligned with the empowerment paradigm have also made over the last two decades in their studies of erotic dancers, call girls, webcam models, and other types of sex workers (Dudash, 1997; Dunn, 2012; Rogers, 2015; Stein, 1974; Weitzer, 2012). In *CamGirlz*, webcam models describe their work as boosting their self-confidence by validating their attractiveness, sexiness, and likeability, validation that is made tangible – unlike in real life – through payment and financial independence. One webcam model explains that the work allows her to “see myself through someone else’s perspective.” A number describe the ego-boost that comes from knowing they are being watched by hundreds of spectators, if not more, suggesting an eroticization of voyeurism, even the eroticization of their micro-celebrity status. More than a handful feel their work has repaired a poor body image. By undressing, performing, being self-possessed before a camera, and learning more about their bodies, the webcam models come to embrace their bodies for their strength, capacity for pleasure, and as commodities that they exchange for pay on the open market through their entrepreneurial activities on webcam modeling websites.

CamGirlz also emphasizes how the webcam modeling industry is inclusive because it values women of all ages, cultural backgrounds, and body shapes and sizes. In the many body positive vignettes, webcam models describe transformations from shame to self-love and acceptance. One webcam model, who describes being abandoned by her husband because he thought she was “too fat,” explains how she renewed her confidence through webcam modeling websites where she found many men who not only appreciated her fuller figure but preferred it over slimmer forms. Another model explains: “I got really good feedback as a plus girl. I’m proud of my body now. Being able to show it off is liberating.” Many webcam models stress the diversity and body acceptance culture on webcam

modeling sites over the homogeneity and fat shaming tone of popular culture at large. “You don’t have to look like the ideal woman here,” one webcam model says. Another: “Seeing girls who maybe don’t have society’s perfect body has been great.” Another webcam model describes “seeing myself from an outsider’s perspective really changed the way I see myself.” By representing webcam models moving from sexual submissiveness and dissatisfaction to sexual assertiveness and pleasure, from bodily shame to self-acceptance and self-love, *CamGirlz* suggests that for some women webcam modeling is a catalyst for personal transformation, even inner revolution.

As well as transforming their relationships to their bodies, *CamGirlz* suggests that webcam models also improve their mental and psychological well-being through their work. One webcam model, who self-identifies as having Asperger syndrome, explains that before starting webcam modeling she often felt “terrified of the world...[because] people confuse me.” Through her work, she says that she has become more skilled at reading people’s emotions and using strategies for relating to other people. Khyla, one of the most interesting subjects in the documentary, is a 60-year-old webcam model who turned to the work after suddenly becoming a widow: “My husband died on me, he had a massive heart attack. I couldn’t eat or sleep. I wasn’t doing real good,” says Khyla. Wearing leopard print lingerie, lying on her back in bed in the pose of a mermaid on a rock, one knee lifted, with toes pointing gingerly and her long grey, wavy hair falling down one shoulder, Khyla explains why she enjoys her job: “It validates me, that I’ve still got it, that I still feel good about myself. The thing is, I don’t want to start looking for someone new. I just want to be with him. With these guys, I get a sense of that connection. I just wanted to feel that connection again. There is a unique category of men looking for older women.”

CamGirlz’s depiction of Khyla’s motivation is a good reminder of the complexity and myriad reasons women choose webcam modeling and, by extension, sex work. While money is assumedly always the driving factor, Khyla suggests it is not so for her. She is using her virtual interactions with men to approximate the intimacy she once had with her late husband. Her performances of sexuality and authenticity are, as Hochschild (1983) would say, “deep acted,” drawn from memories she has of

her husband, which she substitutes in the present moment in her interactions with clients from whom she remains at a physically and emotionally safe distance. As Hochschild (1983) notes, after Stanislavski, emotional labourers draw on “real feeling that has been self-induced” (p. 36). Thus, Khyla induces real feeling in these virtual encounters and casts these virtual men as surrogates for her late husband. “I’m honest with the guys about why I’m on here,” she says candidly. “I was feeling a loss and it really turned my life around.” According to Khyla, being a webcam model makes her feel more alive, connected to the world, and sexy. Given that scholars have found that in popular culture women over 65 are rarely represented and, if they are, it is usually with diminished mental and physical capacities in advertising for medical products (Lauzen & Dozier, 2003), *CamGirlz* offers a fresh perspective of a vivacious mature woman. By asserting that sexiness and sexuality are not age-dependent, the documentary broadens ideas about sex workers and how women should be at large.

All in all, *CamGirlz* represents webcam models in positive ways that counter stereotypes of the victim or criminal sex worker. In *CamGirlz*, webcam models find an escape from minimum wage work, operate as mini media companies and make decisions about how they will look and what acts they will perform on camera, reconfigure the visual codes of pornography and subvert the expectations of the paying audience by performing shows of their own design that are quirky and unique – while also giving viewers the authenticity they want. By representing these performances, *CamGirlz* suggests that webcam modeling contains subversive formal possibilities, which are also lucrative for the webcam models themselves.

Yet, *CamGirlz* is not a completely balanced look at the webcam modeling industry. As Jones (2015) has noted, “individualized erotic labour” in “isolated environments” carries the risk of overwork and exhaustion (p. 563). In *CamGirlz*, webcam models cope with doing isolated, intensive work by adopting the emotional labour strategies Hochschild (1983) theorized, some with more troubling ends. One method is to separate mentally from one’s job. A second method is to distinguish between one’s on-camera performance and private life and to value their performances as a skill. As one webcam model says: “One guy I knew on here...wrote to me and said, ‘I’ve left my wife and I’m coming over

there to be with you.’ I was like what are you talking about? This is a business relationship.” Another webcam model puts it more bluntly: “They are a font on a screen.” These moments can be read as suggesting that webcam models who differentiate between their performance and their private lives stand the best chance of avoiding burnout because they place a part of themselves in safekeeping and do not over-identify with the role that viewers pay them to play.

Yet some webcam models identify “wholeheartedly” with their role and blur the distinction between their performance and private selves. In *CamGirlz*, a number of webcam models describe their work as “authentic”, “real”, “an expression of myself”, “really real”, “and “not acting.” These remarks indicate that the webcam models do not see any difference between themselves and what they perform on screen and seem to deny that they are doing emotional labour. For Jones (2015), webcam models who “reject emotional labor” may indeed experience a sense of authenticity yet there are costs related to this convergence. For Hochschild, total identification with one’s performance self puts workers at risk of “burnout” and withdrawal into “a robotic state” where they lose “access to (true) feeling... a central means of interpreting the world around us” (p. 188), and this collapse leads to “widespread trouble” (p. 197).

In *CamGirlz*, one example of this “trouble” are in scenes that represent “spanking,” a popular service wherein webcam models use a wooden paddle or their own hands to strike their own bare buttocks, at times leaving red marks and sometimes raised red welts. In one stance, images of spanking or self-flagellation appear alongside voiceovers of models describing their “authenticity” and “empowerment.” In these moments, *CamGirlz* posits no contradiction between self-flagellation for pay and empowered authenticity. And while it is possible that webcam models enjoy performing sadomasochistic acts, it is unlikely that doing so in rote fashion for anonymous audiences offers consistent gratification. While taking webcam models’ expressions of agency is important, so is questioning and probing the politics of these expressions. But *CamGirlz* fails to probe the possible conflict between expressions of empowerment and performances of disempowerment on screen. This dissonance is intrinsic to neoliberal feminism and its offspring, postfeminism.

Critique: CamGirlz's "Postfeminist Sensibility"

While I maintain that *CamGirlz* offers a positive and new portrayal of webcam models that counters stereotypes, I want to nevertheless point out, by way of Gill (2007), how the progressive elements of *CamGirlz* are at times entangled with "postfeminist sensibility" (p. 2).

One feature of the postfeminist sensibility, Gill writes, is the media's preoccupation with a "sexy body" as the key source of a woman's happiness (p. 3). Whereas traditional patriarchal values located "femaleness" in a woman's behaviour, psychology, and motherhood, popular culture today increasingly frames a woman's "sexiness" – or her dauntless quest to become sexy – as the font of her self-esteem (p. 3). This trope is on display in countless television shows where women diet, wonder if they look fat, skip meals, and lie on their beds sadly wriggling into tight jeans as their much older and fatter husbands chomp on chicken wings and drink beer. In *CamGirlz*, models frequently cite their sexy bodies as the cradle of their newfound joy to the neglect of other pursuits, aspirations, or interests such as friends, art, politics, or personal goals. Save for one woman who has plans to become a therapist, the webcam models yoke their self-esteem to the sense that their bodies are beautiful. This is troubling since the webcam models often describe their bodies as interchangeable and synonymous with the self. As one web-cam model says: "I think this is a way for people to get to know me better because they see me everything. They see me naked, they see me sad, they see me happy, they see the real me". Whereas liberal feminism celebrated a turn away from the body as the site of a woman's identity and empowerment, seeing the choice as between body and brains, postfeminists frame their "body and attractiveness as an instrument to achieve societal and personal change" (Adriaens & Van Bauwel, 2011, p. 179). In *CamGirlz*, personal pride is often located in the body's sexiness alone.

This focus on the "sexy" body as a source of women's empowerment also shows up through the film's imagery. *CamGirlz* is beautifully shot, often elegant, and noticeably includes copious images of women's nude bodies, from their legs to their labia. While the women's body parts are never fragmented as in traditional pornography, the lingering close-up shots on women's body parts reflects what Arthurs (2004) has pointed out as sex work documentary's tendency to use imagery to titillate the

viewer, thereby undercutting the thought-provoking and educational potential of the documentary form. *CamGirlz* also contains what Gill describes as surveillance and the discipline of the body. While a level of surveillance is inevitable, given that webcam models earn their livings by being watched, it is disturbing that so many cite surveillance as a source of self-esteem, and a lack of surveillance as a cause of depression. While Gill used “discipline” to mean dieting and body management, the models in *CamGirlz* who flog themselves are certainly practicing a form of discipline that is eroticized and made to be surveilled.

According to Gill, the shift from portraying women as passive sexualized objects to desiring sexual subjects is another feature of postfeminist media. Traditionally, “good” women characters passively waited for men to make the sexual approach, while “bad” women characters were highly sexualized medusa figures deformed by their libidinous impulses (like Glenn Close’s amorously obsessed character in *Fatal Attraction*, who, out of lust, boils a rabbit). Now, however, as Gill points out, popular culture increasingly lauds women for being sexually aggressive (and even emphasizes this aggression as empowerment). The models in *CamGirlz* also present themselves as active, driven, and desiring sexualized subjects and emphasize their sexual pleasure as transgressive. In *CamGirlz*, one webcam model says proudly: “If I can be a thousand peoples’ dream girl, then fuck yeah.” Critics of postfeminism argue that capitalism and anti-feminism, working through the exigencies of the sex industry, have conspired to trick women into believing that flaunting their sexuality is an expression of their inner strength (Banyard, 2009; Douglas, 2010). Levy, in *Female Chauvinist Pigs* (2005), argues that women’s complicity in their own sexual objectification is one of neoliberal feminism’s greatest coups. Similarly, McRobbie (2009) uses the term “the phallic girl” to describe a woman who claims to have won equality with men and no longer needs to identify or be part of a feminist movement. McRobbie views the phallic girl as a neoliberal invention. On the surface, the “phallic girl” seems to answer calls for sexual equality, yet when closely examined conforms to the ideal sexualized female. In *CamGirlz*, the subjects speak frequently about their sexual desire and satisfaction (“I had my first orgasm on

screen”) as an index of empowerment, yet seldom speak of any collective feminist action, and the word “feminist” is never used.

The models in *CamGirlz* also display a postfeminist sensibility through discourses of empowerment that suggest women’s many choices to realize their potential outside of structural inequalities. In contrast to liberal feminism, which made its goal the dismantling of gendered oppressions and inequalities, neoliberal or “choice feminism” suggests that every person – and every woman – in society is free to make her own choices and achieve their individualistic dreams (Banyard, 2009; Tolentino, 2016). Making “choices” is now in itself a feminist act. As Viner notes: “Feminism is used for everything these days except the fight for true equality – to sell trainers, to justify body mutilations, to make women make porn (as cited in Power, 2009, p. 11). In *CamGirlz*, webcam models frequently employ the discourse of choice to describe being empowered to choose their work and enjoy sexual pleasure, yet the words “choice” and “empowerment” are used in exclusively individualistic ways.⁶⁴ Choice is a foundation of liberal feminism that used to be tied to women’s struggles for civil and reproductive rights, which found their victory in *Roe v. Wade*, a U.S. Supreme Court case that led to women’s legal right to make their own choices about their own bodies (Murphy, 2016). Today, feminist scholars argue that self-serving corporatism and blithe pop feminism – de-invested in improving women’s lives beyond the breathless consumerist moment – have erased the original meaning of choice as it relates to feminism. Tolentino (2016) writes that the word “choice” has eroded the political, active foundations of feminism, making the discourse of women’s empowerment

⁶⁴ Tolentino (2016), writing in *The New York Times*, rues how empowerment went from being a word that described a means of achieving collective change to a word that describes only a personal project of self-improvement. The concept of empowerment was not always trivialized, nor was it even particularly attached to women. In 1968, Paulo Friere, the Brazilian educator, used the word “conscientization,” empowerment’s precursor, to describe the “process through which an oppressed person perceives the structural conditions of his oppression and is subsequently able to take action against his oppressors” (n. pag.). In the early 1980s, an educator named Barbara Bryant used the word “empowerment” to describe “an ethos” social workers could use to “discourage paternalism” and encourage marginalized Black communities in the United States to implement their own strategies for solving problems (n. pag). But, in 1981, Tolentino writes, a psychologist named Julian Rappaport redefined empowerment as a political doctrine that viewed personal power as “fundamentally limitless.” Empowerment went from a means of achieving collective change to a personal project that placed responsibility on the individual to improve herself. Tolentino points out the double-speak in this semantic shift: “Sneakily, empowerment had turned into a theory that applied to the needy while describing a process more realistically applicable to the rich...Today ‘empowerment’ invokes power while signifying the lack of it. It functions like an explorer staking a claim on new territory with a white flag” (n. pag.).

today neither “praxis, nor really theory” (n. pag.) but “about pleasure, not power; it’s individualistic and subjective” (n. pag.). This is certainly true in *CamGirlz*. Although webcam modeling is legal, webcam models still face challenges as a workforce, not least the struggle for unionization that would improve their bargaining power with their corporate landowner websites.

Yet, in its strident empowerment discourse, *CamGirlz* sidesteps many of the challenges webcam models face in the webcam modeling industry. While the film stresses that webcam models “own” their content, what goes unmentioned is that webcam models are, at all times, vulnerable to clients recording their performances – through “screen grabbing” – and uploading the videos to porn sites, thereby creating a permanent record of the webcam model’s work, which she no longer controls and for which she is no longer compensated (Jones, 2016). Webcam models are vulnerable to doxxing – a new form of digital harassment in which people’s personal information is hacked and published online to intimidate or humiliate (Jones, 2015).⁶⁵ Isolated incidents have also arisen in which clients track a webcam model’s location, while technology glitches sometimes put models at risk for performing for free. Moreover, *CamGirlz* focuses on a privileged group of American webcam models. The other, less visible contingent of the webcam industry are those women outside the U.S. who work in “studios” where exploitation has been noted.⁶⁶

⁶⁵ Webcam models have also been victimized online by trolls posing as customers. In one incident reported in *The New York Times*, trolls asked a webcam model to write her name on her body and pose with her prescription medication bottle. The information she provided was enough for the trolls to identify her, set up a Facebook page with her real name, post naked photos of her, and forward the account to her friends and family with the message: “Hey, do you know Sarah? The poor little sweetie has done some really bad things. So you know, here are the pictures she’s posted on the internet for everyone to see” (Bertrand, 2014). Millie Martins, a popular webcam model from Columbia, has received a series of death threats (Rogers, 2015). While the above are isolated events, they speak to the drawbacks inherent to forms of labour and business enterprises not governed by any global legal framework or industry policies.

⁶⁶ Some scholars have found that the global webcam industry is not equitable, with the benefits predominately going to popular webcam models in the United States (Biddle, 2012; Jones, 2015). Webcam modeling operations in developing countries may in fact be factory-type facilities filled with booths outfitted to look like bedrooms, where models work for up to 16 hours at a time for a pittance. Many of these operations exist in the Philippines and Romania and function as a kind of global sex work sweatshop in which women are paid low wages to provide thrills to first world customers (Biddle, 2012). Yet, for some women in developing countries, webcam modeling provides the opportunity to attend university. In *Vice*, Davis (2013) writes about a month he spent at a webcam modelling studio in Bucharest, where there are about 2000 webcam studios. In a city where the average monthly salary is less than \$300, some models earn \$13,000 USD a month. Biddle (2012) likewise interviewed Bucharest webcam models who were paying their way through university by webcamming, including one woman who earns the equivalent of a full-time middle-class salary by working only four days a month, allowing her to focus on her studies (n. pag.).

The documentary does not mention any collective goals of webcam models either to reduce inequalities within their own industry or to improve conditions for women globally. Even privileged American webcam models experience discrimination. Jones (2015) found that most women of colour do not make nearly the fabled \$10,000 a month many webcam modeling sites advertise, and within the U.S., white women dominate the industry.⁶⁷ While I am not suggesting that *CamGirlz* need mention all of these industry challenges, it is notable that it invokes “empowerment,” a feminist buzzword, without exploring any inequality which empowerment is supposed to redress. In this sense, *CamGirlz* epitomizes a neoliberal discourse, which, as Diamond et. al. (2017) notes, claims “to have absorbed feminism’s ideas, images and rhetoric while insisting that struggles for social and gender justice are over” (p. 3). In *CamGirlz*, the feminist struggle appears to be over as we witness this victory lap around webcam model studios and websites.

The concept of empowerment similarly arises in *CamGirlz* when models speak about using webcam modeling as an escape from low-wage and precarious service work. Yet, the reasons why only low-wage jobs were available to them go unexplored. Rather than study the devastation of the social safety net and standard employment relations under neoliberalism, *CamGirlz* frames the women’s decisions to become “entrepreneurial” as virtuous solutions to personal setbacks. As Gill & Kanai (2018) note: “when rights to employment and social safety nets are continually under attack, popular culture increasingly circulates discourses about self-reliant, entrepreneurial, and creative flex-workers who maintain a “positive” attitude (p. 320). While the film gestures at gender-based inequalities when exploring the low-wage service jobs women held before they started webcam modeling, *CamGirlz* does not examine how, under neoliberalism, work has become increasingly precarious.

The documentary is also mute on the connection between poorly paying jobs that call upon women’s “feelings” and women’s rising inequality under neoliberalism. Hochschild (1983) locates

⁶⁷ Jones (2015a) found that the effect of a lower cam score has real impacts on a webcam model’s earnings: the lower a webcam model’s score, the lower down on the webpage she appears and the less likely she is to receive business (p. 794). Jones also found that Black webcam models “adopt a look that adheres to traditional feminine white aesthetic” including longer chemically-straightened hair, weaves, and coloured contact lenses. Further, Jones found that Black webcam models with fuller physiques and curly hair had significantly lower scores, while the highest earning Black webcam model was skinny, with long straight hair, and green eyes (p. 792).

women's over representation in service jobs in the historical fact of women's economic oppression or, in what she terms, women's low "social shield" (p. 164). Because of their "low social shield," women have compensated and secured for themselves material resources by offering their nurturance and sexual allure, what Hochschild calls the "defensive use of sexual beauty, charm, relational skills" (p. 164). Importantly, Hochschild sees this "defensive use" of beauty and charm as a sign of women's agency, yet still roots that agency in oppression. In *CamGirlz*, there is no suggestion of women's ongoing lower "social shield." On the contrary, women's capitalizing on their assets – their "erotic capital" – is framed in purely entrepreneurial terms while the reasons why women might need to use these skills are not addressed. In bypassing any examination of power and inequality, *CamGirlz* enacts an apolitical stance that is characteristic of postfeminist sensibility. As Power (2009) notes, postfeminism "masks a deep inability to come to terms with serious transformations in the nature of work" (p. 69). Why a woman's only choices are working double shifts at a pizza restaurant and rarely seeing her child or doing sex work, or why a woman who is bullied at work finds her only recourse in quitting, are not presented as inequalities that need to be redressed (by raising minimum wage or offering childcare benefits) but as personal struggles to be overcome by women individualistically.

Ultimately, we can understand *CamGirlz* as exemplary of what Gill calls the "feminist entanglements" of postfeminist media. By reveling in the image of the webcam model as ideal neoliberal entrepreneur, by focusing on the body as the Holy Grail of women's empowerment, and by suggesting that sexual agency is the font of women's empowerment, *CamGirlz* activates a less potent form of feminism. And while no documentary can cover all facets of a subject, *CamGirlz* – by ignoring doxxing, the risk of being recorded and losing ownership of one's images, and global inequalities – fails to call attention to the dark side of the webcam modeling industry. At the same time, claims about being "empowered," "flexible," and "creative" lose some gusto in the harsh light of structural inequalities like the wage gap that haunts women disproportionately under neoliberalism. Within this celebratory narrative, women are said to have found particularly fulfilling opportunities in

entrepreneurship by becoming “empowered,” “flexible,” and “creative” workers. Yet, as Power (2009) notes, under neoliberalism women work longer hours, with less security, for lower pay.

Conclusion

This chapter has examined *CamGirlz*’s representation of the life and work of webcam models. *CamGirlz* offers a positive and new representation of webcam models that moves beyond the binary of criminal or victim, and shows webcam models as empowered workers and creative entrepreneurs.

Through the personal portrait documentary form, *CamGirlz* represents webcam models escaping low-wage service jobs for higher paying ones, becoming mini media companies and exercising control over design and production, developing a sexual awareness and gaining confidence, subverting the traditional visual codes of pornography, and expressing what they perceive to be their authenticity. By representing webcam models who create spectacles of sexual performance art, *CamGirlz* registers how webcam modelling carries the potential for reconfiguring the traditional visual codes of pornography (fragmentation and submission) into a new form of pornography that places a degree of control in the hands of women, which the webcam models say empowers them with creativity, agency, and even pleasure.

That said, *CamGirlz* is at times entangled with “postfeminist sensibility” (p. 2) and depicts a largely white, middle-class, youthful group of workers in the U.S., eliding global inequities and the role racism plays in the success or failure of webcam models. *CamGirlz* also extols webcam modeling’s “flexibility” but sidesteps the downside of these precarious service jobs which are the new norm in the gig economy. Nevertheless, by showing a group of hardworking webcam models who are creative, agential, and inventive, *CamGirlz* calls for greater empathy for webcam models and a deeper understanding of their work, free of moralistic judgements.

CamGirlz may not mount a feminist revolution, but it does widen the feminist conversation about sex work from one focused solely on oppression to one supple enough to include the possibility that, for some women, sex work is work.

Chapter 4: Sex and Self-Commodification in the City Sex Work as Intimate Business in *The Girlfriend Experience*

“Whereas domestic-sphere, relational sexuality derived its meaning precisely from its ideological opposition to the marketplace, recreational sexuality bears no antagonism to the sphere of public commerce. It is available for sale and purchase as readily as any other form of commercially packaged leisure activity.” (Bernstein, 2007, p. 7)

In the last chapter, I examined how the documentary *CamGirlz* explored the ascendant webcam modelling industry and the work webcam models do when manufacturing intimacy and sexual feelings for payment through the Internet. *CamGirlz* represents the emotional labour and display work webcam models perform to simulate authenticity, what Hochschild (1983) calls “the unmanaged heart” (p. 190). Yet, while webcam models sell this authenticity from behind the physical and emotional barrier of a computer screen, what would happen if sex workers sold such intimacies in person? According to Bernstein (2007), this type of transactional yet intimate relationship is becoming more common. Describing the changes late capitalism has brought about in our social and intimate lives, Bernstein touches on the themes of self-commodification, work, intimacy, sex, and the normalization of transactional sexualities that drive this chapter and the questions it raises about popular culture’s portrayal of call girls. How has the shift from a Fordist to a post-Fordist economy – in which competition, consumerism, and individualism are king, and anything, even the simulation of love, can be bought and sold on the market – changed how call girls do their work? In what ways are call girls ideal neoliberal entrepreneurs? How has the increasingly transactional nature of intimate relations in neoliberal society brought about an emerging and more rounded, nuanced, and sympathetic image of the call girl in twenty-first-century popular culture?

In this chapter, I take up these questions by examining Steven Soderbergh’s *The Girlfriend Experience* (2009), a feature film that captures the zeitgeist of transactional neoliberal capitalism and which epitomizes the proliferation of a new sex worker type – the call girl-cum-girlfriend – in popular culture. Between 2006 and 2016, numerous films and television shows featured “girlfriend experience” call girls (GFEs), including the films *The Girlfriend Experience* (Cuban & Soderbergh, 2009), *A Perfect Ending* (Bader & Conn, 2012), and *The Escort* (Edwards & Slocombe, 2016), and the TV shows *House of*

Cards (Fincher & Foley, 2013 – 2017), *The Killing* (Sud, 2011-2014), *The Girlfriend Experience* (Fleishman & Kerrigan, 2016 -), *Law and Order* (Wolf, 1990-2010) and *CSI* (Zuiker, 2000-2015). While businesswomen sex workers are nothing new, what is new about these GFE call girl characters (besides their ubiquity) is their humanization and the services they sell: “authentic” feelings. Unlike the stereotype of the cold, clock-watching pro, these GFE call girls dine, kiss, cuddle, banter, listen, soothe, and converse in their roles as professional proxy girlfriends. At the same time, they conduct their businesses with zest, calculation, and ambition: they analyze the market, create themselves as brands, target clientele, and operate their enterprises with focus. This new wave of popular culture about GFE call girls draws on new literature about the commodification of feelings in late capitalism and reconfigures and humanizes the call girl into a twenty-first-century neoliberal entrepreneur who sells “authentic” feelings.

In this chapter, I argue that *The Girlfriend Experience* portrays call girl Chelsea as the paradigmatic self-commodifying emotional labourer and precarious service worker in twenty-first-century neoliberalism. By showing the work of being a high-class call girl – much of it tedious – from performing emotional labour to operating as an entrepreneur – the film de-glamourizes high end sex work and strips it of sentiment and sensationalism. *The Girlfriend Experience* is a unique film in this regard because it does not pass moral judgment on Chelsea’s work. In fact, it normalizes sex work by suggesting the congruencies between it and other forms of precarious and embodied service work under neoliberal capitalism. At the same time, the film depicts Chelsea’s often alienating work of self-commodification – such as aesthetic labour, conspicuous consumption, and self-promotion – to illuminate the emotional toll of her work.

In these nuanced ways, through Chelsea, *The Girlfriend Experience* offers a new representation of a sex worker who is neither the stereotype of the happy hooker, nor the bitter old Madame, but a rounded and humanized labourer doing legitimate service work that may come at an emotional price. By representing the benefits and challenges of Chelsea’s work, *The Girlfriend Experience* emblemizes Weitzer’s polymorphous paradigm and offers a new representation of the call girl as an emotional

entrepreneur in twenty-first-century post-Fordist capitalism.

To examine Chelsea's labour and product as a GFE call girl, I draw from the relevant literature on the commodification of emotion, aesthetic labour, and conspicuous consumption and offer a close reading of *The Girlfriend Experience*'s depiction of Chelsea as a neoliberal entrepreneur who produces and sells girlfriend experiences as a commodity on the market.

Contexts: History, Popular Culture, Theory

To fully appreciate the novelty of *The Girlfriend Experience*, it is useful to briefly look back at the history of popular culture representations of call girls. Before the twenty-first century, Hollywood tended to portray call girls within a binary of criminal or victim. Stereotypical call girls in twentieth-century films like *The Blue Angel* (1929), *Of Human Bondage* (1933), and *Butterfield 8* (1960) embodied female unruliness and frequently died by film's end, suggesting the price a woman pays for using her erotic capital to her own advantage (Campbell, 2006). Even more liberal films where the call girl survives made clear that a woman could not improve her financial position by selling sex. A good example of this comes by way of the iconic film *Baby Face* (1933), in which call girl Lil uses sex, wit, and charm to climb in New York high society. The censor board was so offended by the film's "amoral" ending – in which Lil is rich and happy – that it sent a letter to MGM encouraging them to make clear that Lil's sexual capitalism "left her in no better a position" than when the movie started (as cited in Petersen, 2013, n. pag.); MGM submitted, and the film ultimately ended conventionally with Lil's marriage. In any case, while exceptions existed, the moralistic Hollywood pattern through the 1950s was to criminalize or domesticate call girls and to show their "businesses" as ultimately amoral, unworkable, and antithetical to mainstream society.⁶⁸

⁶⁸ While Hollywood was slow to portray the capable call girl, records of her date back to the colonial period. During the Gold Rush, women owned upscale brothels in the Western United States (Rosen, 1983). Sometimes, women brothel owners became wealthy. Chicago's Everleigh Club, which opened in 1900, is an example of women's sexual entrepreneurship. Owned by the Everleigh sisters, whom Abbott (2007) describes as a "20th century amalgamation of Martha Stewart and Madonna," their stately house featured a ballroom with golden friezes, \$650 gold spittoons, and themed rooms where the club's "butterflies" could entertain customers (p. 17). In 1901, *The Chicago Tribune* described it as the "most richly furnished house of courtesans in the world" (Zulkey, 1979). Some call girl entrepreneurs even took a sober pride in their work. In her autobiography, *A House Is Not a Home* (1953), Polly Adler, a New York call girl-turned-Madame active from the 1920s until the 1940s, was sanguine about her work: "I had a job to do, and I could find satisfaction in doing it the very best way I knew how" (p. 26).

By the 1960s, films about call girls had dispensed with blatant moral baggage and as Gallego (2012) notes, did not extend “morals or ethical sanctions” (p. 70). *The Happy Hooker* (1974), based on Xaveria Hollander’s eponymous autobiography, depicted a likeable and rational call girl, but the film treated sex as an amusing hobby rather than a job and did not explore the business of being a sole proprietor sex worker. By the 1980s, films reflected the influence of moral conservatism and prohibitionist feminism and showed call girls suffering from mental illnesses, like *Money on the Side* (1982), in which a regretful call girl hangs herself, or *Nuts* (1987), in which Barbra Streisand stars as a psychologically damaged call girl who stands trial for the murder of her john. While these films importantly highlighted the emotional challenges of sex work and the exploitation that may occur within it, they lacked the nuance of exceptional and humanizing films like *Klute* (1972, Pakula) and *Working Girls* (1988, Borden), which showed the benefits and drawbacks of sex work and the workaday experience of call girls running businesses and engaging in self-commodification (Leyda, 2013). Films that did portray entrepreneurial call girls rarely presented the call girl’s point of view. Rather, the call girl was caricaturized and became, as film critic Thomson (2014) has aptly noted, the “bitter old woman sitting alone, counting her money” (n. pag.) Alas, the fare du jour was death, defeat, mental disturbance and, occasionally, glamourization.⁶⁹ What is new about *The Girlfriend Experience* is how it humanizes Chelsea and, at times, even makes her a symbol for larger changes occurring in neoliberal post-Fordist society.

Over the past three decades, the shift from a Fordist to a post-Fordist economy has transformed peoples’ social and work lives by normalizing precarity and shifting entire workforces into immaterial labour or service occupations (Harvey, 2007). Some scholars have argued that the changes brought on by the shift from a Fordist to a post-Fordist economy has made relationships increasingly commodified and transactional (Bernstein, 2007; Constable, 2009; Mears, 2014). Bernstein (2007) argues that disenchantment with traditional “companionable relationships” has ushered in a

⁶⁹ In *Beverly Hills Madame* (1988), for example, a Madame promises an aspiring call girl that “when we finish, you’ll be able to talk to a senator, a prince, a movie star, an ambassador and all of them will believe you have a degree from Radcliffe” (as cited in Parish, 1992, p. 45).

new kind of “recreational” relation that draws its meaning and value from “physical sensation” and “emotionally bounded exchange” (p. 7). Bernstein defines these new relationships as “bounded authenticity” (ibid.). These relations, which are based on the pretense of authenticity, are “available for sale as readily as any other form of commercially packaged leisure activity” (ibid). While sold as emotional encounters, a start and end time “bounds” these experiences and marks them as commercial. Bernstein’s conceptualization of “bounded authenticity” is useful for understanding *The Girlfriend Experience*’s portrayal of Chelsea’s work and what it may symbolize about the changing nature of intimate relations in the 21st century. Unlike the stereotype of the disinterested, brusque call girl, *The Girlfriend Experience* represents Chelsea as a masterful performer of “bounded authenticity.”

In *The Girlfriend Experience*, call girl Chelsea’s “bounded” product is the “girlfriend experience” or the GFE. As opposed to the “porn star experience,” where clients try out sexual acrobatics gleaned from porn films, a client buying a “girlfriend experience” seeks companionate affection, empathy, and warmth. The balance of a GFE call girl’s work is emotional, her role part cheerleader, admirer, confidante, friend, and lover (Lever & Dolnick, 2000; Hollander, 1974; Lucas, 2005). As Rogert Ebert (2009) notes, “we know what sexual surrogates do. A ‘girlfriend’ may be playing a human surrogate” (n. pag.). While clients buy attention and care, they also buy the illusion of the GFE call girl’s “authenticity.” Thus, the GFE call girl’s task is twofold: first, to provide a commercial sexual service, and second, to act as though her attraction to the client is sincere (Lever & Dolnick, 2000). Scholars have written about the performance skills a successful GFE call girl uses in transactions of “bounded authenticity,” from pretend affection, interest, adoration to feigned admiration and respect and the imbuing of voice, kisses, touches, and moves, her job is to gild her service in authenticity (Bryan, 1976; Lucas, 2005). Weitzer (2012) has called the GFE the buying of “a kind of relationship...rather than just sex” (p. 33).

What is novel about *The Girlfriend Experience* is how it depicts the work behind these courtesan-like performances in which call girls simulate relationships. To do her job well, Chelsea engages in extensive emotional labour to create experiences of “bounded authenticity” for her clients

and wide-ranging entrepreneurial work to market her business. In the next section, I offer a close reading of *The Girlfriend Experience* to show how it offers a complex and positive new image of the call girl in both of these ways.

The Girlfriend Experience: Performing Bounded Authenticity

When *The Girlfriend Experience* opens, it is late 2008 and the U.S. is sliding into financial ruin. The timing is poor for any business expansion, but Chelsea has plans to “take her business to the next level.” As a poised twenty-something GFE call girl with a designer wardrobe, espresso hair, and flirtatious feline eyes, Chelsea is very good at her job; so good, in fact, that she plans on making sex work her path to financial independence: “I didn’t want to depend on my parents’ money. That’s more than half the reason I started doing this job in the first place.” *The Girlfriend Experience* makes clear that Chelsea is not a victimized character. She lives in a chic Manhattan apartment and says she enjoys her relationships with her clients (“Lucky for me he’s attractive, so that helps, and I enjoy myself”). Chelsea is also financially pragmatic. As a young woman with an ambiguous educational background and hopes of one day owning a luxury clothing boutique, sex work offers an unparalleled opportunity to earn a six-figure income. As the global economy crashes and unemployment or precarious service jobs become the status-quo, Chelsea views sex work as the most lucrative and least exploitative form of service work she can do.

The Girlfriend Experience stresses how the work of a call girl is similar to the work of an actress. Chelsea specializes in emotional labour and the pretense of authenticity. In sessions lasting from one to twenty-four hours, Chelsea’s job is to create “bounded authenticity” through performances of feelings. Scholars have written about the performance skills a successful call girl uses in her transactions. From pretending affection, interest, and admiration, to imbuing her voice, kisses, touches, and moves with warmth and desire, Chelsea’s job is to gild her service with authenticity. To suggest something is authentic, according to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, is to make claims that it is “genuine” and comes from an “undisputed origin” (Authentic, n.d.). In the context of interpersonal

relations, as Guignon (2008) has noted, to say a person is authentic is to say that their actions faithfully reflect the thoughts, feelings, and beliefs that constitute their innermost values. Thus, the call girl's task is to provide a commercial sexual service yet to act as though her attraction to the client is authentic and sincere (Lever & Dolnick, 2000).

A cursory glance through memoirs by call girls reveals a focus on performance authenticity. The call girl and writer McNeill (2013) for instance, writes that the call girl is “[u]ltimately, an illusion; it no more matters how she really feels, or what she really likes, or whether she is really excited, that it matters that Penn and Teller aren't really making things vanish or appear or transmogrify into something else” (n. pag.).⁷⁰ Some call girls are conscious of emotionally and physically preparing for an evening of work by psyching herself up, a form of preliminary emotional labour:

From the moment she takes off her blue jeans to take a shower, put on her makeup, and get into her sexy mini skirt and halter top (if she's going to a client's place) or her lingerie (if he's coming to her place) – both costumes for her fantasy performance. Sex workers have to conjure up the 'feminine' demeanor of 'niceness' and 'sexiness' even when they are not in the mood (Lever & Dolnick, 2000, p. 99)

The opening scene of *The Girlfriend Experience* offers a meticulous study of Chelsea's “illusion” making and her production of bounded authenticity. The scene begins in a trendy Tribeca restaurant with low lights, exposed brick walls, and ambient chatter where Chelsea is on a date with her client, a handsome French banker. The camera alternates between wide frame shots and close-ups of Chelsea and her client absorbed in an intimate looking conversation. Chelsea is doing what Hochschild (1983) calls “deep acting,” the working up of real feelings for a situation that one feels little about. Chelsea summons even her body language to suggest her interest; she leans forward, as if hanging off her

⁷⁰ First person accounts by call girls likewise emphasize the performance aspects of the work. In Studs Terkel's oral history *Working*, call girl Roberta Victor explains that “men were...paying [me] to act out of fantasy” (1973, p. 65). In her memoir *The Happy Hooker*, Xaveria Hollander (1974) stresses that “a good lady of the night is an actress!” (p. 178). Call girl Holly Golightly, in *Breakfast at Tiffany's* (1961), winkingly confesses to being “the most real phony around!” (Jurow & Blake).

client's every word; plays with her hair nervously; arches an eyebrow coquettishly. Her client admits that he finds Manhattan movie theatres too crowded and they make him anxious. Chelsea smiles and agrees, as if to soothe his potential embarrassment at having made the disclosure. While their conversation lacks the quick repartee of an authentic and exciting first date, *The Girlfriend Experience* shows Chelsea labouring to compensate for this transactional hollowness with her body language and words to manufacture intimacy and even sexual frisson. Watching them exit the taxi at his hotel condominium, her arm entwined in his, they would seem like a couple entering the home they share.

The Girlfriend Experience shows Chelsea continuing to perform bounded authenticity at her client's posh hotel. While Chelsea is hired to transact a sexual service she behaves tentatively, as if she is on a date and is not obligated in any way to her partner. Chelsea's client puts on a cool jazz CD and pours them two glasses of red wine. They sit on the couch and Chelsea leans into him shyly, as if testing to see if her affections will be reciprocated. Their bodies draw closer. A shot of their twin wine glasses in the foreground, while in the background they kiss, is a stock romantic image. "It's good to see you," her client says. She passes him his glass of wine. They clink glasses. The camera offers another intimate close-up of their tender kissing.

The Girlfriend Experience lingers on this kiss to focus the difference between the Hollywood sex worker stereotype and Chelsea's GFE call girl. Whereas it is conventional in Hollywood films for sex workers not to kiss – we can think of how Julia Roberts' Vivian Ward says in *Pretty Woman* – "I don't kiss clients" – Chelsea kisses her client extravagantly. While not the most physically intimate act, Western culture has long framed kissing as the most emotionally consummate and romantic. As Marrar (2012) notes, from Rodin's sculpture "The Kiss" (1882) to Doisneau's photograph of the passionately kissing couple outside the Hôtel de Ville (1950), the kiss is a visual marker of longing, affection, attachment, and intimacy. As both a physically assertive gesture and an emotionally submissive act, Marrar writes, the kiss "offers to blend our identities for a moment. At the centre of this fully involving embrace, with its extraordinary agility and sensitivity, mouths, lips, tongues meet to enable both mutual exploration and mutual yielding" (p. 33). By showing this kiss at length, *The Girlfriend*

Experience solidifies Chelsea as a different kind of sex worker, one apart from the Hollywood sex worker stereotype.

The Girlfriend Experience continues to distinguish Chelsea's work through the depiction of the sex itself. Were the film about a one-dimensionally brisk call girl, some close-ups of racy lingerie and some heavy breathing would segue to one hour later, when the call girl brusquely leaves the building through a back door, heels in hand. *The Girlfriend Experience*, however, skips the sex, and goes straight to the intimate post-coital conversation Chelsea has with her client. Seated at the edge of the bed looking vulnerable, he confides, solicits her advice, and listens to her. As a GFE call girl, Chelsea snaps into the role of listener and soother. By showing Chelsea playing the role of confidante and trusted advisor, *The Girlfriend Experience* shows once again that she is a call girl who defies the stereotype. Like a fantasy girlfriend, Chelsea is endlessly patient and fascinated by everything her client says, but like a real girlfriend, she spends the night to simulate an authentic relationship. Chelsea's role-playing continues the next morning with lattes and *The New York Times* at breakfast with her client on a green rooftop overlooking Manhattan. In matching fluffy white bathrobes, she and her client discuss the stock market. By portraying the duration of this date, from evening until morning, *The Girlfriend Experience* shows the layered and nuanced work Chelsea does that requires her to shift between emotional registers and to read her clients' unspoken cues; it is arduous work akin to being responsible for directing a play in which there is no script, but whose romantic ending must be assured.

The ways in which the transactional nature of their relationship is hidden and euphemized is most evident, however, when Chelsea is paid. After their date, Chelsea comes down the stairs of the lavish hotel condominium to find her client on the phone. She waits for him to notice her. Finally, he mumbles "thank you" and hands her a white envelope containing her "gift." Calling her payment a "gift" – customary among call girls – speaks to how deeply both parties are invested in manufacturing the appearance of intimacy to conceal the transactional nature of their connection. On one hand, calling her payment a gift protects both client and call girl from legal action, but, more to the point, it semantically and euphemistically cleans the transaction of its mercantile quality. As Zelizer (2005)

notes, “to label is to make claims about the relationship between payer and payee” (p. 826, as cited in Constable, 2009, p. 50). Businesses pay workers; but friends and lovers give each other “gifts.”

This date is a microcosm of the emotional and companionate role Chelsea plays for her clients through her GFE performances. While these are transactions, Chelsea uses emotional labour to make them appear authentic. In sessions of varying length, in luxury condominiums and posh hotel rooms, Chelsea creates “bounded authenticity” for the lonely, the professionally stressed, and the commitment averse who want affection without the mutuality, risk, or responsibility of a real relationship. Chelsea’s clients are wealthy blue-chip men who store gold bars in vaults; in Chelsea they store their feelings. As one client admits, “I’m feeling so stressed out. I should probably see a shrink. But it’s more fun to see you.” *The Girlfriend Experience* emphasizes the emotional supporting role Chelsea plays for her clients. While they continue to wear their well-cut suits, the financial crash has humbled them and they convey their feelings of dread to Chelsea with the urgency of a confessor in a private booth. While the stereotypical Hollywood call girl is a trophy for her client and eye candy for the audience, the supporting role Chelsea often plays with her clients is meaningful. These dates underscore Sanders’s (2008) contention that men seek out call girls for “communication, sexual familiarity, mutual satisfaction and emotional intimacies found in ‘ordinary’ relationships” (p. 400, cited in Liddiard, 2014, p. 7). In fact, over the course of the film, Chelsea sees half a dozen clients, but has sex with only one; with the rest, she has lunch, dinner, or long conversations, shoring up what scholars have found about call girls: that their labour is emotional in the main (Bryan, 1966; Lucas, 2005; Stein, 1974). As Lever & Dolnick (2000) note, while street workers spend only minutes conversing with their customers, call girls spend more than three quarters of their time having conversations and listening to their clients. “More than anything,” they say, their clients “want companionship. They just want somebody to sit and talk to them and make them feel like they’re interesting and that they’re good people... they want sex but it’s kind of like icing on the cake” (as cited in Lucas, 2005, p. 531).

In many cases, the sex is non-existent and instead the topic is money. Most of Chelsea’s sessions revolve around one topic: the financial downturn. Clients vent, lament, and cry: “I’ve aged out

of the business” says one. “The economy is fucked and my business is fucked. I’m making like a tenth of what I made last year. It’s worse and worse,” says another before burying his face in his hands. Chelsea listens and labours to create “bounded authenticity” by playing the part of an ideal, non-judgmental, consoling girlfriend. Observing her through the six dates (with six different men) one comes to see a sameness in her manner and delivery method, a kind of standardized emotional performance of caring. Chelsea’s manner has the spare and stripped energy of a Rothko painting: she is a presence whose dominant characteristic is an absence. She asks questions (but never probes), offers compliments (but is never obsequious), is sympathetic (but never pitying), and provides affection (but is never smothering). When doing her emotional labour, she also uses what Hochschild (1983) refers to as “surface acting” – she wears a serene half-smile and perches on the edges of beds, in chairs, looking petite and non-threatening. Her performance of authenticity is convincing. One client tells her: “You’re such a big part of my life.” Several of Chelsea’s clients say they value her because they feel as though she “really knows them” and they feel she is “authentic.”

Of course, her clients do not know Chelsea, yet their illusion of this knowingness rests upon Chelsea’s performing her emotional labour so well. As Hochschild (1983) notes, “to show that the enjoyment takes effort is to do the job poorly” (p. 8). Pettinger (2011) found that on review websites, men leave the most favourable comments about call girls who seem to be enjoying themselves (they are particularly sanguine about call girls who appear to have orgasms). Conversely, they detest call girls who seem inauthentic, distracted, rushed, or disinterested. Chelsea’s job is to conceal the production of this authenticity.

The Entrepreneurship of a GFE Call Girl

While *The Girlfriend Experience* shows Chelsea’s emotional labour, it even more focuses on the behind-the-scenes work of running a business as a GFE call girl. Throughout the film, Chelsea does multiple business-related tasks: she creates marketing plans, schedules her appointments, conducts meetings, screens clients, rents commercial space, keeps records, fields telephone calls, arranges transportation, does accounting, and promotes her services. Much more like a manager than a stereotypical

Hollywood sex worker, Chelsea runs her business as any independent contractor would. She pays taxes and keeps excellent financial records. In one scene, her accountant praises her bookkeeping skills: “I’ve seen your books. You’re very good at what you do. You could be the best at what you do.” By showing the back end of Chelsea’s business, *The Girlfriend Experience* aligns her with other service-oriented entrepreneurs and normalizes her line of work.

Furthermore, *The Girlfriend Experience* illuminates Chelsea’s day-to-day business operations. Of paramount importance to Chelsea’s livelihood is her marketing. While Chelsea is doing well, she is nevertheless vulnerable to competition and, like other precarious service workers in the post-Fordist economy, is dogged by the knowledge of her job’s insecurity. When the film opens, Chelsea’s anxiety is heightened; she is losing clients to a new and younger GFE call girl who resembles her, but is several years younger, a fact that nettles Chelsea. Viewing complacency as failure, like many precarious workers Chelsea knows that her continued success depends upon her constant self-promotion, self-scrutiny, and self-improvement. She must hustle. Observing stiff competition, and feeling vulnerable, Chelsea redoubles her entrepreneurial efforts to advance her career and secure her financial future.

One of the many ways Chelsea does this is by having regular meetings with a journalist who is writing an article about GFE call girls like her. Periodically throughout the film, Chelsea meets with this journalist at beautiful restaurants for brief interviews, in which she answers questions about her work. *The Girlfriend Experience* suggests that Chelsea engages in these meetings because they are a form of networking and, as she sees them, a pathway to bigger opportunities. Viewing Chelsea’s work as unique, an amalgam of twenty-first-century entrepreneur and traditional courtesan, the journalist advises her to “capitalize now” and suggests that she write a book – a memoir – about her experiences selling sex and authentic feelings. “That’s really hot right now,” he tells her. He also gives her impromptu business advice – “What differentiates you from other women is what’s going to improve your business” – and they frequently discuss potential business strategies.

The Girlfriend Experience also focuses on Chelsea’s online marketing efforts to represent how the Internet really did revolutionize the way call girls conduct business. As director Soderbergh

emphasized: “The super high end GFEs work totally on their own...this is something the Internet really makes easy” (as cited in Harris, 2008, n. pag.). Beginning in the 1990s, call girls gained through the Internet opportunities to advertise their services without significant start-up capital. As Cunningham & Kendall (2011) have noted, a call girl “discovered that if she could put together a simple web page, she could reach a massive, upscale audience not only in her own city, but nationally and internationally, thereby increasing her business exponentially” (p. 273). Whereas call girls once had to choose between working for an agency (which took a large cut of their earnings) or advertising in newspapers (which was expensive and made them vulnerable to arrest), website technology was affordable, readily available, and afforded some measure of protection in how it allowed call girls to vet and communicate anonymously with clients. Call girls began developing websites to build their brands, establish niches, and attract new clients (Lucas, 2005).

The Girlfriend Experience represents this aspect of Chelsea’s business through her meeting with a web developer who specializes in marketing for call girls.⁷¹ While perhaps not the first Hollywood movie scene to show a sex worker promoting her services online, it is certainly the first to show a sex worker hiring a business consultant and meeting him in a tony restaurant, a significant indicator of the normalization of Chelsea’s work. Together, they conduct an inventory of her website. It is a process that lays bare the extent to which Chelsea – and the web developer – sees herself as a product. With narrowed eyes, the web developer scrutinizes Chelsea’s photographs. His flatly delivered verdict: mediocre. “I can make these a lot more high-class, like *Playboy*.” He encourages her to identify her target audience (upscale) and to “improve your logo” and “make the overall aesthetic of the website much more high class.” Chelsea’s main concern is search engine optimization (SEO); she wants her website to appear first in a Google search for “Manhattan GFE call girls.” The developer tells Chelsea she needs to be listed on the escort review websites: “Get yourself listed on directories and on review sites. The more links there are the better the SEO will be.” He recommends that Chelsea hire him on a

⁷¹ *The Girlfriend Experience*’s portrayal of a call girl’s strategies of self-promotion speak to a tradition that goes back thousands of years. In Ancient Greece, upper-class sex workers, called *auletrides* and *hetarae*, were erotic entrepreneurs and masterful self-promoters. *Auletrides* adorned the bottoms of their sandals with patterns of nails, so that as they walked, the soles imprinted into the dust messages for potential customers such as “follow me” (Evans, 1979, p. 37).

monthly retainer of \$1500. By showing Chelsea retaining this consultant – indeed, by showing that such a professional exists – *The Girlfriend Experience* illustrates how sex workers like Chelsea must compete in the digital age; to get noticed, they must craft strong online personas.

During this scene, the camera offers a number of close-ups of Chelsea's face. At the mention of "review websites" her face becomes noticeably strained. Her concern is understandable. Call girl review websites are the paradigmatic symbol of the commodification of sex workers. By the late 1990s, two major review websites had appeared, The Erotic Review.com and Punternet.com, spaces where male clients ranked and wrote of their experiences with call girls in the style of "restaurant reviews" (Radokovich, 2012, n. pag.). These websites allowed clients to feel more like empowered consumers, but for call girls like Chelsea, they represent a looming spectre of surveillance and the fact that their performance and appearance will be publicly critiqued is a source of stress (Davies & Evans, 2007).⁷² This knowledge, in turn, motivates Chelsea to redouble her efforts to improve herself and self-commodify into an ideal GFE call girl who will win 10/10 ratings and command higher fees.

The Girlfriend Experience further normalizes Chelsea's work by casting as Chelsea the globally famous porn star, Sasha Grey. Grey is arguably one of the wealthiest, most visible twenty-first-century sex workers. Part of the millennial mainstreaming of sex work that is increasingly public facing and business-oriented, Grey herself is a vibrant brand. While her top-rated films on Pornhub.com feature extreme sex acts, in interviews she cites Goddard and Nietzsche as influences. As Schaschek (2014) notes, "Grey likes to see her own career – as an artist rather than an anonymous sex worker" (p. 1). While in *The Girlfriend Experience*, the inciting incident is Chelsea's decision to "take her business to the next level." In real life, Grey is also a businesswoman. Like Chelsea, she operates a booming website, where she sells her videos and merchandise, and she frequently makes public appearances. In many ways, she is the sex worker Chelsea aspires to be. As Grey told *Rolling Stone*, making no secret of her entrepreneurial ambitions, "I am determined and ready to be a commodity that fulfills everyone's

⁷² As Doring (2009) notes, the encounter is evaluated according to an unspoken rubric: appearance (did she look like she did in the photos?); performance; personality; apartment; location; and even parking. Some feminist scholars have argued the review websites are objectifying. As Doring observes, "the online forums concerning prostitutes and the quality of their services impart a cynical view of women" (p. 1094)

fantasies” (Rolling Stone, 2009). Articulate, deliberate, and bold, Grey is a poster woman for the empowerment paradigm and an unapologetic, proud twenty-first-century sex worker for whom self-commodification, sex, and authenticity is business as usual. In Grey’s image, Chelsea also sees sex work as a vertical industry in which she can climb.

Conspicuous Consumption: Aesthetic Labour

In addition to building her online visibility, *The Girlfriend Experience* represents grooming as one of Chelsea’s primary business strategies. From online ads to websites, the marketing of call girls is based exclusively on visuals. As Doring (2009) notes, men will invariably comment on how the call girl looks and to what degree her photographs are accurate. *The Girlfriend Experience* suggests that engaging in aesthetic labour is crucial to Chelsea’s performances and economic survival. The work of modifying one’s appearance and body for financial reward can be understood as aesthetic labour (Mears, 2014). While Wolff (1991) calls this aesthetic labour “the third shift,” seeing it as a “taxing” impediment to women’s achievement in other fields (p. 24-27, as cited in Mears, 2016), for Chelsea, it is part and parcel of her entrepreneurial self-commodification.

Chelsea’s airbrushed beauty suggests investment in hair and skin care. She is fastidious with her appearance. In one scene, she awakens in a luxurious king-sized bed, scampers to the washroom, and peers at herself in the mirror. What seems like preening soon becomes scrutinizing; while she finds no flaws, she proceeds to comb her eyelashes one by one in a way that suggests her ceaseless attention to even the finest details. While Chelsea’s clients invest in stocks to ensure their prosperity, Chelsea uses aesthetic labour to maintain her appearance and safeguard her financial future. But, as *The Girlfriend Experience* interestingly shows, Chelsea’s aesthetic labour is less about making herself beautiful (although that matters) than it is about making her appear to be a part of the upper class. Call girls, even if they come from working class backgrounds, are associated with affluence. When the industry emerged in the 1950s, driven by loosening prostitution laws, disposable income, and an increase in global travel and telephone communications, call girls were immediately linked to businessmen (Ringdal, 2004). Called by one scholar “the aristocrats of prostitution” (Greenwald, 1959,

p. 19), their status within the sex industry rests upon the clients they are purported to attract and the comparatively high fees they command (Stein, 1974). A study by researchers at Rutgers University found call girls in Los Angeles earned an average of \$7,200 a month, while Manhattan call girls banked about \$6,000 (Kemsley & Hamilton, 2015, n. pag.). In Manhattan, call girls who work only three or four nights a month can earn \$100,000 a year (Venkatesh, 2009, p. 182).

In *The Elegant Prostitute: A Social and Psychoanalytic Study* (1959), the first sociological study on call girls, Greenwald concluded that Manhattan's most successful call girls exuded "the aura of a ballet dancer or an art student, in any case, a girl from a good background" (p. 19). Scholarship on call girls stresses the importance of achieving the "right look" – which is urbane and sophisticated – and consuming the correct products to that end.⁷³ Because Chelsea's target clientele are wealthy Wall Street bankers – men who can afford her rates – a great deal of her labour involves making sure she (and her brand) looks like she belongs to their social class. (The consequences of not conforming to the correct class position are shown in *Pretty Woman*, in which working class sex worker Vivian is rebuffed by snobby sales clerks in a designer clothing store who cattily judge her on the basis of her inexpensive-looking clothing). Whether redesigning her website to make it appear more polished or posting photographs that make her look more stylish and upscale, *The Girlfriend Experience* shows Chelsea doing aesthetic labour to associate herself and her brand with the upper class.

Sociologist Thorstein Veblen's concept of "consumption" is useful for illuminating Chelsea's sartorial strategies. A key principle of consumption is that the things we publicly consume and wear send messages to others about the social groups to which we belong – and do not belong. Veblen first used the term in 1899 to describe how people were beginning to buy, consume, and wear commodities beyond which "served human life or well-being on the whole" (as cited in Szeman & O'Brien, 2016, p.

⁷³ As one call girl in Terkel's *Working* (1974) explains: "Preparations are very elaborate. It has to do with...preserving the kind of front that gives you a respectable address" (p. 60). Women employed by Cachet, a venerable call girl agency in 1980s Manhattan, abided by a strict sartorial code: high-quality undergarments, garter belts, and sheer stockings – no fishnets or patterns – and frequently carried theatre programs or briefcases to their assignments (Ringdal, 2004). One of the more renowned Madames in Paris from the 1940s until the 1970s, Mme. Gaudet, instructed the call girls in her employ to carefully read the newspapers every day so they would be able to converse with worldly clients about current events (Charlton, 2015). Another of France's prominent Madames, Mme. Claude, groomed the call girls she employed to appear upper class and was purportedly "obsessed with fixing" them with "Saint Laurent clothes...Cartier watches...Winston jewels...Vuitton luggage...[and] plastic surgeons" (Stadiem, 2015, n. pag.).

203). Veblen concluded that people were becoming increasingly “conspicuous” in their consumption to signal their class distinction, through what he called “taste.” Building on Veblen, Bourdieu (1987) was also interested in how people use taste to signify status. For Bourdieu, what we think we freely consume – based on our tastes – is to a great degree imagined. Rather, Bourdieu argued that people in capitalist society do not wear certain clothes or furnish their homes in certain ways simply because they “like” particular items. Rather, we consume according to the class to which we belong or, frequently, *aspire* to belong, or to achieve class mobility (ibid). By conspicuously consuming luxury goods, Chelsea marks herself as a certain type of person (part of the upper class), which she hopes will enhance, in turn, her appeal to upscale clientele, and augur her own economic mobility.

As a GFE call girl Chelsea is compelled to “conspicuously consume” designer clothing in order to appear upper class. Doing so comprises the bulk of her aesthetic labour and a great deal of her time. From designer heels to black pencil skirts, skinny belts to silky blouses, statement necklaces to pearl studs, Chelsea conspicuously consumes clothing to the point where it verges on an occupational Stanislavski method in which shopping for and wearing these items becomes a method for becoming her character. As Hakim (2010) points out, by way of Beauvoir, if a woman’s beauty is a performance, then to a large degree, it can be self-created and “achieved through training” (p. 504). Chelsea “trains” by conspicuously consuming designer clothing. Throughout the film, in voice-over, Chelsea catalogues her sartorial decisions as a complex component of her work: “I met with Philip on October fifth and sixth. I wore a Michael Kors dress and shoes with La Perla lingerie underneath and diamond stud earrings. We met at 7:30 at the hotel for a drink downstairs. He liked my dress, but didn’t go into detail why.” Rather than record her own feelings, Chelsea records herself as an assemblage of conspicuous designer goods.⁷⁴ Subsequently, “On October 25, I met with Dennis...I put on a Kiki D corset, panties

⁷⁴ Chelsea’s voiceovers also stylistically echo a convention of the chick-lit diary-genre popularized in the early 2000s by films and TV shows like *Bridget Jones’s Diary* and *Sex in the City*. Writing about the British TV series *Secret Diary of a Call Girl*, which also uses the convention of the voice-over, Boyle (2010) observes how the show’s protagonist shares with Carrie Bradshaw on *Sex in the City* a proclivity for “[making] her “intimate memoirs” public” (p. 114). This confessional, first-person narrative, part lifestyle diary – about clothes, city living, and self-styling – and part sex work memoir, can be seen as a new kind of “chick lit” wherein the work of the middle-class call girl and the lifestyle of the middle-class empowered female consumer become entwined, and the former normalized. As Boyle notes, such narratives “[blur] boundaries between commercial and non-commercial sex” (ibid.) and speak to the normalization of transactional sex in late capitalism.

and gloves. The shoes were basic Zara...On October 28 I met Dan. I wore vintage black cashmere sweater, Ernest So jeans, and Poi de Victoire boots.” By listing her “Michael Kors dress” and “La Perla lingerie,” Chelsea embodies Bourdieu’s (1978) idea of distinction: “Objectively and subjectively aesthetic stances adopted in matters like cosmetics, clothing or home decorations are opportunities to assert one’s position in social space, as a rank to be upheld or a distance to be kept” (p. 57). In her ethnography of call girls, Bernstein (2007) has also found that “market segmentation among male consumers and degrees of manipulation of women’s bodies” are correlated (p. 1336). Wearing designer clothes, for Chelsea, is both a lifestyle and an entrepreneurial strategy of segmentation that brands her as an affluent call girl to the right clients. For GFE call girls, Bernstein (2007) notes, one’s carefully maintained image assures “a reliable pool of well-educated, professional men with predictable manners and predictable ways of talking” (p. 479). Through her “Kiki D corset,” her “Ernest So jeans,” and “Poi de Victoire boots,” Chelsea aims to appeal to her market segment, clients who will choose to engage her services based on her looks and their correlation to a certain class.

Chelsea’s consumption habits which conflate image with self are also emblematic of what some scholars have identified as late capitalism’s most defining feature: consumerism. McGuigan (2014) calls neoliberalism’s “ideal subject” one who experiences selfhood through consumerism (p. 234). Where once human relationships offered a reminder of one’s self, under neoliberal late capitalism, consumerism does that job and “redefines citizens as consumers, whose democratic choices are best exercised by buying and selling” (Monbiot, 2016). In a neoliberal state, Purdy (2015) further notes, “personality and social life...pivots on consumer style choice” (n. pag.). Chelsea’s self-definition through consumption also suggests her habituation in an increasingly surface world where looking good functions as feminist “empowerment” (Douglas, 2010; Gill, 2008) or a way of achieving personal and social change through cultivating one’s sexiness (Adriaens & Van Bauwel, 2014). Concurring, Rottenberg (2018) describes the ideal “neoliberal post feminist subject [as] an atomized individual who focuses on her own well-being and self care” (n. pag.)

Yet Chelsea's cataloguing of sartorial choices is not just glib post-feminist rhetoric or self-absorption or blithe appeals to "empowerment." Rather, her rehearsals of designer labels can be better understood as a hedge against personal financial collapse. Like actresses and models who must maintain a certain weight and shape, skin lustre and hair quality, and the correct wardrobe, Chelsea shares with these other display workers the stress and obligation of having to continually produce an ideal version of herself through conspicuous consumption. It is a matter of necessity. As Hakim (2010) notes, some jobs – including those in the sex industry like Chelsea's – rest upon one's strategic and constant deployment of "erotic capital." Chelsea's career hinges on maintaining a particular image, and appearing the wrong way could mean the difference between a client re-booking her or finding another GFE call girl to patronize.

As *The Girlfriend Experience* shows, Chelsea's precariousness as a GFE call girl obligates her to do constant aesthetic labour and conspicuous consumption, a practice she shares with other freelance service and display workers whose looks are paramount to their success. Mears (2014) describes how display workers manage "the uncertainty" of their jobs by engaging in

the ongoing production of the body and the self, necessitating that they are "always on" and unable to walk away from the product – which is their entire embodied self. The resulting self-vigilance translates into entrepreneurial labour, making them risk embracing rather than risk averse, and ultimately normalizing a workplace in which workers absorb market risks as individualizing projects of the self (p. 1336)

As a GFE call girl who is potentially available to work twenty-four hours a day, who is always ready to answer inquiries in hope of securing new clients, and whose smart phone is tethered to her website,

Chelsea is a precarious service worker who cannot ever truly switch off her GFE call girl persona.⁷⁵ As Power (2009) has noted, in neoliberal capitalism, where precarity is the norm, searching for new work is now a constant vocation even when one is employed, making self-promotion and advertising a twenty-four-hour-a-day gig. But whereas in the past one's resume represented one's professional corpus, Power argues that today one's entire body – personality, attitude, and subjectivity – is on display and being evaluated in a buyer's market. "Everything is on show, everything counts," Power writes, "from the boardroom to the strip-club, one must capitalize on one's assets at every moment, demonstrating that one is indeed a good worker, a motivated employee, and that nothing prevents your full immersion in the glorious world of work" (p. 24). Even in her free time, Chelsea works as an aesthetic labourer and conspicuous consumer to ensure that her market value stays high. In Chelsea's world, looking good is synonymous with working, and working rests upon looking good, creating a feedback loop that requires her endless performance of aesthetic labour and conspicuous consumption.

Call Girls and Gym Boys: The World of Transactional Service Work

As an emotional labourer and entrepreneur who does aesthetic labour and conspicuously consumes, Chelsea is an ideal neoliberal service worker. For this reason, she fits seamlessly into neoliberal society. In fact, as *The Girlfriend Experience* suggests, the self-commodification she practices as a GFE call girl is not dissimilar from the service work which other service workers practice every day. The film suggests the congruencies between sex work and other forms of embodied service work under

⁷⁵ *The Girlfriend Experience's* depiction of Chelsea's work requiring her to always be on (like other flex-labourers in late capitalism) echoes experiences of precarity narrated by call girls in memoirs published around the same time. In her study of memoirs by middle-class call girls, including *Belle de Jour: The Intimate Adventures of a London Call Girl* and *Diary of a Manhattan Call Girl*, Attwood (2010) notes that while these first-person narratives often unfold in the form of a lifestyle diary – about clothes, city living, and self-styling – they are simultaneously about the transformed neoliberal economy in which women flex workers are interpolated as flexible, adaptable, and resourceful entrepreneurs. These portrayals "register a series of shifts in which contemporary life is perceived as increasingly precarious" (p. III) and where workers are expected to toggle between brief contractual gigs, making the notion of "permanence in work or relationships...increasingly implausible" (ibid.).

neoliberalism by drawing a parallel between Chelsea's job and that of her boyfriend, Chris, a personal trainer to wealthy Manhattan bankers. Like Chelsea, Chris does emotional labour for wealthy men. While Chelsea spends her work life talking (and sometimes having sex) with clients in hotel rooms, Chris spends his days training out-of-shape financiers in private rooms in fitness clubs. While their work is not identical, both of their jobs involve physical proximity, sweat, emotion, exertion, and peoples' bodies. Both help clients discover their potential for sensuality and strength while performing the parts of listener and cheerleader. Although he earns much less than Chelsea, Chris, like his girlfriend, is in the business of using his personality and emotions to maintain his clients.

The Girlfriend Experience stresses this parallel by intercutting scenes of Chelsea and Chris at their respective workplaces, where they are both emotional labourers paid to smile and sound enthusiastic. In one scene, Chelsea is on a date with a client; across the city, Chris trains a banker client in the gym. While Chelsea clinks glasses with her client and says how "she enjoys talking to him," Chelsea's boyfriend encourages his client who sweats away on a Nautilus machine: "Way to go! You're doing great!" he enthuses. As practitioners of bounded authenticity, Chelsea's performances are bounded by the revolving doors of any number of posh hotels; her boyfriend's performances by the doors of the gym. Both good-looking and charismatic people who invest considerable effort and time into their appearances through aesthetic labour, and service workers who practice emotional labour, Chelsea and Chris are walking advertisements for the embodied services they sell.

Yet, neither must appear to be opportunistically selling their services, which would undermine their pretense of authenticity. Both use indirect selling strategies, which require them to perform rhetorical acrobatics and leave them unsure of whether their sales pitches registered. Chris, for example, tries to subtly convince one of his clients to buy a package of training sessions. He says, "I don't think our relationship is ending soon, so I suggest you buy a package...you'll be saving \$20 per session, so that's like \$500." In an even fainter sales pitch, the morning after a date, Chelsea lingers in the living room of her client's posh rental condominium while he talks on his phone. Chelsea wants him to book another session; she looks anxious. Her client, who has reverted to business mode, hands

her the “gift” envelope and returns to his phone call. Chelsea takes these “sales” rejections in stride, but notices them. “It was weird,” she says to her personal driver as they glide through early morning Manhattan streets, “He didn’t even book another appointment.” By showing Chelsea and her boyfriend selling emotion and bodily services – through indirect sales pitches, which are often rejected – *The Girlfriend Experience* suggests that Chelsea’s labour of bounded authenticity is confined neither to the sex industry, nor to women.

Indeed, by showing a world in which Chelsea and her associates are always making deals, vying to sell or buy, even during “personal” moments, *The Girlfriend Experience* depicts the transactional nature of late capitalist society. Even in the most personal moments, money and transactions are a spectre. Immediately after sex, one client tells Chelsea about a friend who keeps borrowing money. Scenes of Chelsea selling the GFE are intercut with scenes of Chris trying to launch his own business, a line of men’s sportswear. As service workers, both Chris and Chelsea are constantly recalibrating their market worth to ensure they present in their most appealing light. When Chris is not doing emotional labour to train clients, he is doing aesthetic labour when working out. Likewise, when Chelsea is not doing emotional labour, she is either grooming or shopping. By showing Chelsea’s ceaseless engagement in self-commodification, whether through manufacturing feelings, consuming things, or making herself consumable, *The Girlfriend Experience* suggests that Chelsea’s work as a GFE call girl is not unique or exceptional, but the rule and the new norm. Whether swiping yes or no on Tinder, posting pictures on “AmIUgly” subreddits, or ceaseless selfies on Facebook or Instagram, 21st century culture is increasingly about people asking strangers to evaluate and validate them and preparing one’s self for the evaluation. When Chelsea strides through elegant hotels, conducts meetings in airy Manhattan cafés, buys designer clothes, or attends art gallery openings, *The Girlfriend Experience* underscores her alignment with and enmeshment within society that already pivots upon the central values of her work: transactional intimacy and self-commodification. Chelsea operates within, rather than outside, society; as a GFE call girl, Chelsea is not a pariah, but simply an entrepreneurial service worker under neoliberal capitalism.

The Girlfriend Experience affirms Chelsea's dignity as a sex worker, but implicitly rues how this depersonalized state of affairs has come to pass as the norm. It suggests personal and emotional consequences for lives lived without hope for authentic intimacy, in ceaseless self-commodification. While Chelsea's boyfriend claims to be unaffected by her job, his words ring hollow, and they are a disconnected couple. In one scene, Chelsea wakes up in a hotel room with a client; the scene is intercut with shots of Chris, across the city, jogging on the waterfront. By showing the very different ways this purportedly connected couple begin their days, *The Girlfriend Experience* suggests the void of their intimacy despite their status as girlfriend and boyfriend. When they are in it, their chic apartment seems to bound their authenticity but just like the intimacy Chelsea bounds within posh hotel rooms, outside of these spaces of bounding, these transactional relationships dissolve.

The self-commodification endemic to Chelsea's world also places her in contact with sex industry gatekeepers who treat her body like an object to be transacted. Later in the film, on the web developer's recommendation, Chelsea meets with another expert about increasing the number of reviews about her on a sex worker review website. The "expert," a self-styled "erotic connoisseur," is an opportunistic pervert who preys on ambitious women like Chelsea by writing fake reviews on his popular website in exchange for sexual favours. Fashioning himself as a Svengali of the sex industry web 2.0, he flatly asks her for sex: "A review copy, if you will," he says smugly. He implies that if she does not comply, he will write negative reviews and damage her reputation. Good reviews on such sites are mandatory for aspirants like Chelsea. Without them, the Svengali suggests, one is a nobody; with them, one can climb. He slickly brags about his star-making powers: "Cara is 20 years old. Fell off the turnip truck. When I put up the reviews, she was so in demand. You think you know what upscale is, but I'm offering you upscale demand." He tells her he can take her to Dubai, where she can make tens of thousands of dollars. "Everyone thinks Russian hookers are the best, but I'm trying to convince them to buy American," he says, referring to Chelsea as if she is a manufactured object, like a car.

It is during this transaction that Chelsea expresses, for the first time, misgivings about her life lived as a series of self-commodifying transactions. She tells the "erotic connoisseur" that she does not

like reading reviews of herself; she finds it alienating. In unsettling scenes like this, Chelsea's comment that she needs to wear "thick armour" in her business is an understatement. The insertion of this seedy element is a reminder that even in a transactional world, power is not always balanced between the two parties making the transaction; in this case, the transaction becomes a bid for extortion. Although successful, Chelsea still faces seediness from men who control capital and regard women's bodies as commodities that are bought and sold.

The Costs of Self-Commodification

One effect of Chelsea's bid to become Manhattan's top GFE call girl, *The Girlfriend Experience* suggests, is a life experienced in fragmentary ways, as little bits of performance that do not cohere as a self that feels authentic. Sequenced non-chronologically, and partially improvised, with dialogue that trails off into inconclusiveness, the film's form suggests Chelsea's fragmented experience. This fragmentation is a consequence of doing highly demanding emotional labour. In *The Managed Heart* (1983), Hochschild writes: "Beneath the difference between physical and emotional labour there lies the similarity. In the possible cost of doing the work: the worker can become estranged or alienated from an aspect of self – either the body or the margins of soul – that is used to do the work" (p. 7).

The Girlfriend Experience reveals this sense of estrangement and alienation through absence rather than presence. Gradually, it becomes clear that Chelsea has no friends; her relationship to her family is non-existent; her boyfriend is more prop than life partner. Noticeably, Chelsea is never seen with the same client twice; this, coupled with the film's fragmentary style, precludes any relationship development, which is exactly Soderbergh's point. Chelsea's world is one in which self-commodification, and rampant consumption that disguises an endemic lack of feeling, trump relationships and any form of collectivity. Yet, the film does not root this condition in Chelsea's work as a GFE call girl; rather, it suggests that late capitalism's exigencies to commodify everything, including intimacy, is the problem. Indeed, when not with a client, *The Girlfriend Experience* suggests Chelsea is suffering the ennui of living in a commodified society where authentic intimacy is as elusive

as a unicorn. Sweeping shots of her walking on empty Madison Avenue at dusk take on a lonely cast and offer a vision of the downside of Chelsea's privilege as a gilded blue-chip courtesan. She talks about her "true self" as though it is a genie locked in a bottle: "At the end of the day, the clients might say they want to know the real you, but they don't. If they wanted you to be yourself, they wouldn't be paying you...you really have to adapt and be something they want."

The Girlfriend Experience humanizes and makes complex Chelsea's situation of doing work that is staggeringly rewarding from a financial perspective, but emotionally exhausting. After seeing one regular client, for example, Chelsea tells her personal driver that he "didn't even kiss me goodbye. It was very strange. It was a very awkward departure. I mean, he's never done that before," suggesting an expectation on her part, however latent, that their transaction be something more than it is. Chelsea admits that her business is built on maintaining a persona that has nothing to do with her true feelings. Yet Chelsea does not seem any more or less alienated than her clients, who spend their days in front of computer screens and then pay her thousands of dollars to listen to them talk about their alienation. *The Girlfriend Experience* suggests, rather, that Chelsea's ennui is rooted less in sex work than in the larger meaninglessness that comes from living in a society in which authentic connections are lacking, and a dependency on commodified intimacies leaves one spinning in solipsistic loops.

While prohibitionist feminists suggest that when intimacy and sex are commodified, the sex worker suffers psychological damage due a woman's sense of self and sexuality being so aligned. But this is not *The Girlfriend Experience's* point at all. While the film suggests a cost to performing "bounded authenticity," Chelsea's ennui more expresses what Campbell (2006) calls "the lack of human fulfillment in a society ruled by commercial enterprises" (p. 213). But *The Girlfriend Experience* offers something new and particular about Chelsea's condition that is different from twentieth-century depictions of sex workers who understood (and often fought against) their outsider status. In the 2009 version of the sex worker story, Chelsea is not an outsider but just another precarious service provider hustling under neoliberal capitalism.

In a final incident of the film, Chelsea breaks the cardinal rule of her enterprise: she develops romantic feelings for a client and begins seeing him outside of business hours for free. His appeal? He is the first client who asks her questions about herself. He listens to her. He does emotional labour for *her*. Excited by what seems like a chance to experience an authentically intimate connection that is not commodified, and invigorated by the joy that comes with connecting intimately to a new person, she ends her relationship with her boyfriend. For the first time in her adult life – or at least during her tenure as a GFE call girl – Chelsea feels seen and cherished. Chelsea leaves the city for the Hudson Valley by train for a rendezvous with her lover. As she sits on the train, the camera offers close-ups of her relaxed face. The sartorial voice-overs, tellingly, end, as her workaday screen of business transactions, climbing and competition, fall away. She plays with her hair as she waits for her lover and anticipates their romantic weekend of authenticity and intimacy that she will not have to contrive.

But the finale of *The Girlfriend Experience* suggests that there is no escape from the commodification of intimacy – even in the absence of a financial exchange. Chelsea’s lover phones her: “I’ve been thinking about you non-stop,” he begins, before telling her that he is not coming. A consummate consumer of the transactional intimate experience, Chelsea’s lover is incapable of meeting her again in person, much less her emotional needs. Bauman (2009) might describe his attitude as prototypically twenty-first-century in his preference for romantic encounters that are “securely enclosed in the frame of an episode, as it will engrave no deep grooves of the constantly re-groomed face being thus insured against limiting the freedom of further experimentation” (as cited in Bernstein, 2007, p. 7). The camera captures Chelsea, alone, clutching her phone, as tears trail down her face. A voice-over begins. It is the voice of the repugnant “erotic connoisseur” reading the review he has posted on his website about Chelsea. The savage and objectifying tone makes clear his review is retaliation for her refusal of his sexual advances:

With her smoky eyes, dark straight hair, and perky little body, Chelsea would appear to have the goods to satisfy the guy or girl next-door. Alas, Chelsea seems bent on marketing herself as

a sophisticated escort. With her flat affect, lack of culture, and her inability to engage, Chelsea couldn't even dazzle Forest fucking Gump.

This finale, *The Girlfriend Experience* suggests, is a disappointing one for Chelsea. In a twist of irony, a detestable man turns Chelsea into an object at the very moment she hoped to encounter intimacy by connecting to a man she cared about. In a context where call girls have no labour unions to protect them from sleazy opportunists, *The Girlfriend Experience* suggests that Chelsea's work might advantage male buyers of sex more than sex workers themselves. In any case, Chelsea seems to regret relinquishing her professional detachment and leaving the safety of a life in bounded authenticity for the raw disappointment of other people's deficiencies. She feels foolish for mistaking her client's sexual fascination for wanting to know her "true" self. *The Girlfriend Experience* shares the review through voice-over to build empathy for Chelsea. While Chelsea's lover sees her as a transaction and the "erotic connoisseur" depicts her like an object, *The Girlfriend Experience* portrays her as a multi-faceted person and asks the audience to do the same. While her situation is uniquely that of a disappointed call girl in the twenty-first century, *The Girlfriend Experience* renders it one that is deeply human and universal. Devastated, Chelsea returns to the role she understands best: that of a GFE call girl. The clear boundaries of the GFE are artificial, but they help mitigate pain.

In the last scene, Chelsea visits a client, a jeweler, at his Manhattan diamond store. In his cluttered back office, Chelsea strips to her underwear and the two embrace. The scene, which is shot in real time, is one of contradictions: he is bear-like, she is bony; he is clothed, she is nearly naked; their embrace is loving, yet they are strangers; he is at work, yet she is the one who is working. A menorah sits conspicuously behind them on a windowsill, suggesting tradition, family, and convention, in contrast to their connection, which is brief, commercial, and taboo. He reaches an orgasm and begins to cry. Shot in a warm yellowy light, the camera focuses on their entwined bodies as they continue to embrace. That neither disengages after the "goal" of the session is achieved suggests more than a cut-and-dry connection – in fact, their embrace looks more heartfelt than any other in the film. Yet,

notably, a wall clock ticks above them, counting down the minutes of the appointment, reminding the viewer with a subtle wink that this authentic-looking connection was bought in hourly increments and perhaps even paid for by credit card.

In a film that places conspicuous consumption and authenticity in tension, it is fitting that *The Girlfriend Experience* ends with a tenuous embrace in a diamond store. Authentic intimacy, like a diamond, forms through an investment of time, energy, heat, and pressure. Manufactured intimacies, like “the girlfriend experience” are like gems grown in a lab. Time is accelerated, energy minimized, and risk eliminated altogether. The product is promised in a certain shape, with impressive lustre, and at a particular price, even before it materializes. As a consequence of being manufactured, it is guaranteed to look perfect, yet it is not real. In *The Girlfriend Experience*, Chelsea is a businesswoman who understands her product well. She excels at manufacturing and selling it. By showing her work in detail and her personal strengths and vulnerabilities, *The Girlfriend Experience* offers a unique and sensitive portrait that contains very few of the stock-in-trade sex worker stereotypes.

But the film leaves many questions unanswered. What are Chelsea’s plans beyond being a GFE call girl? How will she deal with aging in her business? How does she launder her money? How long can she practice as a call girl before she gets arrested? What would she do if she were jailed? Noticeably, *The Girlfriend Experience* does not show or even suggest that Chelsea is in solidarity with other call girls. Nor does it ever allude to the criminalization of Chelsea’s work. Chelsea has seeming legal impunity, faces no stigmatization, and operates as any entrepreneur would. Instead, the film focuses on Chelsea’s success and pleasure in being desirable. There is no sign of sex worker activism or of collective action to dismantle current prostitution laws. On the contrary, *The Girlfriend Experience* suggests that to be successful like Chelsea, it is safest to remain atomized and empowered by marketplace logics and manufactured intimacies. No other options exist in *The Girlfriend Experience*. The film begins and ends with neoliberal capitalism. While this portrayal humanizes sex workers and combats whore stigma, it veers from political knowledge of how the criminalization of sex work

strengthens sex worker stigmatization. This utopian vision supports neoliberal capitalism, but belies the reality of GFE call girls like Chelsea, who, off screen, continue to operate in the shadows.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I have argued that *The Girlfriend Experience* offers a new image of the GFE call girl as twenty-first century entrepreneur and emotional labourer, a seller of commodified intimacies.

Through Chelsea, *The Girlfriend Experience* presents a labour and polymorphous paradigm view of the sex industry by showing both the advantages and disadvantages of her work. Chelsea is a successful and empowered businessperson who chooses her job, benefits from it, carves out a successful niche, advances her personal interests, and finds a degree of personal satisfaction. She is humanized as a smart, financially savvy, and sensitive woman. Compared to the twentieth-century stereotyped call girl who was victimized or criminalized, mentally unstable, or who was never shown working, *The Girlfriend Experience* dignifies Chelsea's labour, skills, and choice. In doing so, *The Girlfriend Experience* humanizes call girls, espouses neoliberal tenets (rather than conservative family values), challenges the stereotype of the exploited, victimized sex worker, and affirms the GFE call girl as both an ideal sex worker and an ideal type of entrepreneur of free market capitalism.

But the film also suggests that her work requires Chelsea to engage in extreme self-commodification that comes at an emotional price. Such self-commodification, the film suggests, is not specific to call girls, but part of the new world of work in neoliberal society. In *The Girlfriend Experience*, Chelsea is a worker who understands this model and excels at it. She works hard and operates as an entrepreneur in a world where self-commodification and precarity are increasingly normalized. In *The Girlfriend Experience*, call girls are not activists, disgruntled women, or marginalized outsiders, but beautiful metaphors for the alienation of late capitalism, insiders, rather than outsiders, of society. As such, GFE call girls, according to the logics of Chelsea's world, are acceptable, as long as they conform to the status quo.

Chapter 5: Sexual Healers

The Sex Surrogate as Care Worker in *The Sessions* and *She's Lost Control*

“People want help with their sexuality...especially if people have suffered trauma or pain. But it is such a shameful thing to talk about in North America, still. And prostitution is not considered OK. It's obviously illegal. As surrogates we technically live in a legal no man's land.” (Vera, sex surrogate)

In my previous chapters, I have shown how from 2006 to 2016, a period in which transactional intimate labour became increasingly common, popular culture began to offer new, more complex, and humanizing representations of erotic dancers, massage parlour workers, webcam models, and call girls. These new images portray sex workers as paradigmatic entrepreneurs in a growing services industry, confront virgin/whore stereotypes, and represent sex workers outside of a victim frame to elucidate their motivation to do and experiences of sex work. While in the previous chapters, I focused on how popular culture has emphasized the erotic capital, self-commodification, emotional labour, and aesthetic labour and display work sex workers do, in this chapter, my last, I examine two films that portray sex workers as care workers, professionals who, more than titillate or tease, touch and heal. These portrayals offer a positive new image of sex workers and, like others in this dissertation, emphasize sex workers' agency to choose their work and dignify their skills, but more than all others, these films highlight the positive contributions sex workers make to their clients' lives.

Sex surrogates are sexual guides, troubleshooters, and healers. Working one-on-one with clients whose medical or psychological issues have negatively impacted their sexual lives, with the support of a referring therapist, sex surrogates teach, coax, caress, kiss, whisper, encourage, instruct, and care to provide emotionally gratifying – and life affirming – experiences to people who have faced challenges finding what De Boer (2015) calls “sexual inclusion” (p. 323). In therapeutic relationships lasting several months, sex surrogates use structured exercises, hands-on practice, and conversation to teach clients to become more at ease in their bodies, awaken to their sexual selves, to give and receive sexual pleasure, and build emotional intimacy toward the goal of pursuing fulfilling relationships outside of a commercial exchange (Guttmacher, 1970; Fisher, 2012; Jacobs et. al., 1975; James, 2011; Ridley, 2012). The American sexologist inventors of sex surrogacy, Masters and Johnson, found sex

surrogacy to have an 85% success rate (Jacobs et. al., 1975). Yet, by the 1980s, sex surrogacy's murky legal status, rising moral conservatism, and the AIDS crisis had all but shuttered it (Binik & Meana, 2009). Prohibitionist feminists were critical of it, too. Jeffreys (2008), for example, called sex surrogacy a "smoke screen" for "men with disabilities to abuse women" (as cited in DeBoer, 2015, p. 70).

Recently, however, popular culture has begun to produce new images of sex surrogates as skilled care workers, healing professionals who teach as much as they touch, and enrich people's lives by reducing sexual shame, teaching how to overcome inhibitions and learn to connect to others with intimacy. Between 2006 and 2016, new images of sex surrogates appeared in the films *Shortbus* (Gertler & Mitchell, 2006), *The Sessions* (Blake & Lewin, 2012), and *She's Lost Control* (Moverman & Marquardt, 2014), the television series *Grey's Anatomy* (Rhimes, 2005 -) and *Masters of Sex* (Ashford & Apted, 2013-2016), and the television documentary *This is Life with Lisa Ling* (Burke & Leiter, 2014-).

In this chapter, I argue that two recent films, *The Sessions* and *She's Lost Control*, offer a positive new portrayal of the sex surrogate as a healing care professional. Far from the stereotype of the victim or criminal sex worker, the sex surrogates in *The Sessions* and *She's Lost Control* are highly skilled care and body workers who provide their services with therapeutic professionalism, enrich the lives of people living with disabilities and dysfunctions, take pride in their work and see it as a vocation. Furthermore, *The Sessions* and *She's Lost Control* portray the work of sex surrogacy as a deeply humane therapeutic practice and sex surrogates as serious practitioners who approach their work with precision: they consult with referring therapists, create treatment plans, follow procedures, practice emotion management techniques, take clinical notes, invoke boundaries, and use clinical skills to improve the lives of the sexually wounded. At the same time, both *The Sessions* and *She's Lost Control* highlight the challenges of doing emotional labour and the risks of becoming personally attached to one's clients. Furthermore, *She's Lost Control* makes a compelling case for why sex surrogacy – and all forms of sex work – should be decriminalized to ensure the safety of all women who choose to sell sex consensually. Together, *The Sessions* and *She's Lost Control* repudiates the stereotyped image of the victim or criminal sex worker as a menace to society and offers a new image of the sex surrogate as a

care worker. Conceptualizing sex work as a form of care work and body work helps de-stigmatize sex workers by shifting attention from the “moral status” of sex work to the actual labour they perform, which is deeply humanizing.

I begin this chapter by contextualizing sex surrogacy theoretically (as a form of care work and body work), and by discussing the emotional labour it demands and its relational rewards. I then move on to examine how *The Sessions* and *She’s Lost Control* represent sex surrogates as skilled care and body workers who enrich their clients’ lives and personally benefit from their work, before exploring the latter film’s powerful case for why sex surrogacy – and consensual sex work in all forms – should be decriminalized.

Contexts: History, Popular Culture, Theory

The concept and practice of sex surrogacy was developed by the American gynecologist William H. Masters and the psychologist Virginia Johnson during their experiments into treatment methods for “human sexual dysfunction” at the University of Washington in the 1950s and was later introduced to the world in their 1970 book, *Human Sexual Inadequacy* (Davies & Maier, 2013). Masters and Johnson argued that men with sexual dysfunctions stood the greatest chance of recovery not by undertaking theoretical exercises or talking with therapists, but by working directly *in coitus* with trained sex professionals. Masters noted: “I have emphasized that a cooperative sexual partner is indispensable” (1970, p. 148). He eventually hired women to work for him as “sex surrogates.”

Today, sex surrogacy follows a similar model. Clients connect to sex surrogates through referring therapists. In therapeutic relationships lasting several months, sex surrogates guide clients through exercises, practice, and conversations that teach clients how to become more at ease in their bodies, awake to their sexual selves, give and receive sexual pleasure, and build emotional intimacy with a partner (Rosenbaum et. al., 2014). The goal is to equip clients with the confidence to pursue relationships in the future, outside of a commercial exchange (Binik & Meana, 2009; Ridley, 2012). Both client and sex surrogate continue to meet regularly with the referring therapist for feedback. Therefore, surrogates can be understood as sex workers who are “part of a three-way therapeutic

team” that includes the therapist, the sex surrogate, and the client or patient (Sanders, 2007, p. 440).

Yet, under U.S. law, sex surrogacy is identical to and is prostitution.

Sex surrogacy has historically flown a banner of high social status and legitimacy compared with other forms of sex work. As Binik & Meana (2009) note, sex surrogacy has “experienced no serious criticism or competition from other professionals and little societal opposition, the exception being of some religious groups” (p. 1017). Yet, some scholars have critiqued Masters and Johnson’s “invention” of sex surrogacy. Explaining that “the casual pick-up will not do,” Masters had hired women to act as sex surrogates while noting in his book that “perhaps there will be some day a ‘pool’ of accredited women who will sell their services to men with sexual problems (p. 148, emphasis mine). Szasz (1980) rightly points out that sex workers have long worked with men with disabilities. For Szasz, the invention of the category of “sex surrogacy” speciously claims “superiority [over] prostitutes – in exactly the same way that the new obstetricians claimed superiority over the old midwives a century ago – that is, by asserting that they are professionals whose practice is based on science and a dedication to protect the public – whereas their competitors are quacks” (p. 50). A further issue is that the category of sex surrogates for people with disabilities implies that sex workers need special training to work with disabled people, a presumption that, as Davis notes, “can be seen as reinforcing the medical model of disability” (as cited in Kim & Sherry, 2006, p. 1440). Rubin’s (1984) concept of “charmed circle” intimacies provides us with a hint as to why sex surrogacy and sex work are often spoken of as separate entities altogether. Sex surrogacy “borrows respectability” from the medical establishment (ibid.).⁷⁶ Yet, as I have shown in this dissertation, sex workers of all stripes do emotional labour, body work, and care work. The distinction made between sex surrogates and sex workers serves as a good example of how heavily discourse shapes how we evaluate the “respectability” of

⁷⁶ If sex workers were already familiar to Masters, why did he rename the sex workers he hired “surrogates”? Masters, invoking the Hippocratic oath, explained that by not re-naming sex workers surrogates he would run the risk of damaging “the self-image of clients who may attain the social stigma of being a person who paid for the services of a prostitute” (as cited in Rosenbaum et. al, 2014, p. 325). Although Masters and Johnson did not charge fees to their clients during the first five years of surrogacy beta testing, later, in the 1970s, their clinics offered private services such as a two-week course at a price of \$10,000, the equivalent of \$46,000 in 2017 dollars (Reese, 2014). The house of sex surrogacy that Masters and Johnson built grew rapidly in the 1970s, prompting one writer in *New York Magazine* to observe that “sex therapy is rapidly expanding, grabbing up territory, crossing tracks, even sending up skyscrapers” (Wolfe, 1973, p. 120). *Human Sexual Inadequacy*, supported by medical science, had lent sex surrogacy respectability.

commercial sex acts depending less on the acts themselves than on the status of the person who authorizes them and as well as the setting in which they occur. The comparatively positive regard in which sex surrogates are held (and their low profile) has made popular culture portrayals of them overwhelmingly favourable.

Before the twenty-first century, there were few popular culture portrayals of sex surrogates. The first feature film with a sex surrogate protagonist, *My Therapist* (1984), offered a sympathetic portrayal of a sex surrogate whose no-nonsense demeanour made clear that sex surrogates are professionals. “Here with me in sex surrogate therapy,” Kelly tells one recalcitrant client, “we learn certain exercises to help a man overcome his sexual dysfunction. Now, the first exercise begins with full frontal nudity. Do we begin the exercise or do you go home?” (Shaftel & Legon, 1984). The film’s alternative title, *Love Ya Florence Nightingale*, an allusion to the British nurse, underscored the sex surrogate’s contributions to the greater good, yet the film’s relentlessly sexualized tone and gratuitous nudity made its star, pornographic actress Marilyn Chambers, into a lusty object, rather than a professional subject, and the film did not delve deeply into the skills sex surrogates possess as care and body workers. *Breathing Lessons: The Life of Mark O’Brien* (1997, Yu), a short Academy Award-winning documentary – similarly focuses on O’Brien yet deals only passingly with sex surrogate Cohen Greene. Neither *My Therapist* nor *Breathing Lessons* grappled with the dicey legal status of sex surrogacy. Yet, what these films did bring to the fore was the degree of care work sex surrogates do.

In the last 20 years, scholars have studied “intimate labour” (Boris, Gimore & Parrenas, 2010), “care work” (Dowling, 2017; Haines, 2017), “relational work” (Zelizer, 2005), “body work” (Wolkowitz, 2002) and “emotional labour” (Hochschild, 1983). These concepts share a focus on work done in intimate proximity to another person, that involves emotional relating, and that occurs in private (Dowling, 2017; Haines, 2017). Because these forms of work reproduce human relations, not a tangible product, they are commonly referred to as immaterial labour (Edgell, 2012). Care work involves feelings and actions, what Haines (2017) calls “an affective outlook and a set of practices” (p. 525). Care work may include listening to people’s problems (Folbre & Nelson, 2000), offering advice, encouraging

with words of support, and communicating affection. As Haines (2017) has noted, the therapeutic purpose of care work is to foster in people emotional confidence so they reach their full potential and live satisfying lives. For almost 100 years, physicians, sociologists, and sex workers rights advocates have argued that sex work is care work (Evans, 1979; Roberts, 1993). The esteemed British physician Dr. William J. Robinson, in an address to medical doctors in 1929, argued that “the profession of prostitution must be declared perfectly legal and legitimate; nay, it must be judged as an occupation of public utility” (as cited in Evans, 1979, p. 245). As Agustin (2007) has argued, intimacy is required by numerous service work jobs so it is therefore “only possible to isolate sexual services from other services if sexual communication and touching are accepted as utterly different from all other contact” (as cited in van der Meulen, 2013, p. 18). Ericsson (1980) has compared sex surrogates to nurses or social workers in his discussion of sex workers who provide sexual services for people with physical disabilities.

Sex surrogates also practice emotional labour and body work. While a sex surrogate’s task is to help clients overcome sexual problems and inhibitions, she will spend far less time on sex than on relating to her client emotionally about sex, through teaching, talking, guiding, and assuring. In providing this emotional and relational service, sex surrogates must exude patience, kindness, openness, and warmth. This is emotionally demanding work. Like other sex workers represented in popular culture and discussed earlier in this dissertation, they too engage in emotion management techniques.

Having provided the theoretical context of care work and sex work and disability, in the next section I discuss how *The Sessions* offers a new image of the sex surrogate and legitimizes sex surrogates as care workers by showing Cheryl Cohen Greene using a range of skills in care and body work, the positive impact she has on her client Mark O’Brien, and the “relational rewards” she draws from her work.

Refuting Stereotypes: The Sex Surrogate as Care Worker and Body Worker in The Sessions

The Sessions (2012), an Academy Award-nominated film, does not just endorse the practice of sex surrogacy; it elevates it into a therapeutic treatment animated by care, skill, and deep empathy. Based on a true story, *The Sessions*, a character-driven film with the talkiness of a stage play and the intimacy of a novel, spans a three-month period in 1988 during which sex surrogate Cheryl Cohen Greene and poet Mark O'Brien met in bedrooms and hotel rooms for sessions that would change both of their lives. O'Brien, a polio survivor, was paralyzed from the neck down and spent much of his time in a life-saving iron lung, a respirator that encased his entire body and breathed for him. "It's big and yellow and ugly," O'Brien wrote of it, "but it works" (as cited in Goodman, 1997, n.pag.). Immobilized for up to 20 hours a day, O'Brien's opportunities for intimacy had been limited. Yet, upon meeting Cohen Greene, a sex surrogate specialized in facilitating sexual experiences for people with disabilities, O'Brien discovered new parts of himself, literally and figuratively. "She put her hand on my chest," O'Brien says in the film, "no one had ever done that. The act of affection made me weep." By portraying Cohen Greene's therapeutic and healing sessions with O'Brien, *The Sessions* shows the important role that sex surrogates may play in helping people achieve sexual well-being, an intrinsic part of a fulfilling life. In addition, by showing sex workers who care for the mind as much as the body, the film repudiates the stereotyped image of the sex worker as a menace to society and offers a new image of the sex surrogate as a care worker.

The Sex Surrogate as Care Worker

The Sessions establishes Cohen Greene as a care worker from the first scene in which she and O'Brien interact. One bright afternoon, O'Brien's attendant wheels him on his gurney to the home of a friend, where the session is to take place (his own apartment, we are told, is too small). In the spare bedroom, O'Brien lies in bed (having been lifted there by his attendant who now waits in the living room). Cohen Greene enters and greets O'Brien warmly. Overcome by nerves, O'Brien blurts out "your money is on the table." Cohen Greene, in an arch but not unkind tone, informs O'Brien that she is not "a prostitute"

so he does not have to pay her first. “Let’s start again,” she says. Cohen Greene then explains their unique relationship and her role in it:

Although the aim is to have sex, I’m not a prostitute. I have nothing against prostitutes, but there’s a difference. A prostitute wants your return business. I don’t. I’m here to help you learn about your sexual feelings, so you can share them with a future partner. Think of a prostitute as a restaurant. I’m more like culinary school. I teach them the tools, so they can move on. I don’t want repeat business.

By drawing a distinction between Cohen Greene’s work and that of a stereotypical prostitute, *The Sessions* discursively distances her relationship with O’Brien from the stereotypical commercial sex exchange, which is associated with brevity and sexual lust. By highlighting that she is not a “prostitute,” Cohen Greene is certainly “borrowing respectability” from surrogacy’s medical origins, (Kim & Sherry, 2006). Yet, *The Sessions* is also signaling through Cohen Greene’s language how sex surrogates bring a unique pedagogical approach to their work (“I’m here to help you learn”; “I teach”; “I’m like a...school”) and rebutting the prohibitionist feminist argument that sex workers have no job skills. Jeffreys (2008) for example, has argued that “youth and inexperience are the most highly valued aspects” of a sex worker (p. 19). By explaining that her relationship with O’Brien will be one of tutelage, and by forgoing the requirement that the client pay first, Cohen Greene divests their encounter of overt mercantile dimensions and emphasizes her clinical approach.

The Sessions further distinguishes Cohen Greene from the stereotypical Hollywood sex worker by portraying her as a serious therapeutic worker who takes a technical approach. As The International Professional Surrogates Association notes: “the surrogate participates with the client in structured and unstructured experiences that are designed to build client self-awareness and skills...These therapeutic experiences include partner work in relaxation, effective communication, sensual and sexual touching...” (ISPA, n.d.). Accordingly, at their first session, Cohen Greene outlines

the parameters and boundaries of the sex surrogacy relationship. In direct tones, she explains that they will have six to eight sessions; that theirs is a professional relationship; that she has a family she will not speak about; and that she will keep the focus on O'Brien. By showing Cohen Greene delineating these boundaries, *The Sessions* shows how sex surrogates must put into place "emotion management strategies" (Hochschild, 1983) to protect themselves and the therapeutic relationship. *The Sessions* represents Cohen Greene adopting the strategy of positing "a healthy estrangement, a clear separation of self from role" (Hochschild, 1983, p. 188); she posits this separation between "self" and "role" by employing a repertoire of procedures that draw on her care and body work skills. *The Sessions* shows how Cohen-Greene operates according to a structure and best practices, in which roles are clearly-established and success predicated upon technique more than titillation.

As *The Sessions* shows, Cohen Greene understands that sex is primarily a mental act and makes her first goal as a care worker setting the petrified O'Brien at ease. Lying in the bed where his caregiver has placed him, O'Brien, who weighs less than 100 pounds, is vulnerable and pathologically shy. Having never been alone with a woman, he trembles with fear. *The Sessions* shows Cohen Greene drawing on her care skills by using mindfulness exercises to set the anxious O'Brien at ease. "Take a deep breath, Mark," Cohen Greene says. She models taking a breath. "And let go." Sensing his need for a distraction, Cohen Greene asks O'Brien questions about his writing. "Tell me about what it's like to be a poet," she says. Later, "what does it feel like to be outside the iron lung?" By engaging him on topics at which he is expert, she deliberately builds his confidence. She then transitions to taking a medical inventory: how is his breathing? Has he ever had sex? Is he able to maintain an erection?

The Sessions portrays Cohen Greene performing this care work with authority and control. She speaks with the warmth of a caring friend and the judiciousness of a skilled teacher. In several scenes, *The Sessions* shows Cohen Greene doing emotional labour with soft tones, well-selected words, and disarming gestures. To modulate the emotional intensity of their meeting, she intersperses her medical inventory with confidence building remarks. She compliments O'Brien's shirt and cologne. When she learns he is able to maintain an erection, she tells him many men cannot do so and that he "should be

proud of himself.” At the end of their session, she tells O’Brien, “You did great.” *The Sessions* shows how, as a care worker, Cohen Greene effortlessly pivots between evaluating O’Brien’s emotional state, offering assurances, asking questions, complimenting, and building O’Brien’s confidence, which are all part of her repertoire of care skills.

The Sex Surrogate as Body Worker

The Sessions also represents Cohen Greene as a body worker. Body workers use their own bodies to “model sexual comfort and confidence” (Rosenbaum et. al., 2014, p. 323). At their first meeting, *The Sessions* focuses on Cohen Greene’s body to suggest her confidence and to distinguish her from the stereotypical Hollywood sex worker. While the traditional Hollywood sex worker wears salacious, figure-revealing clothing, Cohen Greene, in contrast, wears a plain shirt, a loose skirt, and flat shoes. Her underwear is beige and practical. She carries a practical brown satchel; her face is make-up free. When Cohen Greene undresses, the camera does not invoke what Mulvey (1999) calls the “male gaze” (p. 74) or use sexually objectifying languorous full-frontal nude shots; rather, as she strips, the camera shoots her unconventionally from the side and against a decidedly unerotic background (a wall unit filled with pottery and books). *By portraying Cohen Greene in visual contrast to the Hollywood sex worker stereotype of the “marked woman,” and by de-emphasizing nudity as a titillating spectacle, The Sessions suggests that Cohen Greene is different, a new kind of sex worker, an embodied subject rather than a titillating object, a sex surrogate who leads with her care and professionalism. The camera portrays Cohen Greene’s body not as an object, but a subject of sexual confidence: she moves with strength, vigour, and deliberateness that is much less a striptease than a work protocol. By the time a naked Cohen Greene lies down beside O’Brien, the scene has established her as a self-assured body worker.*

Sex surrogates are also body workers who touch and teach. As Twigg et al. (2011) note, sex surrogates are experts at handling the “bodies of others” and “assessing, diagnosing, handling, treating, manipulating, and monitoring bodies” (p. 171). Experts in sensuality and touch, sex surrogates use a repertoire of corporeal techniques and exercises to help their clients become more embodied and confident. In *The Sessions*, Cohen Greene begins with “body awareness” exercises to help O’Brien

become comfortable with nudity. She begins by unbuttoning O'Brien's shirt. Given the rigidity of his locked muscles, Cohen Greene is very careful, but O'Brien's fingers nevertheless catch on the cuff of his shirt and he yelps in pain. Invoking her duty of care, Cohen Greene reminds him: "Mark, I'm going to be really careful with you. I am not going to hurt you in any way." Lying beside O'Brien, Cohen Greene explains that she is going to touch every part of his body and he is to tell her how it feels. Her dialogue suggests her dual role as sexual mentor and a comforter: "If something feels good, tell me," she says. "I don't want you to tolerate anything."

It is through Cohen Greene's adroitness at facilitating "body awareness exercises" that *The Sessions* portrays the full extent of her expertise as a body worker. Starting at the top of his head, Cohen Greene runs her fingers through O'Brien's thick hair: "You have soft hair. Does that feel good?" She strokes his ear lobe. To simulate the effect of this body work, *The Sessions* uses close-up real-time photography to show Cohen Greene's fingers rubbing O'Brien's earlobe, a remarkably visceral experience. By the middle of their session, much to his mortification, O'Brien develops an erection. Cohen Greene, now practicing emotional labour, notes that his reaction is normal and objectively explains how the body responds to sexual stimuli. In this scene, by showing Cohen Greene moving from emotional labour, to care work, to body work, and by illustrating the attentiveness, care, and sensuality with which she treats O'Brien, *The Sessions* dignifies Cohen Greene's work.

On many occasions, *The Sessions* shows how this care and body work verges on epiphany-inspiring therapy. In a later session, Cohen Greene places O'Brien before a full-length mirror to regard his own naked body. "OK, Mark," Cohen Greene says gently. "This is you." O'Brien grimaces and is reluctant to even look. Having spent a lifetime as the objectified specimen of doctors, a body tethered to life-preserving machines, O'Brien has seen his body as an encumbrance, his sex as futile, his lungs as "paper bags" (Yu, 1996). At 4'7", he weighs only 60 pounds, is ashamed of his shape, and embarrassed by his frailty (Sartogian, 2012). Yet, encouraged by Cohen Greene's morale-boosting words, O'Brien regards himself in the mirror. In the documentary *Breathing Lessons: The Life and Work of Mark O'Brien* (Yu, 1996), O'Brien reflects on this long-delayed moment of reckoning: "I was surprised

I looked so normal, that I wasn't the horribly twisted and cadaverous figure I had always imagined myself to be." *The Sessions* shows how Cohen Greene's care and body work alters O'Brien's perspective and transforms his embarrassment and shame into self-love and acceptance.

What is more remarkable, *The Sessions* shows Cohen Greene performing this care in unsparing real time, a pace that draws attention to the meticulousness of her activities. Watching in real time the depth of care and intimacy she is performing makes recognizable the fact that Cohen Greene is doing work that no other professional – not a doctor, nurse, personal support worker, or therapist, much less a friend or family member – could do for O'Brien. Lifting, coaxing, caressing, holding, speaking, soothing, encouraging, mollifying, touching, and admiring are just a few of the actions the film shows. *The Sessions* makes clear that this work is highly physical, intimate, and demanding and would challenge the non-expert on both a physical and emotional level. By making visible Cohen Greene's unique and important skills set as a sex surrogate, *The Sessions* shows that, contrary to the stereotype of the sex worker as an unskilled and coerced teenager described by prohibitionists like Jeffreys (2008), Cohen Greene is a hardworking, highly skilled, and agential care and body worker.

The Sessions stages Cohen Greene's care and body work skills most vividly when she and O'Brien have sex for the first time. O'Brien is petrified of sex. As a nervous and bookish virgin, he has prepared himself by reading numerous books on human physiology, which have given him the unfortunate idea that that he will hurt Cohen Greene by having penetrative sex with her. O'Brien's sexual neuroses about injury and penetration appears to be rooted in the traumatic memory of contracting the poliovirus as a young boy and having a foreign body invade him. The prospect of coming into contact with another foreign body – Cohen Greene's – triggers memories of being that helpless child. Noticing that O'Brien is struggling to relax, Cohen Greene engages him in a visualization exercise. She instructs O'Brien to close his eyes. "I want you to remember yourself as a six-year-old boy before he contracted polio. Describe some of your feelings," she whispers to him. Having noted that O'Brien's trauma has manifested as sexual shame, Cohen Greene hopes that by inviting O'Brien to connect to an earlier part of himself that is uninflected with trauma and pain, he

will also reconnect to, and have empathy for, the little boy inside of him who did not ask for his life to be irreparably changed by polio. “Describe some of your feelings,” she whispers to him.

As *The Sessions* shows, O’Brien follows Cohen Greene’s voice to startling and cathartic ends. Through a montage of candy-hued images, *The Sessions* illustrates O’Brien’s mental journey back to his own childhood, to a scene of summertime gaiety at the beach. As a boy with a 1950s crew cut and glittering blue eyes, O’Brien runs along a beach with his sister, squealing with pleasure as his feet slap along the wet sand. “I feel the wind, sand beneath my toes,” O’Brien, the adult, says. “Do you really feel like him?” Cohen Greene asks. “Do you feel him? As you are today?” “And are you mad at him? Do you blame him for getting polio? Was it his fault?” Tears well up in O’Brien’s eyes. In a cascade of sensual images – the smooth inside of seashell, a cat’s whiskers, a lapping ocean wave – O’Brien orgasms. It is a remarkable scene that captures a rare concurrence of sexual ecstasy and emotional catharsis. By showing Cohen Greene’s innovative use of such a creative exercise leading to O’Brien’s meaningful release, *The Sessions* validates Cohen Greene as a master at inducing pleasure, reducing shame, and activating self-love and suggests that she is not only a gifted sex surrogate, but also a healer.

Showing Professional Boundaries and Emotion Management Techniques

While *The Sessions* depicts Cohen Greene doing care work, body work, and emotional labour, this is a good time to point out that she is not a quasi-mother, girlfriend, or confidante of past Hollywood portrayals. The sex worker “nurse” types, as Campbell (2006) insightfully points out, often carried the sexist and reductive suggestion that women are natural sex workers because nurturing is intrinsic to the female character. Similarly, Hochschild (1983) writes of the two behavioural strategies women adopt “to improve their lot – by using their motherly capacity to enhance the status and well-being of others, and by using her sexual attractiveness” (Hochschild, 1983, p. 182). In contrast, *The Sessions* stresses that Cohen Greene’s effectiveness as a sex surrogate is not predicated upon her natural “female” qualities, nor her pretending maternal care, but is the result of her repertoire of professional skills and emotion management strategies that allow her to draw clinically appropriate boundaries between herself and O’Brien. Hochschild (1983) theorized that women

service workers cope with the demands of their work in one of three ways: one, by identifying “wholeheartedly” with their emotional work; two, by engaging in the performance of service cynically, thereby distancing one’s self from the work (and its irritations), which though temporarily effective, often leads to feeling robotic and numb; or third, by recognizing a separation between one’s work and private self, yet to valuing the performance self for being a useful occupational skill. Hochschild suggested this third method was most likely to lead to effective emotion management and prevent burnout.

The Sessions is clear that Cohen-Greene’s effectiveness as a sex surrogate is predicated upon her adoption of the third method, her ability to posit a separation between her work and private self. She does so by employing a repertoire of professional procedures that draw on her care and body work skills. While prohibitionist feminists argue that sex workers cope with their jobs by disassociating, in contrast *The Sessions* represents Cohen-Greene excelling at her job because she enjoys it and through the mindful adoption and use of her professional skills. Chapkis (1997) argues that by performing emotional labour sex workers do not lose anything “essential” to themselves; in fact, receiving payment and thinking of affect as a “job” allows them to maintain boundaries with clients and gain “greater control” [over their lives]...as “emotion was no longer something that simply happened to them, they felt practiced in also creating and controlling it” (p. 75). In *The Sessions*, Cohen-Greene similarly uses her skills as an emotion management technique.

As the film shows, Cohen Greene maintains boundaries by drawing on her care and body work skills to posit a separation between her work and private self, a technique Hochschild (1983) suggests is most likely to lead to effective emotion management and to prevent burnout. For example, at the end of their first session, a clearly enchanted O’Brien asks, “Tell me anything about yourself.” Cohen Greene firmly responds that her private life is off limits. By practicing “emotion management” strategies, and keeping the focus on O’Brien and their work, Cohen Greene guards against transference and countertransference, the process by which personal feelings enter a therapeutic relationship and place it at risk. Whereas in the classic sex worker film, *Pretty Woman* (1990), crossing the work-private life boundary comprises the narrative arc – which ends in a marriage proposal – *The*

Sessions shows Cohen Greene as a true professional who upholds boundaries in order to remain successful in her care work.

The Sessions further illustrates Cohen Greene's professionalism by frequently showing her at work in her home office. While the stereotypical Hollywood sex worker is rarely gifted with intellect or meta-cognition, much less portrayed reading a book, *The Sessions* represents Cohen Greene as a serious and thoughtful clinician who reads and writes. Her home office is filled with books and writing pads and looks like that of a physician or a therapist. On her large desk are notebooks and pens, a fax machine, an open appointments calendar, and a tape recorder that she uses to dictate her clinical notes that she later transcribes. Following each of her sessions with O'Brien, Cohen Greene sits at her desk in the glow of a green Tiffany lamp and speaks into her tape recorder. Her observations of O'Brien are clinical and detached, concerned with sexuality as a process of bodily and emotional functions, rather than an exercise of pleasure. She notes: "Mark cannot masturbate. He's had only the occasional kissing experience. He's capable of maintaining an erection, but the curvature of his body could present a serious obstacle to intercourse." Significantly, as she speaks into the tape recorder, the camera focuses on the framed diploma on the wall behind her, her university degree. The diploma connotes Cohen Greene's training, her home office and clinical note-taking her professionalism, and her sessions with O'Brien her care work, body work, emotional labour, knowledge and skill. By showing Cohen Greene as a skilled care and body worker, *The Sessions* persuasively rebuts the prohibitionist argument that all sex workers are without skill and shows Cohen Greene as a dignified care worker who makes valuable contributions to the lives of her clients.

Sex Surrogates: Enriching the Lives of People with Disabilities

The United Nations considers sexuality to be a basic human right. Research on the health benefits of sex has shown it to be hugely beneficial (De Boer, 2015). Yet, sexuality and disability have long been a taboo subject, even within the field of Disability Studies (Sanders, 2007). As Shakespeare (2000) notes, the sexual rights of disabled people have come second to other struggles like securing housing and access to public space. Since the early 2000s, however, the intersections between disability and

commercial sex work have emerged as a growing area of scholarly inquiry. As Liddiard (2014) observes, debates about whether people with disabilities ought to have the right to buy services from commercial sex workers have become “a hot topic” (p. 1). As Griffiths (2016) argues, 75% of people with disabilities responding to a survey believed that prostitution should be legalized (p. 107). *The Sessions* validates sex surrogates by portraying the therapeutic and life-enriching effect Cheryl Cohen-Greene has on Mark O’Brien. Through the six sessions the film meticulously depicts them sharing – with all of their attendant joys and complications – *The Sessions* humanizes both Cohen-Greene (as a sex surrogate) and O’Brien (as a man who buys sexual services from a sex surrogate) while emphasizing the transformative and inspiring impact of sex surrogacy on both of them.

In doing so, the film confirms what sociologists have been suggesting for decades: that sex workers may provide emotional support to their clients, some of whom live with disabilities (Lucas, 2005; Sanders, 2008; Tennenbaum et. al., 2014). By showing Cohen Greene playing a vital role in helping O’Brien achieve what DeBoer (2015) calls “sexual inclusion” (p. 402), *The Sessions* validates the contributions sex surrogates make to the lives of clients who live with disabilities.

When *The Sessions* opens, O’Brien is confined to an iron lung for up to 20 hours a day. Despite his immobility, O’Brien leads a rich life: he is a Berkeley graduate and lover of Shakespeare, a poet and journalist, the founder of a poetry press dedicated to publishing the work of disabled authors, and a baseball fanatic. O’Brien is an intelligent and self-deprecatingly funny man who uses his wit to confront his disability head-on. “I was looking for an intelligent, literate woman for companionship and, perhaps, sexual play. I am, as you see, completely paralyzed, so there will be no walks on the beach,” he later wrote (The Sartogian, 2012). Yet, as *The Sessions* shows, underneath O’Brien’s wit and volubility, he is secretly ashamed of his body and regards his sexual urges with embarrassment: “I ejaculate while I’m being given bed baths by my attendant,” he tells his confidante, a priest, “[and] all I feel is shame and mortification while other men get pleasure out of it.”

At the start of *The Sessions*, O’Brien is 38. He has lived beyond his life expectancy, yet senses he is “getting to my use by date.” As a poet who burnishes human experiences into their most crystal

form, O'Brien is a sensuous man. He does not want to die without having sex, an act he considers a pivotal human experience. Scholars have noted that people with disabilities are often stereotyped as asexual; frequently, disabled teenagers are not taught about sex (Shakespeare, 2000). In fact, nobody had ever mentioned sex to O'Brien. The extent of his physical contact had come from accidental intimacies, a doctor's clinical brush during an examination, or the graze of an attendant's hand. In his poem "Being Washed" from his poetry collection *Breathing* (1982), O'Brien describes how this lack of physical contact made him feel like a thing: "There's so much of it to wash / It being me, a former person" (as cited in Yu, 1996). In *The Sessions*, more humorously but no less seriously, he compares his invisibility to that of "a dried out bubblegum stuck underneath existence." In a 1990 article in *The Sun*, O'Brien writes about his troubled relationship to his body and sex:

As a man in my thirties, I still felt embarrassed by my sexuality. It seemed to be utterly without purpose in my life, except to mortify me when I became aroused during bed baths. I would not talk to my attendants about the orgasms I had then, or the profound shame I felt. I imagined they, too, hated me for becoming so excited. I wanted to be loved. I wanted to be held, caressed, and valued. But my self-hatred and fear were too intense. (O'Brien, 1990, n. pag.)

O'Brien's chronic shame springs, in part, from living in a society which has long denied the sexuality of people with disabilities. As McRuer & Mollow (2012) observe, "rarely are disabled people regarded as either desiring subjects or objects of desire" (p. 1). When O'Brien came of age 50 years ago, being a sexual person with a disability seemed plain wrong. "Whenever I had sexual feelings or thoughts, I felt accused and guilty. No one in my family had ever discussed sex around me" (1990, n. pag.). In *The Sessions*, the inciting incident occurs when O'Brien receives an assignment from a local newspaper to write about sex and disability. While doing his research, he connects with a local therapist who specializes in facilitating surrogacy relationships. O'Brien, until this point, had seen sex as an impossibility, yet that changes when he is given the phone number of Cohen Greene. In the film,

O'Brien encounters Cohen Greene through the course of conducting research for an article. The truth, however, was quite different:

About this time, a TV talk show featured two surrogates. I watched with suspicion: were surrogates the same as prostitutes? The surrogates did not look like my stereotypes of hookers: no heavy make-up, no spray-on jeans. The female surrogate was a registered nurse with a master's in social work...The surrogates emphasized that they deal mostly with a client's poor self-image and lack of self-esteem, not just the act of sex itself. (1990, n. pag.).

As O'Brien reveals, it was popular culture that helped him overcome his initial misgivings about hiring a sex surrogate.

Prohibitionist feminists have argued that men with disabilities hire sex surrogates and sex workers because they are misogynistic. Jeffreys (2008) asserts that sex surrogacy is a "smoke screen," simply a way for "men with disabilities to abuse women in prostitution the same way men without disabilities do" (as cited in DeBoer, 2015, p. 70). In an article unambiguously titled "The Notion That It's OK for Disabled Men to Pay for Sex Is Rooted in Misogyny and Ableism," on the popular feminist website *Feminist Current*, Martin (2014) excoriates the practice of sex surrogacy for people with disabilities: "When I hear non-disabled people frame the use of women in prostitution by disabled people as a human rights issue, my blood boils...the sexual appetites of disabled men should not take precedence over the advancement of women's equality...it's unacceptable to pit the interests of two vulnerable people against each other" (n.pag.). Martin (2014) argues that people with disabilities do not need to hire able-bodied sex workers to have meaningful sexual experiences, an excellent point. People with disabilities can and do, of course, find romantic and sexual companionship without paying for it, and the suggestion that they cannot is condescending and infantilizing.⁷⁷ Martin goes on

⁷⁷ DeBoer (2015) rightly points out that the medicalization of sex that is part and parcel of sex surrogacy is problematic for it runs the risk of re-stigmatizing people with disabilities. By involving a therapist, clinician, even a physician, as well as clinical check-ins, appointments, feedback forms, and interviews, the sex surrogacy process can be invasive and run the risk of making

to concede that because society continues to marginalize disabled people, there is a need to make sexuality more accessible. She believes, however, that “communication technology, mechanical technology, and public education” already meet that need (n. pag.). By this she seems to be suggesting that disabled people should find sexual satisfaction with sex dolls, online pornography, and robots, or through “public education” (which stresses abstinence and masturbation).

By suggesting that people with disabilities avail themselves of mechanical, depersonalized sexual tools, Martin neglects to consider a host of other reasons why men buy sex, reasons that O’Brien compellingly articulates. There are certain qualities to in-person sexual encounters – the sensual experience of touch, taste, sound, and smell – that online or mechanical encounters cannot replicate. Online encounters emphasize the genital aspects of sex, whereas face-to-face encounters allow for greater nuance, playfulness, experimentation, and communication to explore one’s sexuality. Furthermore, as Liddiard (2014) notes, the assumption that men visit sex workers for carnal reasons alone is itself rooted in the persistent and the essentialist stereotype that all men are hypersexual.

Far from showing men as hyper-sexual and sex surrogates as exploited, *The Sessions* suggests men with disabilities seek out commercial sex for emotional reasons; for a sense of connection, conversation, warmth, and validation (Sanders, 2007; Shakespeare, 2000). Similarly, DeBoer (2015) argues that disabled men seek out sex for a sense of “sexual inclusion” and the wish to be seen as “sexual agent” (p. 73). She writes: “When one’s sexuality is acknowledged, a deeper sense of personhood may also be recognized” (p. 75). Support for sex surrogates comes most readily from the sex workers’ rights movement and advocates for the rights of the disabled. Equally, in his ethnography of disabled men who buy sex, Liddiard (2014) found that for most “purchasing sex can be a fruitful means for disabled men to gain sexual experience” (p. 14). Prohibitionist feminists have argued that learning with a sex worker is not possible, for the simulated nature of the situation nullifies any educational effects, yet the men in Liddiard’s study described their encounters with the sex workers as

a client feel like an object of scrutiny. For persons who may have been objectified and medicalized for much of their lives, turning the sex experience into a medical experience may therefore carry unwanted negative consequences.

“integral towards learning even the most ‘rudimentary’ of intimate experiences, such as sensuous and erotic touch” (p. 14). As I have already indicated, *The Sessions* represents how Cohen Greene’s guided exercises are integral to raising O’Brien’s self-confidence and lowering his anxiety. The presence of a sex surrogate helpfully divests the sexual encounter of anxiety-provoking expectations that inevitably come with non-commercial sexual relations. Thus, the client is under no pressure to perform. Furthermore, O’Brien’s mobility limitations require Cohen Greene to lift, position, and move him and do other types of body work to teach him how to use his body in sexual encounters. No online pornography or sex robot could play this dialogical, skill-building teaching role. *The Sessions* suggests that sex surrogates provide a caring and important service to society and urge audiences to consider the healing role sex surrogates can play in the lives of people who have been unable to lead full sexual lives due to a variety of challenges: an isolated adolescence; not meeting the socially constructed and idealized notions of beauty; sensing that one does not conform to standards of masculine and feminine sexuality; few opportunities to meet sexual partners; and little sexual experience and low self-esteem due to a culture that regularly constructs the sexuality of the disabled as deviant, strange, and wrong (Sanders, 2008; Shakespeare, 2000). Nonetheless, as Liddiard (2014) rightly points out, conversations about people with disabilities buying sex run the risk of labeling “disabled sexualities with connotations of deviancy and ethical ambiguity” and framing them as “perverse” (p. 1), and must therefore be conducted carefully.

But *The Sessions* represents O’Brien’s hiring of a sex surrogate as a life-enriching decision. Through sex surrogacy, he overcomes his bodily shame and self-loathing, learns how to be more confident in his body, and experiences intimacy. For O’Brien, contacting Cohen Greene is a practical solution that also makes him feel safe. Of his decision to hire a sex surrogate, he once wrote: “I wanted someone who would be sensitive to my unusual needs.” As an adult living with a disability, O’Brien longed to learn about sex from an expert, someone who would not judge him for his inexperience. Indeed, far from the contention that men with disabilities buy sex for misogynistic reasons, *The Sessions* suggests that O’Brien and Cohen Greene engage in a mutually beneficial relationship. Thus,

The Sessions is a sex-positive film that affirms the sexual rights of the disabled and, by extension, the services that sex surrogates offer. Further, by showing O'Brien seeking out Cohen Greene's services for intimacy and connection, as much as sexual pleasure, the film rebuts the prohibitionist position that men with disabilities who buy commercial sex are perpetuating the oppression of women.

O'Brien's self-actualization – a direct result of his sex surrogacy relationship with Cohen Greene – also makes possible the beginning of his first ever-romantic relationship. At the end of the film, O'Brien – once petrified of women – meets the woman who will become his partner until the end of his life. The film's ending mirrors real life. After O'Brien ends his sessions with Cohen Greene, he begins a relationship with a woman named Susan Fernbach. O'Brien's romantic and intimate trajectory clearly shows the positive impact of sex surrogacy on his life; by providing him with valuable care and learning, he becomes confident enough to enter into a relationship. Indeed, by ending the film as O'Brien's new relationship begins, *The Sessions* offers powerful evidence for the social utility of sex surrogacy, which leads to a richer and fuller life for O'Brien.

At O'Brien's funeral, which ends the film, his priest remarks, "But Mark knew love. He loved and was loved." As a sex surrogate, Cohen Greene embodies the goal of care work by helping her client "develop [to his] fullest human capacities" (Haines, 2017, p. 525). By showing the life-enriching impact of Cohen Greene's care work on O'Brien, *The Sessions* presents a new image of a sex surrogate – a specialized sex worker – who is neither a victim nor a criminal, but a care worker and body worker, a sexual healer who brings joy and dignity to the lives of her clients.

Sex Postitive Sex Surrogacy: Relational Rewards

A further way *The Sessions* offers a positive new image of the sex surrogate is by depicting Cohen Greene taking pride in her work. It does so by showing Cohen Greene's work connecting to her personal value system. *The Sessions* roots Cohen Greene's job satisfaction in her personal project of "reclaiming" her sexual power, which her conservative upbringing effaced. As Cohen Greene recounts, she grew up outside of Boston with a sense of shame and guilt about sex, which was compounded by her Catholic school education. In the late 1960s, she happened upon a newly published memoir that

would change her life. In *Surrogate Wife: The True Confessions of a Sex Therapist*, author Valerie X. Scott described herself as a “sex surrogate,” a sex worker who specialized in working with clients whose dysfunctions and disabilities had negatively impacted their sexual lives. Having grown up with a sense of shame and guilt about her own sexual impulses, compounded by her Catholic schooling, Cohen Greene’s attention was piqued. She was drawn to the idea of channeling her warmth and sensuality into helping others find intimacy and sexual satisfaction in their lives (Cohen Greene, 2012). She soon attended a seminar at The San Francisco Sex Information Institute and, within a year, was working full-time as a sex surrogate. By 2012, she had worked with over 900 clients, including men living with disabilities that ranged from severe anxiety to paralysis (Fox, 2013).

In *The Sessions*, Cohen-Greene tells O’Brien that “the church didn’t like my attitude about sex. I liked sex. They think they threw me out but I threw them out.” Similarly, in her spirited 2012 memoir, *Intimate Life: Sex, Love, and My Journey as a Surrogate Partner*, Cohen Greene elaborates on her transition from repressed Catholic schoolgirl in Boston to a professional sex surrogate in California sex as metaphor for women’s liberation:

My young life straddled two eras. I was in my 20s in the 1960s. The shifting social winds of the time encouraged me to question and rethink nearly everything I had been taught. Held up to daylight, many of the beliefs about sexuality that I had been inculcated with as a child didn’t survive. This process culminated in my career as a sex surrogate (Cohen Greene & Garano, 2012, p. 4)

The Sessions aligns with the empowerment paradigm by framing Cohen Greene’s transformation from repressed and fearful young woman inculcated with prohibitions about sex into a mature woman who felt free enough to explore her impulses. Her “re-thinking” was spurred by her encounters with sex positive feminism and the empowerment paradigm principle that sex work can be a way of unshackling one’s self from the compulsory role of sexually docile female. Her attitude also aligns

with the empowerment paradigm idea that by selling sex, women reject patriarchal norms of female sexual submissiveness, which have long corseted women's sexual expression (Chapkis, 1997). Cohen Greene sees her work as an act of individualism, a deliberate and personally rewarding decision to explore a new and radical lifestyle (ibid.). Cohen Greene's experience furthermore solidifies her conviction that a life of sexual repression is not a life fully lived. In light of her own hard-won comfort with her body and sexuality, Cohen Greene views her vocation as one that could help others achieve similar comfort.

Relational Burdens: The Cost of Emotional Labour

At the same time, however, *The Sessions* shows Cohen Greene experiencing the burdens of performing care work and emotional labour. Although *The Sessions* represents Cohen Greene adopting the "emotion management" (Hochschild, 1983) strategy of positing a separation between her work and private self, it artfully demonstrates how such a well-wrought strategy is not necessarily ironclad. One such example of "emotion suppression" (Stacey, 2005) occurs during Cohen Greene's first session with O'Brien. Clearly overcome by empathy for O'Brien's situation, Cohen Greene retires to the bathroom where she stands at the mirror and looks contemplative. She takes several deep breaths to calm herself before returning to the bedroom. In this sequence, *The Sessions* shows that as a care worker who is paid to quell other people's anxieties, Cohen Greene is not immune to anxiety herself and must work diligently to manage her own feelings, which is sometimes a challenge.

Cohen Greene, moreover, must also practice emotion suppression to subdue positive feelings that could threaten her professional relationship with O'Brien. Indeed, as *The Sessions* shows, the more time Cohen Greene spends with O'Brien, the deeper her feelings for him grow. After their sessions, his words linger in her mind with a resonance that feels enlivening. One day, O'Brien telephones Cohen Greene to invite her out for coffee. Were Cohen Greene to accept the invitation she would be violating her professional code of conduct; therefore, she declines. But a close-up of her face as she says the words "I can't" shows the sadness she feels at having to distance herself from a man who she finds so

interesting. In her home office, she speaks into her tape recorder: “His emotional needs are beyond the scope of my involvement.” Her words are clinical, but the camera focuses again on her face, which looks pained, and her voice trembles with unspoken emotion.

The Sessions also shows Cohen Greene practicing emotion suppression in her personal intimate relationships. On several occasions, Cohen Greene tries to engage her husband in conversation about her work. For example, on the evening after meeting O’Brien, Cohen Greene tells her husband that she has met a man who spends his life “locked in a metal box.” Her husband absently says “you’re a saint” before turning away and falling asleep. Cohen Greene, meanwhile, sits up awake and looks pensive and lonely. *The Sessions* suggests that the intensity of Cohen Greene’s work makes it difficult to put aside her work and yet bringing her work home is no solution. While her job is to provide care for other people, she struggles to find care for herself.

Despite these challenges, *The Sessions* shows Cohen Greene predominately experiencing the “relational rewards” (Stacey, 2005) of doing care work, the feelings of satisfaction care workers report in the commission of their work. Later, when reflecting on their relationship, Cohen Greene described her desire to work with O’Brien as a kind of mission: “He told me he felt like he was on the outside looking in at a banquet but he knew he would never be able to taste that food. As soon as I met him, I vowed that he would have a chance to taste the feast” (Sartogian, 2012). This sense of mission feeds the wellspring of pride she takes in her work.

Interestingly, *The Sessions* also shows that Cohen Greene practices “emotion suppression” to block “relational rewards.” She does so to maintain control over positive feelings, which she fears could destabilize her professional role as a care worker. This suppression, however, is not always successful. Over the course of their relationship, Cohen Greene develops strong platonic feelings for O’Brien. He, in turn, falls romantically in love with her. During one of their sessions, she lets slip the words, “I love you.” Cohen Greene is not feigning. She revels in the time she spends with O’Brien and is fascinated by his mind and facility with language. In “Love Poem for No One in Particular,” a poem O’Brien writes for Cohen Greene and mails to her, he movingly describes his words replacing his frail

limbs so that he can touch her:

Let me touch you with my words
My hands, these limp empty gloves
Let my words stroke your hair
Slide down your back
And tickle your belly
Let my hands as light and free flying as bricks
Ignore my wishes and stubbornly refuse
To carry out my quietest desire
Let my words enter your mind
Bearing torches
Let them willingly into your being
So they may caress you gently
Within

(Lewin, 2012)

O'Brien's corporeal and erotic language ("stroke," "slide," "tickle") shows that he has been viscerally and imaginatively transformed by his sessions with Cohen Greene. What is even more, his sessions have affected O'Brien to such a degree that he now imagines caring for Cohen Greene in the ways she has cared for him in their sessions. Cohen Greene is deeply moved and honoured to be O'Brien's muse. Standing in the dark, she clutches the poem to her chest and cries, experiencing the "relational rewards" of doing care work. For Cohen Greene, working as O'Brien's sex surrogate is an emotional and transformative experience.

In the film's narrative climax, and what will become their final sexual encounter, O'Brien asks Cohen Greene if she will try to have an orgasm during the last time they have sex. Cohen Greene

complies with O'Brien's wish. But having such a deeply intimate experience in what is supposed to be a professional relationship represents a dangerous departure from her emotion management strategies. The separation of private self from work self dissolves as she reaches an emotional crisis. In a telling illustration of her role confusion, Cohen Greene forgets the envelope of money – her payment – in the motel room. Visibly shaken, she tells O'Brien they must end their sessions. *The Sessions* uses this high-stakes climax to suggest that while Cohen Greene began her relationship with O'Brien procedurally, and has a long track record of successfully maintaining boundaries, the delicate nature of the sex surrogacy relationship makes emotional labourers like Cohen Greene vulnerable to experiencing dissonance between how they feel and how they must act. As Hochschild (1983) reminds us, inherent to doing emotional labour is the responsibility of “maintaining a difference between feeling and saying,” which “over the long run leads to strain” (p. 90)

Yet, it is exactly these representations of raw human feelings, of strain and emotional pain, that make *The Sessions* a new, complex, and humane representation of a sex surrogate. While prohibitionist feminists assert sex work's inherently dangerous character, sex workers' inherent frailty, and men's inherent misogyny, *The Sessions* does not portray Cohen Greene as an exploited woman who suffers because of her relationship to O'Brien. She is not the victim of violence. O'Brien does not hate women. Rather, Cohen Greene is a smart and agential care worker who, like every human, is vulnerable to feelings of connection and love. This is a deeply humanizing depiction of a sex worker, one that eschews the stale virgin/whore dichotomy and refreshingly shows both her strength and vulnerability. Through its climax, *The Sessions* powerfully suggests that sex surrogates – and indeed sex work itself – cannot be understood through the binaries of exploiter and exploited. By showing that no single theory can explain the complexities of sex surrogacy, *The Sessions* advances a polymorphous view of the practice of sex surrogacy and suggests the presence of both its benefits and challenges.

Yet, *The Sessions* does not engage with one crucial contemporary issue that affects all sex surrogates today in the U.S.: the criminalization of prostitution. Although it is set in 1988 San Francisco, a time and place in which women like Cohen Greene could face possible prison time for

their work, were they to be arrested, the film proceeds as though sex surrogacy were already decriminalized, a service akin to massage therapy, rather than one that is identical to prostitution under the law. Thus, *The Sessions* sidesteps a deeper examination of any of the legal challenges and granular actualities of what happens to sex workers when they practice their trade without the protection of employment standards. For this elision, *The Sessions* is a comparatively sunny film. In contrast, *She's Lost Control*, another recent film about a sex surrogate, does deal with the granular issues related to sex surrogacy and the law and makes a strong case for why sex surrogacy – and by extension, all forms of sex work – should be decriminalized.

She's Lost Control: Sex Surrogates as Care and Body Workers

She's Lost Control (2014), a less rosy film than *The Sessions*, represents the challenges sex surrogates face when doing work that is criminalized. *She's Lost Control* tells the story of Ronah, a graduate student in behavioural psychology who is in her early 30s and lives alone in Manhattan. Ronah is a committed sex surrogate who believes in sexual inclusion and takes pride in making life-enriching contributions to her clients' lives. A satisfying career as a sex surrogate and a track record of having excellent relationships with clients derails dramatically when Ronah's referring therapist sends her a new client, a monosyllabic nurse anesthesiologist named John who has "intimacy issues." When Ronah becomes personally – and then romantically – involved with John, boundaries are breached and backlash occurs. While *The Sessions* proceeded as if sex surrogacy was legal, *She's Lost Control* illuminates how, under the current laws, sex surrogacy is still criminalized. The tonal difference between *The Sessions* and *She's Lost Control* is perceptible immediately through contrasting production design: while the buttery yellow California palette of *The Sessions* implies safety, belonging, and warmth, *She's Lost Control* is shot in dreary pewter and its spare, metallic soundtrack suggests a world that is unsafe, unstable, and cold. These differences reflect the unlike worlds in which Cohen Greene and Ronah practice as sex surrogates: one in which sex work is seemingly decriminalized and the other in which sex work is still an illegal and dangerous form of work. What the films share is their overt focus on the sex surrogate as a care worker.

The Sex Worker as Care Worker

As *She's Lost Control* shows, Ronah is a care worker who works with clients – men in their twenties, thirties, and forties – who have physical disabilities and face mental and emotional challenges that have hindered their ability to intimately connect. In the film's opening montage, Ronah works with a client who has chronic anxiety. Ronah asks him how he is feeling, demonstrating her listening, comforting, and nurturing skills: "Any thoughts or feelings you want to share?" In another vignette, Ronah works with her client, a burn victim. Trembling and weeping, the man describes how ashamed he is of his scarred body, the result of a horrific house fire. Ronah responds softly, suggesting he try one step at a time. Perhaps he would like to remove his shirt? Through this early montage, *She's Lost Control* establishes Ronah as an involved and encouraging force in the lives of her emotionally fragile clients. The film also shows sex surrogacy as a caring service in which emotion takes primacy over carnality.

She's Lost Control focuses on Ronah's relationship with her new client, John. At their first meeting, *She's Lost Control* emphasizes the defining feature of the sex surrogacy relationship: the sex surrogate's control. A significant indicator of sex worker empowerment, Weitzer (2012) has noted, is the degree to which the sex worker has decision-making power and controls her work environments. At her first meeting with John, Ronah is clearly in control: she produces from her briefcase a typewritten consent form stipulating that their relationship is "not for sexual gratification." Ronah then administers via a saliva sample a rapid test for sexually transmitted diseases and then asks John if he has brought a cheque. Interestingly, unlike *The Sessions*, where Cohen Greene cautions O'Brien against discussing money lest he mistake her for a prostitute, *She's Lost Control* does not distinguish sex surrogacy from commercial sex work when it comes to the financial exchange. Indeed, Ronah is clearly engaging in a commercial sex act.

She's Lost Control also makes clear that Ronah is far from the Hollywood stereotype of the sex worker. Her opening routine of testing John for sexually-transmitted diseases is far from an erotic gambit and indicates to both client and audience that Ronah does not consider it her job to simply

gratify her client's sexual desires. The setting of her meeting with John underscores the therapeutic nature of their relationship: they meet in a pallid hotel room with walls the colour of watered down toothpaste and lighting that is clinical and harsh. Moreover, Ronah herself does not look like the clichéd Hollywood movie sex worker who dresses scantily to arouse. She wears brown pants and a brown blazer, more like the uniform of a bus driver than the suggestive outfits of the stereotypical sex worker. "We're going to spend the session clothed," Ronah informs John in their first session. "We're just going to talk. No sex." By emphasizing Ronah's decision-making power and control, which implies the process-driven character of the sex surrogacy relationship, *She's Lost Control* offers a new image of Ronah as a sex surrogate professional who places care over carnality and the satiation of physical lust.

She's Lost Control represents Ronah performing body work as she initiates John into a deeper understanding of human intimacy. At their second session, Ronah engages John in an exercise called "Passive versus Active" to help John connect to his own emotions. Ronah sets up two chairs to face one another and invites John to select either the passive or the active role. When he chooses "passive," Ronah becomes active. She takes John's hand in her own and strokes it, turns it over, traces the lines on his palm, and touches his wrist in smooth, sensual motions. It is an intimate and careful gesture of such subtlety that it is over as quickly as it began, which is exactly the point. Ronah is modeling the attentive small acts of kindness and attention that constitute intimacy between two caring and connected adults. Ignorant of such exchanges, John has thus far engaged in only anonymous, brief, and brutal sex acts which do not lead to lasting intimate connections.

Ronah then asks John to repeat the gestures on herself. "Do you want to touch my hair?" she asks. He gingerly touches her hair but looks worried. "That's good, keep going," Ronah says. With her encouragement, John becomes more confident and begins to gently stroke Ronah's hair. Through this moment, *She's Lost Control* suggests that Ronah's care and body work have tangible and positive effects on her client, who appears to be changing from a cold, remote person into a man who is capable of engaging in an emotional-physical connection, however ephemeral. As *She's Lost Control* shows

through the “Passive versus Active” exercise, Ronah teaches John how to share power in a relationship – to give and receive – an intrinsic aspect of intimacy.

It is interestingly during Ronah’s third session with John that *She’s Lost Control* shows how these apparently dissimilar characters – Ronah, a care worker and John, a distant man who needs care – are actually more similar than they first appear. In fact, they are both care workers. John cares full-time for his disabled sister, work that requires tremendous time and energy. Professionally, he is also a care worker: as a nurse anesthetologist, he is responsible for administering drugs that put his patients to sleep, ensuring they do not experience pain during their surgeries. But while both Ronah and John do care work, *She’s Lost Control* places a premium on Ronah’s work because she has to build relationships and intimacy, whereas the care work John performs involves only brief, non-intimate interactions. “I’m not good at follow-ups,” John says. He is referring to his job as a nurse anesthetologist and the fact that he never sees the same patient twice, but his comment is an apt metaphor for his inability to connect intimately in his own personal life. *She’s Lost Control* also suggests that Ronah’s care work is more difficult than John’s because, rather than putting her clients to sleep, she is concerned with awakening their latent sensual power.

Further, while both John and Ronah work with people who are sick, John works in a legal setting, within a team and with the help of diagnostic tools. Ronah, on the other hand, does care work illegally, alone, without the aid of blood tests, X-rays, or MRI scans, and uses her intuition, training in psychology, and experience to guess at what ails her clients and then design a treatment plan that will alleviate their pain. Despite these differences, Ronah connects with John through their shared experience of doing care work and understanding that trust is central to the wellbeing of a patient (or in John’s case, a client). Ronah, performing emotional labour, assures John that he is safe with her: “In order to make this work, to be effective, you need to trust that when I’m here, I’m completely here with you. Can we agree on that?”

The Sex Worker as Caring Body Worker

A turning point in the sex surrogate and client relationship is when the client drops the defenses that keep them from moving forward and start to trust the surrogate. As *She's Lost Control* shows, such a moment occurs when Ronah, desperate to break through to John, brings a portable music player to their fourth session. Ronah plays a dance song and proceeds to spin around the room, toss her hair, laugh, and dance in a silly fashion, and invites John to do the same. The sudden injection of levity into what was an otherwise heavy relationship provides the antidote, it would seem, to John's malaise. Ronah and John dance together in fits of giggles and ecstatic hugging. The hotel room in which they regularly meet, with its bland pale green walls, becomes a prism of white sunlight that envelops Ronah and John as they twirl and dance with abandon. As the grey scale production design that dominates the film blooms into a palette of greens and blues, suggesting regeneration and growth, this dancing sequence represents the height of Ronah's gifts as a care and body worker. Through her creative and therapeutic application of music, she awakens John to his sensual possibilities.

In addition to portraying her care work, *She's Lost Control* also shows Ronah's skills as a body worker. Like Cohen Greene, Ronah involves her client in "body awareness exercises." In one session, she uses her body to model what Rosenbaum et. al. (2014) call the surrogate's role of modeling "sexual comfort and confidence" (p. 323). She undresses herself and then undresses John and places him before a mirror. Through Ronah's gentle coaxing, he musters the courage to finally look at his reflection. Like O'Brien, John has trouble doing so at first, but gradually becomes more comfortable with his image as together, he and Ronah face their naked selves in the mirror. To build his confidence, Ronah practices emotional labour: "You have a nice body," she tells him. John, having learned about reciprocity from a previous session, replies: "So do you." In facilitating this care and body work, *She's Lost Control* portrays Ronah as an expert practitioner who encourages, compliments, touches, listens, relaxes, and teaches in a therapeutic fashion to build her client's confidence.

Yet, while a wellspring of caring, Ronah still operates as a clinician. Like Cohen Greene, she draws a firm dividing line between her professional and private life. During one session, she delineates between her work life and personal life: "You pay for my time, but you can't control how I feel." *She's*

Lost Control further highlights Ronah's clinical practice by showing her periodic meetings with the therapist who referred John to Ronah, during which they discuss John's progress. As Sanders (2007) notes, the patient, the referring therapist, and the client form a triadic relationship. While that relationship does not guarantee a smooth process, it does offer support for the sex surrogate. By showing Ronah balancing care work, body work, and emotion work, while invoking professional boundaries, *She's Lost Control* supports the view that sex surrogates are skilled care and body workers.

Sex Surrogates: Relational Rewards and the Costs of Emotional Labour

She's Lost Control further emphasizes the legitimacy of sex surrogacy by showing Ronah as an ambitious professional who is committed to a lifetime career as a sex surrogate. She is pursuing an M.A. in behavioural psychology, training which she believes will theoretically ground her sex surrogacy practice. She also assumes that a graduate degree will give her credibility. Her mentor, an older sex surrogate, says "it's good you're getting a Masters degree. Protects you from a legal standpoint." Ronah is so serious about her career that she has plans to buy an apartment out of which to practice full-time, an arrangement akin to that of any therapeutic professional with dedicated office space.

Ronah takes take pride in and draws "relational rewards" (Stacey, 2005) from her work. In her sessions, she frequently smiles and looks contented. While the film's lighting is generally grey and dreary, the scenes with her clients are notably bright. Ronah's relational rewards stem from helping her clients overcome their inhibitions and dysfunctions. On several occasions she tells the referring therapist, "I enjoy these challenges." Ronah likes her "tough cases" because they pose a professional challenge; when she is able to break through to such a client, the relational reward is that much greater. Ronah, as the film shows, regards her work as a vocation, feels most competent and empowered when at her job, and her track record of success forms her well-spring of self-esteem. *She's Lost Control* portrays sex surrogacy as legitimate work and Ronah's job satisfaction as proof of its relational rewards.

Yet, *She's Lost Control* is not an unbalanced film, for it also represents the challenges Ronah faces in her efforts to keep her work life and private life separate. Chapkis (1997) argues that by performing emotional labour sex workers do not lose anything “essential” to themselves, yet Masters and Johnson, in *Human Sexual Inadequacy* (1970), raised concerns for the sex surrogate who would be “playing a role...where her needs went unmet and no emotional bonds were formed” (as cited in Rosenbaum et al., 2014, p. 325). *She's Lost Control*, too, raises concern that the emotional intensity and clandestine nature of Ronah's job may cause her to sacrifice leading a full life outside of her work. Indeed, *She's Lost Control* contrasts the richness of Ronah's work life and the starkness of her personal life.

She's Lost Control illustrates this starkness through Ronah's apartment, which is dark and drab, starved of sunlight, free of personal effects, objects of beauty, or mementoes. While New York student apartments are not known for their opulence, her home is also literally uncomfortable. Her shower, for example, is broken and uncontrollably sprays water on the walls and ceiling of her bathroom whenever she tries to wash, causing repair people to storm her apartment constantly – yet the shower is never fixed. If having a functional shower is important to one's sense of dignity and, on a practical level, crucial for a sex surrogate whose care and body work place her in such close contact with other people's bodies, this out-of-control shower becomes a metaphor for “leakiness,” suggesting that Ronah retains less professional control than she imagines. Furthermore, in contrast to *The Sessions*, which shows Cohen Greene's home life as relatively comfortable, *She's Lost Control* implies that Ronah's work might be preventing her from having a balanced life.

She's Lost Control also suggests that the intensity of Ronah's care work impedes her ability to form meaningful relationships outside of her work. It is noticeable that Ronah has few friends. Her one social activity is an impromptu dinner with a neighbour: they eat at her bare table under a dim bulb. When the neighbour asks what Ronah's job is, she lies, nullifying the possibility of friendship. “I'm seeing three clients now,” she tells her older sex surrogate mentor at one point. “I don't know what I would do if I had a boyfriend.” Ronah has no personal life or personal connections because she gives

her emotions to her job. Throughout the film, though she does not date, she injects herself with hormones, part of the fertility regime she is undertaking to freeze her eggs for future use. While freezing one's eggs suggests the hopeful wish to have a child, it also implies a dearth of hope in meeting a life partner with whom to co-parent, which can also be seen as a mark of Ronah's isolation.

Indeed, *She's Lost Control* portrays family as a source of stress and aggravation rather than support and happiness. In brief but very telling glimpses, *She's Lost Control* portrays Ronah's family life as dysfunctional. Periodically, she Skypes with her brother; an angry man, he nonetheless cares for their mentally ill mother. Ronah's conversations with her brother are tense and he demands her ceaseless attention, support, and care, while giving nothing in return. Amid this bleakness, *She's Lost Control* represents Ronah's work as the lodestar of satisfaction, which seems to justify her intention to make sex surrogacy a career. Yet, the emotional labour Ronah's work demands leaves her craving care herself and vulnerable to crossing boundaries in ways which, in the current criminalization framework, result in disaster.

The Burden of Criminalization

Sex surrogates must use emotion management strategies with their clients to protect themselves from burnout and to guard the integrity of the therapeutic relationship. In the first half of *She's Lost Control*, Ronah operates with cool professionalism and manages her emotions by invoking procedures and drawing on her skills to maintain what Hochschild (1983) calls "a healthy estrangement" from her work (p. 188). Yet, as she becomes increasingly preoccupied with curing John, she begins to over-identify with her work – what Hochschild (1983) has labeled "wholehearted" identification – and forgo the emotion management strategies that otherwise allow her to succeed at her job.

As *She's Lost Control* shows, Ronah develops romantic feelings for John that blind her to his increasingly threatening behaviour. One day, he says in deadpan tone: "I want to strangle you." This overt threat of violence is cause to immediately terminate their professional relationship, yet Ronah continues to see John. When she catches John looking through her phone, a clear violation of her privacy, she chastises him, but only briefly. Becoming more fixated on John, Ronah breaks with

standard procedure and secretly visits his workplace, a local hospital, to clandestinely watch him at work. With a furtive look on her face, Ronah stands in the coldly lit blue hallway observing John who, in green scrubs, appears confident and competent, a different man altogether: standing at the nurse's station he talks amiably with his nurse colleagues. While the scene clearly shows Ronah becoming inappropriately invested in her client, it is also significant for how it juxtaposes John's care work – in a legitimate hospital, with regulations and colleagues – with Ronah's care work, which has no fixed address, is solitary, unregulated, and carries no legal protection. Without a doubt, *She's Lost Control* emphasizes this last point when a security guard approaches Ronah and asks her if he can help her find anything. Flustered, Ronah leaves. She asks a friend, a fellow sex surrogate, "What do you do if you're falling in love with a client?" *She's Lost Control* suggests Ronah's inappropriate visit to John's workplace – and her mounting romantic feelings for him – expand in a context of isolation, which stems from the secrecy she must uphold about her job. Isolation, secrecy, and a lack of social support cause depression and anxiety, elevate feelings of helplessness, and impair one's cognitive functioning. Were the care work of sex surrogacy legal and regulated – like John's nursing care work – *She's Lost Control* tacitly suggests, Ronah would be able to forestall a loss of self-control by accessing support from a professional organization or union and seeking guidance from friends and family.

Whereas *The Sessions* portrays sex surrogacy as though it is decriminalized, *She's Lost Control*, in contrast, shows how its ongoing criminalization compel women like Ronah to lead secretive lives, which exacerbates existing relations of domination and subordination. De Griend & Messias (2014) has noted that "women in highly gendered professions, such as nursing, teaching, domestic work, sex work, and other service professions are frequently targets of workplace violence" (p. 33). One newly minted sex surrogate describes the arbitrariness of the murky legal zone within which she operates: "As surrogates we technically live in a legal no man's land...there really is no legal support for us" ("interview"). A sex worker rights activist puts it this way: "efforts to criminalize the sex trade in recent years have made it more dangerous" (Gunn, 2018, n. pag.).

The climax of *She's Lost Control* is indeed any sex worker's worst nightmare. During their

eighth session, Ronah finally feels as though she is connecting to John. He touches her gently yet passionately and communicates his thoughts and feelings ardently. As a sex surrogate care worker, Ronah feels accomplished – she has succeeded at her job. The elation she feels at seeing John’s development, and her own mounting romantic feelings for him, compel Ronah to break the cardinal rule of her work and spend the night with John at the hotel. They have passionate sex. Ronah forgoes control physically (she orgasms) and emotionally by waiving all emotion management strategies (because she believes she has cured John’s “intimacy issues”). John confesses to Ronah that he “likes her.” Ronah replies: “I like you, too, John.” Ronah places her head on his chest and weeps softly. When they fall asleep in an embrace, *She’s Lost Control* seems poised to end on a hopeful note. Yet, while *The Sessions* portrays sex surrogacy as a seemingly legal enterprise in which a happy ending is inevitable, *She’s Lost Control* suggests that sex surrogacy is an unsafe job under the current criminalization framework.

The film does so by showing Ronah’s vulnerability when engaging in care work outside of the protection of any institutional or legal framework. In the middle of the night, John awakens and he experiences what appears to be a psychotic episode; he punches the bathroom mirror, swears at himself, and weeps. When Ronah rushes to comfort him, he redirects his anger at her and accuses her of lying to him: “Has anything you told me been true?” he cries. As Ronah tries to care for him – by embracing him and saying soothing words – he rejects both her care and then insults her body: “Your hands are small. You’re bony! I don’t like fucking like you!” he says. John has regressed to the angry man with “intimacy issues” he was when they first met and bitterly blames Ronah for his lack of growth: “I’ve done everything! You didn’t cure me!” By showing John faulting Ronah for not “curing” him, *She’s Lost Control* suggests that sex surrogacy is far from being a science and, even as an alternative therapy, may be unlikely to help men like John, who are deeply troubled. It is this insult to Ronah’s care work that pierces her most deeply and she retaliates by spitting in John’s face. He pushes her onto the floor, pours leftover whiskey from his glass on her body, lights a match, and drops it on Ronah. Miraculously, she manages to extinguish the fire with a towel and suffers only superficial burns. But

she is left hurt, cowering on the floor of the hotel bathroom. Despite her injuries, she manages to leave on her own and goes directly to a police station, where she reports the crime.

It is through Ronah's conversation with police officers after her assault that *She's Lost Control* shows how the criminalization of all forms of sex work place women in an untenable position. In a police questioning room, Ronah sits under a harsh neon light as though she is a criminal being questioned. The camera zooms in to show the raspberry coloured contusions on her face from John's assault. She looks like she is in both physical and emotional pain. The two questioning officers, a man and a woman, begin by asking Ronah about the nature of her relationship with her attacker. Ronah hesitates. In this hesitation, *She's Lost Control* suggests that Ronah realizes her dilemma: were she to tell the police officers that she is John's sex surrogate she would implicate herself in the act of prostitution and run the risk of being charged with a felony. Were she to lie to the police officers about the nature of her relationship with John, she would be committing perjury. The close-ups of Ronah's face show the emotional somersaults she is doing; she is faced with two unendurable choices. Ronah prevaricates: "I just want to know what my options are," she says. Sensing her unease, the female police officer tells Ronah that the police just want her to feel safe. Yet, given her two "options," Ronah cannot possibly feel safe; so, she creates a third by leaving to use the washroom. Once out of the officers' sight, she flees and returns to her apartment whose starkness underscores the film's explicit conclusion: in Ronah's hour of need, she has nobody to care for her; she is utterly alone.

Writing in *The Village Voice*, Scherstuhl (2014) suggests that *She's Lost Control*'s violent climax and distressing ending seems to "reach the same simple conclusions about surrogacy — creepy! dangerous!" (n. pag.), yet I want to suggest that there is another way to look at the film's climax. In this violent culmination – in which, incidentally, John's burning of Ronah patterns itself on the misogynistic attacks against women, including sex workers, in the sixteenth century – *She's Lost Control* forcefully represents the powerlessness all sex workers experience in the event they become the victims of violent crimes. Indeed, were Ronah, a care worker, to have assaulted John at his workplace, she would have immediately been arrested; yet because she is a criminal under the law, not a care

worker or sex surrogate, she has nobody to call, nobody to comfort her, and no legal recourse to assure her future protection. In depicting Ronah's journey from empowered sex surrogate-care worker to battered and isolated woman, *She's Lost Control* shows the unjust – yet ironic – imbalance of power between Ronah and John: Ronah is a care worker who is criminalized, while John is a care worker who is protected by the state.

Through the depiction of Ronah's victimization and ensuing powerlessness, *She's Lost Control* suggests that rather than protect women, the criminalization of prostitution harms them most grievously. It does so by giving violent men the confidence to abuse women who sell sex, since such men likely know they will be acting with relative impunity. Indeed, when we consider that the men who batter and kill the majority of women are boyfriends and husbands – not strangers – we can only imagine the freedom sadistic men must feel when harming and killing sex workers. And given that only 5% of rapes are prosecuted overall, we can further imagine the entitlement violent men who rape sex workers must feel, knowing they will, more than likely, never be convicted, much less charged. *She's Lost Control* offers a powerful reminder that sex workers need assurance they will not be criminalized in the event they report crimes committed against them to the police.⁷⁸

In *She's Lost Control*, Ronah's ordeal becomes exculpatory evidence to support arguments made by the labour and empowerment paradigms that the criminalization of sex work makes sex workers' lives unsafe. Ronah is a sex worker and a victim of assault and, one could argue, attempted murder. She is also in a double bind. She enjoys and takes pride in her work; she also must work to afford

⁷⁸ The effects of the ongoing criminalization of sex work (and sex surrogacy) in the U.S. stand in contrast to the effects of sex work's decriminalization in Australia, New Zealand, and the U.K., where distinctions between sex workers and sex surrogates are not made. In fact, the distinction made between sex worker and sex surrogate would seem to depend on geography and political climate. Australia's *The Scarlet Road* (Fiske & Scott, 2011), for example, the first documentary to look at surrogacy from a sex worker's perspective, explicitly supports all forms of sex work. The documentary follows 34-year-old Rachel Wooton, an intelligent, articulate, and passionate advocate for the rights of sex workers and people who have disabilities. Wooton advocates for sexual self-determination and pleasure and is critical of laws that criminalize sex work. She is one of the founders of Touching Base, an organization devoted to building bridges between sex workers and people with disabilities, two sexual minority groups who have long struggled against marginalization and stigmatization. The recent British documentary, *Sex on Wheels* (Young, 2013), also examines these themes. In the U.S., however, describing oneself as a sex surrogate is marginally safer than describing oneself as a sex worker, although in practice, sex work and sex surrogacy are often the same in all but name. Asked what the difference is between her work and that of a sex worker's, one "intimacy coach/therapist" responds "not much" (Lazatin, 2014, n. pag.). Cheryl Cohen Greene, on whose life *The Sessions* is based, describes her work as "that of a professional prostitute trained to help sex therapy patients" (Smith, 2012, n. pag.).

graduate school and support herself in one of the most expensive cities in the world. Yet, her work is unregulated and, at times, dangerous. Taking as axiomatic that the sex industry is irreducible to one rigid feminist theory, *She's Lost Control* captures how the experience of sex work fluctuates according to variables related to location, class, gender, reasons for entry, vulnerability to arrest, and support networks. Rhona has a job that is unique in that it carries no protection under the law. John, we can assume, knew this when he violently assaulted Rhona, understood that she would implicate herself by going to the police. Doing helping work as a sex surrogate has placed her at great risk, yet, as the film shows, the criminal justice system is structured to protect a violent perpetrator over Ronah. Thus, the criminalization of sex work makes Ronah helpless when she is most powerless herself. *She's Lost Control*, as a title, suggests that Ronah had control in the first place, but that was never the case. As the film depicts, practicing as a sex surrogate – even under the auspices of medicalized sex surrogacy – is potentially perilous without the protection of the law.

It is a bitter end. As a sex surrogate, Ronah takes pride in practicing care and body work, draws satisfaction from her job, enriches the lives of many clients, and cares about them deeply. Yet *She's Lost Control* asserts that Ronah cannot work safely in a system that criminalizes sex work. Even more provocatively, the film depicts the peril all sex workers face in the event they encounter violence. While sex surrogacy is clearly work, under the law sex surrogates are criminals. By portraying Ronah's skill, her favourable impact on clients, and the satisfaction and benefit she draws from her job, *She's Lost Control* offers a positive portrayal of sex surrogates as care workers. Yet, by showing the dangers of doing care work that is criminalized and unregulated, *She's Lost Control* also suggests that sex surrogacy – and by extension all sex work – must be regulated in order to ensure the safety and dignity of women who choose to consensually sell sex.

Conclusion

The Sessions and *She's Lost Control* offer a positive portrayal of the sex surrogate as a healing care professional, as a skilled care and body worker who enriches the lives of others. While physicians and the disability rights movement have championed sex workers as care and body workers for over a

century, this representation in popular culture is new and a significant marker of changing societal attitudes towards all sex workers in the twenty-first century.

Far from the stereotype of the victim or criminal sex worker, the sex surrogates in *The Sessions* and *She's Lost Control* are highly effective care and body workers who conduct their businesses with therapeutic professionalism, better the lives of people living with disabilities and dysfunctions, take pride in their work and see it as a vocation rather than a job. Contra the image of the sex worker as “the other” who is either punished or killed for her transgressions – an image that persisted through the twentieth century – *The Sessions* and *She's Lost Control* portray Cohen Greene and Ronah as rounded and complex characters who are agential, skilled, and sympathetic women. By neither vilifying nor glamourizing sex surrogacy, by exploring the granular day-to-day tasks of the sex surrogate, and by highlighting both the benefits and drawbacks of the work, *The Sessions* and *She's Lost Control* model how popular culture can offer humane, nuanced, yet complex images of sex workers that show what Weatherall & Priestly (2001) call the “multiple and contradictory meanings of sex work” (p. 324). The difference between these films and those of the past are that these reflect a growing acceptance of sex surrogacy as a valid form of work, respect for a woman’s right to choose her work, and turn away from salaciousness, moralism, and melodrama in favour of a more tolerant, subtle, and thoughtful study of how sex surrogates live and work.

At the same time, the films show the challenges sex surrogates face in the commission of doing emotional labour that requires them to use what Hochschild (1983) calls “emotion management strategies” (p. 5). In *The Sessions*, Cohen Greene develops strong feelings for O’Brien, and he for her, which brings them both emotional pain. *She's Lost Control* depicts violence as a potential occupational hazard for sex surrogates who operate in a framework in which sex work is still criminalized. By portraying the dangers sex surrogates face when doing their important and enriching work, *She's Lost Control* supports the decriminalization of sex surrogacy – and by implication, all forms of consensual sex work – and makes a powerful case for the de-stigmatization of all sex workers. Whether or not one agrees with the selling of sex, both films offer a compelling and new image of the sex worker who is

neither a criminal nor a victim, but a contributor to society who ought to be treated with dignity and allowed to work within a legal framework that assures her safety. *She's Lost Control*, in particular, portrays that it is not the work itself that places women at risk, but its criminalization.

In *The Sessions* and *She's Lost Control*, the sex surrogate is a healing care professional who deserves to be regarded as a legitimate worker. The films show how sex surrogates offer a valuable form of care work to clients who live with disabilities and dysfunctions and suggest the educative and healing role they could play in society at large. Further, both films show the specialized care and body work skills sex surrogates possess, and the sophisticated emotion management techniques they use in the commission of their work, thereby confronting the prohibitionist feminist perspective that all sex workers are exploited women with no recognizable skill sets. In addition, the films show how sex surrogates draw a sense of pride and accomplishment from their work. In Cohen Greene's case, the satisfaction of being a sex surrogate stems from her personal project rooted in empowerment feminist principles about free sexual expression. In Ronah's case, that satisfaction is rooted in her training in psychology and her conviction that a good life must include sexual expression. By showing the contributions, skills, and subjectivities of two rounded, complex, smart, and agential sex surrogate characters, *The Sessions* and *She's Lost Control* compel us to think about how sex workers could be treated and safely operate in society were consensual sex work – in all its forms – regarded as a legitimate job. In this vision, sex would be regarded as an integral part of the human experience and sex surrogates its emissaries, legitimate workers with valuable knowledge and skills. Taken together, *The Sessions* and *She's Lost Control* offer evidence of a growing trend in popular culture toward destigmatizing consensual sex work and treating all sex workers with greater empathy and dignity, regardless of the terms they use to describe their work.

Conclusion: From Victimhood and Vice to Sex Worker Rights

“According to the mainstream media and popular prejudice, the marginal sex worlds are bleak and dangerous. They are portrayed as impoverished, ugly, and inhabited by psychopaths and criminals.”
(Rubin, 1984, p. 295)

“Shows about gigolos, high-class escorts and porn stars hint at a new wave of small-screen attempts to offer an introspective look at the sex industry... Becoming a sex worker is now seen, by an ever-increasing number of people, as a viable, non-judgment-inducing career choice, as benign as working in an office or at any other ‘straight’ job.” (Koster, 2016, n. pag.)

In this dissertation, I have examined the new representation of the sex worker as entrepreneur and care worker in American popular culture from 2006 to 2016, a period of transformation, public debate, and change around the politics of sex work. American society has begun the process of re-evaluating the status of sex work and new questions are being raised where traditional (and moralistic) certainty used to be, while sex work is increasingly framed as an issue of human rights. Powerful organizations lobby for decriminalization. Mainstream news media publish nuanced – and supportive – articles about sex workers. Sex workers, long marginalized from feminist conversation, have begun to get a hearing. As Bateman (2018) writes: “No one who honestly believes in the feminist phrase ‘my body my choice’ should be ignoring the most marginalized and stigmatized group of working women in our society” (n. pag.) At the same time, social and economic shifts under neoliberal capitalism have changed how people work and bring “feelings” into their jobs, which are increasingly precarious. In this dissertation, I have contributed to feminist media studies’ probing of popular culture’s portrayals of sex work and feminist theorizing on sex work by showing how popular culture is representing a new sex worker within this period of change, when the definition of sex work is shifting from illegal vice to legitimate business. For the first time, popular culture is starting to recognize and register that many sex workers do not want to be saved, but listened to and legitimized.

The new figure of the sex worker as entrepreneur and care worker marks a shift away from twentieth century popular culture, in which sex workers were often sensationalized as “types” – tragic and fallen or sly and criminal – and assumed to be (often deserving) victims. Often, popular culture made sex worker characters into symbolic “bad women” who served as warnings to “good” women (and often showed what awaited women who misbehave). Beginning in the 1980s, neoliberal representations tended to glamourize or

trivialize the labour of sex work and elide the political and social measures that could make sex work safer for women. The problem with these representations was that they simplified the sex industry by re-inscribing the virgin/whore dichotomy, equating consensual sex work and sex trafficking, reinforcing patriarchal ideas about women's docile sexuality, and misrepresenting sex workers by stereotyping them as victims. By portraying sex workers as a homogeneous group of damaged women, popular culture re-circulated sensational, often dehumanizing ideas about sex workers and did little to elevate sex work into a serious topic of inquiry.

In the previous chapters, I have shown how popular culture is challenging the stereotype of the sex worker as virgin or whore with a range of new sex workers who are not "types" but rounded, sympathetic, often complex characters who are mothers, wives, daughters, business owners, and contributing citizens. Against the stereotype of the sex worker as fallen woman, *P.O.P.*, *The Client List*, and *The Sessions* portray sex workers who are mothers. Against the stereotype of the uneducated and ignorant sex worker, *The Client List*, *CamGirlz*, and *She's Lost Control* represent sex workers who are intelligent and keen students. These new works foster understanding for sex workers by exploring the many reasons women choose sex work: the potential to earn a great deal of money in a short time; a flexible schedule that accommodates other responsibilities (like school or mothering); disenchantment with service industry jobs; tuition costs; the empowering feeling of being paid for sexual services; and because they enjoy it. These representations bring attention to what actually prompts some women to become sex workers. Traditionally, as Bernstein (2007) points out, "sexual labour is regarded as, at best, an unfortunate but understandable choice for women with few real alternatives," yet today, increasingly, women with other options are entering sex work (p. 78). Rather than judge women for this decision, the portrayals I have examined in this dissertation explore women's motivations – often in vivid detail – by showing both the economic (and sometimes affective) incentives of engaging in sex work.

For the sex workers in these representations, sex work is a business that offers them economic mobility and an opportunity to control the means of production and work independently. Hardly fallen women, the sex workers in these portrayals bring to their work an enthusiastic, enterprising and entrepreneurial spirit. In *Magic City*, erotic dancer Gigi Maguire earns enough capital to establish her own business, Pole Fan Addicts, a training academy for younger erotic dancers, where artistry matters

more than nudity, and dancers work collectively. In *The Client List*, a single mother becomes a “mompreneur” and builds and operates a successful massage parlour business which allows her to escape the penury of minimum wage jobs. In *CamGirlz*, webcam models control the production of the entertainment spectacles they produce and into which they pour their creativity. While it was once customary to portray sex workers as women who made poor life choices, these new representations show that some women rationally choose and benefit from sex work. At the same time, these portrayals are not glib; they show sex workers facing challenges that are unique to the sex industry and make clear that sex work remains a dangerous job under the current laws. And while these portrayals are admittedly of comparatively privileged indoor sex workers, they nevertheless represent a professionalized stratum of the sex industry, which, until recently has been largely ignored or treated superficially by popular culture.

For the first time, popular culture is also starting to produce images of the *work* of sex work. The films, television series, and documentaries I have examined in this dissertation show sex workers who practice emotional labour, what Hochschild (1983) theorizes as the performance of “feelings.” The webcam models in *CamGirlz* practice emotional labour to stage digitally mediated encounters that exude “authenticity” or what Hochschild (1983) calls the “unmanaged heart” (p. 190). In *The Girlfriend Experience*, call girl Chelsea “deep acts” her role as alluring cosmopolitan confidante for her depressed businessmen clients, using what Bernstein (2007) calls “bounded authenticity” to create the illusion of intimate relationships. Sex workers in these representations also practice “care work” to help others achieve emotional and physical wellbeing. In *The Sessions*, sex surrogate Cohen-Greene teaches O’Brien how to give and receive sensual touch and feel more at ease in his own body; she is a healer who makes intimate contributions to their clients’ lives. Sex workers also perform body work. Riley, in *The Client List*, is a skilled massage therapist; sex surrogate Ronah, in *She’s Lost Control*, masterfully helps her clients become more comfortable in their own skin through “body awareness” exercises. Sex workers in these representations also engage in aesthetic labour and display work. The Snack Pack erotic dancers in *P.O.P.* are talented performers who use their bodies as instruments to entice and

seduce; in *CamGirlz*, webcam models engage in display work to decorate their bedroom backdrops in ways that best express their “authenticity.” The sex workers in these portrayals challenge the prohibitionist assertion that sex workers have no skills and dehumanize themselves by engaging in sex work; rather, many describe themselves as savvy performers of heterosexual femininity who knowingly use their erotic capital for economic mobility. In consonance with the labour and empowerment paradigm, these representations make clear that sex workers are not passive victims, but practitioners who entertain, offer pleasure and, at times, bring greater well-being into peoples’ lives. These new portrayals take seriously the long-hidden *work* of sex work; in doing so, they take sex workers seriously and send the message that there is nothing shameful or wrong about selling sex.

At the same time, these new representations also engage with Hochschild (1983) by showing the strain emotional labour places upon sex workers and the hazards of emotional “performances,” such as stress and self-alienation. Erotic dancer Clara, in “Road Strip,” vindicates her inner ugly duckling by drawing male attention to her insouciant striptease acts; yet, when the attention wanes, the emotional fallout is unsettling. In *The Girlfriend Experience*, Chelsea’s exhaustion after playing her role makes her vulnerable to developing romantic feelings for a client – and the result is disastrous. At the same time, however, these works show how performing emotional labour can provide sex workers with satisfaction and a sense of control over their work. Many sex workers in these representations describe the pride and enjoyment they derive from their jobs. As Riley says in *The Client List*: “This may be hard for you to believe, but I like my job.” Others are reservedly satisfied with their jobs, like Gigi in *P.O.P.* who says she “does it all for her daughter so her daughter won’t have to.” Yet, she still takes pride in being an excellent performer, as evidenced through her vigorous and impressive stage shows. This new popular culture lays bare the rewards and challenges of performing the *work* of sex work and ventures beyond the outsider’s understanding and assumptions of sex worker victimhood.

These new popular culture representations also intervene in ongoing feminist debates about sex work. Where it was once routine for popular culture to validate morally conservative and prohibitionist positions on sex work, these new portrayals tacitly or explicitly oppose these paradigms

by delineating sex workers from trafficked women, underscoring sex workers' agency to choose their work, dignifying their skills, highlighting sex work as a means of economic mobility, and showing the positive contributions sex workers make to their clients' lives. While prohibitionist feminists assume male clients to be deviant, these new works show the existence of clients who are ordinary men seeking intimacy, validation, or a consensual sexual experience. Furthermore, they suggest that it is the criminalization of sex work, rather than the clients or work itself, that imperils sex workers' lives by compelling them to conduct their business in clandestine locations, blocking their access to legal and labour protections, and escalating their stigmatization. *The Client List* shows Riley being forced to make payments to the police in order to operate her business (which, ironically, do not stem the police harassment she faces); it also reveals the hypocrisy of the criminalization of sex work through Riley's relationship with one customer, who ironically is a judge. That said, in certain portrayals, like *CamGirlz*, the sex positive ideas being espoused sometimes dovetail with a postfeminist sensibility, while *The Client List*, though sympathetic to sex workers, at times reinforces patriarchal conceptions of ideal motherhood. The most nuanced portrayals are those in which sex work is examined as a site of both agency and exploitation thereby drawing on what Weitzer (2012) has called "the polymorphous" paradigm (p. 30). *She's Lost Control* channels the polymorphous paradigm by portraying Rhona's commitment to the practice of sex surrogacy and the positive impacts she has on her clients' lives; at the same time, Rhona is the victim of an assault, yet decides against reporting the crime for fear of incriminating herself as a sex worker, being charged with prostitution, and jeopardizing her future career as a therapist.⁷⁹ If sex work were decriminalized, the film suggests, Rhona's abuser would be behind bars.

⁷⁹ This fear is warranted. As scholars and sex workers have shown, women who have worked in the sex industry face potentially devastating social and economic reprisals (Bruckert & Parent, 2013; Pesta, 2010; Petro, 2011). In 2012, journalist Sarah Tressler was fired from her job at *The Houston Chronicle* for having once worked as an erotic dancer (Greenslade, 2015). Melissa Petro (2017), who worked as an erotic dancer and GFE call girl to support herself during college, lost her job as a schoolteacher in 2012 after publishing a piece in the *Huffington Post* about the shutdown of the adult advertisements on *Craigslist*. Her dismissal, which was without cause, sent "a chilling message to any sex worker out there looking to leave the life" (n. pag.). Sex workers are especially vulnerable to aggressive online shaming campaigns. In 2012, former Olympic runner Suzie Hamilton had an endorsement from Nike and appeared in photo spreads in *Vogue*. This all ended when *thesmokinggun.com* outed Hamilton as a high-priced Las Vegas call girl (Ewing, 2015). Hamilton took to *Twitter* to defend herself, explaining her foray into sex work as the result of undiagnosed depression. It was too late, though. Nike dropped her and Hamilton, derided by online slut shaming, fell into a suicidal depression (Callahan, 2015; Dunn, 2015). In an anti-feminist gesture extraordinaire, Debbie Schlusel, a right-

By showing the benefits and dangers sex workers face – dangers that largely stem from the criminalization of sex work, not the work itself – some of the works discussed in the foregoing channel the polymorphous paradigm. All, however, challenge the criminalization of sex work, and endorse the labour/empowerment paradigm position that sex workers deserve the same legal protections, employment rights, and dignity other works receive under capitalism.

These new representations also draw our attention to the stigma sex workers continue to bear, what Gira Grant (2014) calls “whorephobia.” In many cases, sex workers take the stage to speak back to stereotypes directly. In *P.O.P.*, erotic dancer Gigi Maguire addresses the camera and challenges “the image that is portrayed in TV and movies” and asserts she is neither “a prostitute” nor a “crackhead.” In *CamGirlz*, a webcam model says “people think we’re just dumb sluts or something. But you need intelligence and drive and you have to be an entertainer.” By giving sex workers the stage to represent themselves, these portrayals play an important de-stigmatizing role in supporting sex workers who want to convey that they are neither deviant nor fallen, but ordinary women who have decided to use their erotic capital for economic mobility. Without moralizing, these works show women who become entrepreneurs in the only corner of the market where women are more successful than men. Recognizing that their sexuality offers an opportunity for financial gain, these women embrace their identities as sex workers. In a time of social change around the meaning of sex work in the U.S., this popular culture offers nuanced representations of sex workers and humanizes them outside of the tired virgin/whore binary.

The Limits of These Representations

While marking a positive break with the stereotypes, the new popular culture representation of the sex worker as entrepreneur and care worker often links with a neoliberal “post-feminist sensibility” (Gill,

wing pundit, frequent right-wing television news guest, and self-styled “expert on radical Islam,” wrote an article on her personal blog titled “Suzy Favour Hamilton: Former Olympian Uses Bipolarity as BS Excuse for Being Hooker, Slut” (2015). Schlüssel went on to characterize Hamilton as a “lowlife,” “sleazebag,” and “hooker” who – as sources told her – was also a “slut” in university who “did some pretty nasty things” (ibid.). To illustrate the misogynistic double standard, consider that Hamilton was publicly excoriated for being a call girl (for selling sex), while the actor Charlie Sheen has admitted to buying the services of call girls and was until recently the highest paid television actor (Pomerantz, 2011; Spargo, 2015).

2007) that equates sexual expression and individual entrepreneurship with empowerment and stresses freedom as realizable through the marketplace alone. Inequality, poverty, unemployment, and sexual and racial discrimination are occluded. For example, although Riley becomes a sex worker during the financial downturn and after her husband abandons the family, *The Client List* does not explore deeply the political-economic reasons for the widening income gap in the U.S. and the foreshortened opportunities women face disproportionately in the twenty-first century service economy. Furthermore, while these works are not what Razack (1998) has termed “tourist tales,” in which middle-class women “transgress” bourgeois sexuality before returning to the safety of their class positions to describe their empowering experiences, the sex workers in these portrayals are certainly part of what Bernstein (2007) describes as the increasingly visible middle-class sex workers who do emotion-based labour.

On the whole, these portrayals further elide the issue of racism. To be sure, these portrayals are not racist in themselves and, by the numbers, five out of the eight representations covered in this dissertation feature characters or subjects who are women of colour – agential women who counter one-dimensional media stereotypes about Black women as exotic sex objects or sidekicks – and are arguably more diverse than the average TV series or movie. But none of these works deal directly with the intersections of race and sex work, specifically, how sex workers of colour in the U.S. are exponentially more vulnerable to arrest and prosecution. None of the Black characters or documentary subjects ever mention race as a factor in their experience of doing sex work. Neither *P.O.P.* nor *Magic City* explore the racism that exists within the erotic dancing industry. Given the systemic discrimination Black women face in U.S. society, talking about race when talking about the sex industry is crucial. As Patel (2018) writes, 70% of defendants facing prostitution charges in Brooklyn are Black women; in fact, the discrimination against women of colour sex workers is so pervasive that the Legal Aid Society of New York has mounted a challenge to the “constitutionality” of anti-loitering laws that are disproportionately invoked against Black and Hispanic women and result in their being charged with sex work offenses far more often than white women (n. pag.). While representing women

of colour and drawing on the rhetoric of empowerment vis a vis sex work, these representations are surprisingly mute on racial discrimination. In fact, Black women characters in these works are portrayed as having the identical experiences as other sex workers. By disavowing the significant ways that race structures the experience of sex workers, these works ignore the existence of racism within the sex industry and criminal justice system and U.S. society at large.

It is also troubling that certain portrayals stress women's bodies as the mantles of their empowerment. To be clear, I agree with the premise of Hakim's (2010) theory of "erotic capital" – that women should be able to capitalize on their physical assets for financial reward if that is their choice. Yet, when certain portrayals in this dissertation suggest that erotic capitalism is a feminist strategy, one that empowers all women, the premise of collectivity in feminism is lost, and that is a problem. Gill (2007) argues that sophisticated post-feminist media does not objectify women, but encourages women to become active participants in their own objectification under the spurious banner of empowerment; in this sense, the "male gaze" theorized by Mulvey (1999) is internalized and girls are "endowed with agency on the condition that it is used to construct oneself as a subject closely resembling the heterosexual male fantasy found in pornography" (Gill, 2007, p. 152). Sex workers in some of the popular culture in this dissertation groom themselves to the specifications of the heterosexual male ideals of sexy womanhood and are paid to perform according to men's wishes. This is a sound money-making strategy, but it is separate from feminism. Exploring the limits to one's erotic capital for economic mobility, such as aging out of the sex industry, are also topics that are worthy of exploration.

It is noticeable, too, that the popular culture suggests that there are acceptable vs. unacceptable emotions that women – but especially sex workers – may express. Few sex worker characters and documentary subjects express anger. In *The Client List*, Riley displays only the more socially acceptable female sadness in the form of crying spells (to a soundtrack of soft saxophone music). In *CamGirlz*, women describe the terrible jobs they endured before becoming webcam models, yet none seem particularly dismayed by the state of an economy that propounds "opportunity for all" while failing to offer many a living wage. Increasing the minimum wage, instituting nationalized

health care and day care for single mothers and students, and building a stronger social welfare system, are but some of the political demands that feminists make in real life, but in this popular culture, these issues are not even on the table. Even in the comparatively nuanced *The Girlfriend Experience*, Chelsea, at times, exhibits a kind of emotional aphasia in the face of significant personal and political challenges.

The absence of anger, on one hand, may suggest evolved poise; on the other hand, it may reflect (and reinforce) how women's feelings – especially strong feelings – in patriarchal society are rarely taken seriously, with the result that an angry woman is still one of the rarest sights on screen because she threatens patriarchal ideology (and male viewers). According to Hochschild (1983), society discounts women's feelings in two ways: by deeming “rational” feelings “unimportant” and by deeming “irrational” feelings “dismissible” (p. 173). The weaker economic position women hold in society – what Hochschild (1983) calls their “low status shield” – makes it easier for men, and the institutions they represent, to dismiss women's feelings. According to Hochschild, women who challenge the dismissal of their feelings by expressing their feelings with greater force find that their amplification simply activates “the spiral” until “they come to fit the image awaiting them as ‘emotional.’ Their efforts are discounted as one more example of emotionalism” (pp. 173-174). In these portrayals, few sex workers become “emotional” because to show an “emotional” sex worker would negate her sympathetic appeal for audiences and bring her far too close to the image of “angry feminist” to which our culture is still allergic. Compliance makes for a likeable sex worker character. Yet, docility is what prevents these representations from making a palatable political statement and arguably, of having a stronger political impact.⁸⁰

⁸⁰ Even during the second wave feminist movement, when anger was the emotion *du jour* for public intellectual feminists, it was still largely the privilege of white feminists. Writing in *The New York Times* in 2016, Roxane Gay explains: “I am an opinionated woman so I am often accused of being angry. This accusation is made because a woman, a Black woman who is angry, is making trouble... Race complicates anger. Black women are often characterized as angry simply for existing (n. pag). Today, as Edwards (2015) writes, anger as a form of feminist agitation “seems banished from contemporary conversations on feminism—replaced, instead with a kind of cathartic baring of wounds” (n. pag.). In these new representations sex workers certainly bare wounds and share personal struggles but rather than use anger to agitate for change, they work on changing themselves by using self-improvement and the marketplace, two arenas in which women's anger finds no place. An angry woman, indeed, is incongruent with capitalist logic and for this reason the angry – or even disgruntled – sex worker is still one of the rarest sights on screen. But this image and this expression of emotion is important. As Roxane Gay (2016) writes, “anger allows us to express dissatisfaction. It allows us to say something is wrong.”

In absence of any expression of anger, these representations lack the political force necessary to assert what is wrong and to suggest what needs to change to assure safer working conditions for sex workers and greater integration into society. In my idea of an ideal representation of a sex worker, she would be a mother, daughter, a friend, a worker, and she would find positives and negatives in her work. Recognizing that current prostitution laws imperil sex workers, she would take part in collective action to challenge existing laws, and she would openly speak about the specific ways in which laws could be changed, or policies altered, to improve her life. The works I have examined, however, do not explicitly critique the status quo. Instead, they validate sex workers who conform to a particular image of neoliberalism's ideal subjects: "entrepreneurs" and flexible precarious service workers who are young, conventionally attractive, individualistic, apolitical, and within the U.S. These are, importantly, positive representations, yet rather than "ideal," I see them as one important step along the way towards more complex and politically aware portrayals that focus on agency *and* structure.

Thus, these representations elide the political battle for decriminalization that sex workers are currently fighting. Specifically, they do not explicitly show sex workers taking collective action to rally for greater rights. And while it is true that mainstream popular culture is opposed to showing unionization or worker rights movements, this on-screen elision is all the more noticeable in light of the off-screen visibility of sex worker activism in the past ten years. *The Sessions*, for example, is mute on the fact that surrogate Cohen-Greene is committing a felony under California law. The locating of sex worker empowerment within the personal rather than the collective realm suggests the political limits to these representations' progressive stance. As Arthurs (2004) notes, "the emphasis sex workers themselves place on self-representation to overcome the 'othering' effects of media discourse...cannot substitute for meticulous research that draws on a variety of forms of evidence that go beyond the personal" (p. 102). Similarly, Suleri argues that as important as women's personal narratives are, they "cannot function as a sufficient alternative" to rigorous examinations of power relations lest they be accorded "an iconicity that is altogether too good to be true" (as cited in Vanstone, 2007, p. 20). In concordance with the neoliberal proclivity for individualization, popular culture representations of the

new sex worker superbly illuminate her felt experiences, rally against her stigmatization, and normalize her as a working woman, yet deeper portrayals of the politics of sex work remain to be had.

The Stakes: Continued Stigmatization of Sex Workers

In spite of these limits, the new popular culture image of the sex worker as entrepreneur and care worker is important, for it challenges stereotypical and sensational popular culture of the past, rightly frames sex work as a labour issue, de-stigmatizes sex workers by portraying them as humans and not types, and begins the work of opening a cultural conversation about why sex work is work and rallying support for sex worker self-determination. These representations are especially necessary right now, as sex workers in the U.S. face new problems at a legislative level.

In 2016, sex workers faced a pervasive threat to their livelihoods and safety when federal legislation shut down *Backpage.com*, a website on which sex workers advertised their services and communicated with clients. For years, *Backpage.com* had helped sex workers stay safe by giving them a platform to advertise their services – which in turn allowed some to move from more dangerous street sex work to indoor sex work – and a channel through which to communicate with clients before meeting, thereby creating a digital trail. The 2018 passing of two new pieces of legislation – the bills Allow States and Victims to Fight Online Sex Trafficking Act (FOSTA) and the Stop Enabling Sex Traffickers Act (SESTA), known as FOSTA-SESTA, legislated by Donald Trump in April 2018 – effected great change. The new legislation amends a loophole in legislation that had absolved internet platforms from responsibility for the content users posted or the results of services offered. With FOSTA-SESTA, any website hosting advertisements for sex work are now considered participants in sex trafficking and face up to ten years in prison (Witt, 2018, n. pag.). Supporters of FOSTA-SESTA, including victims' rights advocates and anti-trafficking groups, argue that the shutdown of online advertising platforms on which sex workers advertise will protect women from being trafficked. But critics of the bill argue that FOSTA-SESTA is rolling back internet freedoms, removing consensual sex workers' only way of safely advertising and vetting clients, and exposing an already marginalized community to violence.

The closure of *Backpage.com* is the latest in a crackdown on internet sex work platforms, which began in 2015 with the closure of *MyRedBook.com* and peaked with the shuttering of the “erotic services” sections on *Craigslist* in 2018. Furthermore, while FOSTA-SESTA conflate sex trafficking and sex work, critics charge that it will not even succeed at its stated purpose of preventing sex trafficking. The largest anti-trafficking organization in the U.S., Freedom Network USA, says the bill “will not provide a meaningful improvement in anti-trafficking efforts, and may cause severe consequences for sex workers and trafficking victims alike” (Patel, 2018, n. pag.). The Civil Liberties Union also rejects the bill, calling it “a risk to freedom of speech” (ibid.). Even the Department of Justice (which Trump overrode to get the bill into Senate) says that the bill will make it harder to prosecute traffickers and have “unintended consequences” on sex workers (ibid.). Ultimately, websites like *Craigslist*, *Backpage.com*, and others, allowed sex workers to move from street-based sex work to indoor (safer) sex work and to screen clients from the privacy of their own homes prior to meeting them. According to a large-scale study, when sex workers were still allowed to use the online platform *Craigslist* to advertise and communicate with potential clients, sex worker homicides dropped by 17% (Cunningham, DeAngelo, & Trip, 2017, p. 5). Cunningham, et al. propose that online platforms make sex workers’ lives safer by moving outdoor sex workers indoors; facilitating repeat business with non-violent clients; enabling sex workers to do background checks; and, because online platforms capture a “digital fingerprint,” disinclining clients to violence for fear of later detection (ibid.). As Paulas (2018) writes: “With each site’s closure in this latest generation of communication crackdown, sex workers, already unprotected as a workforce, will be left further vulnerable to dangerous clients” (n. pag.). SESTA-FOSTA is the latest example of the still widely held assumption that all sex workers are victims.

In an environment in which sex workers’ lives are at risk and their civil liberties and self-determination hampered, the popular culture portrayals I have discussed represent one step towards a wider, more nuanced conversation about how women who choose to sell sex can be protected from harm, and how to represent their stories in ways that enrich discussions of sex work and the structural factors which surround it. While some of these portrayals at times embrace an unequivocally rosy

picture of sex work, others are more nuanced and epitomize a middle ground between total agency and total exploitation theorized by Weitzer's "polymorphous paradigm," which seeks to understand sex work according to a constellation of factors and to regard sex work as labour. Treating sex work as work allows us to usefully set aside morally-based determinations and unhelpful conflation between sex work and trafficking and to focus on the heart of the matter when talking about why women sell sex: as a job for money. As one writer and former erotic dancer describes it:

The unglamorous truth about my experience as an adult entertainer is that I felt empowered – as a woman, as a feminist, and as a human being – by the money I made, not by the work I did. The performances I gave didn't change anyone's ideas about women...I wasn't "owning" or "subverting" anything other than my own working-class status...[The work] didn't make me a better feminist. It just made me a feminist who could afford her own rent (as cited in Zeisler, 2008, p. 137)

Since 2016, more representations that frame sex work as work, which neither glamourize or sensationalize sex workers, nor assume that all sex workers are victims, have appeared (Koster, 2016). In 2017, David Simon, the creator of *The Wire*, premiered his series *The Deuce* (2017-), a drama starring James Franco as an aspiring porn producer and Maggie Gyllenhaal as a savvy sex worker-turned-entrepreneur in 1970s New York City. *Westworld* (2016-), one of the newer, more interesting portrayals of sex workers, is set in a futuristic amusement park themed like the nineteenth-century wild west that caters to wealthy hobbyists. The intelligent robots that staff the park must "live" the scripts they are programmed with, including some that involve being raped and murdered on a daily basis. After some robots develop post-traumatic stress disorder, their inventor admits they may be more sentient than he let on, and one robot, a sex worker, decides that she will emancipate herself and her co-workers from the male-run *Westworld*. While the popular culture I examine in this dissertation does not portray sex workers collectively agitating for rights, *Westworld* does, and is an indicator of how popular culture is

beginning to mediate the sex workers' rights movement. These, and numerous other sex worker themed shows and documentaries, have appeared in the last two years – from the viral *Twitter* story of erotic dancer Zola, which James Franco recently optioned into a film (Child, 2016; Pulley, 2015), to one of the newest episodes of *This Is Life with Lisa Ling*, about a sex surrogate – merit further study.

In the past few years, films and documentaries made by sex workers have also appeared with increased frequency on media channels like *YouTube*, online at *Sexworkerfest.com*, and at the bi-annual San Francisco Bay Area Sex Worker Film and Arts Festival (U.S. San Francisco Bay). Some of these films have won acclaim. *Tangerine* (Baker & Baker, 2015), starring Mya Taylor, a former sex worker, is the sensitive and non-moralizing story of a group of transgendered sex workers of colour in Los Angeles. Addressing *Tangerine's* focus on character rather than type, Mya Taylor said: "The film is not about people in sex work. The film is about friendship. The people just happen to be sex workers. It's just like a real life story, you know?" (as cited in Ford, 2015). The wide audience and critical acclaim *Tangerine* received (Taylor won the 2015 "Best Actress" San Francisco Film Critics Circle Award) will surely encourage more studios to support such projects. The popular culture made by and involving sex workers themselves also merits more scholarship. As Ditmore (2017) writes: "the way forward is to listen to sex workers and ask what would truly be of use to them – whether in law reform, research, or any other area – to offer suggestions, and to support the needs of sex workers without imposing another agenda" (as cited in DeVilliers, 2017, p. 181). This project, which is limited to wide release and commercially or critically acclaimed works, suggests how much work still needs to be done on smaller scale films and documentaries made by sex workers themselves.

Directions for Further Research

In this dissertation, I focus exclusively on popular culture's new representation of the sex worker as care worker and entrepreneur, a new image that aligns with the labour/empowerment and polymorphous paradigms. But it is also worthwhile to examine representations that align with the prohibitionist paradigm. Portrayals of sex trafficking and violence, as well as representations that assume sex worker victimhood, are important to examine from a feminist media studies perspective,

especially those that are produced at the expense of sex workers, epitomized most recently by the reality television show *8 Minutes* (A and E, 2014).⁸¹ Similarly, sheriffs' departments' websites across the U.S. publish mug shots of women arrested for prostitution – along with their full names – exposing them to public humiliation, and the possible loss of other jobs and custody of their children. *John TV*, hosted by an evangelical sex work prohibitionist, specializes in videos that show him ambushing johns and sex workers in cars and publicly humiliating them. *8 Minutes* and *John TV* capitalize on the public's assumption that sex work is always exploitative and cast themselves as rescuers in order to, ironically, exploit sex workers by entrapping them, using them as a source of unpaid labour for cheap entertainment, and reinforcing their deviant and stigmatized status. Even popular culture with a purported feminist agenda has reinforced such stereotypes.⁸² This exploitation-based popular culture merits further inquiry from feminist media studies scholars.

⁸¹ The reality TV series *8 Minutes* follows a pastor and former police officer, Kevin Brown, as he goes undercover as a client and meets sex workers alone in hotel rooms. Unbeknownst to the sex workers, Brown has given himself eight minutes to evangelize on the degrading nature of sex work and persuade the sex workers that they must exit the sex industry. He offers sex workers financial help, drug treatment if needed, and emotional support in exchange for signing a waiver to appear on the show (they are promised their faces will be blurred). After *8 Minutes* aired, sex workers began coming forward to say they never received the housing, medical, or employment help promised; some were given a hotline phone number, while others received no help at all. One reported that the so-called rescue van that was shown ferrying her away to "safety" actually dropped her off around the corner (Burns, 2015, n. pag.). Many of the sex workers say they were publicly humiliated by the show and left financially damaged and emotionally scarred. "This show, these people, it's a disaster in my life," said one sex worker (Emery, 2015, n. pag.). She says the producers gave her a \$200 flat fee and never returned her telephone calls. While she waited for the help she was promised, her savings dwindled and eventually she returned to sex work. On her first day back on the job, she was arrested (ibid.). Writing on *Alternet.com*, Brown (2014) points out that not only did these sex workers not ask for help, but their lives were made worse for the intervention. In the wake of the scandal, A and E cancelled the show.

⁸² In early 2016, people who conducted online searches for "call girls" reached a site called *Girls of Paradise.com* (GirlsofParadise.com). It looked very much like other call girl websites, with a grid of photographs of attractive women in revealing clothes. Prospective customers were able to click on photographs, which activated a chat window that invited them to communicate live with a call girl. After a perfunctory conversation, the call girl would ask the prospective customer if he wanted to see "more photos." Regardless of his response, the prospective customer would then begin receiving disturbing photographs. One set showed a woman with a bloody and bruised face, with the accompanying text: "I was found dead in my apartment, stabbed 53 times." Other sets of photographs showed sex workers with ligature marks on their necks and text that explained that they had either killed themselves or been murdered by violent men. In fact, *Girls of Paradise* was not a call girl website, but a collaboration between the French sex work prohibitionist organization, Le Mouvement de Nid, and McCann Paris, the multinational advertising agency. In a video on another website explaining the campaign, the organization stated that the site's goal was to innovatively bring to the public's attention the fact that "to be a prostitute today means to be a victim of extreme violence. By putting money in the system, clients are accomplices of this violence. We wanted them to realize the consequences of their actions" (WITW, 2016). The campaign won a gold Clio, one of the most vaunted prizes in the advertising world (ibid.). While the intention of the campaign was noble – to bring public attention to the violence and threats women sex workers face on the job – it was limited in two ways. First, studies have shown that call girls – like other indoor sex workers – are exponentially less likely to face violence than outdoor sex workers (Lever & Dolnick, 2000; Weitzer, 2011). If *Girls of Paradise* were interested in factually representing the women who are most imperiled, it would represent street sex workers. Second, *Girls of Paradise* suggests that the only way to keep sex workers safe is by abolishing sex work altogether and elides how decriminalization could allow sex workers to conduct their business out of the shadows, gain protection under the law, and disincline violent men from assaulting sex workers (because they would be more likely to be identified and held accountable were a system of balances and checks in place). As Lucas (2005) notes: "criminalization makes [sex] work more insecure, dangerous, isolating, and socially disreputable" (p. 540). In keeping with the prohibitionist feminist paradigm, *Girls of Paradise*

Another area for future study is the self-representation of sex workers on the Internet. Websites like *TheEroticReview.com* are contentious within the sex industry. These websites aggregate customer reviews of sex workers, much like *Expedia.com* aggregates travelers' reviews of hotels. For newer sex workers, excellent reviews on these websites result in increased credibility, which in turn translates into more bookings and higher earnings. Yet, the "make or break" power wielded by such sites (for instance, one bad review could mean thousands of dollars of lost income) make sex workers vulnerable to exploitation. In fact, some women have been threatened and coerced into performing sex acts in exchange for positive reviews – a form of exploitation represented by *The Girlfriend Experience* (Paulas, 2018). In response to this abuse of power, some sex workers have fostered new means of collective action by starting their own review websites or adding review sections to their personal webpages (ibid.). As Feldman (2014) notes, "in the face of very real and sometimes violent legal and social sanctions faced by sex workers, the Internet's anonymity allows sex workers to 'come out' online and speak as sex workers on issues of interest to them (p. 248, as cited in Jones, 2015, p. 563). Relatedly, more inquiry is needed into how sex workers self-represent on social media platforms such as *Reddit*, *Instagram*, and *Twitter*. How do sex workers use *Facebook* to promote activism? How do sex workers use *Twitter* to promote their interests? Finally, new popular culture representations about sex workers produced outside the U.S.⁸³ and popular culture representations of male sex workers, while beyond the scope of this dissertation, are also worthy of further scholarly inquiry.⁸⁴

rallies for the total abolition and criminalization of sex work. Such sophisticated advertising and activist campaigns – from both ends of the feminist spectrum on sex work – are worthy of further study.

⁸³ New portrayals outside the U.S. include the Brazilian series *Confessions of a Brazilian Call Girl* (Baldini, 2011), the Scottish documentary *Strippers* (Wilcox, 2014), and the Moroccan documentary *Much Loved* (Ayouch, 2015). The English film *Irina Palm* (2007) stars Marianne Faithfull as a grandmother who becomes a massage parlour worker to pay for her grandson's life-saving medical treatment. Other European films, which are not included in this study, tend to focus more on social issues around prostitution. For example, in the powerful Kenneth Loach film *I am Daniel Blake* (2017), a single mother is denied benefits due to bureaucratic red tape; after nearly collapsing and eating a tin of cold beans in a food bank, she becomes a sex worker. Her life improves dramatically thereafter. Understanding what stories European popular culture is telling about sex workers right now – in comparison to the U.S. – is a further area that warrants inquiry.

⁸⁴ Finally, popular culture is also portraying male sex workers with greater frequency. A miniseries based on the 1980 blockbuster *American Gigolo* (written by Neil LaBute and produced by Jerry Bruckheimer) has recently gone into production. *La Bare* (Manganiello, 2014) is a documentary about the "gender dynamics" of the male erotic dancing industry. *Rocco* (Demaiziere, 2016), another documentary, is the story of Italian porn star Rocco Siffredi's last year as a performer and a retrospective of his career. More research is needed on popular culture representations of street sex work, trafficking, male sex

When I first began this research, I took a trip to the Toronto Reference Library, one of the larger public branches in North America. On the building's sixth floor is the Picture Collection – a relic of the analog age – that houses dozens of filing cabinets containing magazine-and-newspaper-clipped pictures of almost every earthly phenomenon, organized according to subject area, from “animals” to “countries” to “foods” and, most interesting to me, “occupations” and “social issues.” At this time, Canada had just suspended its prostitution laws after the judiciary ruled that they endangered women's lives instead of protecting them, and sex work was very much in the headlines. After locating the “prostitution” folder – so voluminous it was actually two folders – in the “social issues” section, I carried it over to a librarian sitting at the desk. I was curious as to how the social transformations around sex work were trickling into everyday life. “Are you thinking about moving the prostitution folder to the ‘occupations’ drawer?” I asked. She immediately knew what I was talking about. “We are thinking about it,” she answered. When I phoned in December of 2018 to follow up, a Picture Collection librarian told me that the Library had begun the process of re-organizing and re-labelling files of what it had identified as “culturally or socially sensitive” material. “We know that this is important – and it is happening, it is in the works,” they said.⁸⁵

In the twenty-first century, American culture is changing how it thinks about sex work. The stories about and images of sex workers in movies, television shows, and documentaries, such as the ones explored in this dissertation, are starting to contest stereotypes and replace them with images of ordinary women who are simply trying to do their work safely and without being stigmatized. These new representations affirm the dignity and labour of sex workers and are markedly more on side with

workers, and trans sex workers. Projects similar to this one could be undertaken to understand how popular culture represents sex workers whose lives and work are studied even less than women sex workers.

⁸⁵ The librarian explained that due to the huge size of the Picture Collection – hundreds of files containing thousands of images – evaluating the contents and assessing their descriptors was an immense job that would take time. But it had begun. The librarian told me that they had decided to begin with the files related to Indigenous identities and then move on to examine and correct the files about other historically marginalized groups. “This collection was started in the 1950s and 1960s,” the librarian told me, “we inherited a lot of that language and now we are trying to change that.” The word “change,” which resounded in this brief conversation, seemed to sum up in a microcosmic way the general findings of my research: in just several years, society – from the popular culture I have examined in this dissertation to the language public institutions use – has begun the process of renegotiating how it characterizes and represents sex workers.

sex workers and their battle for decriminalization than those in the past. As we become more critical about the stories popular culture tells us about sex workers – in the same ways we have done with images of other marginalized groups over the last 100 years – we can also begin to question our most deeply held biases against women in the sex industry. Regardless of our personal feelings about sex work, sex workers deserve portrayals that go beyond moralizing statements about women’s sexuality (that draw from the virgin/whore binary) or blithe pronouncements about women’s empowerment (that draw from neoliberalism and post-feminism) as well as theoretical positions on sex work that can be dogmatic and overly deterministic because they do not engage with sex workers on their own terms and with attention to the specificity of their lived experiences. Indeed, the most nuanced popular culture portrayals represent rounded characters who experience both the benefits and drawbacks of doing sex work. As McNeill (2012) writes, when considering sex work, we need to recognize that

real life is not like a silent melodrama; the baddies do not all wear black hats and sport waxed moustaches, and many of the women who are tied to the railroad tracks are there because they consented to be and will not appreciate ham-fisted attempts at “rescue.” There is a whole spectrum between the party girl whoring herself for thrills and the chained sex slave, and the number of prostitutes at the one end is no higher than that at the other. The vast majority of us, like the vast majority of the human race, exist in the murky grey area between absolute freedom and abject slavery, trying our best to balance the pursuit of happiness with the toil necessary for survival (n. pag.).

Between 2006 and 2016, popular culture began the work of offering new and humanizing images of the sex worker as entrepreneur and care worker. As I have shown in this dissertation, popular culture’s new sex worker represents a positive break from stereotypes and a rejoinder to the anti-sex work position espoused by patriarchal conservative ideologies and, at times, prohibitionist feminists. That said, these new portrayals at times lack political urgency. While they release sex workers from the clutches of caricature and dispense with salacious stereotypes, and bring sex workers from the margin

to the center – often the center of the marketplace – they also involve the empowerment of only a select few types of sex workers – young, middle-class, and conventionally attractive indoor sex workers who work within the United States. Nevertheless, these new portrayals are humanizing because they show sex workers in a sympathetic light as women with complex lives who make choices. As the sex worker activist Silva Leite says, “It is dangerous to start from a perspective that people have no choices in life, because if we do that we start looking at them as victims and victims have no choice, and no voice” (as cited in Anasti, 2017, n. pag.). While the popular culture I have examined here does not speak for sex workers, it does voice some of sex workers’ long silenced views of their own work.

By emphasizing sex workers’ choices, dignifying their work, and humanizing them, these representations participate in the long overdue de-stigmatization of sex workers and problematize the idea that all sex workers are victims who need to be saved. While popular culture representations of sex workers do not in themselves change the legal system – which is the ultimate goal of the sex workers’ rights movement – popular culture does change hearts and minds. Today, sex work is increasingly being re-evaluated as an issue of human rights, dignity, and safety, and the humanization (and safety and dignity) of sex workers depends, in part, upon changing popular culture representations about them. As I have shown in this dissertation, popular culture’s new sex worker as entrepreneur and care worker – despite its limits – takes one important step forward in that direction.

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