

Abstract Drawing from fieldwork and interviews with middle-class *sex workers*, this essay considers the relationship between the class-privileged women and men who are increasingly finding their way into sex work and more generalized patterns of economic restructuring. How has the emergence of new communications technologies transformed the meaning and experience of sexual commerce for sex workers and their customers? What is the connection between the new ‘respectability’ of sexual commerce and the new classes of individuals who now participate in commercial sexual transactions? This essay concludes by exploring some of the key transformations that are occurring within middle-class commercial sexual encounters, including the emergence of ‘bounded authenticity’ (an authentic, yet bounded, interpersonal connection) as a particularly desirable and sought-after sexual commodity.

Keywords authenticity, class, postindustrialism, sex work, technology

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Sex Work for the Middle Classes

By the end of the 1990s in postindustrial cities such as San Francisco, a burgeoning internet economy was in full swing, and media stories abounded which suggested that technology was pushing contemporary culture towards new frontiers of sexual tolerance by eliminating the biggest obstacles to the buying and selling of sexual services: shame and ignorance. Commentators highlighted the ease and efficiency of the new technologies and the ways in which online sexual commerce had shifted the boundaries of social space, blurring the differences between underworld figures and ‘respectable citizens’ (Droganes, 2000; *Economist*, 2000; Prial, 1999).

Less frequently commented upon were the broader cultural underpinnings of new forms of technologized sexual exchange. Nor was there much discussion of the socioeconomic transformations that linked

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seemingly disparate cultural phenomena together. What were the underlying connections between the new ‘respectability’ of sexual commerce and the new classes of individuals who were participating in commercial sexual transactions? What was the relationship between the overwhelmingly white, native-born and class-privileged women (and men) who were finding their way into sex work and more generalized patterns of economic restructuring? How did the emergence of new communications technologies transform the meaning and experience of sexual commerce for sex workers and their customers?

My discussion in this essay derives from ethnographic fieldwork carried out in five US and European postindustrial cities between 1994 and 2002, a period of rapid technological growth and expansion.¹ Fieldwork consisted of on-site observations and informal interviews with participants in a variety of erotic work spaces and at sex workers’ support groups; 15 in-depth, face-to-face interviews of 2–6 hours in length and an immersion in sex workers’ own writings and documentary films (Bernstein, 2007). In this article, I focus on the experiences of sex workers who exemplify the ways that middle-class sex work has been facilitated by – and itself facilitates – new technologies of sexual exchange. A secondary aim is to explore some of the key transformations that are occurring within the privatized commercial sexual transactions that many such participants engage in, including the emergence of what I term ‘bounded authenticity’ (an authentic, yet bounded, interpersonal connection) as a particularly desirable and sought-after sexual commodity.

Economic concerns in sexual labour

In postindustrial cities of the West, sex workers who are white and middle class have sometimes been hard pressed to defend themselves against critics who maintain that they are atypical and unfit spokeswomen for the majority of women engaged in sexual labour, whose ‘choice of profession’ is made under far greater constraints. Although middle-class sex workers may not be speaking for the majority when they seek to reframe sexual labour in terms of a respectable and esteem-worthy profession (Leigh, 2004; Nagle, 1997), some of the most sociologically interesting questions go unasked and unanswered if we limit ourselves to the non-majoritarian critique. Why are middle-class women doing sex work? Can sex work be a middle-class profession? Most crucially, if sexual labour is regarded as, at best, an unfortunate but understandable choice for women with few real alternatives, how are we to explain its apparently increasing appeal to individuals with combined racial, class, and educational advantages?²

The research that I conducted during the internet boom years of the late 1990s suggests that economic considerations, in fact, remain highly

relevant to middle-class sex workers' erotic and professional decision-making. Richard Florida's (2004) notion of the 'creative class' – a social formation specific to late 20th-century technologically advanced urban economies – shares certain common features with earlier sociological notions of postindustrial society's 'new class', as well as with Pierre Bourdieu's notion of the 'new petite bourgeoisie'. Even during the peak years of the internet economy, well-paid, part-time work – especially for women of these 'creative classes' – was, more often than not, difficult to come by. Despite the huge expansion of jobs in postindustrial dot-com economies, patterns of gendered inequality within the high technology sector meant that even white, college-educated women were likely to be excluded from the highest-paying positions.

Compared to men with similar forms of educational capital and class provenance, middle-class women in postindustrial economies are much more likely to find themselves working in the lowest-paid quarters of the temporary help industry, in the service and hospitality sectors, or in other poorly remunerated part-time jobs (McCall, 2001; Milkman and Dwyer, 2002; Sassen, 2002). Jenny Scholten and Nicki Blaze (2000) have written about their experiences living in San Francisco during the dot-com boom years and supporting their nascent writing careers by working as strippers, coining the term 'digital cleavage' to refer to a gender-specific version of the more frequently remarked upon 'digital divide' (the class-based gap in access to high technology). Observing the disparity between their 'non-corporate type' female friends who worked in the sex industry and many of their male counterparts who easily drifted into well-paid work in the high-tech sector, they note that 'College hadn't prepared these men for systems administration anymore than it had prepared us for pole tricks. We'd all learned our trades on the job.' With women constituting a mere 28 per cent of the employees in the IT industry – and occupying the lowest rungs within it (Scholten and Blaze, 2000), the decision to provide lap dances was regarded by many women as a more reliable source of revenue. Notably, by the late 1990s, a prominent student-run newspaper in the San Francisco Bay Area was as likely to feature 'Help Wanted' ads for exotic dancers, escorts, and pornographic models as it was for part-time computer assistance.

Given the gendered disparities of postindustrial economic life, the relatively high pay of the sex industry (compared to other service sector jobs) provides a compelling reason for some women from middle-class backgrounds to engage in sexual labour. Girl-X's narrative of her decision to become a phone sex worker, which appeared in a special Sex Industry issue of the alternative parenting magazine *Hip Mama*, exemplifies one common route of passage into the Bay Area sex industry in the late 1990s:

I had gotten bored with my day job, which was – and still is – unworthy of mention . . . The idea [of doing phone sex] excited me . . . I would no longer be subject to the indignities that came along with my previous jobs in the service industry, slinging espresso, records, books, or trendy clothes. I could barricade myself in my cave-like studio apartment all day and all night if I wanted, leaving only for special occasions, like the appearance of a Japanese noise band at one of those divey punk clubs. (Girl-X, 1997: 20)

Where Girl-X exemplifies the transition from low-end service work into sexual labour, Zoey's account of trying to support a middle-class lifestyle on \$17.75 an hour (despite holding bachelor's and master's degrees) exemplifies another. Zoey was a 30-year old former social worker who was working as an erotic masseuse when I met her. During a conversation over tea in her apartment, she described her transition into sexual labour this way:

A year out of school I was very burnt out on the low pay, and really wanted to make more money . . . My boyfriend at the time had a good friend who had been doing sensual massage for many years and had found it tremendously lucrative . . . And so, I thought, oh, this would be a great ground for me to, you know, skip over years of torturous low pay [laughter] and actually then, to practice things that were truly dear to my heart.

During an interview with Elise, who was pursuing a doctoral degree in comparative literature when she began what would eventually evolve into a 10-year stint as an escort, she pointed to a related set of motivations that had underpinned her own decision to engage in sex work:

I had recently met these women who were sex workers . . . and I saw that this looked easy, like an easy way to make lots of money . . . I was working on my dissertation and I had to teach and to take out huge student loans. That was like a huge factor in deciding to do sex work because I felt like I couldn't afford to go into any more debt. So yeah, I started doing sex work at this agency where my friend worked. And then eventually I started working from home.

Sex work and distinction

Economic factors also served to shape middle-class sex workers' choices in other ways, ways which were not directly related to the pursuit of material sustenance in a high-tech economy but which pertained more generally to members' class-specific cultural dispositions. In *Distinction*, Pierre Bourdieu's analysis of the material and social underpinnings of taste, he describes 'the new petite bourgeoisie' as composed of individuals with two primary class trajectories – on the one hand 'those who have not obtained from the educational system the qualifications that would have enabled them to claim the established positions their original social position promised them' – women like Anna, a sex worker I met from an

affluent suburb in Colorado, who had just completed her BA but had yet to pursue an advanced degree – and on the other hand, ‘those who have not obtained from their qualifications all they felt entitled to’ – women like Zoey or Elise, who were dismayed that their educational credentials had not lifted them to greater heights (Bourdieu, 1984: 357). Given either trajectory, individuals who pertain to the new petite bourgeois class fractions are likely to settle into subordinated spaces within the institutions of cultural production and exchange. According to Bourdieu, what is most distinctive about these new class fractions, however, is the particular ethos which infuses the cultural goods that they produce and consume. Unlike the ‘old’ petite bourgeoisie (paradigmatically, the declining class of craftsmen and small shopkeepers) which sought to distinguish itself from the working classes via an ethic of self sacrifice and ‘virtue’ – the new petite bourgeoisie seeks its occupational and personal salvation (and thus its sense of distinction) via an ethic of ‘fun’:

[W]hereas the old morality of duty, based on the opposition between pleasure and good, induces a . . . fear of pleasure and a relation to the body made up of ‘reserve’, ‘modesty’ and ‘restraint’, and associates every satisfaction of the forbidden impulses with guilt, the new ethical avant-garde urges a morality of pleasure as a duty. This doctrine makes it a failure, a threat to self esteem, not to ‘have fun’. (Bourdieu, 1984: 367)

Middle-class sex workers’ frequent embrace of an ethic of sexual experimentation and freedom must thus be seen not only in ideological terms, but as a particular strategy of class differentiation as well. Not incidentally, many of the middle-class sex workers that I interviewed were unpartnered and without children, and the majority described themselves as nonmonogamous, bisexual, and experimental. Some sex workers even espoused an ideology of sexual fluidity that (along with the necessary economic capital) enabled them to serve as both sellers and occasional *buyers* of sexual services. In contrast to the old petit-bourgeois values of upwardly mobile asceticism and restraint (which served to distinguish this class from the working class, whose ethos rejects ‘pretense’ and striving), the new petite bourgeoisie regards fun, pleasure, and freedom as ethical ideals worthy of strenuous pursuit. The embrace of these ideals serves as a means for members of the new petite bourgeoisie to distinguish themselves from the old petite bourgeoisie, an invisible boundary separating classes of individuals who might seem, at first glance, to exist in close proximity.

Organizing the exchange for authenticity

Middle-class sex workers’ sense of distinction vis-à-vis their work could also be found in the types of work situation that they favored. As

researchers Melissa Ditmore and Juhu Thukral (2005) have observed, the goal for most indoor sex workers (of whatever class background) who remain in the business is usually to be able to work independently. A common trajectory is to enter the industry working for someone else and to gradually build up one's own clientele. While professional autonomy was indeed desirable for the middle-class sex workers that I spoke with, there were other organizational criteria that were important to them as well. During whatever period of time that they might spend engaged in brothel-based work with third-party management, they were inclined to remove themselves from locales that seemed to foster a purely instrumental relationship to the labour. As Bourdieu has written, new petit-bourgeois 'need merchants' 'sell so well because they believe in what they sell' (1984: 365). Although the sex workers I interviewed described an array of experiences with third-party management, some of the most troubling situations did not involve violent coercion or physical danger but rather circumstances exemplifying a crude economic self interest and lack of authenticity – the opposite of the sense of value and distinction that attracted them to the work in the first place.

The first time I did massage, I was green, green, green. I don't think that there was a hell of a lot of camaraderie or direction shared amongst the women. I know that there was male ownership or at least male management and I don't think that the commissions were fair . . . [It was] not an empowerment situation . . . I do remember one phrase, 'greasing down pigs'. I remember always thinking about the oil, and touching, and thinking of the men as pigs. So we're not talking real true-blue pleasure here. (Diana, 38)

I worked at a place once in a sort of gourmet neighbourhood in Berkeley – alternative but ritzy . . . But even though they acted like we were a co-op – they expected us to do all of the cleaning and answering the phones, and required us to do the laundry during our shifts, stuff that a madam would normally do – all they did was come in and collect the money . . . They also made us come to staff meetings in addition to our regular schedule. These meetings were unpaid, a waste of our time . . . I finally left when I got a chance to open my own place in the City. (Amanda, 38)

A San Francisco-based sex worker, Amanda, currently has several of her present and former lovers serving as her 'drivers' (taking her to the homes of outcall clients, and waiting for her until she is finished) as well as providing security for her with in-call clients (staying in an adjoining room of her rented workspace and being ready to intervene in case of any mishaps). Amanda likes to refer to the three men who work for her as her 'sofa boys', whose main job it is to sit on the couch, chat with her during slow periods and help her clean up at the end of a shift. Far from controlling Amanda, these men are essentially friends that she has recruited to act as her paid employees. Pye, a sex worker activist and newspaper columnist from

Stockholm, also described her current working environment – a strip club that is run as a (legitimate) workers' cooperative – in emotionally positive terms. During our interview, Pye explained that at her club, the workers not only maintained close relations with one another as well as with the management but also divided up all wages and tips equally: 'We're like friends and family to each other – one girl plays the violin; another is in a folk band; another is studying English lit'.

The role of new technologies

Despite the broader structural trend which situates women of most social classes on the wrong side of the 'digital cleavage', the internet has reshaped predominant patterns of sexual commerce in ways that many middle-class sex workers have been able to benefit from. As various commentators have noted, the internet has enabled sexual commerce to thrive not only by increasing clients' access to information but also by facilitating community and camaraderie amongst individuals who might otherwise be perceived (and perceive themselves) as engaging in discreditable activity (Lane, 2000; Sharp and Earle, 2003).³ For women who are able to bring technological skill and experience to sex work, it is increasingly possible to work without third-party management, to conduct one's business with minimal interference from the criminal justice system, and to reap greater profits by honing one's sales pitch to a more elite and more specialized clientele (Sanders, 2005a).

During our interview, Amanda was quite explicit about the ways that the new technologies had revolutionized her practice. She recounted how, after her brief stint working in a Berkeley brothel in which she was consistently 'passed up' by the predominantly working-class clientele 'in favor of younger, bustier, blonde women', she decided to give sex work another try when a friend suggested to her that she could advertise on the internet and work out of her own space:

Now, I only advertise on the internet. It insures me a reliable pool of well-educated, professional men with predictable manners and predictable ways of talking. When they make appointments, they keep them. My ad attracts a lot of first timers. I seem 'safe', like someone they would already know, since it's clear that I have the same kind of background as they do and I seem easy to talk to. White educated women like me have a lot of appeal to professional white men.

Sybil, an aspiring dancer, described a similar transition from brothel work to self-employment:

At the brothel, I would always get sold short . . . I was always presented in the number three or number four position, brunette being a big negative . . . But the great thing about Jennifer [the madam] is that she told me, and it went

over my head like a low flying jet, 'Sybil, you're old enough, you're good enough, and gosh darnit you know how to sell yourself. Just take out a fucking ad and work out of your own crib.' I am so grateful. For less than the commission price of one client at Jennifer's, I have created a monster by virtue of six words, a knowledge of language, and marketing skill.

By advertising through specialty websites, members can even pitch their advertisements towards clients who harbor an interest in their specific physical characteristics (fat women, older women, Asian women), or in the precise sexual services for which they can offer expertise (tantra, sado-masochism, erotic massage). Many such sites are also linked to client websites which feature restaurant-style reviews of their services. Other websites contain links to escorts' personal blogs, in which the day-to-day musings of the sex worker are intended to serve as a window into her personality. Finally, there are community websites with classified listings, where advertisements for sex workers simply appear in the 'services' section, sandwiched unobtrusively between the headings for computer help, event planning, skilled trades and real estate.

Professionalizing sexual labour

As Bourdieu observes, one way that members of the new petite bourgeoisie have found to embrace a sense of social distinction is via the adoption of 'reconversion strategies', in which cultural capital is employed to 'professionalize' marginal spaces within the labour market and to invest them with a sense of personal meaning and ethical value (1984: 368). At the meetings of sex worker activists that I attended in San Francisco, members made efforts to professionalize their trade through activities such as the demonstration of 'penetration alternatives', discussions of novel and tested safe-sex techniques, and presentations of statistical studies documenting the incidence of HIV in body fluids. Meetings were also a common place for members to make referrals to one another and to circulate written materials such as 'dirty trick' lists (featuring the names and phone numbers of clients who were suspected of being dangerous); legal, investment, and tax advice; and safer sex guidelines.

Over the course of the last decade, there have been a number of print and web-based 'how-to' guides which serve a similar purpose, distributing accumulated know-how worldwide (EscortSupport.com, 2004; Meretrix, 2001). One popular self-help volume for entrepreneurial sex workers features chapters on 'Marketing Your Services', 'Continuing Education within the Field', and 'Planning for the Future' (Meretrix, 2001). In similar fashion, the 'Escorting Tip Guide', published by the website EscortSupport.com (see Figure 1), contains a list of frequently asked questions, such as 'What is the best way to screen clients?' as well



Figure 1. Banner for EscortSupport.com, a website for sex workers which extends tips and networking to a broad online community. Used with permission.

as a set of probing ‘self knowledge’ questions for prospective sex workers to consider: ‘Was it money alone that attracted you? . . . Do you have any internal stigma about working? [T]here are far too many women in the business who thinks all it takes to succeed is tits and ass . . .’ (EscortSupport.com, 2004).

For the middle-class sex worker I spoke with, the performance of sex work often implied a distinctive skill set that could be elaborated through education and training. Many spoke explicitly about their deliberate pursuit of special skills as a means of enhancing both their experience of doing sex work and their earning power. The forms of training that they pursued ranged from massage certification to yogic breathwork (useful, one woman explained, with clients who were interested in tantric sex) to sexual surrogacy courses to the self-conscious embellishment of skills left over from prior careers. Zoey, for example, who had completed graduate school and an internship in social work, considered her earlier training as a therapist to be vital to her current work as an erotic masseuse:

The model that I have always chosen in doing this work has actually been a psychotherapy model . . . As a therapist, in order to continue working with repetitively traumatized children, I had to be doing a ton of behind-the-scenes work so I could hold my ground and have something to give them of value . . . Because of my training as a therapist I knew, intimately, how to do that; so, I brought that to sex work too.

For Amanda, her best training for sex work came from sex-educator classes, from yoga, and from years of experience teaching pre-school: 'Even though there's no naptime, both jobs are really about connecting non-verbally. And in both cases, you often have to repeatedly set boundaries and clean up the mess'.

In addition to the acquisition of skills and training, the strategic deployment of educational and cultural capital came into play for middle-class sex workers in other ways. Lisa got her job at a Sausalito massage parlour when she 'faked a French accent and answered an ad for a European blonde'. Sybil, like other women, described screening her clients closely, and could restrict her practice to powerful businessmen once she knew 'how to ask the right questions.' Whereas on the streets, many women describe their previous private-sphere heterosexual relations as constituting sufficient technical preparation to engage in sex work (Bernstein, 2007; Høigård and Finstad, 1992; Maher, 1997), for middle-class women, cultural capital, work experience and special training often constitute vital components of sexual labour.

'Bounded authenticity' and the single self

Ironically, it is precisely amongst the middle-class women and men, who are the most strident purveyors of the normalizing term 'sex work', that sexual labour is most likely to implicate one's 'private' erotic and emotional life. Those who have fought hardest for the social and political recognition of prostitution as 'work' (as opposed to a uniquely degrading violation of self) are also those for whom the paid sexual encounter is likely to include emotionally engaged conversation as well as a diversity of sexual activities (bodily caresses, genital touching, cunnilingus and even occasional mouth-to-mouth kisses, rather than simply intercourse or fellatio), requires a larger investment of time with each client (typically at least an hour, as opposed to 15 minutes for street-walkers), and is more likely to take place within the confines of one's own home (see also Lever and Dolnick, 2000). Since middle-class sex workers generally charge by the hour rather than for specified acts, their sexual labour is diffuse and expansive, rather than delimited and expedient.

During the era of industrial capitalism in which the institution of modern prostitution in the West was consolidated, what was typically sold and bought in the prostitution encounter was an expedient and emotionally contained exchange of cash for sexual release (Corbin, 1990; Rosen, 1982; Walkowitz, 1980). Although more intimate encounters still occurred, the expansion of the brothel system during this period led to the emergence of a new paradigm of efficiently Taylorized, commercialized sex. In contrast to this, within the postindustrial paradigm of (new)

middle-class sex work that I have been describing, what is bought and sold frequently incorporates a great deal more emotional, as well as physical labour within the commercial context.

Yet the attachment of a monetary fee to the transaction constitutes a crucial element in the erotic exchange, not merely for the sake of material provision, but at emotional levels as well. For example, middle-class sex workers who recounted to me occasionally offering ‘bargain rates’ or unpaid sexual arrangements to preferred clients soon discovered that they invariably wound up repelling the very clients they wished to keep. As with other forms of service work (therapy, massage), successful commercial transactions are ones in which the market basis of the exchange provides an important emotional boundary for both worker and client, but one which can also be temporarily subordinated to the client’s desire for authentic interpersonal connection. As the San Francisco sex worker activist and writer Carol Queen has explained,

We create sexual situations with very clear boundaries, for ourselves and for our clients. In fact, one of the things that people are paying us for is clear boundaries . . . Same thing with seeing a psychotherapist; there you are paying someone to tell your secrets to, someone you can trust will not judge you and who at least won’t interrupt you in the middle and start telling you their secrets. Instead, you are getting focused attention. (quoted in Chapkis, 1997: 77)

Since the publication of Dean MacCannell’s classic study, *The Tourist* (1976), scholars of tourism have connected the rise of the tourist industry to the pursuit of the ‘authentic’ in a world in which capitalism is perceived to have rendered more and more quarters of social life ‘artificial’. Contemporary theorists of middle-class tourism to the third world have extended this insight, noting that for the new middle classes in particular, the pursuit of ‘the authentic’ in consumption and travel often provides consumers with a sense of distinction, the sense that one is capable of appreciating that which is ‘untouched’ and accessible to only a few (Mowforth and Munt, 1998; Mullings, 2000: 29; West and Carrier, 2004).

In her study of strip club patrons, Katherine Frank (2002) noted that men’s visits to strip clubs resemble a form of ‘postmodern touristic practice’, in that men often place a premium upon ‘realness’ (authenticity) in their interactions with strippers. Frank argues that clients’ desire for authenticity is palpable even amidst the postmodern simulations of makeup, costumes, breast implants, and stage names (not to mention cash exchange). This desire finds expression in their frequently stated preference for exotic dancers who exhibit the ‘natural look’, who personify ‘the girl next door’, and who can engage in conversation with frequency and ease. Sanders (2005b), likewise, has written about sex workers’ strategic signaling of authenticity with their clients.

In my own research, evidence of middle-class sex workers' efforts to manufacture authenticity resided in their descriptions of trying to simulate – or even produce – genuine desire, pleasure and erotic interest for their clients. Whereas in some cases this involved mere 'surface acting' (as with Amanda, in the next extract) it could also involve the emotional and physical labour of manufacturing *authentic* (if fleeting) libidinal and emotional ties with clients, endowing them with a sense of desirability, esteem or even love. In contrast to the 'counterfeit intimacy' that some sociological researchers have presumed to occur in the commercial sexual encounter (Foote, 1954; Ronai and Ellis, 1989; Sanders, 2005b), many sex workers' depictions of their work exemplified the calling forth of genuine feeling that Arlie Hochschild (2003) has termed 'deep acting' and that Wendy Chapkis (1997) has described as the 'emotional labour' of sex. Hochschild distinguishes between the practices of 'surface acting' and 'deep acting' in emotional life (2003: 92–3), noting that middle-class jobs typically call for 'an appreciation of display rules, feeling rules', while working-class jobs 'more often call for the individual's external behaviour and the products of it' (2003: 102).

When I first started out, I enjoyed the sex. I'd go to work and 'have sex'. Now, I don't have that association as much. But my clients seem to think that being a nice guy means being a good lover. They do things to me that they should do with a girlfriend. Like they ask me what I'm into, and apologize for coming too soon! So I need to play along. They apparently have no idea that the best client is the one that comes immediately. (Amanda)

What I've noticed is that a lot of people really want to be witnessed when they come. They really want to feel that. You know, I totally get their desire and I want to be able to offer that. And so what I've learned how to do is to look at them deeply and very, very lovingly . . . For them, it feels great, like it's so personal, like girlfriend stuff. But I feel that I'm just offering them . . . love from the earth, coming up my feet and coming out to them. So they get love. I'm just channeling love. (Zoey)

In addition to satisfying their clients' desires for bounded authenticity, many sex workers placed a premium upon ensuring that the labour felt meaningful to *themselves*. Through the recent development of blogging, a growing number of middle-class women have taken to writing about their experiences doing sex work and the satisfactions and disappointments that they have encountered. Part advertisement for their services and part vehicle for self-expression, websites for escort bloggers often boast hundreds of members. On one popular escort blogspot, Magdalene Meretrix describes the philosophy that she brings to her experience of sex work as 'a combination of mysticism, meditation, and the magical arts'. Meretrix makes clear that she regards her work as more than an occupation,

noting that it has been a 'vital component of her spiritual path'. In a similar vein, another woman spoke to me about creating meaning and authenticity for herself in sex work by offering her clients only the kinds of erotic experiences that she herself enjoyed giving: 'I don't go into those sessions teaching my clients how to pleasure me like a lover, but I *do* teach them how to pleasure me by receiving the service that I offer'. For these sex workers, emotional authenticity is incorporated explicitly into the economic contract, challenging the view that commodification and intimacy constitute 'hostile worlds', which has often prevailed in sociological discussions of the subject (Zelizer, 2005). Eva Illouz (1997) has also written amply on the inextricable intermingling of erotic love and late capitalist consumer culture. As opposed to the 'double self' that prostitutes have been known to draw upon as an emotional resource for facilitating their engagement in sex work (Edwards, 1993; Høigård and Finstad, 1992; Perkins and Bennett, 1985), many middle-class sex workers aspire to a 'single self' with no steadfast divisions between 'front stage' and 'back stage', or between public and private erotic domains (Goffman, 1959).

Conclusion

The contingent of postindustrial, middle-class sex workers that I have been describing call into question a number of common presuppositions about what is necessarily entailed by the commercial sexual encounter and the likely impact of such transactions upon the body and psyche of the sex worker. These sex workers bring a constellation of subjective meanings and embodied practices to commercial sexual exchange that would not have been possible at earlier historical junctures. These new meanings and practices emanate from an explicit challenge to the symbolic dualisms that have characterized paradigmatically 'modern' forms of sexual labour: between private and public, home and work, sexuality and the market. Deeply implicated in these cultural inversions, middle-class workers' sexual labour cannot be easily reduced to matters of socio-economic deprivation – at least not in the conventional sense of the term.

I have argued that the meanings with which they have endowed their labour are connected to new and historically specific conditions of possibility. These conditions include a technologically driven, postindustrial economy that has rapidly driven up the cost of living in desirable urban centers, while at the same time creating a highly stratified occupational sector (one with a limited number of time-intensive, highly paid, and hard-to-acquire professional positions, but with poorly paid temporary and part-time 'junk' jobs that exist in ample quantities). These economic developments are intricately connected to some of the ways that

increasing numbers of young, urban middle-class people are restructuring their intimate lives – either by delaying marriage and childbearing until these are more economically viable options, or by defying the expectations of heterosexual monogamy entirely.

Finally, and at a more general level, in this article I have sought to complicate the view that the commodification of sexuality is transparently equatable with the erasure of erotic and emotional intimacy. Such an argument does not do justice to the ways in which the spheres of public and private, intimacy and commerce, have interpenetrated one another and thereby been mutually transformed, making the postindustrial consumer marketplace one potential arena for the exchange of authentic, yet bounded, forms of interpersonal connection.

Notes

1. A fuller elaboration of some of these themes is presented in Elizabeth Bernstein, *Temporarily Yours* (2007).
2. See a recent article in *The Independent*, which notes that some 40,000 university students in France (or nearly 2%) admitted to funding their studies through the sex trade (Duval Smith, 2006).
3. When I did a count of web-based advertisements in San Francisco in 2001, there were approximately 3000. By 2005, there were some 5000 advertisements on one popular website alone – one crude indication of the expanding scope of online sexual commerce in the city.

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