

## Sexual Labors: Interdisciplinary Perspectives Toward Sex as Work

Eileen Boris

*University of California, Santa Barbara, USA*

Stephanie Gilmore

*Dickinson College, USA*

Rhacel Parreñas

*Brown University, USA*

What constitutes ‘sex’ and defines ‘labor’ has varied across time and space, we have learned over the last 35 years through an explosion of monographs and articles in the history and sociology of sexuality and labor studies. But rarely has the new labor studies, with its attention to gender, race, and ethnicity and its consideration of unpaid as well as paid work, put sexual labors at the center of its focus. Even the rich literature on prostitution more likely has come out of women’s studies than labor studies. Similarly, scholarship on sexuality focuses more on sex acts and identities than on markets, work culture, labor standards, collective action, and occupational segregation – the stuff of labor studies. The referents and literature for these fields stand apart – despite the growth of LGBTQ caucuses in the labor movement, renewed feminist debates over sex work, and the commercialization and proliferation of sexual services and unionization of exotic dancers.

To situate our discussion of sex work within discourses of labor studies, we insist on using the term ‘sexual labor’. We move away from the term ‘sex work’, which is a politically laden concept that seeks to argue against the notion that prostitution is inherently harmful to women. By problematizing the term ‘sex work’, the essays in this volume refuse to fall prey to the debate on whether sex work is a legitimate form of labor or prostitution is a form of sexual slavery (Alexander, 1998; Barry, 1995; Clement, 2006; Duggan and Hunter, 1995; Outshoorn, 2005). Instead, we engage the concept of ‘sexual labor’ so as to expand discussions on commercial sex as an economic and labor enterprise in which workers

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Vol 13(2): 131–137 DOI: 10.1177/1363460709359228

confront subjugations at the same time that they resist and maintain some semblance of control over their labor. Not surprisingly, the essays in this volume do not try to argue for the moral acceptance of 'sex work' but instead present and examine the race, class, gender, and sexuality struggles of workers without attempting to justify the legitimacy of their occupations.

To advance our understanding of sexual labors, we have gathered a group of historically informed but interdisciplinary essays. We cast our net widely to look at unpaid as well as paid sexual labors and to consider sexual labor on its own terms but also in relation to political economy, law, globalization, and citizenship. Ethnographies and participant observation have allowed social scientists to extend our understanding of labor processes, the social meanings of touch and other body acts, and emotional work. Cultural studies have unpacked the construction of representation and probed techniques of identity making. Social movement studies have provided more precise analysis of the framing of goals and measurement of outcomes when sexual laborers organize and protest. Feminist, gender, and queer theories offer a variety of interpretative frameworks, as do critical race studies. The essays in this issue bring together all of these interventions, informing us as scholars of sexual labors.

Our opening symposium provides both an alternative perspective to the campaign mounted by the US government with the passage of the 2000 Trafficking Victims Protection Act and an interdisciplinary lens through which to assess the longer history of labor recruitment. Today's protests eerily hearken back to the fight of British, Australian, and US feminists against the 'white slave trade' of the late 19th and early 20th century. Then, as now, anti-trafficking became synonymous with stopping at the nation's gates criminal men and procured women, with the consequence of abetting immigration restriction and border control, moral panics, imperialism, and racial segregation. *Padrones* and other labor contractors continued their exploitation of new immigrants in fields and factories, while working people themselves garnered blame for undermining living standards. Discourses of slavery framed debates, which focused on prostitution (Burton, 1994; Chacon, 2006; Cheng, 2008; Donovan, 2006; Kempadoo, 2007; Levime, 2003; McFadden, 1999; Peck, forthcoming).

Denise Brennan, Felicity Schaeffer-Grabel, and Celine Parreñas Shimizu interrogate the negative impact of the current focus on sex trafficking over other forms of coerced labor under conditions of economic, political, racial, gender, and national inequality. They especially emphasize the continued legacy of race. Anthropologist Brennan highlights women whom government bureaucrats and some NGOs seek out to brand as victims who must name their abusers, come under state protection, and thus become living proof of the efficacy of the law. Her analysis connects

standard concepts in labor studies – such as subcontracting, workplace raids, peonage, and labor standards – to the study of trafficking. As feminist studies scholar Schaeffer-Grabel compellingly suggests through close reading of texts, the construction of men of color as out-of-control savages from whom women need saving stands behind the US anti-trafficking campaign. ‘Modern-day imperialism’ might better characterize state efforts. Finally, filmmaker and cultural studies scholar Shimizu challenges us to move beyond the dichotomous construction woven into anti-trafficking discourse of immoral women who choose prostitution and moral women forced into it. Her sophisticated reading of ‘gonzo’ pornography, usually taken as ‘proof’ of trafficking, deconstructs this dichotomous representation. She asks us to look more closely at what the women are saying and consider their agency within systems of racialized inequality.

In contrast to trafficking, *jineterismo* evokes the politics of choice rather than coercion. Beautiful brown Caribbean women and men provide companionship and sexual services to mostly white European and US tourists, so a common portrayal of this practice goes, making do in economies of scarcity. If they find a sugar daddy or marriage partner, pleasure in goods or in sexual acts, so much the better. Anthropologist Alyssa Garcia complicates our understanding of *jineteras* by connecting them to the history of state regulation of sex work in Cuba. Through a long view, spanning from the Spanish colonial period and the era of the Republic through the early years of the Revolution, the 1970s and 1980s, and finally to the ‘Special Period’, she traces a pathologization of women’s bodies, particularly those of color, in which each time period reincorporates earlier forms of moral economy despite changing political culture. Her move beyond the dichotomous construction of *jinetera*, seen as the bad subject of the socialist state for her greedy desire for dollars, and the prostitute, seen as a victim of the capitalist market requiring re-education and uplift, underscores a debate within a debate: that between defenders of the political regime, who claimed to have liberated women by ending prostitution, and their critics, who point to new forms of sex work as evidence of failure, as well as that among scholars, who find in *jineterismo* a template for varying takes on sexual labor under globalization.

When it comes to state regulation of sexual labors, containment has served as a handmaiden to abolitionism, while policing in the name of protecting the public has moved workers to ever more dangerous urban terrains. Cuban prostitutes found themselves relocated into *Casas de Recogidas* by the colonial state and work camps by the communist state. Like Garcia, historical sociologist and queer studies scholar Becki Ross untangles the meaning of moral and legal regulation. Her ethnography of the political economy of Vancouver’s West End puts the consequences of state persecution in spatial perspective: how closing down, even if

temporarily, the Penthouse Cabaret, known as ‘a union shop for hookers’, in the mid-1970s pushed the trade into the street. There, an anti-vice campaign cleared the way for further gentrification, barring even neighborhood residents from the area and removing visible solicitation to the abandoned industrial edges of the city, a zone reminiscent, though on a lesser scale, of the killing fields today surrounding Ciudad Juárez. The destination spot that the West End was becoming in the 1970s generated a form of gay gentrification that in alliance with politicians, moralists, and economic interests banned other forms of sexual expression; the remaking of neighborhood space, enactment of various prohibitive ordinances, and legal rulings expressed the dominance of the powerful, negating the rights of assembly and free speech of sex workers. Like working-class historians who find resistance along with repression, Ross introduces prostitute activists, their organizations, and allies, who fight the good fight but find little feminist support for their struggle against both violence and criminalization.

Some African-American women who participate in commercial sexual activities are rejecting not just state regulation but also the language of victimhood. They also refuse an assigned cultural script derived from histories of racial appropriation of Black women’s bodies in the USA and western histories of colonizing the bodies and sexualities of women of color worldwide. As happened to prostitutes in Vancouver, multiple publics have ignored or rejected their claims to sexual agency. Through intensive ethnographic research in the adult film industry, feminist studies scholar Mireille Miller-Young explores how Black women operate within the global and sexual economies that have marginalized them both in front of and behind the camera and rendered them as fetishized and disposable sexual objects rather than sexual agents. In the tradition of working-class history, she traces how they labor within the context of limited opportunities and against attempted redefinitions of the gendered and racialized construction of their bodies. Miller-Young also places the voices of African-American sex workers in juxtaposition to Black feminist theorists who have criticized pornography for exacerbating stereotypes of the assumed sexual promiscuity and availability of women of color. In tackling the assumption of unwavering and universal feminist opposition to sex work, she creates a counter narrative in which sexual laborers demand their identities not only as workers but also as inheritors of feminist legacies that allow women to define themselves as agents – sexual and otherwise.

Moving beyond the work associated with prostitution and pornography, sociologists Jane Ward and Kimberly Hoang situate their discussions of sexual labor in labor processes and introduce the concepts of ‘gender labor’ and ‘emotional labor’ as part of larger discourses and

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practices of sexual and intimate labors (Boris and Parreñas, forthcoming). Ward describes ‘gender labor’, meaning the relational acts of femininity that enhance the masculine subjectivity of transgender men, which are performed by femme partners of female-to-male transsexuals. Hoang borrows the concept of ‘emotional labor’ from Arlie Hochschild to refer to the management of one’s own feelings so as to maintain the well-being of the client-worker relationship, to distinguish the different labor and relational dynamics in sex work across economic classes and sectors (Hochschild, 1977; see also Bernstein, 2007). These concepts should prove quite instructive as tools of scholarly interrogation.

Using four large cities in the USA as the geographical base of her research, Ward identifies as labor the activities of the femme lovers of trans men who work hard to produce transgender masculinity. She calls particular attention to the often invisible labor of femininity that is required to maintain masculinity, particularly the subordination and oppression of feminine women who ‘give gender.’ She analyzes the devaluation of the work they perform in order to sustain genderqueer space. The linking of gender and labor in Ward’s scholarship underscores not only that gender is a construction in which masculinities and femininities are continuously produced and reproduced, but also that such constructions are embedded in the unequal labors between women and men, even if such men are transgressive subjects who question the very essence of masculinity.

Hoang considers the economies of emotion and desire through an ethnographic study of Ho Chi Minh City’s sex industry. Like the authors of the symposium whose work opens this special issue, Hoang addresses the globalized sex industry, situating her case within the legacy of French colonialism, revolution, and war. Economic reconstitution, she shows, has engendered different forms of sexual labor. By tracing the emotional labor attached to sex-for-money exchanges across three tiers of the city’s sexual economy, she questions the mainstream view that sex work is void of relational ties. Although geographical location within the city, the racial and ethnic background of the customer, and the fees the sex worker charges determine where the labor fits on the ‘sexscape’ (Brennan, 2004), and while socioeconomic class may distinguish the degree and type of emotional work involved, *all* of her interviewees engaged in a form of ‘relational work’ (Zelizer, 2005) with their clients. Her findings deepen the concept of intimate labor and challenge researchers to look for emotional as well as bodily and economic connection in other contexts.

These essays come to us from a range of disciplines, and speak to the interests of scholars of sex, sexuality, and labor. They remind us to turn a critical eye to – and move beyond – the dichotomous frames of debate about sexual labors – agency vs. victimization, repression vs. liberation, good vs. bad. They also situate critical analysis of sexual labors at the

‘nexus of sex and work’ (Miller, 2004) and at the intersection of women’s and gender studies and labor studies. The theoretical and empirical articles gathered here provide usable and unromanticized frameworks for understanding sexual labors. They emphasize the need to move beyond the mere recognition of sex work as *legitimate* labor but instead to identify and examine the labor processes of sex work. In doing so, they enhance our understanding of the structures of this economic sector, the contours and components of such labors, and the mechanisms of race, class, sexualities, and gender embedded in the extraction of labor that involves the sexual.

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