

Staging the Trans Sex Worker

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Abstract This article interrogates how the figure of the trans street-based sex worker is deployed to argue for positive intervention on behalf of trans individuals, in addition to how it is used at the expense of a variety of trans experiences of sex work. As a corollary, this article addresses how a nuanced account of trans sex work, responsive to these concerns, can provide the basis for a more robust conception of trans theory.

Keywords sex work, trans subjectivity, trans history, criminalization

While trans studies has gained increased recognition for its contributions as an interdisciplinary academic field (Kunzel 2014), sex work, as a topic of scholarly and literary examination, has also enjoyed significantly increased academic attention, including the development of publications aimed at explaining sex work to a lay audience (Bass 2014; Chateauvert 2014; Grant 2014). Despite this shift, even publications that trace commonalities between the histories of sex workers and that of gay liberation overwhelmingly focus on the experiences of cisgender women in sex work, to the detriment of male and noncis sex workers, as exemplified by Mattilda Bernstein Sycamore's (2014) critique of *Sex Workers Unite: A History of the Movement from Stonewall to SlutWalk*, by Mindy Chateauvert. The tendency, on the part of researchers, to position the cis female sex worker as the primary and default subject relegates the trans sex worker subject to the margins. As a consequence, the trans sex worker is an often-mentioned, complex, and titillating curiosity: positioned as both sideshow oddity and pitiable rhetorical object in much writing on sex work (Friedman 2015). While these accounts customarily allude to the latent entanglement between trans identity and trans sex work, they rarely furnish complex and situated treatments of the historical and enduring connections between trans lives and sex work as both labor and social milieu. The connection between trans embodiment and trans sex work pervades all aspects of trans existence, as is reflected in the expression "walking while trans" (Mogul et al. 2011: 61). "Walking while trans" was coined

to express how “transgender women, particularly transgender women of color, are . . . frequently perceived to be sex workers by police,” to the extent that “transgender women cannot walk down the street without being stopped, harassed, verbally, sexually and physically abused and arrested, regardless of what they are doing at the time” (61). This relentless harassment on the basis that transness is conflatable with sex work projects social stigma about sex work onto the trans community. In the excavation of this stigma lies the potential for understanding and revealing the rhetorical deployment of the trans sex worker.

Vek Lewis (2010: 9) argues that “an examination of the representations of trans subjectivities and sexual identities *anywhere* is intrinsically problematic and caught up in the ethics and politics of knowledge about minorities, as well as the creation of space for minority knowledges, that resignify and contest dominant representations.” It is our intention in this article to elucidate the interdependence between trans subjects and the assumption of sex work. Rather than engage in respectability arguments that abnegate trans sex work as unseemly, we engage sex work theory and trans scholarship to situate the relationship between trans identity and sex work as particular and contextual. Our initial problematic concerns the tendency among researchers, writers, and activists to assume a universal (visible) trans subject. This tendency frequently makes particularities of trans experience vanish into abstraction. By deconstructing this tendency, it is possible to discuss trans identity as material rather than metaphor, which is assisted by accounting for how the discourse of trans hypersexuality developed. Given this historical understanding we can reconstruct, to some degree, *how* the figure of the trans sex worker became near universal. Working from this understanding, we unpack how this figure circulates and becomes politically productive in different contexts. Ultimately, the political circulation of this rhetorical figure is tied to a decontextualization of trans experiences in sex work, reducing the trans sex worker to a floating signifier. By working against the tendency to abstract trans sex work from the particulars invariably bound up in such work, our aim is to articulate the basis for more politically and epistemologically incisive engagements with trans sex work.

Viviane Namaste has continuously engaged with the epistemological weakness of the abstract and monolithic trans identity and, especially, the hubris of theoretical discussions that employ trans individuals in their arguments while ignoring the content of their lives. Of particular consternation for Namaste (2000: 268) is that the “celebration of recent U.S. transgender visibility—evidenced through certain media representations, activist positions, and academic debates—does not consider the experiences of a diverse group of transsexual and transgendered people,” a statement that stands to date. That is, in privileging questions of representation and identity, studies then and now have worked to erase

complications such as “the presence and realities of MTF transsexual prostitutes, preferring instead to focus on questions of identity” (66). These positions that Namaste (2009) critiques were focused on questions of gender and its meanings rather than the material realities that significantly affected many trans individuals. Butler-inspired accounts, influenced by the invocation of academics prominent in queer studies and feminist criticism, inhibit understanding other categories of sex- and gender-variance due to their consanguinity with particular logics of sex and gender significance. Decontextualizing this type of analysis from the daily realities of trans individuals renders these interpretations and conclusions inadequate and, in many ways, obfuscating. Ironically, these arguments have not served to create more-nuanced understandings of trans life but have stalled discussions from moving beyond questions of identity.

Complementary to the work of Namaste, Lewis (2010: 28), in *Crossing Sex and Gender in Latin America*, engages with the problem of how contemporary criticism concerned with the “representation of *locas*, *travestis*, and *transexuales* in Latin American cinema and literature fails to question . . . the dominant views of sex- and gender-variant figures as essentially figurative and symbolic of identity composition or crisis, bypassing a deconstruction of the metaphor and a view of the possibilities of envisioning sex and gender transitivity outside its terms.” This scholarship highlights that rather than an abstract and high-monolithic category, the performance of gender is inseparable from other cultural interpolations. Without grounding discussions of trans identity in culturally specific contexts, the labor and concerns that underwrite trans identities are subsumed into a homogenizing narrative (Aizura 2012; Valentine 2007).

While our work is somewhat divergent in concern from untangling trans existence from the cultural usage of trans individuals as metaphors for “deception, charade, crisis, risk, threat, and even political corruption” (Lewis 2010: 226), our aims are linked in attempting to move beyond reified understandings of individuals and into concrete and contextualized understandings of the issues surrounding trans identity. It is our intention to provide an explanation for the particular development of hypersexual understandings of trans identity (specifically the identity of trans women) and interrogate how, against contemporary sex-work discourse, the figure of the trans street-based sex worker is deployed to argue for positive intervention on behalf of trans individuals and is used at the expense of trans experiences of sex work. Next, we move into contemporary theorizing on agency and sex work before juxtaposing these insights with the deployment of trans sex work as an abject outcome. This folds into contemporary theorizing around abjection and the political currency derived from the circulation of images of abjection. Finally, we delve into what a nuanced engagement with the complex realities of trans sex work looks like, practically, before

concluding by noting how such an engagement with the material realities of trans sex work is invaluable to trans studies.

Hypersexuality and Trans Identity

The metaphysical relationship connecting hypersexuality and illicit prostitution to trans identity starkly contrasts with early narratives and representations of transnormativity such as those of Christine Jorgensen, which were notably chaste and sexless. In her account, Joanne Meyerowitz (2002: 197–98) portrays trans representation in “the early 1960s . . . [when] tabloid newspapers and pulp publishers produced a stream of articles and cheap paperback books on MTFs who had worked as female impersonators, strippers, or prostitutes. They often illustrated the stories with pin-up style photos that revealed breasts, legs, and buttocks.” The erotic escapades of individuals such as Hedy Jo Star, Coccinelle, and Abby Sinclair provided grist for the mill for pulp publishers looking for sensational, provocative, and sexual content.¹ Hand in hand with relaxed laws regulating obscenity, pulp publishers produced increasingly obscene and pornographic content focused on the most fantastical trans women they could find.

Later pornographic works went so far as to almost completely subsume the trans narrative. The narrative that formerly acted as at least a flimsy excuse for transgressive yet sexualized content was replaced with aggressively explicit sexual content. This fascination was not limited to the pulp presses; in 1967 the US magazine *Esquire* ran a lengthy article about transsexuality that included an interview with a former prostitute working as a topless dancer. Given the rampant mainstream sexualization and frequent use of trans women in the sex trade as spokespeople, it is no wonder that such framings persist to the present day and have proliferated beyond their origin in the popular press:

Most popular images and impressions of trans women revolve around sexuality: from “she-male” and “chicks with dicks” pornography to media portrayals of us as sexual deceivers, prostitutes, and sex workers. And of course, there are the recurring themes of trans women who transition in order either to gain the sexual attention of men or to fulfill some kind of bizarre sex fantasy (both of which appear regularly in the media, and also in [J. Michael] Bailey and [Ray] Blanchard’s model of MTF transgenderism). (Serano 2007: 134)

While the hypersexualized understanding of trans women is historically derived, the rationale for which would constitute an article in itself, the bedrock responsible for the representation of the transfeminine as hypersexual is the continued and recurrent visualization of trans women in multiple discursive sites—from pornographic literature to sexology—in relation to the notion of sexual availability.

Whatever the root cause of this conceptualization, there is a cultural logic to understanding trans women that links theories such as those of Bailey and Blanchard—which posit an understanding of trans identity as a grotesquely sexualized paraphilia (Winters 2008)—and a media both repulsed and attracted to the sexuality of trans women. This conviction, that there is a relationship between trans sex work and trans hypersexuality, is so commonplace that it finds commonsense expression in platitudes such as trans masculine porn star Buck Angel’s argument that trans women participate in sex work at higher rates because “MTFs are ‘men’ first [therefore] they have a much higher sex drive. So it just seems natural that they would get into sex work” (quoted in Ray 2015: 317). The most obvious and visible facet of this hypersexualization, in media narratives and popular understanding, is, consequently, the figure of the trans prostitute.

FTM Experiences of Sex Work

So far we have focused on the pathologization and hypersexualization of trans women. Similarly, Henry Rubin (2003: 18) observes that in “most scholarship, FTMs are subsumed under the general study of transsexualism. It [was] only quite recently that FTMs [were] considered apart from MTFs.” This scholarly tendency is apparent in Ara Wilson’s *Intimate Economies of Bangkok: Tomboys, Tycoons, and Avon Ladies in the Global City*. Wilson’s (2004) discussion of transactional intimacy alludes to (trans feminine) *kathoey* working alongside cis women, while (trans masculine) *toms* merit mention only as potential bouncers. While Wilson documents the erotic capital of *toms* in the media, *tom* participation in sex work remains unexamined. While trans men are often overlooked in the literature, there are differences in rates of participation in sex work. The National Transgender Discrimination Survey found that transfeminine respondents were almost twice as likely to participate in the sex trade *but* also noted that transmasculine respondents made up 26.4 percent of the participants in the sex trade. This is a significant rate of participation and obviously worth noting. While public fascination with trans feminine sexuality has been an enduring feature of trans identity, trans masculinity has never achieved the same level of notoriety. In contrast with the multiplicity of pulp publications about trans women, trans masculine narratives were more historically more limited and published much later; Mario Martino has the distinction of being the first trans man to have a published autobiography; his memoir came out in 1977. Part of this may be the limited public visibility of trans masculine individuals until fairly recently, a condition that has been attributed to a number of factors including the later widespread availability of testosterone, unsatisfying results of phalloplasty, the greater possibility for gender expression without transitioning, and the availability of identities such as stone butch (Halberstam 1998; Preciado 2013;

Rubin 2003; Stryker 2008). Obviously there is no singular explanation; however, at this point, discussions of trans sex work about trans men engaged in sex work relate to individuals such as Buck Angel or Viktor Belmont who are engaged in work far from the social fringes (Ray 2015). Regardless of relative rates of participation in the sex industry, the reality remains that for “many transgender people, the sex trade can offer greater autonomy and financial stability compared to more traditional workplaces, with few barriers to entry. However, economic insecurity and material deprivation can increase one’s vulnerability to harm and decrease the ability to make self-determined choices” (Fitzgerald et al. 2015: 7). Trans identity remains—at least in a labor and material sense—overdetermined given the economically precarious position many trans people find themselves in and the discrimination to which they are subject. Trans individuals are frequently pathologized as hypersexual if not as potential sex workers despite living in different socioeconomic locations that affect rates of participation in sex work. Yet the question remains as to why this is seen as inherently stigmatizing: that is, what are the mechanisms by which sex work becomes a justification for social exclusion?

Critical Interventions in Theorizing about Sex Work

One of the critical interventions of contemporary theorizing about sex work has been to reject the models popularized by second-wave feminists such as Andrea Dworkin and Catharine MacKinnon who posited sex work, especially pornography, to be the product (and exercise) of patriarchal domination. In rejecting that model, academics have worked to not simply assume that the opposite is true—that sex work is an inherently empowering or rewarding career. Instead, they have moved to attempting to capture the complex experiences surrounding sex work. As Elizabeth Bernstein (2007: 3) articulates, it is impossible to simplify the rationale behind the entry of “women, men, and transgendered individuals into the contemporary sexual economy without situating this participation within a broader context of structural violence (i.e. conditions such as poverty, racism, homophobia, and gendered inequalities)”; rather, we also must be attuned to how overemphasis on this conception of *sex work as harm* erases whether sex work “might sometimes (or simultaneously) constitute an attempted means of escape from even more profoundly violating social conditions.” Given this contemporary discourse, it is worth interrogating how even putatively radical/critical theory that is attentive to structural violence such as Dean Spade’s *Normal Life: Administrative Violence, Critical Trans Politics, and the Limits of the Law* can still articulate positions that obfuscate much of this insight. This is not to rebuke the arguments Spade puts forth in *Normal Life* but to interrogate how there ends up being such a jarringly retrogressive account of trans entry into sex work given the

rich history of trans sex work as a site of agency and resistance integral to the formation of trans cultures and social networks.

Trans Sex Work in Academic Literature

Spade's use of stigmatized sex work to underscore rhetorical arguments for inclusion generates accounts of exclusion that culminate in the framing of sex work as a last resort. Bianca, a case study in the introduction to *Normal Life*, is used by Spade to attune the reader to the reality of trans suffering. Positioned as typical of trans exclusion from normative institutions, Bianca is systematically denied access to vital services, which leaves her with criminalized sex work as a means to subsidize her hormones. As Spade describes her inevitable trajectory into sex work:

When Bianca applied for welfare, she was given an assignment to attend a job center as part of participation in a workfare program. When she tried to access the job center, she was brutally harassed outside, and when she finally entered and attempted to use the women's restroom she was outed and humiliated by staff. Ultimately she felt too unsafe to return and her benefits were terminated. Bianca's total lack of income also meant that she had no access to hormone treatments she used to maintain a feminine appearance, which was emotionally necessary and kept her safe from some of the harassment and violence she faced when she was more easily identifiable as a transwoman on the street. Bianca felt her only option for finding income sufficient to pay for the hormones was to engage in criminalized sex work. At this point, she was forced to procure her hormone treatments in underground economies because it would have been cost prohibitive to obtain her medication from a doctor since Medicaid . . . would not cover the costs. This put her in further danger of police violence, arrest, and other violence. Additionally, because Bianca was accessing intravenously injected hormones through street economies, she was at greater risk of HIV, hepatitis, and other communicable diseases. (Spade 2011: 10)

In the narrative provided by Spade, trans sex work stands in for a variety of institutional rejections experienced by trans individuals that culminate in entry into criminalized labor. Additionally, Spade implicitly traces a logical connection between trans abjection and trans sex work. Bianca is, ultimately, patronizingly used as a symbol of the social rejection of trans individuals and the difficult lives they must lead because of this rejection. Spade's work undertakes the challenge of prioritizing the structural reality trans people face in confronting institutions, public policy, and the reigning social climate rather than privileging personal identity. Yet in his instrumentation of the cases of such trans sex workers in order

to speak more generally about how the exclusion of trans people is produced institutionally, Spade obliterates any sense of agency contra Bernstein's argument that sex work should be viewed in terms of its relationality to other social factors. Spade outlines a life shaped by institutional rejection where criminalized sex work is presented as a consequence of rejection rather than a potential solution to it. Additionally, Bianca, despite Spade's attentiveness to structural issues, is presented as an individual with absolutely no community whether by way of other trans individuals, other sex workers, or both. Yet this seems discordant with the accounts of trans sex recorded by Tor Fletcher in "Trans Sex Workers: Negotiating Sex, Gender, and Non-Normative Desire" (2013), for example. As one respondent reported, "The only community that existed for trans women was the sex-working community and at the time it was a way of survival and . . . the scene was very vibrant with clubbing, dancing, and partying" (Fletcher 2013: 70). Fletcher's interview subjects also reported experiencing discrimination and stigma but were not solely defined as victims. While Spade's reductionist approach to trans sex work may reflect his attempt to increase the concern for trans individuals, his introduction pivots on the social recognition of trans prostitution as absolute abjection.

Critical Interventions on Marginalization

In contrast to Spade, the following critiques are concerned with inadequate and reductionist accounts of trans sex work. The first, Laura Agustín's *Sex at the Margins: Migration, Labour Markets, and the Rescue Industry* (2007), critiques the rescue industry by examining related attempts to abolish, reform, or curtail sex work, in addition to the assumptions underpinning such interventions. Agustín focuses on the construction of anti-sex work discourse and, furthermore, the ways in which organizations concerned with "saving" sex workers from their jobs produce and perpetuate demeaning and patronizing assumptions about those they serve. Likewise, in "Trans Necropolitics: A Transnational Reflection on Violence, Death, and the Trans of Color Afterlife" (2013), C. Riley Snorton and Jin Haritaworn critique the use of violent trans persons of color deaths around the globe in the name of benefiting, at best, the tangential political goals of white gay demagogues in the United States. The fusion of these two critiques situates our understanding of the sociopolitical milieu of the trans sex worker and thus that of transness itself.

Agustín's work is constructed around interrogating the assumptions that govern the relationships between NGOs and sex workers. Specifically, Agustín concentrates on how NGOs understand sex work discourse and their attendant demeaning and patronizing assumptions about sex workers, particularly migrant sex workers. For Agustín (2007: 135), the concerns of NGOs are centered

on how to “control prostitution,” [while] unpredictable local toleration predominates, police abuse is endemic, commercial sex is blamed for spreading sexually transmitted diseases, thriving networks facilitate workers’ mobility and entrance into commercial sex, which pays far better than any other job available to women, male and transgender workers are overlooked, and research focuses repeatedly on individual motivations for buying and selling sex.

That is, undue focus is given to the question of how prostitution can be regulated or why individuals either purchase sex or sell it without an attentiveness to the structural factors that regulate the sex industry and the lived experiences of sex workers in that industry. Epidemiologically, NGOs are invested in reducing the harms associated with prostitution. NGOs situate themselves either as heroic saviors, self-appointed experts on the “rescue” of sex workers, or as moral authorities amid an understanding of prostitution as an individual choice born of particular social factors. By ignoring the large-scale structural factors that shape prostitution (hence Agustín’s sobriquet, the “rescue industry,” characterizing this so-called activism), and by missing the multiplicity of experience and circumstance among the heterogeneous group *sex workers*, rescue industry NGOs misunderstand even the simplest needs of sex workers. While many of these organizations use feminist principles that seek to look at the collective social violence of patriarchy as a motivating factor in engaging in sex work, this more often spreads misleading portrayals of sex work. Agustín explores the “passive victim” and “exploitive pimp,” roles often depicted as a certainty, and which she argues are unhelpful for understanding the dynamic realities of sex work.

In this instance Agustín (2007: 39) argues that “the roles of ‘perpetrator’ and ‘victim’ are treated as *identities* rather than temporary conditions. But services that want victims to become ‘survivors’ sometimes reinforce passivity, particularly in therapeutic contexts, diagnosing syndromes and disorders and emphasising damage over coping.” The category of victim becomes so ingrained in this process that, as Agustín cautions, organizations become so invested in producing the category of victim that the “helpers themselves [become] disturbingly important figures” (8). This turns back on our earlier discussion of Spade’s writing on trans prostitution as a metaphor for social death — or at least the necropolitical management of trans life by forced integration into the criminal economy. For Spade’s rhetorical usage to work, trans individuals must be the passive victims of the machinations of administrative systems. While the explicitly gendered nature of social welfare is a bleak situation faced by trans individuals, this sort of victim discourse is predicated on “the abject victim subject who seeks rights, primarily because she is the one who has had the worst happen to her” (Kapur 2002: 5). While this makes for a distressing image of the indifference of the

state to trans suffering, it also casts trans individuals and particularly trans sex workers as passive victims lacking in agency, as previously noted, but, most important, as bereft of the capacity for meaningful choice.

This perspective is in line with critiques launched by scholars such as Snorton, Haritaworn, and Sarah Lambie regarding the construction of trans victimhood as political currency. Specifically, for all three theorists, the question is *who* utilizes the bodies of brutalized and dead trans persons of color and to what end. Alternately phrased, how are the deaths of marginalized trans persons, especially trans women, they ask, made productive? Lambie, a legal scholar, addresses this in the politicized mourning undertaken on Trans Day of Remembrance (TDOR). Lambie points out that much TDOR rhetoric concentrates on transphobia and homophobia, neglecting the equally, if not more, relevant issues surrounding transmisogyny, racism, and the global impact to date of settler colonialism. Furthermore, violent acts are often framed as individual rather than systemic, or self-perpetuating and often ignoring the pattern of deaths and violence as perpetrated mainly against trans women, nonwhite individuals, many of whom are sex workers, and many located outside the United States. As Lambie (2013: 31) maintains, TDOR fails to contextualize these “incidents of violence within their specific time and place, thus obscuring the ways in which hierarchies of race, class, and sexuality situate and constitute such acts. In the process, transgender bodies are universalized along a singular identity plane of victimhood and rendered visible primarily through the violence that is acted upon them.” By saying this, Lambie is claiming not that transphobia is irrelevant in all cases but that lumping all trans death together as the product of transphobia works to erase the contexts that produce violence in addition to noncisgender identity itself. TDOR does not verify that individuals were killed because they were trans and in fact counts as victims of transphobia trans persons murdered for reasons completely unrelated to being trans. Lambie draws our attention to the listing of Deanna/Thomas Wilkinson, Shawn Keagan, and Grace Baxter as victims of transphobic violence when their murders were because of their involvement in sex work, as their killers were unaware of their trans status. The public spectacle of mourning over slain trans persons involves abstracting the victims of violence from the many reasons that they were subjected to violence. Contrary to the generalized conception of transphobia underlying events like TDOR, the fatal violence experienced by gender-variant people is particular and situational. The political currency in this instance, by Lambie’s estimation, is not to address the variety of identity factors that contribute to experiencing this violence but to unmoor trans bodies (especially trans bodies of color and the bodies of trans sex workers) from their particularity in the construction of *why* they experienced violence. Such decontextualized understandings of trans suffering erase the

complex lives of trans individuals until all that remains is their experience of individualized violence.

Snorton and Haritaworn argue that this unified sense of victimhood is the alchemy by which value is extracted from the deaths of trans persons of color. Consonant with Lamble's argument that trans death is stripped of its particularities to establish political legitimacy for the projects of more socially valorized trans persons, Snorton and Haritaworn engage in a complementary critique of the circulation of trans suffering for political value. That is, Snorton and Haritaworn (2013: 71) aim to "provide an example of how trans women of color act as resources—both literally and metaphorically—for the articulation and visibility of a more privileged transgender subject." What is intriguing about Haritaworn and Snorton's argument is their attentiveness to the different sorts of bodies that circulate and how they accrue value. What Snorton and Haritaworn articulate are the different ways in which particular queer and trans lives find their expression of political "value." In Snorton's discussion, the complex afterlife of Tyra Hunter is unpacked, while for Haritaworn the focus is on how antimigrant rhetoric becomes married to the development of transphobia as a state-sponsored discourse. Yet what is telling in Haritaworn's description of the "Smash Transphobia" action at Berlin's Frobenstrasse is both the historical disinterest in the suffering of trans individuals engaged in sex work in the area and the erasure of their particularity, for the sake of engineering a racialized anti-immigrant rhetoric to "protect" trans individuals. Echoing through the concerns of their essay is how, instead of "those most in need of survival, the circulation of trans people of color in their afterlife accrues value to a newly professionalizing and institutionalizing class of experts whose lives could not be further removed from those they are professing to help. Immobilized in life, and barred from spaces designated as white . . . it is in their death that poor and sex working trans people are invited back in; it is in death that they suddenly come to matter" (Snorton and Haritaworn 2013: 74). That is, generating respectable trans subjects in need of state protection is implicitly tied to the exploitation of violence against the more marginalized. In this sense, the violence and death faced by marginalized trans subjects is the key to admission into social tolerance for the less marginalized under the aegis of "protection." Once more, trans sex workers and the complex experiences of violence and death are abstracted to particular, political purposes, and the very textures of being a trans woman involved in the industry become erased as possible sites of meaning and action.

Practical Considerations on Trans Sex Work

There is a continuity between the logic of abstracting trans suffering from its context and the use of the rhetorical figure of the trans sex worker. Such a figure is conceptualized less as a human being in a social context than as a continuation of

the murdered trans body theorized by Lamble, Haritaworn, and Snorton, albeit less dramatic in presentation. That is, the depiction of trans sex workers in terms of poverty, exclusion, and suffering, as previously argued, works to strip away their agency. What, on the other hand, would an account that neither sugarcoated real harms experienced by trans sex workers nor treated them as passive victims of systematic violence look like? If we remove the figure of the trans sex worker from abstraction and instead sensitively interrogate the particularities of trans sex work in context, what do we gain? A sterling example of this sort of research is Marcia Ochoa's *Queen for a Day: Transformistas, Beauty Queens, and the Performance of Femininity in Venezuela*. To be sure, Ochoa is not exclusively concerned with *transformistas* or prostitution. She also tackles the production of femininity in Venezuela, which allows her to interrogate the continuity between the spectacular performance of runway beauty for which Venezuela is famous and the prostitution of *transformistas*.

Ochoa (2014: 89) argues that “glamour, beauty, and femininity are technologies with specific practices that result in social legibility, intimate power, and, potentially, physical survival in a hostile environment.” The performance of the above is mediated by a history of colonization, racialization, and emergent modernity along with the social scripts embedded in Venezuela. Relevant to this discussion, Ochoa's attempt to explain the performance or accomplishment of femininity in modern Venezuela focuses on how “a *transformista* . . . body does not make sense without an understanding of the social forces acting on it” (160). In terms of the *transformista* body, these social forces are conceptions of femininity drawn from beauty pageant ideals celebrated as a contribution of Venezuela to the world at large and articulated in the face of experiences of daily violence and ubiquitous participation in the sex trade. However, Ochoa is attentive also to the uniqueness of the *transformista* experience, noting that contrary to the notion of Western transition and transsexuality as “changing the state of the body to concur with the gender identity that resides in the mind[,] . . . for *transformistas*, gender is always already in their bodies. The task of a *transformista* is to enable its emergence” (161). For *transformistas*, this emergence is mediated by their use of medical technologies and by their participation in sex work, which structures their visibility and identity.

For *transformistas*, sex work occurs on the Avenida Libertador, in the business district of Venezuela's capital, Caracas. The visibility of *transformistas* on the Avenida Libertador is integral to their commercialized sexual exchanges, and this visibility is strategically integrated into the material structure of the Avenida. The *pasarelas*, walkways “designed to facilitate foot traffic between the north and south sides of the Avenida,” provide a tactical barrier between *transformistas* and the police and allow *transformistas* to solicit clients, although they do not signal

the passing cars but “just stand on the end of the *pasarela* in a sort of pose and make eye contact with a driver when a car slows down” (Ochoa 2014: 148). Additionally, the *pasarela* serves as a runway, mimicking those used by Venezuelan beauty queens (the *misses* juxtaposed with the *transformistas* in Ochoa’s elucidation of Venezuelan femininity). Ochoa explicitly draws out this parallel, noting that this makeshift runway

makes *transformistas* immediately legible as glamorous women to passerby. While it is common knowledge that the glamorous ladies of Avenida Libertador are *transformistas* this stance normalizes their visibility within the Venezuelan aesthetic of beauty and femininity, if even from a distance. . . . In addition to runway walking, *transformistas* also often stand still and pose. Occasionally, in these poses, some *transformistas* will open their shirts up to bare their hormone- or surgically enhanced breasts. Sometimes a *transformista* will remove her top altogether and go bare breasted. . . . Ostensibly, this stance is used to market the commodity that *transformistas* are selling—their bodies. It is also a display of one visual sign that marks them as women (not just feminine appearing, but physically, carnally female), and thus reinforces *transformistas*’ authenticity as women. . . . By directly flaunting the local ordinances in a highly visible way, *transformistas* are asserting that they are in charge of the space—that they can stand calmly and display themselves and police can’t do anything about it. (Ochoa 2014: 150, 151)

Ochoa’s attentiveness to the practices of *transformistas* “selling themselves” on the Avenida illuminates both their abject social position and their defiance and self-actualization. Contrary to simplistic “poverty porn” that pathologizes the lives and bodies of trans sex workers, Ochoa’s account acknowledges the immense systematic violence and marginalization faced by *transformistas* while also acknowledging their agency. Notably, for our purposes, this account also engages with the particularities of *transformista* identity and how it informs *transformistas*’ engagement with sex work, rather than attempt to account for their engagement with sex work as merely a product of social marginalization, even as the two are related.

Realities of the Trans Sex Worker

There is a great need for adopting nuanced and particular studies on these complex yet crucial topics in trans studies, sex work studies, and ultimately both gender and feminist studies. This is in concordance with Lewis’s (2006: 88) argument that often the purpose or effect of research is to “impose the researcher’s point of view, prioritising abstract theory over subjective knowledge, utilising subjects as exemplar of currently fashionable intellectual paradigms or positioning them as curiosities meant to intrigue.” By interrogating the biases

structuring academic forays into the sociology of Latin American trans identities, Lewis deconstructs how “outside” perspectives, rather than writing in sympathy with their subjects, instead use them for theoretical purposes. Similarly, it is our attempt to foster an understanding of trans identity structured by proximity to sex work but where the ubiquity of trans sex work is used fruitfully rather than punitively. This requires deconstructing and rejecting the poverty porn narrative that frames trans sex work in terms of trans victimhood. Sex work is a variegated experience including, but not limited to, “escorting, street-based sex work, massage, prostitution, dance, pornography acting/performing, professional domination and submission, fetish and phone sex work” (Van der Meulen et al. 2013: 2). So much of the academic discourse on trans sex work focuses on limited aspects of the varieties of sex work performed by trans persons. Yet this also raises the possibility of work engaging with all the varieties of trans sex work, trans sex workers (past and present), how they are influenced by the complex negotiations of trans identities, and furthermore how trans identity and embodiment are shaped by the ubiquity of trans sex work. This is aligned with theoretical innovations that view trans identity through the complex lens of political economy, rejecting narratives of simple self-fashioning but looking at the complex interactions between policy, technology, law, and identity as expressed through neoliberal modernity (Irving 2012). Taking trans sex work seriously, therefore, involves illuminating the connections between sexuality, commerce, legality, nation, race, and gender and attentiveness to their particularity rather than dwelling on narratives rooted in pathology, criminality, and decay, which posit trans sex workers as metaphors for wider social concerns. It requires that we start from a different point: treating them as agents navigating complex identities.

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Note

1. Susana Vargas Cervantes (2014) similarly traces the complex mappings of gender, sexuality, class, and race as reflected in popular periodicals in Mexico.

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