

Trick Identities: The Nexus of Work and Sex

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For more than two decades, historians of prostitution in the United States have focused their analyses on the “sex wars” of the Gilded Age and Progressive Era, emphasizing reform efforts, the geography of prostitution, and, occasionally, the “sporting life” and deviant subculture of commercial sex.¹ Such studies have helped us understand tensions among moral reformers and their subjects and how social control has been exercised over sexually “deviant” groups in the past. With few exceptions, however, they have ignored the reality of prostitutes’ daily lives.² Most important, they give us little sense of how women in “the life” understood themselves, their work, and their clients. This weakness is often attributed to a gap in the source base, but I think it stems from a general failure among historians to consider the actual sex tasks involved in prostitution, despite histories that examine various other aspects of the profession as women’s work.³ Although women’s historians have addressed other occupations with an eye to how the actual work task has served to construct work identity—domestic labor, clerical work, waitressing, dress-making and millinery, nursing, teaching, agricultural labor, and meatpacking, to name just a few⁴—to date, no historian has applied this model to prostitution. Beginning in the 1980s and gaining steam more recently, however, scholars of sociology, anthropology, and literary criticism have penned theoretical studies of prostitution in Britain and the United States and have provided increasingly nuanced analyses of prostitutes’ sexual labor.⁵ In addition, some prostitutes’ autobiographies from the recent past (and, I have found, from even earlier) have portrayed the sex part of sex work as work, even an “industry.”⁶ Here, I build on these writings and demonstrate the insight we gain into the history of prostitution when we look at sex acts as part of prostitutes’ workaday lives in the same ways we might examine the experiences of waitresses dishing out food, teachers grading papers, and meatpackers classifying tripe.

Examining commercial sex as work complicates traditional typologies of sexual identity.⁷ One of the main things we notice when we begin to pay attention to the work of prostitution—that is, to actual sex acts performed for money—is the great variety of acts available in the commercial sex environment. Although prostitution has always been a predominantly heterosexual exchange in which men purchased sex from women, female prostitutes often participated in sex acts with people of both sexes (and often of races other than their own) for both pleasure and profit.

To the men and women who bought or sold sex acts, a particular sex act or desire did not necessarily reflect the sexual identity of the performer. Thus, a self-identified lesbian prostitute could perform heterosexual sex acts or same-sex sex acts within an evening, and might express disgust with or desire for either her male or female customer. Similarly, a heterosexual prostitute could have had sex with a paying female customer or with another woman for the pleasure of a man, again while feeling much or little desire for her customer or sex partner. Was the former any less lesbian, or the latter any less straight, because their sexual activities involved both sexes? Was a prostitute who both desired and had sex with a paying male customer necessarily heterosexual? Was the woman who paid for sex with another woman a lesbian? In the setting of the brothel, desires, acts, and identities did not map onto one another in any predictable and tidy pattern.⁸ Commercial sex thus uncouples the connection between sexual desires, sexual acts, and conventional object-based categories for sexual identity.

The history of brothel-based prostitution also pushes us to think about the extent to which work identity is separable from "personal" identity. Even if we use a more modern and I believe accurate conception of sexuality as socially constructed and historically specific, prostitutes' malleable sexuality proves the rule: context constructs identity.

Prostitutes' engagement in a wide variety of sex acts—sometimes pleasurable, often distasteful, meaningless, or violent—with multiple partners for pay on the job, and their construction of a separate sexual persona when off the clock raises another question: Are prostitutes agents or victims? The answer to this question cannot be posed as an either/or question. Rather, prostitutes are agents *and* victims—agents in that they choose to perform certain sex tasks as part of their workaday life; victims because they must also appeal to (and presumably sate) customers' desire in order to earn a living.⁹ According to prostitutes' historical and contemporary accounts, the fantasies they appeal to and the sex acts they sell represent both savvy marketing and the limits of what they will and will not do as part of their daily work requirements. If these women were waitresses, for example, the analogy might be recommending filet mignon over meatloaf to a hungry customer while refusing to do dishes or prep the salad bar. For prostitutes, this might mean offering fellatio instead of intercourse, because the former is less work for equal or the same pay, while refusing to kiss her customer on the mouth because it would allow him to cross a barrier she maintains while "on the clock." She still must satisfy her customer's need for orgasm by offering the service that will get the job done; yet, she finds ways to maintain her sense of self while doing so. Thinking about prostitutes' work as a task, rather than a value-laden sexual

act, reveals that the binary of agent/victim does not necessarily hold up in the commercial sex environment. Sex as work complicates traditional distinctions between prostitutes and other women, most of whom also sell or trade their services in some form.

Thinking about "sex tasks" also raises an important question: Exactly what constitutes sex? To many people, "sex" means penile-vaginal intercourse. By this definition, a prostitute performing oral sex is not really selling sex, although she is selling something close to it. And what of sex workers who sell phone sex or virtual sex? What about strippers? Is what they sell sex if one person talks or displays themselves and another person masturbates? Is selling a fantasy selling a sex act?¹⁰ What about acts in which the customer pays to pleasure (or to believe he or she is pleasuring) the prostitute?¹¹ These are just a few of the questions that must be addressed when thinking about which of sex workers' daily tasks constitute "sex acts" and which are more about fantasy. Looking closely at the myriad acts in which sex workers engage with customers renders the picture of sex work, prostitutes, and their customers more nuanced than is usually assumed when scholars discuss prostitution as if it always, and obviously, entailed penile-vaginal intercourse with the customer on top (in every sense of the phrase).

One conclusion we might draw is that the selling of a wide range of sex acts reflects and helps define a unique kind of sexual identity, one that resides at the nexus of sexuality and work identity. Historian Ruth Mazo Karras has defined prostitution as a historical category of sexual identity rather than simply an occupation. Karras argues that law and society perceived Western European medieval prostitutes, or "meretrices," as "whores"—women with an innate propensity to sexual sin and excess who also sold their bodies for cash or kind. Her evidence shows that these prostitutes embraced the label meretrice, consciously demarcating themselves from other women as a separate sexual category—that is, they developed what moderns would call a sexual identity as whores.¹² Karras's insight suggests a helpful way to think about the questions I have posed above. Because it is both sex and work, sex work troubles modernly imposed boundaries between heterosexual and homosexual, commercial and noncommercial, agent and victim. To speak of prostitutes' sexuality as both separate from and central to their working lives makes no sense if one understands "sexuality" in conventional terms of sex acts, object choice, and inner desires. If, however, we think of prostitution as involving the construction of a new kind of sexual identity defined in part by the constant negotiation between "sex" and "work," we can begin to see that any historical reconstruction of prostitutes' lives requires us to attend carefully to specific "sex tasks" and the marketing of fantasy.

Thinking of prostitution as a sexual identity implies women's willful choice to apply such a label to themselves, as did Karras's meretrices. Such self-naming raises an important question: When women have embraced a whore identity, have they done so because it served to titillate customers who wanted to believe that prostitutes "wanted it"? In other words, is claiming to love being a prostitute and the sex it entails simply a savvy marketing strategy? This question is a hard one to answer, and historical and contemporary evidence support both this interpretation and one which argues that sex workers can and do find pleasure in the tasks they perform. As with most things, both are probably true, and it depends on how you define the words "pleasure" and "enjoy." Some prostitutes enjoy their job because it pays well; others because they like to be in sexual control; others report having orgasms with some of their customers; and still others claim that the pleasure they find in their work comes from tricking customers, whom they often portray as pathetic, out of as much money as possible.

Finally, thinking of prostitution as a sexual identity raises larger issues of agency and victimization among sex workers—a debate that has raised hackles for at least the past two hundred years among women, from first-wave feminists to contemporary feminist scholars. Some argue vehemently that sex work exploits women and reinforces patriarchal sexual hierarchies and the objectification and victimization of women. Feminists in this camp vilify sex work and those who purchase it in its many forms—pornography, strippers, phone sex, virtual sex, and prostitution. Others claim agency for the women who perform sex work, recognizing that while some sex workers are exploited and pushed or pulled into the business by poverty, drug addiction, or abusive partners or family, others choose to enter the trade and enjoy the job. This camp also vindicates the customers, calling the former group "prudes" and meddlers in other people's private business.¹³ Although most feminists would agree that women's ability to work outside the home for wages is a positive step forward for women, many are decidedly conflicted when women chose prostitution as their employment, despite the fact that it is still one of the few professions in which women earn as much if not more than men.

The agent/victim debate has continued salience in terms of the historiography of sex work as work. Those of us who write about prostitution in the past must always grapple with whether we wish to portray prostitution as woman's employment choice or woman's sexual exploitation. Indeed, this is yet another binary that analyzing sex work as work dispels. As with all things in the past and present, a semblance of "truth" is found somewhere in between. However, women's historians—many of whom, myself included, wish to find contemporary relevance in our read-

ings of the past—must remain mindful not to present historical evidence in ways that distort women's experiences as a way to further feminist and personal agendas. While conducting research for and writing my dissertation, I often struggled with historical evidence that contradicted my picture of women's sexual experience (for example, sources that portrayed prostitutes as either victims or villains). Then, too, I often felt vindicated and almost elated when I found evidence that upheld what I believed to be true (that prostitutes exercised at least some agency, possessed complicated sexual identities, and may have even found some pleasure in their work and nonwork lives). Perhaps especially when writing histories in which sexuality, sexual agency, victimization, and recognition of patriarchal hierarchies are at the fore, this internal struggle—and need for ongoing self-reflection in the creation of our historical narratives—is an important one to have and to make explicit in our writing.

Many historians have heard the call from other feminist scholars, particularly anthropologists, sociologists, and literary critics, to bring the voice of the prostitute back into their narratives.¹⁴ I have found that it is often only through the sex workers' voices may we find detailed narratives about the sex acts in which they engage. Perhaps one of the most pressing concerns for those who study prostitution and the history of sexuality is unearthing reliable sources about sex acts and people's perceptions of their own sexual identity and experience.

A ubiquitous problem of first-person evidence about sex workers is the fact that until the past one hundred years or so (and not in any real quantity until the past fifty years) predominantly men penned such narratives. Perhaps the most (in)famous of these is the often-cited *Memoirs of a Woman of Pleasure* (or *Fanny Hill*), written by John Cleland in the late eighteenth century.¹⁵ Until recently, historians have dismissed as pornographic this genre of "autobiographical" writing about sex and sex work because of the historically male authorship, because they tended graphically to depict sex, and because they may or may not have been fictionalized accounts.¹⁶ Obviously, many of these stories *are* pornographic—or, at least, overblown, politically charged, or just plain impossible. However, if we compare these narratives with authentic autobiographies of prostitutes from the past and the plethora of such writings that proliferate today, many of the narrative threads and factual evidence ring true. Thus, I believe, they should be admitted as plausible historical sources (when supported by other, more traditional forms of evidence).

In my own research and writing, I rely not only on such traditional sources as vice commission reports about prostitutes to uncover their sexual experience, but also on autobiographical writings. Although I am not always able to verify the authorship or authenticity of the "erotic autobiog-

raphies" I came across in my research, I nonetheless include them as evidence when they corroborate information in other sources.¹⁷ Because of the subjective nature of sexuality and people's motivations to hide, alter, or downplay sexual stories in the majority of traditional sources, such nontraditional sources prove invaluable when researching the history of sexuality.

Studying the history of sexuality broadly, and prostitution more specifically, is impossible without studying sex acts (or at least the imagination of such acts through such sources as pornography or erotic autobiography). The intersection of work and sex in prostitution, in particular, and in other forms of sex work (pornographic photos and videos, stripping, phone sex, and X-rated websites, for example), raises important questions and queers our understandings of both sexual identity and work identity. Let's bring sex back into the history of sexuality.

NOTES

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¹For work that concentrates primarily on prostitution reform, see, for example, Ruth Rosen, *The Lost Sisterhood: Prostitution in America, 1900–1918* (Baltimore, Md.: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1982); Barbara Meil Hobson, *Uneasy Virtue: The Politics of Prostitution and the American Reform Tradition* (New York: Basic Books, 1987); David J. Pivar, *Purity Crusade: Sexual Morality and Social Control, 1868–1900* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1973), and David J. Pivar, *Purity and Hygiene: Women, Prostitution, and the "American Plan," 1900–1930* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 2002). For a detailed look at the male "sporting" subculture of New York City, see Timothy J. Gilfoyle, *City of Eros: New York City, Prostitution, and the Commercialization of Sex, 1790–1920* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1992).

²Rosen (*Lost Sisterhood*, chap. 6) and Ann M. Butler (*Daughters of Joy, Sisters of Misery: Prostitutes of the American West, 1865–90* [Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1985]), examine the female subculture of prostitution. They do not, however, examine prostitutes' sex tasks as work qua work. See also, Patricia Cline Cohen, *The Murder of Helen Jewett: The Life and Death of a Prostitute in Nineteenth-Century New York* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1998).

³For example, Judith R. Walkowitz, *Prostitution and Victorian Society: Women, Class, and the State* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980), esp. 14; Rosen, *Lost Sisterhood*, esp. chap 6; Paula Petrik, *No Step Backward: Women and Family on the Rocky Mountain Mining Frontier, Helena, Montana, 1865–1900* (Helena: Montana Historical Society Press, 1987), 25; Butler, *Daughters of Joy, Sisters of Misery*, esp. chap. 3; and Hobson, *Uneasy Virtue*, 108.

⁴See, among many others, Alice Kessler-Harris, *Out To Work: A History of*

Wage-Earning Women in the United States (New York: Oxford University Press, 1982); Lisa M. Fine, *The Souls of the Skyscraper: Female Clerical Workers in Chicago, 1870–1930* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1990); Dorothy Sue Cobble, *Dishing It Out: Waitresses and Their Unions in the Twentieth Century* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1991); Wendy Gamber, *The Female Economy: The Millinery and Dress-making Trades, 1860–1930* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1997); Darlene Clark Hine, *Black Women in White: Racial Conflict and Cooperation in the Nursing Profession, 1890–1950* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1989); Kathleen Weiler, *Country Schoolwomen: Teaching in Rural California, 1850–1950* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1998); Vicki Ruiz, *Cannery Women, Cannery Lives: Mexican Women, Unionization, and the California Food Processing Industry, 1930–1950* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1987); and Mirta Zaida Lobato, “Women Workers in the ‘Cathedrals of Corned Beef’: Structure and Subjectivity in the Argentine Meatpacking Industry,” in *The Gendered Worlds of Latin American Women Workers: From Household and Factory to the Union Hall and Ballot Box*, ed. John D. French and Daniel James (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1997), 53–71.

⁵For example, Shannon Bell, *Reading, Writing, and Rewriting the Prostitute Body* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994); Valerie Jenness, *Making It Work: The Prostitutes’ Rights Movement in Perspective* (New York: Aldine de Gruyter, 1997); “Sex Work and Sex Workers,” special issue of *Sexuality and Culture* 2 (1998); and Ronald Weitzer, *Sex for Sale: Prostitution, Pornography, and the Sex Industry* (London: Routledge, 2000).

⁶For example, Dolores French, with Linda Lee, *Working: My Life as a Prostitute* (New York: E.P. Dutton, 1988); and Frédérique Delacoste and Priscilla Alexander, eds., *Sex Work: Writings by Women in the Sex Industry*, 2nd ed. (San Francisco: Cleis Press, 1998).

⁷This raises the tendentious feminist question of whether heterosexual marriage and other forms of sexual bargaining between women and men technically constitute prostitution. See, for example, Catharine MacKinnon, *Toward a Feminist Theory of the State* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1989); and Carole Pateman, *The Sexual Contract* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1988).

⁸See Heather Lee Miller, “The Teeming Brothel: Sex Acts, Desires, and Sexual Identities in the United States, 1870–1940” (Ph.D. diss., The Ohio State University, 2002).

⁹For a similar argument in terms of women’s sexual deviance, see Joanna Phoenix, “Paradoxical Stories of Prostitution,” in *Constructing Gendered Bodies*, ed. Kathryn Backett-Milburn and Linda McKie (New York: Palgrave, 2001), 56–81, esp. 56.

¹⁰Another question that might be asked is: Must the exchange result in orgasm? The answer is: not necessarily. Contemporary prostitutes report that they sometimes give customers a certain length of time—for example, until a lit cigarette burns out—to achieve orgasm. If they are not finished by then, they must either pay more or the transaction is complete. See, for example, Leon E. Pettitway, *Workin’ It: Women Living through Drugs and Crime* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1997), xxxiv.

¹¹For example, Xaviera Hollander, with Robin Moore and Yvonne Dunleavy, *The Happy Hooker* (New York: Dell, 1970), 77.

¹²Ruth Mazo Karras, "Prostitution and the Question of Sexual Identity in Medieval Europe," *Journal of Women's History* 11 (summer 1999): 159–77.

¹³A good overview of this debate is Melanie Simmons, "Theorizing Prostitution: The Question of Agency," *Sexuality and Culture* 2 (1998): 125–48.

¹⁴For example, Shannon Bell, *Reading, Writing, and Rewriting the Prostitute Body* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994), esp. 185.

¹⁵Vivien Jones, "Eighteenth-Century Prostitutes: Feminist Debates and the Writing of Histories," in *Body Matters: Feminism, Textuality, Corporeality*, ed. Avril Horner and Angela Keane (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2000), 127–42, esp. 129–30.

¹⁶Lisa Z. Sigel (*Governing Pleasures: Pornography and Social Change in England, 1815–1914* [New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 2002]) looks closely at pornography as a valid source of information about social history, politics, and sexuality.

¹⁷For example, [Lola Ardley], *Memoirs of a Pleasure Girl*, typescript copy, Kinsey Institute for Research in Sex, Gender, and Reproduction, Bloomington, Indiana [hereafter Kinsey Institute]; Wilbur Burton, "Erotic Autobiography," 1951, Kinsey Institute; and *Memoirs of Madame Madeleine*, 2 vols. (1928; reprint, New York: Miller Bros., 1930–1946). As scholar of autobiography Philippe Lejeune has noted, a pact is made between author and reader of autobiography (nonfictional or fictional) in which both understand that historical exactitude may not always be possible, but the intention is to relay facts and feelings truthfully. Ultimately, Lejeune (and his successors) argued, "'autobiography is above all a narrative, which follows in time the story of an individual.'" See Paul John Eakins foreword and Chap. 1, of Philippe Lejeune, *On Autobiography*, ed. Paul John Eakins, trans. Katherine Leary (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989), ix–xi, 3–30, quotation on xi. See also Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson, eds., *Women, Autobiography, Theory* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1998).