

On Sex Negativity and Sex Work

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A story we are told:

You are on the brink of sexual freedom; it is here and at your disposal. It is asked only that you find it or make it. If before we were ugly we may be beautiful now-still, you must make yourself natural, whole, and good. You were traumatized but you may recover, simply possess yourself. This is work to be done but it is a good work. Work on your shame, perhaps even fight those who shame you, and it follows that you will be free. At the end of it you will be whole and you will have reclaimed your natural pleasure. The right of man is to fuck and to orgasm. Feel free with your body to do these things because they are good. The feminists and the sexual liberationists knew this and this is why their movement is over. Cosmo and Oprah know this now and therefore everyone knows it. Sex is good and pleasure is powerful, and it is this proposition that will save us from our pain.

Michel Foucault repeats this tale in its barest bones: "someday, sex will be good again." Yet for all that such optimism may aspire to, it exists seamlessly with the brutal realities of gendered life. Rape goes on unabated; the lives of so many remain consumed in domestic and reproductive labor. It is not that optimism is simply ineffective, that it has been appropriated and de-fanged by a system of repression and may thus be saved, but rather that it exists alongside shame and silence, each playing their part in a broader production of sex and gender. If it was once radical and marginal to assert an essential, or simply available, goodness to sex, it is now central, institutional. Far from the domain of some radical set, it is at once an ideology of patriarchy and of the majority of its opponents, a disparate, heterogeneous collection of discourses united in common aim. It is the optimism that insistently, cruelly returns us to the work of fucking.

This optimism is what I position myself against."

c.e. — "Undoing Sex: Against Sexual Optimism"

This zine is an edited and expanded transcript of a talk given at a recent feminist gathering. Sections transcribed from the original talk are reprinted without italics, and later additions are in italics. I'll talk about sex negativity and sex positivity; work and the ways sex positivity has been recuperated by capitalism and patriarchy; womanhood, femininity and some ways that anarchists and others relate to femininity; what sex work shares with other forms of reproductive and emotional work (both waged and unwaged); the impossibility of ethical work under capitalism; identifying with our own objectification to try to abdicate our responsibility to avoid enacting sexual violence on others; and the possibility of a truly liberatory sexual optimism. This is definitely a work in progress, so if you have questions, criticism or feedback, please tell me what you think!

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Introduction

I'm glad to be able to have this conversation in this space, cause it's a conversation that feels urgent for me to be having in my life in an ongoing way and I feel like probably people [here] have interesting things to share or hopefully this will resonate with some of you or all of you.

I also wanna start out by saying that I'm definitely not the first person or the first sex worker to invent having kind of a negative attitude towards sex to cope! My thoughts and ideas from this definitely come a lot from conversations with other people and other sex workers, and women and queer people and trans people and, it's a lot of other people's wisdom that they've shared with me that has inspired me and taught me a lot, and I've been super grateful for that.

This conversation will probably get kind of heavy. I think it's likely that we'll talk about sexual violence, or coercion, or trauma, or lots of things that are hard to talk about and I want to encourage everyone to do what they need to do to take care of themselves, and take care of each other and if you need to like, peace out or whatever, please do that. I don't want to force anyone to sit here and listen to things that are super upsetting.

A bit about where I'm coming from with this or what my deal is: I just started doing sex work a couple of years ago and have mostly been doing the sugar baby thing. I think about it like I'm escorting. People, men, pay me to go on dates with them and make them feel loved and have sex with them and also kind of sell them the illusion that I'm happy to be there and would be doing that for free or something, but definitely, there are transactions involved. I get paid and then I leave and that's the situation. It's not my sole job and it's never been my sole job, but I would definitely say it's a major part of how I'm supporting myself financially. Just wanna be open about what my situation is or something.

What is Sex Negativity?

When I try to think of what that means to me in my life, I think of it as long having felt that sex was a site of domination or exploitation for me. Allowing myself to explore a negative outlook on sex helped me feel okay about not wanting to do the work of making sex a priority in my life, or trying to find ways to reclaim sex or have sex in ways that weren't this particular relation of power or this particular relation of domination.

I've included a short quote and a list of features of "instrumental sexuality" aka sex under the patriarchy from The Prudes' Progress,¹ a text that I encourage you to check out for a much more thorough elaboration of a sex-negative perspective!

Under patriarchy, sex is power, power is sexy, and sex is compulsory. That is to say, the sex act is attractive in a way that is conditioned by its qualities of power and violence... sex is not above criticism. Not bad sex, not sex gone wrong, not the sex that other people have. Our sex."

Instrumental sexuality is defined here as an ideology which:

¹ Lisa. "The Prudes' Progress: Re-Membering Feminist Desire, Part I - A Sex-Negative Feminist Analysis of the Problem." *A Radical TransFeminist*, 14 Nov. 2012, <https://radtransfem.wordpress.com/2012/11/14/the-prudes-progress-part-i/>.

- *Treats domination and differences of power, including but not limited to the differences in power between women and men within a patriarchy as erotic*
- *Is based on the concept of 'active' (subject) and 'passive' (object) roles (I prefer 'object' to 'passive' because this role can also be about acting precisely as desired/instructed, i.e. more like a tool or machine, also forms of object)...*
- *... and involves the idea of the subject 'getting something' from the object, i.e. is a "doer/done-to" model*
- *Relies on oppressions which create and maintain those differences of power*
- *Is dependent on and interwoven with institutions and social forces which promote it as desirable for the object as well as the subject*
- *Because of that interweaving, also has woven into it behaviours (including sexual behaviours) which don't only eroticise the power difference but create and maintain it*
- *Exists on a clear continuum with ideologies supporting sexual violence and rape*

Critique of Sex Positivity

I think a valuable aspect of sex negativity is as a critique or reaction to sex-positivity or like, a lot of ideas, some of which I still think are good and want to keep... I'm not trying to bring back institutional shame, or religious ideas of fixed gender and everything that goes along with that. I'm not trying to say that we shouldn't do what we like with our bodies, or that we should somehow, on purpose, abstain from sex even. I don't, and I really don't think that's a way out. I more want to put forward an awareness or a discussion of the ways that sex harms me or the ways that like it's not in itself a good thing, and be able to talk about that.

The sex positivity thing is like... I understand what people before me were trying to do in developing ideas of enthusiastic consent and wanting the people we have sex with to be there out of genuine desire, and I think that's a good project. I think that comes from a good place and was a strategy to try to fight rape culture and patriarchal domination and all these things that I think are bad.

I have also experienced those ideas as their own form of sexual coercion where it's no longer only demanded of me that I have sex, it's also demanded of me that I perform a level of enthusiasm and enjoyment to absolve my partners — lots of whom are men — of their guilt about the sexual relation and make it okay for them somehow, in this political way, because they're giving me something by fucking me. And I find that really repulsive or I experience that as just more pressure to do more things in bed. It's just that the thing in this particular case is acting out consent theatre, and it doesn't match with my lived experience of that situation.

I have found that doing sex work has been a way to make that experience in lots of ways more explicit and to be compensated for that labour of performing consent. That has made me feel less fucked up or less, like, I don't know what the word is... less broken by those encounters, or something.

I also want to say that I do think that sex work is its own distinct thing, but I think it shares a lot with other forms of gendered relations under patriarchy, and also other forms of work, especially work that is feminised.

I guess I'm gonna be speaking mostly about my relationships with men but, I have also experienced the coercion of enforced sex positivity in queer spaces where it has felt like there is power in sex, or being a person who has sex or that part of my value is tied to how fuckable (or not) I am. A lot of these dynamics define what it means to circulate within a sexual economy even if it's not a heterosexual economy.

Against Work

I'm an anarchist and an anti-capitalist and am against work, in general. I think that there are lots of forces in the world that are coercing people to produce value and I don't want that to exist. I think that's domination and force and capture and that's definitely part of what I'm trying to fight in my life. When I think about it, I definitely — I do want a world where there would not be sex work. I also want a world where there wouldn't be baristas. I want a world where people aren't forced to sell their labour for money, because they have to pay their landlord, like... basically fuck all of that.

In doing sex work, I'm in lots of ways being paid to perform the role of a woman in society, and that to me shares a lot with other kinds of domestic or reproductive work (both waged and unwaged). My friends that get paid to clean rich people's houses so that like their bosses can go off and be a different kind of woman who doesn't have to be preoccupied with those responsibilities, that work is also something I relate to. And I want a world where that particular role or that particular power relation wouldn't exist anymore, where perhaps "being a woman" and "having sex" would also be meaningless or mean a completely different set of things. In the meantime, in this world, I'm not interested in policing the borders of gender and I don't want to enforce on anyone particular ways of coping with this gendered nightmare.

Also I'm not trying to say that sex work itself is this liberatory thing. I don't think it is. I don't think it's revolutionary simply because it's illegal or even socially transgressive. It's a job and I do think of it that way and I try to minimize its effect on my life (like I do with other jobs) or try to give it as little psychic energy as I can, because I want to have as much of my own energy and life for the things and people that I actually care about and for political struggle and for love and relationships. When I think of the difference between this particular contract that I have negotiated with men for my sexual submission and the range of possibilities that were open to me in that regard, this one seems far better than others that I have considered. I feel grateful to have escaped the trap of marriage. And thinking about other women in my family and what their experiences had been like, I think I have, in some ways, more autonomy than they did and that matters to me. That's something that I'm on purpose choosing because out of the set of options available to me, I think that having [sex work] in my life is good and makes a lot of other things possible in the world that I think are good.

Insisting on a difference between work and not-work is important to me both philosophically and practically. I try to maintain strong boundaries to prevent work from taking over my whole life, which feels like a necessary condition for building anarchist life and struggle with others. It might be true that "there's no outside" to this civilization in the sense of nowhere on earth is "pristine" or untouched by colonization and capitalism. But the scale and intensity of this process is uneven across time and space, and the outcomes of each individual battle not predetermined. Primitive accumulation churns along, consuming our bodies, relations, and life energy for production. Resistance is still worth it

because it makes a difference to us in our individual lifetimes and because it's our best hope for making a difference to others/all of us, now and in generations to come.

Sex Positivity Recuperated

The lie of sex positivity is that sexual pleasure is now supposed to be its own reward. One familiar patriarchal story about sex goes like: women's sexual submission is a prize won by men, extracted from women once their resistance is neutralized by seduction or by force. Where this understanding has been widely held and less mystified, our part in the story tends to go: I'll trade you sexual submission and reproductive labour for material support and your protection from the consequences of giving no one (or too many people, or the wrong people) those things.

Where sex positivity has been put to work as a tool for sexual repression, we're now expected to say: "I'll trade you sexual submission and reproductive labour for the sexual gratification and personal joy I get from doing these things!"

I recognize that sex doesn't always feel like "work" in the sense of drudgery. I don't expect people's attitudes towards the sex they're having and how much they enjoy it or hate it on any given day needs to stay the same. It seems to me like denying oneself sexual pleasure for its own sake has more in common with a desire for ascetic discipline and self-mastery than concern for the well-being of our sexual partners. I'm not saying that it's bad to feel pleasure or gratification from having sex. I'm saying it's bad to make feeling these things (or, more realistically saying we feel these things) compulsory.

Wages for Sex Work

To have generalized the understanding that women's sexual pleasure is its own reward, and to go on to pretend that we are all now simply exchanging sexual pleasure on a level and frictionless terrain, free of patriarchal power dynamics, is a repressive caricature of feminism designed to "cruelly return us to the work of fucking."

This understanding has dramatically reduced women's negotiating power in this fucked up capitalist sexual economy. The men I fuck are almost never on the same page as me about what fucking does to our power relations (to put it bluntly: they win, I lose). Rather than feel a responsibility and/or some amount of social pressure to materially support me, an implicit acknowledgement of the power relations between us — they expect me to pay for my own dinner and also, now, to pretend that I find giving blowjobs personally gratifying. For free! Truthfully, I can almost never be bothered these days. As usual, transactional dynamics that are present in many sexual encounters (and workplace encounters too) that are not financially compensated or otherwise explicitly acknowledged are simply more evident in the context of sex work. My clients frequently use their attractiveness or the prospect of my sexual gratification to suggest that I be paid less, because I seem to be enjoying myself — a fact that I am never in a realistic position to deny.

I also wanted to talk about how... — I do think I have felt traumatized in different particular ways by every job I've ever had to do and sex work has its own particular ways of traumatizing me. Going into [sex work] with the knowledge that I feel like, yeah, this is me getting paid to have sex that I don't really want to have or me enduring certain kinds of sexual coercion, this obviously takes a toll, and I think that part of what feels urgent in those conversations to me

is [figuring out] how to deal with that in ways that are not self-destructive and help me to stay resilient for a long time in this world. But, I also don't say that to be shocking or something or to be like "oh this is like so extreme [that] I'm doing this thing" cause I also don't feel like "wow, that's so ~*crazy and fucked up." I've definitely had friends who aren't sex workers relate to stories about work [in weird ways], I might be like "oh yeah like this person said some horrible shit and then we had sex and whatever" and my friend might be like "oh my god that's so horrible, wow, I can't believe anyone would ever do that" and I sort of feel like "alright well... I don't know, it feels pretty regular to me" or it doesn't feel so... so separate or so much more intense than lots of other relationships or situations that I've experienced in my life."

If I were being honest, I'd admit that I often feel like "oh my god that's so horrible, wow I can't believe anyone would ever do that" when my friends and coworkers talk about their relationships with their boyfriends and husbands. I think extending solidarity and support to people who aren't sex workers but who are fucked (over) by the patriarchy in similar or related ways is a good impulse. The project of producing an isolated class of sex workers whose consent can be traded on the open market allows everyone to keep pretending that the same economic transaction and the same coercive power dynamics don't exist at the heart of the institution of marriage, for example, or diffusely in all of our sexual relations to some extent. It's disappointing to see other anti-capitalists — in a recent article entitled "It's basically sex work: a brief summary of why people who have never done sex work have to stop saying that"² — participating in this sort of isolation under the guise of identity-based moralizing or protecting your narratives of trauma with a kind of intellectual property approach.

Against "Ethical" Jobs

Another part of allowing myself to have a negative outlook on sex (and sex work) is letting go of the need to defend sex work by appealing to a moral framework of care and ethical work. I don't want to play the respectability politics game of saying "You should listen to and respect me because my work benefits society and I'm a good worker!" when I actually think capitalism makes every job unethical and there's nothing wrong with being a totally shit worker, even if your job is sex work. (I feel there are a few things wrong with being a bad worker with other forms of care work where my clients would be more vulnerable, which is why I try to avoid them for the most part).

Capitalism seeks to establish control over the things we need to survive (including various forms of care and relationships) and then sell them back to us to extract profits. This system is not at all set up to provide people with ethical ways of relating to each other, and in fact relies of huge amounts of misery and exploitation to keep it going. Certainly some jobs involve worse compromises than others, and some are considered totally unacceptable by most anarchists. But every job involves some amount of compromise in order to participate in the capitalist economy, and sex work is no different.

Some feminists and sex workers frame sex work as as "ethical work" because some escorting gigs involve some amount of providing care for elderly people and people with disabilities or some porn gigs involve doing the Work of producing Representation for others. While I appreciate the effort to lessen the social stigma of sex work, I think this approach is misguided.

² "It's Basically Sex Work: A Brief Summary of Why People Who Have Never Done Sex Work Have to Stop Saying That." *It's Going Down*, 16 Apr. 2019, <https://itsgoingdown.org/its-basically-sex-work-a-brief-summary-of-why-people-who-have-never-done-sex-work>

We can affirm that elderly folks deserve to live in real communities where they receive care from the people around them, and that people with disabilities deserve bodily autonomy and full and dignified sexual lives, and queer people deserve to create and share complex, beautiful, and totally obscene stories about our sexual desires and experiences. We all make choices about how to survive under capitalism, and trying to get paid for things you generally find enjoyable can be an ok way of doing that. I also don't feel bad about enjoying the sexual pleasure and human contact I get from clients. But doing care work, even though it shares a lot with positive aspects of human relationships, isn't the same as actually caring for our loved ones and communities of struggle, and it's not the same thing as fighting the forces that keep us down. We can't expect our work to be our contribution to making the world a better place because under capitalism, no one gets paid for doing things that will actually get us free.

Non-transactional Relations Between Friends

Also when I talk about labour, it is important to me to try to not think of my whole life in terms of these microtransactions of labour between friends and comrades and lovers and people who I am actually trying to build something with that isn't transactional. I respect the analysis that recognizes emotional labour as a thing that lots of people are forced to perform in different ways and I think that's really important, but I don't think that generalizing that analysis to my whole life is a direction I want to go because I find that very depressing and horrifying. I want relations based on generous love and care and shared goals and not this strict accounting of who is doing more work, or who is owing, or who is taking, or whatever even if I think it is important to pay attention to these interpersonal dynamics. I don't think giving them a capitalist framing is the way to do it.

I have found deciding to do sex work good for all of my other relationships because it sort of puts that relation of domination and the transactional nature of that in a sphere that I already regard as the enemy's terrain or something? Like already, I go to work and I'm like "well fuck this, I have to be here, but I can try to survive it or negotiate it the best way I can or get the most for what I'm doing, or steal as much as I can, or whatever." That's a pretty antagonistic relationship. I have for a long time experienced similar antagonism in my sexual relationships with men and felt a lot of guilt and shame about that because it was with people who I genuinely loved and cared about. But, I also felt that tension of like "I'm doing all of this work, and yet somehow, what it means to be liberated is that you don't have to support me materially or financially," or feeling resentment at this feeling of somehow losing power in our sexual relationship, but not being [allowed to] really fully feel that resentment or go where it was taking me, because I was still trying to keep those people in the category of friend, or lover, or comrade. It required sort of negating that power dynamic in my head or not acknowledging it or otherwise trying to ignore it, and that makes me feel crazy. It makes me feel like [there's something] wrong with me. I don't know. Being able to be like 'yeah I'm here because I'm being paid and my emotions and performance and whatever is not my genuine self,' that feels healthier for me. I feel like more of a whole person to...separate those things. And I think part of why that is is because I don't think it's totally possible to separate the power and domination of sex under the patriarchy from sex itself or from having sex with people.

Womanhood

I do think of myself as a woman. I'm not particularly thrilled about it, but also there are totally things about it that I like or at the very least continue to perform, and I don't think that blaming individuals on that level for the ways they choose to participate or not participate in performing these kinds of work is a good way to build solidarity or even a good way to struggle against the patriarchy or different forces that conspire to keep people in these roles of subordination.

I'm generally against trying to universalize my own understanding of what a woman is, or demarcate a clearly defined identity with borders you can either be inside or outside. I have no interest in policing that identity border (or constituting and arming any particular gender-based identitarian group, to be honest) but I certainly do have an interest in acting with others to fight, offensively as well as defensively, against patriarchal domination.

Femininity

My sex work persona is some kind of detoured bimbo. I do try to minimize the time, money and emotional energy I put into reproducing myself as a worker for pretty much all my jobs, so spending hours and thousands of dollars transforming my body to look like an uncanny sex doll is probably not going to happen for me although it is a desire that I have. And while I don't think the bimbo roleplay is in and of itself subversive, I also don't think it is oppressive or harmful to others in a way that is at all proportional to the amount of social censure directed towards anyone embodying a bimbo archetype (or elements of it). This censure seems intended to punish those who make the economic transaction of sex under patriarchy public and visible again. In its most intense form, that kind of femininity is expensive and tends to make people assume that you financially depend on sexually gratifying men in some way, whether as a trophy wife or a sex worker (freelance trophy wife?)

I appreciate how taking on this role helps affirm my rejection of Career Woman Respectability Feminism that dictates that I should make my self worth contingent on success in the working world (and then what, an endless hell of riding e-scooters to fetlife dates with sapiosexual men where I have to pay for my own drinks? killllll me). Getting money from sex isn't any more busted than getting money from any other thing, despite the smug satisfaction of those who generally think that "whoring" debases a person but find pride and self-worth in working shitty jobs that destroy your body and spirit. You can keep your sense of personal dignity about the extent to which you refuse to perform sexual labour without being self-righteous or moralistic about other people's choices to prioritize time without work and autonomy, take the wage premium, and refuse the penance of being emotionally abused by many different strangers for 40 hours a week.

Reading about sex negativity helped me open a vault in my own thoughts and feelings that I hadn't been letting myself open, because it was painful and I was still participating more in compulsory sexuality and trying to muster up romantic feelings of enthusiasm for sex. Specifically, I found it hard to let myself think about my value on the sexual marketplace, because it's painful to think of oneself that way and I don't want to identify with it at all. It has also helped me more fully understand my feelings and experiences of being in relationships where I experienced the same kinds of transactional dynamics even though I wasn't getting paid. Sex work has blessed me with a weird detached relationship to my own "attractiveness by hegemonic standards" and it's probably not the

healthiest, but it does feel a lot healthier than totally identifying with it and taking it personally every time I fail to measure up.

Beauty Work

We can support people's individual and collective struggles to resist the imposition of gender while also prioritizing people's autonomy and agency around their own embodiment and how they choose to relate to the vast array of girl technologies available to us. Humiliating someone for shaving their legs or having breast implants is just plain old misogyny dressed up in puritanical radicalism. Both helping each other lessen the material burden of reproducing femininity by pooling efforts to share shoplifted clothes or scam insurance for hormones as well as building social worlds together that help us feel okay about being fat or hairy are real contributions towards freeing ourselves now in our daily lives from misogynist (frequently transmisogynist) violence. I get frustrated with the stance that the only politically correct approach to femininity (of all things!) is some puritan white cis girl shit, the "natural beauty" look. I'm pretty wary of upholding "natural" as yet another embodied aesthetic ideal because I don't trust people to not create vile new (or recycle the same old) misogynist and transmisogynist forms of punishment for those who don't measure up. To me, individualistically performing abstinence from feminine beauty work as a competitive personal purity project feels like a politically emptied-out and recuperated version of genuine, intentional efforts to support each other in resisting the imposition of beauty work.

I worry that I sound like I'm engaging in a defense of beauty work itself. I do want to acknowledge that the work of reproducing ourselves as sexual objects is often physically and emotionally harmful and economically burdensome, by design. I just think that the personal costs of abstaining from beauty work vary widely depending on our individual lives and social positions, and that we should be empathetic about the fact that we're all making choices in a compromised world.

It is true that anarchist scenes (at least in urban North America, but probably elsewhere too) are full of far more normatively attractive young(ish) white people than one would expect for a liberatory social movement. Requiring people to participate in capitalist beauty work to fit into anarchist social worlds is a failure of ours to be sure (albeit a failure of most other social worlds too). Trying to collectively create spaces where we celebrate different ways of being beautiful or not beautiful, doing or not doing a gender, and existing as a body is a good and important project. To the extent that anarchist spaces I spend time in have done this, I have felt a greatly positive difference in my life. And being attentive to power in our interpersonal relations will never stop being necessary, even if it's not sufficient on its own to destroy gender as a regime of social control. But when I encounter people coercively enforcing standards of modesty or plainness on others with sexual shame, I think this is total shit that has nothing to do with liberation. And claiming that sexual objectification is a deserved corrective to the social power people gain from being fuckable is victim-blaming rape culture bullshit. People might be interested or want to participate in the project of resisting gender with us, but we'll never find out if we treat them like garbage for performing too much or (too little) beauty work.

I will say that all of the patriarchal gender roles available to us in this particular world are total shit. Possibly the worst strategy for dealing with this is to uncritically valorize every aspect of femininity without even trying to discerning which ones are largely markers of our own oppression and which are moreso stigmatized simply by their association with women and/or femininity.

I don't wear my work outfits when I'm just hanging out with friends anymore — partly because I didn't love the low-grade sexual shaming or unwanted sexualised interactions I endured, and partly because I realized that it was unfair to expect people to be totally perfect at resisting the effects of capitalist technologies of heterosexuality. Just like food companies spend billions of dollars on research and focus groups to develop addictive snack foods that open the electrochemical floodgates in your brain — fashion companies are heavily invested in the global sex trade via spending billions to design clothing used to reproduce sexual labourers (by which I mean all of us, to some degree) and sexually appeal to men. It's not a purity project, but I do think it's beneficial to avoid relying on technology to mediate my relationships with friends, whether that's smartphone screens or rompers designed to evoke the image of a sexualized child — so I forgive them for acting weird because it's actually a good thing that we've created lives together where we're not all constantly exposed to the cosmo magazine bullshit, and I decided to just chill out about it. I'm also really grateful for the anarchist subcultural norm — adopted from radical queer and punk scenes? — where it's generally considered not cool (ie racist and/or (trans)misogynist) to express sexual disgust about people's body hair.

Staking Out a Terrain of Innocence, Building Fortifications

With all resistance comes repression, and it's rare that people who benefit from patriarchy don't push back to defend their own interests when people find ways to resist their patriarchal domination. Sometimes that looks like saying "any attempt to affect the behaviour of others is authoritarian violence" or "the balance of this social norm should be shifted further back towards protecting my reputation, at the expense of its effectiveness in preventing and/or addressing sexual violence." These reactionary moves attempt to preemptively stake out defensive positions against accusations of sexual or interpersonal violence.

But those of us who, on balance, don't win at patriarchy can still engage in manipulative reputation management or try to evade responsibility for treating our sexual partners in unacceptable ways. I am uneasily reminded of what this has in common with an idea brought up in "Top or Bottom: How do we desire?" by Billy-Ray Belcourt, George Dust, and Kay Gabriel³: a discussion of how people take on bottoming as an identity as a part a quest to avoid guilt and sexual responsibility, and stake out a claim on the territory of innocence/virtue. To be perfectly clear, I don't think that's possible. I see in it a continuation of this civilization's project of domination, especially how the presumed innocence of white cis femininity has been wielded for various transmisogynist, colonial and white supremacist ends.

I see how deciding to do sex work is, in one sense, abdicating responsibility for hurting my sexual partners or having to care about that. I entertain some sick fascinations in trying to get good at my job — thinking about the eroticization of domination at the heart of all the terrible things men want, then using these reflections to perform a technically exacting misogynistic fantasy. Then I get to laugh about how much they liked it and how terrible they are with my friends later. But when I was younger, my friends and I would sometimes do this with the men we were dating, and we hated them for it when it worked (and used those stories to justify to ourselves and each other the various ways

³ Belcourt, Billy-Ray, et al. "Top or Bottom: How Do We Desire?" *The New Inquiry*, 10 Oct. 2018, <https://thenewinquiry.com/top-or-bottom-how-do-we-desire/>.

we treated them badly). I still have compassion for myself in that situation but feel like that was an abusive and fucked up way to relate to someone you love.

Trying to be self-reflective and seriously attend to questions of sexual violence in my personal relationships, especially with other anarchists, has led me to a situation where sex work is the only context I have found where I truly don't feel like I'm instrumentalizing others to work out my own sexual trauma in an unethical way. It feels — if not pure or good, then at least explicit and honest. Certainly also depressing, although I don't feel hopeless about it because I don't expect this particular situation to last forever.

I recognize in this my own attempt to absolve myself from being ethically culpable for the sexual violence I might enact on others, and stake out a preemptively/"structurally" innocent position. I definitely think these are questionable motivations even if I don't feel bad about hatefucking my clients. I feel a certain comfort knowing that my clients are indicating their enthusiastic consent to having sex with me by paying me to do so. Also openly discussing the transactional nature of our encounters makes me feel less crazy than being in a partnership that is transactional in the same ways but it's not "supposed" to be and so I'm not supposed to bring it up.

Sexual Optimism and Healing

If I'm not going to try to heal my damaged sense of sexuality then at the very least, I can refrain from inflicting my harmful expectations of gendered roles on anyone else. I currently am not prioritizing this kind of healing — I don't think it's the kind of thing that I can fully do on my own as an individual anyway, and especially not in isolation from attacking gender and patriarchy together with others. But I don't think healing is pointless or impossible, even if it's circular and forever incomplete. I don't think healing (especially healing as a project of optimizing a liberal individual self) is an end in itself. But it can help us feel better, be stronger, and keep us going in our struggles against domination.

I do think that a journey to uncover some mythical wild, essential sexuality inside myself would be a fool's errand, and I don't currently feel motivated to make constructing a healthier sexuality a priority (I appreciate that sex negativity helps me resist the pressure to prioritize sex in my life in general). But we find ways in lots of different realms to gesture towards the world we want to live in from within this world. If others find it valuable to attempt to build freer and non-instrumentalizing sexual relationships in their lives now, I sincerely think that is a good project and I don't want to sabotage it. I also especially feel a responsibility to relate to sex cautiously and take care to avoid harming other anarchists or causing relationships of real potential and affinity to crash and burn. I want us all to be strong and whole and okay together to try and make an anarchist world, and our relations with each other are already so damaged by the impacts of sexual violence, on ourselves as well as our ancestors.

All this to say — I'm not foreclosing the possibility of a liberatory sexual optimism, only saying that it's not currently my project, and to be truly liberatory it would have to look completely different from the compulsory sexual optimism I'm describing in the rest of this piece.

Where to Go From Here?

I think I'll stop there. Are there things that I said or things about this topic that people are thinking about that feel urgent? Do people have curiosities or questions or life experiences that they want to share? I'm totally down to talk about things on a theoretical level too, but also I'm trying to think through this by myself and with other people on the basis of my ongoing everyday life and I'm curious if people find that any of this resonates, or not. Like I said, I'm not trying to suggest that people take on this framework if it doesn't feel like that will help you or bring you personal power or if that's not the project that you're interested in doing with your life. Some friends have said to me "I kinda think that's interesting, but I'm instead embarking on this project of trying to feel good and healthy and whole about my sexual relationships and I don't wanna go down this road of fucking with that." And I really understand and respect that. I've just found that [sex-negativity] has resonated with me and helped me, and maybe other people also have those experiences. I don't know.

Questions for Further Discussion

What does a sex-negative lens uncover in your daily life and relationships?

How does BDSM fit in a framework of sex as domination? Is it possible to step outside of/play a different role in the gendered sex as domination equation, or is that fundamentally impossible? Does the magnitude of the existing power differences between people affect this?

What would it look like to try to build sexual relationships that didn't rely on eroticizing domination and instrumentalizing others? The Prude's Progress describes some ways forward for women who love women in her piece and expresses some skepticism about the possibility of non-instrumental sexuality outside of that context. What might that look like in your life and relationships?

What sexual norms exist in anarchist subcultures? Which are liberatory or oppressive?

Is not fucking men a solution to these problems? To what extent are these same dynamics (transactional relations, compulsory sexuality) present in queer relationships and social worlds, and do they function differently?

Further Reading

The Ethical Prude and The Prudes' Progress

(radtransfem.blogspot.com)

Pro-festo of the Prostitutes War Group

(prostituteswargroup.wordpress.com)

Bleached Blond Bimbos #1 and #2

(searchable at the Queer Zine Archive Project, <http://archive.qzap.org>)

Against the Couple Form

(<http://www.liesjournal.net/volume1-03-againstcoupleform.pdf>)

Grin and bare it all: Against liberal conceptions of sex work

(<https://libcom.org/library/grin-bare-it-all-against-liberal-conceptions-sex-work>)

Getting Away with Hating It: Consent in the Context of Sex Work

(<http://titsandsass.com/getting-away-with-hating-it-consent-in-the-context-of-sex-work/>)

Live Through This (<https://thenewinquiry.com/live-through-this/>)

the tumblrization of everyday life → glorification of the reactive affects
in some cases, the fetishization of powerlessness
there is nothing “wrong” with a politics of complaint
but there are several risks
like developing a dependent relationship with “the enemy”
politically neutralizing oneself by dumping all of one’s subversive energies into meaningless channels
or reifying one’s powerlessness by identifying with it
because it makes one virtuous
complaint becomes a form of subcultural capital
a way to morally purify oneself
as a “queer woman of color” I know that the world is hostile to my existence
but it is not an indication of my “goodness”
i may frame it this way to cope with my position
but developing a morality out of not having power just reinforces my powerlessness
i am fine with expressions of impotence and weakness
and all the things that people do because they don’t have power
but I want real strategies for transmogrifying weakness into power
not by denying or “overcoming” weakness, but adopting a certain attitude toward it
a more enabling, less moralistic attitude
jackie wang, loneberry.tumblr.com

The Anarchist Library
Anti-Copyright



Anonymous
On Sex Negativity and Sex Work
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