

Fragments of an Anarcha-Transfeminist Sociology of Sex Work

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A Last Minute Note On Language

In my haste, it would appear that I forgot to include an explanation of why this text is written the way it is and some of the potential complications with it, so here it is. In this text, you will find a fair amount of obscene words, transphobic slurs, and trans community specific colloquialisms. This is deliberate and not done without care. All of my interviewees, plus countless other trans people in my life, have asked to read this when it is done, and it occurred to me that I do not know how to write about transness and trans-related subjects without my writing having a distinctly trans character. It also occurred to me that I do not know how to write about transness and trans-related subjects without in some way referencing my own existence as a non-binary trans lesbian. I mean come on, part of my whole idea with this project was that I'd get to meet other trans women and talk about being trans women. It stands to reason that this had an influence on the literary character of this piece alongside the empirical.

So I wrote much of this work in a style and vernacular that is somewhat accessible to trans people both in and outside of the academy. Granted there is much of this that is dense with jargon and social scientific literary quirks, but when describing sexual acts, I chose to be as explicit and frank as necessary. This was also done because I did not wish to recreate in my own voice the kind of distant, outsider-y tone when confronting bodies that I often find in literature written by cis people about trans people. I am an imperfect author, and I recognize not everyone will appreciate my approach to language here, but it is my hope that you, dear reader, understand why I felt it necessary to speak in a language most familiar to me and those whose experiences I tried to capture here.

As a heads up to readers, both current and future, there is considerable discussion of sexual violence in this text, both in the theoretical and as experienced by real people. I tried to be as honest and careful with my framing of it, but I sincerely apologize if I have failed. Please do remember to take care of yourselves.

Introduction

I was about twelve years old when I first discovered tranny porn. I had recently begun using Tumblr, which at the time still allowed sexually explicit content to be posted uncensored, and late one night I came across the promotional account for Natalie Mars, a rather prominent trans woman in the contemporary adult film industry. Being a snot-nosed little punk, I immediately felt compelled to send Natalie an anonymous message via the ask box function. In this message, I asked what several terms that often appeared in her posts, such as MtF (male to female), futanari (a Japanese term popularized by anime referring to women with penises), and tranny (tranny) meant, and she replied quite cordially and carefully with seemingly no frustration at what must have been fairly obnoxious questions. Did I understand the concept of being trans? Abso-fucking-lutely not. But suddenly my world exploded with the possibilities of what life could be like as a girl with a penis. After all, Natalie Mars said she was a girl, and she certainly looked like one, but she also had a face that reminded me of mine, almost like she knew what it was like to be a teenage boy like me.

Of course, I kept those feelings and these experiences secret, hidden from the world, while also still attempting to explore these possibilities in some confused way. All throughout high school, I would log in to chat rooms in search of text based roleplaying partners, and during this period of time I discovered a great number of things. Most importantly, I realized that I enjoyed the thought of having sex as a woman. About half the time I would log in to these chat rooms, I would identify myself as a woman, donning the name “Rachel” or “Charlotte”, and while occasionally I would roleplay with people who identified themselves as men, I more often than not would search for those who identified themselves as lesbians.

Was I convincing at playing a woman in varying sexual scenarios? I have no way of knowing. But I did this for years. I would never discuss having a penis, the entire time acting as if I was a proud cisgender female woman and definitely not a deeply confused teenage boy. I was always afraid my secret would be found out, that I would fail to perform femininity in some way that would tip off my partner that I was really a boy and therefore be treated as one. As a sort of rationalization for this behavior, I imagined all of this like a massive creative writing exercise. Sure, it was smut. But it was smut that forced me to create characters different from my own persona that I found myself playing out in the real world. Being so inexperienced in real life, I ended up reading and watching a lot of lesbian erotica as research for these roleplaying sessions so that I could more convincingly keep up the ruse. Never did any of my research or roleplaying include the possibility of lesbian sex involving a penis, for that was too real and stirred too many confusing feelings for me. No, this was purely research of a phenomenon completely distinct and separate from myself that I categorically could never experience. Or at least I thought.

And then suddenly I stopped. As I got older, I became more and more afraid of my own lack of real sexual experience as a boy, and so I shut out of mind any understanding of queer sexuality that I had haphazardly developed via the internet. At the time, I was constantly being bullied for my failures to perform traditional masculinity. After all, I was a long haired boy with

a thing for musical theater who liked to wear knit scarves. Not terribly subversive, but growing up in the Pocono Mountains of Pennsylvania, kids learned to be cruel at a real young age, in no small part egged on by my teachers. After graduating high school, I leaned real hard into performing masculine heterosexuality to the best of my abilities, desperately trying to prove to the world that I was not only capable of being a man but one that was valued and deemed attractive enough to be validated for my efforts with physical affection and momentary spaces for emotional vulnerability. And boy howdy, was I bad at it.

I do not remember a lot of this period, as this was around the time I started to seriously shut my mind off and merely go through the motions of existence in something of a dream state, especially whenever I was in a sexual context. But eventually, I realized I had been lying to myself all of these years about these desires to be a woman. As sex became more and more difficult to engage in, the more obvious it was that I hated having to live as a man every day of my life, and in the brief moments in which I was summoned to perform heterosexual manhood, I was filled with a most abject of terrors that I would fail and people would see me for who I truly was. So I stopped engaging, and instead turned to the internet for comfort in these experiences, desperately calling out into the void for someone, anyone, to tell me that I was not alone in feeling this way. And eventually the call would come back to me, and here I am, roughly five and half years after my first major realization that I was a trans woman, now living with the name Veronica.

That call back to me came from a most fitting of places. As I mentioned earlier, my first introduction to transness as a concept was through interacting with a transfeminine adult film actress, Natalie Mars, on Tumblr. After Tumblr banned sexual content from being posted in 2018, I migrated over to Twitter, and wouldn't you know it, apparently there are a whole bunch of transfeminine sex workers on there constantly posting memes and nudes! I found this little community almost instantly, and from there, my gender was transed. In clearer (less jokey) terms: I realized I was trans in no small part due to my interactions with other trans women on the site, and through befriending them I developed a more inclusive and less judgemental mindset about feminism and sex work. Yet it was always striking to me just how many trans women I would encounter online were in some way connected to the world of sex work. Putting on my sociologist hat, I started to ask questions, and now here I am with a full senior thesis on transfeminine sex work. So let us begin!

In this work, I am going to be talking about sex. I am also going to be talking about trans women. I am going to be talking about trans women who have sex. I will also be talking about a lot more than just that, though. From November of 2021 to March of 2022, I engaged in a series of interviews with transfeminine sex workers, and I spoke with them about their experiences in the industry, their relationship to it, and to those outside of it. Throughout this work, I will be attempting to put forward an argument that the experiences of the women I interviewed suggest a number of critical means by which marginalized populations can resist domination in their everyday lives while still having to live within these broader systems. I am speaking broadly here, which is perhaps not appropriate to the argument I am putting forward; I am talking here about how kinky queer trans women who make their living off of sex work relate to our specific (transfeminine) and collective (everyone else) struggles against capitalism, the state, and cisheteropatriarchy.

To begin, I will offer an overview of my research methods and the literature on the relevant subjects. Then I will provide summaries of the social forces which led to my interviewees entering the sex work industry. Following this, I will explain what the work they do actually is and some

of the most important processes involved. From there, I will discuss some of the conflicts and dangers experienced, and subsequently I will continue my analysis of the conflicts and dangers in my first major interpretative section on sex work as framed from an anarchist perspective on labor and the state. My final substantive section will focus on understanding transfeminine sex work as part of the necessary destabilization of transmisogyny by creating space for empowered trans sexuality.

Methods and Notes on Positionality

To conduct this study, I decided upon doing in-depth, semi-structured interviews over Zoom ranging from between one and three hours in length. In total, I spoke with five transfeminine sex workers in interviews lasting between one and three hours. Because my definition of sex work for the purposes of this study included in-person and online exclusive work, an ethnographic approach would have been impractical and limited in scope, as the nature of the work varies so considerably depending on the individual worker's particular wares, specialties, skills, and life situation. Some of the people I interviewed have full time jobs with sex work on the side to supplement their income, meaning that what they produce or offer can be less available or consistent, while others are full time sex workers and can devote a substantial amount of time to their craft. Furthermore, I lacked access to a large community of transfeminine sex workers who do in-person work in the immediate area near Bard College, and to gain access to such a community would require going to a major city with a higher overall population and more vibrant sex market.

My sample was derived from Twitter primarily as well as Tryst, a popular website where potential customers can find escorts in their area. My process for recruitment was sending a pre-written invitation via a user's preferred communication method as specified by their profile information. The geographic distance between myself and my interviewees was additionally part of why an interview approach was chosen, as local and state politics and culture factor heavily into the kind of professional environment afforded to transfeminine sex workers. As an individual, I am much more familiar with the layout and customs of Twitter than other platforms, so it seemed logical to use that understanding of the platform when deciding where to find recruits.

One major limitation of my recruitment strategy was my lack of funds to provide interviewees in exchange for their time. As I would come to understand very intimately via many frustrated emails and countless more ghostings from potential recruits, sex workers like to be paid for the work they do, which includes talking to sociologists. If this kind of study were to be replicated, payment for recruits would be highly recommended, as it would enable a much wider range of people with different experiences to speak.

Regarding professional concerns, I initially hoped I would be able to speak with full service sex workers who primarily work on the street, erotic dancers, dominatrixes, and a variety of other kink and fetish specialists. This would have given me a better point of reference by which to compare my findings to previous sociological literature on sex work as well as the subject matter of the Feminist Sex Wars. Demographically, I would have wanted to speak with more Black and other non-white workers across the industry, as one my interviewees, Belle, spoke briefly on the prevalence of violence against Black and brown transfeminine sex workers. Unfortunately, this was not effectively captured by my sample, and I suspect this would not be the case if my sample was significantly larger.

A particular empirical and ethical concern worth mentioning is my own positionality; as I mentioned in my introduction, the origin of my interest in transfeminine sex work stemmed

largely from my own proximity to online communities of transfeminine sex workers. Without getting terribly lewd or vulgar, it would be appropriate to say this proximity was not entirely chaste in character. So this leads me to question whether or not someone such as myself is actually equipped to study such a phenomenon. After all, I am far from impartial and in fact relish in my friendships with sex workers and own history as an online customer. However, as per my discussion of Dorothy Allison and Gayle Rubin in the literature, as a sociologist, I find value in theorizing phenomena that we personally can be implicated in.

That said, as I mentioned earlier, my use of Twitter was not accidental, as I was familiar with the layout and norms of the platform. While I used a separate account created for recruitment purposes, I did often reference my own personal account's list of followers and pages followed to give me a jumping off point. Given the number of transfeminine sex worker accounts I follow on my personal account, it made sense from a logistical perspective to utilize access to this list of people to potentially recruit. This did lead me to interview at least one person with whom I had prior interactions with which we discussed during the interview process, but that does not factor into my data as presented here whatsoever. While I do not think my own sexual history surrounding sex work and kink unfairly skewed my interpretation of the data I collected, this work would be lacking without that honesty.

Literature Review and Theory

In this section I will outline the primary theoretical tent poles and discussions with which I am constructing my arguments with. I will begin by laying out some of the sociological literature on sex work, specifically the work of Elizabeth Bernstein. With this overview of Bernstein's work, I will also contextualize the contemporary legal situation for sex workers as understood via my interviews. I will then explore some of the broader feminist debates on sex work and sexuality more broadly as it pertains to the Feminist Sex Wars, as these political impact of these debates is necessary to understanding both Bernstein's and my own research. Following this, I will make a direct linkage between the thinking of some sex radical feminists from these debates, particularly Dorothy Allison, Alice Echols, and Gayle Rubin, and contemporary transfeminist thought as embodied by Julia Serano. Finally, I will conclude my literature review with an exploration of anarchist thought on sex work and sexuality, work itself, the state, and paths of resistance.

The primary scholar in sociology whose work on sex work I am drawing from is Elizabeth Bernstein, and her research has made a number of influential interventions in this field of study. In her book, *Temporarily Yours: Intimacy, Authenticity, and the Commerce of Sex*, Bernstein charts the evolution of full service sex work in the age of neoliberalism and the birth of the Internet. She conducted an ethnographic study of sex workers in San Francisco, and in this research she encountered the shifting of sex work from being primarily transactional and street based to being relational and relying on new media developments and opportunities to find clients.¹ This is not dissimilar from my own findings, as I found several of my interviewees on an escorting website. While I do not speak on it extensively, her writings in the book about bounded authenticity and what the services actually being offered are, referring to her argument that what is being exchanged is intimacy that is confined to a set temporal window, also run parallel with my own findings.

Bernstein has also written extensively on the impact of what she terms "carceral feminism" on the world of sex work, as she had conducted research on the political movements and specific organizations, both within "feminist" and evangelical Protestant political communities, opposed to sex work. Through her work, she has charted the process by which some feminists drew from the anti pornography and anti sex work traditions of radical feminism, most notably seen in the work of Cathernine MacKinnon² and Andrea Dworkin³, and shifted the definition and focus of victimhood from human trafficking as the central object of feminist theorizing and praxis to a particular racialized and classed dynamic that positions intervention by the state via the criminal justice system as the primary way of helping women overcome the gender violence of sex work. In other words, groups both on the left and right have come together to organize around increasing the involvement of police and the judicial system in the world of sex work under the guise of fighting "human trafficking".⁴

Building on this, the legal landscape of sex work has largely come to be defined by the legislative package FOSTA-SESTA, which was passed in 2018. FOSTA stands for Allow States and Victims to Fight Online Sex Trafficking Act, while SESTA stands for Stop Enabling Sex Traffickers

Act, and so on its face, it is clear that Bernstein's research on and theorizing of ideological shifts continues to be supported. FOSTA-SESTA empowers the government to enforce criminal action against any communications entity that "promotes or facilitates the prostitution of 5 or more persons; or acts in reckless disregard of the fact that such conduct contributed to sex trafficking".⁵ What this means in practice is that popular websites used by full service sex workers and their customers to find each other, such as Backpage and the Personals section on Craigslist, were immediately met with legal action, threats of legal action, or voluntarily went offline.

To explore a gap in the literature, Bernstein discusses the rise of internet sex work as part of her research on the broader changes to sex work itself under neoliberalism, but I have yet to find a scholarly article that has been published to talk about the recent pushes against websites like Pornhub and Onlyfans that have dominated the headlines over the last year or so. FOSTA-SESTA was discussed in all of my interviews, and as demonstrated above can be connected to Bernstein's findings, but it is possible that pornographic content platforms facing similar pressure should be understood in a different light than the boots-on-the-ground activism described in Bernstein's ethnographic works. The findings of this project cannot conclusively prove or disprove this, and so this is an area where more study is needed.

As implied by the the discussion of Bernstein above, within the feminist movement, there has been considerable debate over the nature of sex work and whether or not it should be considered solely a means by which men dominate women. Many on the sex critical side of the Feminist Sex Wars, which were a series of intellectual and activist conflicts in the 1980s surrounding questions of sexuality, frames sex work of all forms as acts of desperation on behalf of the workers, and the consumers of sex work as violent, misogynistic men taking advantage of their power and privilege within the patriarchy to gain access to women's bodies they otherwise would have been denied.

This kind of thinking is not limited to the days of the Feminist Sex Wars, but can be found in feminist writings dating back the first wave, with one notable example being *The Traffic in Women* by Emma Goldman, an anarcho-feminist, in which she rails against the exploitation of "white slavery" and ties it to the broader domination of women under both patriarchy and capitalism. Goldman concludes her essay with, "As to a thorough eradication of prostitution, nothing can accomplish that save a complete transvaluation of all accepted values — especially the moral ones — coupled with the abolition of industrial slavery".⁶ In this passage, Goldman is arguing that the only way to permanently abolish prostitution would be to abolish industrial capitalism and to completely reorganize society, thus framing abolishing sex work for its moral evils as a motivation to abolish capitalism.

The legacy of this work can be found in many feminist writings on the subject, such as Catharine A. MacKinnon's 1986 article "Pornography: Not A Moral Issue". In this work, MacKinnon writes, "Sex forced on real women so that it can be sold at a profit to be forced on other real women; women's bodies trussed and maimed and raped and made into things to be hurt and obtained and accessed and this presented as the nature of women; the coercion that is visible and the coercion that has become invisible-this and more bothers feminists about pornography".⁷

To MacKinnon, the various legal standards by which prior movements, on both the left and right, have fought to eradicate pornography, specifically obscenity law, is foundationally flawed because it misunderstands what is wrong with pornography and makes it into a freedom of speech issue. In her words "Gender is sexual. Pornography constitutes the meaning of that sex-

uality. Men treat women as who they see women as being. Pornography constructs who that IS. Men's power over women means that the way men see women defines who women can be".⁸

This is not to suggest that all feminists have universally been condemnatory of sex work, but rather to provide an effective contrast for what my interviews yielded forward. Other feminists, such as Eva Pendleton in her essay "Love For Sale: Queering Heterosexuality" argue that sex work is actually subversive to male authority, as "using femininity as an economic tool is a means of exposing its constructedness and reconfiguring its meanings. While some feminists argue that sex workers reinforce sexist norms, I would say that the act of making men pay is, in fact, quite subversive".⁹

Along with sex work, one of the primary battle lines of the Feminist Sex Wars was the question of pleasure and to what extent it should be considered as a legitimate feminist concern. Some feminists on the more skeptical side of the debates would argue, to varying degrees, that consent and pleasure were not concepts that could easily be accepted as pure and uncorrupted by social conditioning and the coercive nature of patriarchy. Some feminists would go so far as to argue that consent within a patriarchal system is all but impossible, and that all forms of sex (work) within said patriarchal system should be understood as varying forms of rape. This view can be most readily found in MacKinnon's work, as she says in her landmark book, *Towards A Feminist Theory of The State*, "the deeper problem is that women are socialized to passive receptivity; may have or perceive no alternative to acquiescence; may prefer it to the escalated risk of injury and the humiliation of a lost fight; submit to survive".¹⁰

This perspective was not without challenge though, as Gayle Rubin directly takes aim at the lack of concern for pleasure in pornography and sexuality more broadly by MacKinnon and her compatriots, for in her essay "Misguided, Dangerous, and Wrong: An Analysis of Antipornography Politics", Rubin makes the point that "in their characterizations of pornography as documentary of abuse, both [Andrea] Dworkin and MacKinnon appear to think that certain sexual activities are so inherently distasteful that no one would do them willingly, and therefore the models are 'victims' who must have been forced to participate against their wills".¹¹

In her book, *Skin: Talking About Sex, Class, and Literature*, Dorothy Allison puts forward a vision that through sexuality, women should be empowered to overcome internalized shame and guilt for having desires not considered feminist "enough" and other forms of self doubt and loathing. She describes in intimate detail her own experiences with being denied the freedom to voice her own sexual needs in sexual contexts for fear of judgement by her partners, as well as her inability to articulate desire in a public way through her writing that was simultaneously authentic to herself and not restricted by external expectations of how women are supposed to have sex.

Included in this book is the essay "Public Silence, Private Terror", from which I derived my section title "Overcoming Public Silence and Private Terror In Trans Sexuality", and in this essay, Allison tells the story of answering late night phone calls in the wake of the Barnard Conference on Sexuality of 1982 from scared, confused, and ashamed lesbians attempting to come to terms with their own desires. She says, "we have addressed violence and exploitation and heterosexual assumptions without first establishing the understanding that for each of us, desire is unique and necessary and terrifying".¹² This sentiment is also held in part by Allison's contemporary, Ellen Willis, who writes in her article "Towards a Feminist Sexual Revolution", "in short, it is a losing proposition for feminists to compete with the right in trying to soothe women's fears of sexual anarchy".¹³ Willis is commenting here on how feminists have in some ways done the job of the

conservative right, who stands for upholding the patriarchy, by arguing that women's sexualities can make them allies of the patriarchy rather than taking aim at patriarchy itself and protecting other women.

This notion that desire is unique, necessary, and terrifying is deeply resonant, and not dissimilar to the language used by Julia Serano when describing how the academy has historically viewed trans women. In her book *Whipping Girl: A Transsexual Woman On Sexism and The Scapegoating of Femininity*, Serano says the following,

Having experienced firsthand what it's like to feel a disconnect between my own physical sex and gender identity, having deeply internalized the shame that's associated with having a body that defies public expectations of what is natural and normal, and having experienced the profound sense of isolation that comes with being a young gender-variant person, I found the lengthy, graphic depictions that [Michel] Foucault and [Harold] Garfinkel provide shamelessly voyeuristic.¹⁴

To me, it is critical to link these two experiences with shame and existing as an intellectual curiosity to be debated whose experiences and desires are viewed solely through a critical lens without regard for personhood. When arguing over what is and is not politically correct sexuality or gender variance, as evidenced above, real pain is felt by those stuck in the middle who live these experiences. Ultimately this is the most important point that can be drawn from the sex radicals I have outlined above, as their own personal involvement in lesbian kink communities, in the cases of Rubin and Allison, and sex work, as seen with Pendleton, intimately informed their political outlooks, and this is a conceptual throughline in much of transfeminist writing.

At the beginning of the book, Serano has a "Trans Woman Manifesto" where she lays out one of her central arguments about the transfeminine experience. In this work, Serano coins the term "transmisogyny", which she distinguishes from both transphobia and misogyny by pointing out that while both concepts do apply to trans women and the discrimination they face, they fail to capture the specificity of that discrimination.¹⁵ For her, transphobia is too broad in some contexts because it does not get at the heart of specifically misogynistic interactions with men and male dominated institutions that trans women face that trans men do not experience in nearly the same ways.

As an example of this both discussed by Serano and related to this paper, trans women are simultaneously pathologized and hypersexualized, meaning that we are both abject objects of medicalized psychiatric intervention for our alleged perversions, such as wearing women's clothes, while also fetishized and treated as walking novelty sex objects.¹⁶ To be viewed as both mentally ill and as a hot piece of disgustingly shameful spank bank material for cisgender heterosexual men, all because we have penises and are women is not properly articulated by simply saying this is because of the hatred and fear of trans people in general. Regarding misogyny, Serano claims that in the same scenarios above, the hatred of and discrimination towards women as a broad political category is also too vague in its scope, as cisgender women do not have the same experiences in the same ways. For example, cisgender women do not have to endure the fascination with and fetishization of "man-made vaginas" or being a "chick with a dick".¹⁷

The need for a conceptual distinction between the experiences of cis and trans women is also further accenuated by the prevalence of transmisogyny among second wave feminist writers. Alice Echols points out in her essay, "The Taming of the Id: Feminist Sexual Politics, 1968-83"

that many cultural feminists, such as Janice Raymond, and Adrienne Rich, failed to understand the subversive power of transsexuality because it destabilizes the “boundaries between maleness and femaleness”.¹⁸ Echols points out how the investment of the cultural feminists in rigidly understanding femaleness both inhibits acceptance of lesbian transsexual women and those who participate in kink. She also explicitly links the anti-pornography and anti kink stances argued by Adrienne Rich in her essay “Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence” and the trans-misogyny of Janice Raymond’s anti-trans propaganda book *The Transsexual Empire: The Making of The She-Male*, where she says that we “...transsexuals rape women’s bodies by reducing the real female form to an artifact, appropriating this body for themselves”.¹⁹

Raymond’s work inspired a direct response from Sandy Stone in her pioneering essay in the field of transgender studies, “The Empire Strikes Back: A Posttranssexual Manifesto”. Stone was the specific trans woman was referring to by name when Raymond wrote the above quoted passage, and Stone in turn wrote an analysis of biographical and autobiographical narratives of medical transition for trans women and how these narratives are used to dissolve transsexual understandings of gender/sex into cis standards of womanhood.²⁰ In this sense, Stone is rejecting Raymond’s argument that trans women reduce womanhood to an artifact to be appropriated for themselves, but rather this process is being done by cis psychiatrists, doctors, and even feminists to trans women. In other words, our existence as trans women is not an act of violence being done to “real” women by us, but rather we are the specific subjects of epistemological violence done to all of womanhood as a whole by supposed experts who are somehow uniquely more capable of understanding us than we are ourselves.

Turning back to Serano with this in mind, while cisgender women are sexually dehumanized and pathologized in a number of ways, the existence of their gender is not itself the sexually dehumanized and pathologized object.²¹ To put this more bluntly, cisgender women do not have a political equivalent to “tranny porn”. Go on, try to Google “cissy porn”. You won’t find cisgender women centric porn, what you’ll actually find is probably “sissy porn” which a variation of “tranny porn” in which “men”²² dress up and act as feminizable objects, usually for use and (consensual and fun) abuse by women. Isn’t trans porn discourse fun?

This moment here joking about sissies actually warrants a discussion on language that is critical to understanding my transfeminist theoretical framing. In the days of second wave feminism and the early gay liberation movement, “transgender” as a term did not exist and therefore was not used to refer to individuals whose gender identity deviated from the gender they were assigned at birth which is our contemporary definition of transgender that I am operating with throughout this work. In this period, transsexual, transvestite, crossdresser, and a variety of other more localized slang terms were what were commonly used by individuals we would call transgender today, and each of these terms have developed their own own complicated relationship to broader queer identity political vocabulary.

For example, transsexual has fallen out of favor in many circles due to its history of being a medicalized and biologized term that was often affiliated with state repression, psychiatric violence, and the broader Foucauldian technologies of power used to control the bodies of queer people. This is part of Sandy Stone’s broader point about the cis-normative construction of transsexualism and why she advocates for becoming what she terms “posttranssexual”, which means to shirk all societal expectations of assimilating into cis conceived essentialized gender performance.²³ However, many still use the term transsexual with varying degrees of personal

affinity, as there is not only a generational divide over terminology but also over foundational conceptions of what makes transness.

To many of us today, to be trans means to change one's gender (for lack of a better term), while many trans people conceive of transness as changing one's sex. This has its own political utility, as some argue that to focus on the social construction of gender as the core of a trans politic is to misunderstand and underestimate the significance of biology as a technology of power in trans people's everyday lives. In the essay, "Towards An Insurrectionary Transfeminism", the anonymous transfeminine author signed only as "some deceptive trannies" posits that "as trans people, we feel corporeality forcibly pushed onto us in an attempt to render us intelligible, to use the state of our bodies to comprehend our gender and sell us "more natural-looking" bodies. We feel our bodies outweigh our chosen identities when we interact with others and do not pass".²⁴

In this passage, the author is pointing out that the exact narratives of transness and subsequent understandings of the human body that Sandy Stone is criticizing are part of what govern the everyday lives of trans people, as in interactions one's ability to be read as cis determines how we are treated. While the author does not identify as transsexual, their contribution, when read in dialogue with Stone, is launching a critique of how capitalism's ability to incorporate an infinitely expanding number of gendered subjectivities to be repackaged and sold has come to include understandings of transness that dissolve trans women's transition into mere assimilation into an abstracted womanhood. If Christine Jorgensen's transition story of "being born in the wrong body" can be bought and sold, then there is need for an insurrectionary theory of transfeminism that is reflexive, adaptable, and ready to break shit, and I read this as a spiritual successor in many ways to Stone's call for us to become "posttranssexual".

Simply put, it is easy to concede that gender is socially constructed while in turn validating the "truth" of biological sex, which is in reality also socially constructed. By failing to understand the ways that biology is socially constructed within our conceiving of a trans politics, we leave ourselves vulnerable to misunderstanding trans history and more generally the nuances, meaningful debates, and rich lived experiences of trans people that exist beyond the strict limitations of that which historical psychiatrists and doctors along with modern queer political movements deem the most optically opportunistic (i.e. middle class, cisgender passing, white, conventionally attractive, able bodied, lacking in a threatening sexual character, and so on). This is relevant because for those who are not transsexual nor transgender, the community politics of language become critical as to whether or not they should be included in discussions of transness.

As a non-binary transgender woman, I am electing to include broader forms of gender variation under the trans umbrella for the purposes of this work. This choice is in part drawn from Leslie Feingberg's book *Transgender Warriors: Making History from Joan of Arc to Dennis Rodman*, in which ze offers the following list of groups that transgender activists considered as falling under the umbrella term of "trans":

Transsexuals, transgenders, transvestites, transgenderists, bigenders, drag queens, drag kings, cross-dressers, masculine women, feminine men, intersexuals (people referred to in the past as "hermaphrodites"), androgynes, cross-genders, shape-shifters, passing women, passing men, gender-benders, gender-blenders, bearded women, and women bodybuilders who have crossed the line of what is considered socially acceptable for a female body.²⁵

This list is not exhaustive of everyone who could be trans, nor is it perfect; Feinberg himself states ze would not necessarily include all of these different labels under their personal definition, yet ze states that to hir, trans should “...refer to all courageous trans warriors of every sex and gender- those who led battles and rebellions throughout history and those who today muster the courage to battle for their identities and for their very lives”.²⁶ In this spirit, I will adopt a similar outlook.

It behooves me though to include some thoughts on transness not from trans people, since much of what transfeminists are responding to is the failings of both feminism and the social sciences to properly understand the experiences of trans people without injecting pathologization, demonization, or reducing us to victims of extreme physical, emotional, and sexual violence. Both Julia Serano and Sandy Stone have responded directly to the first two of those categories of literature in their commentaries on Foucault (who studied intersex people) and Garfinkel (who studied transsexual women), and Raymond (who just openly hates trans lesbians), but what of the third group? For this, it is prudent to turn to the work of anthropologist David Valentine, who conducted ethnographic research on trans sex workers and trans activists in the late 1990’s and early 2000’s.

Serano and Stone’s points are further supported by Valentine’s article, “One Percent on the Burn Chart: Gender, Genitals, and Hermaphrodites with Attitude”, in which he and Riki Anne Wilchins talk about their experience of discussing genitalia on the subway trip to an activist demonstration led by Hermaphrodites With Attitude and supported by Transsexual Menace in Washington D.C.. It is here that Valentine gives the game away on behalf of all cis people who engage with transness when he says, “it was not just a fear of potential violence, or that my sexuality or gender identity was under query by passersby who did a double take when they saw my T-shirt. Rather, I was fearful that they were making assumptions about my genitals”.²⁷

This to me is critical, as the point is that we are either subjects of dehumanization via reducing us to victims of violence, or we are dehumanized via reducing us to our genitals. Either we are oddities to be poked and prodded, as Serano and Stone claim, or we are corpses to be held up as martyrs.

In his article “‘The Calculus of Pain’: Violence, Anthropological Ethics, and the Category Transgender”, Valentine grapples with the painful reality that many of his research subjects, the transfeminine sex workers he came to know and befriend over the course of his fieldwork, were brutally murdered while on the job. This article is not about the violence itself or the dangers of sex work, but rather how our society’s understanding of transness as a social phenomenon is dominated by graphic narratives of murder and rape; in other words, when people think of “trans”, they think of people who are murdered and raped. This is reproduced by advocacy organizations and activism who campaign for protections against gender violence, as he writes, “in other words, the very terms by which people understand and engage in their politics — even the primary organizing categories used in activism and advocacy — complicate an easy ethical stance on the facts of violence”.²⁸

This kind of politics that reduces transness to narratives of violence obscures the reality of that violence, and in turn further dehumanizes trans people. This can also be seen in Kristen Schilt and Laurel Westbrook’s article, “Doing Gender, Doing Heteronormativity: ‘Gender Normals,’ Transgender People, and the Social Maintenance of Heterosexuality”, as they provide an overview of media coverage and news stories of trans women, including as number of sex workers, being brutally murdered and misgendered posthumously.²⁹

Moving away from transfeminism, another critical theoretical intervention that can be made both here and more broadly in sociology comes from the anarchists. It is no secret that Marxism has held a prominent position for well over a century within the academy as an analytical framework to be applied and reworked across time and space, nor is it a secret that anarchism is more commonly found in the streets rather than the classroom, save for some particularly bold anthropologists such as David Graeber who sought to bridge this gap. As he puts it, “marxism has tended to be a theoretical or analytical discourse about revolutionary strategy”, while “anarchism has tended to be an ethical discourse about revolutionary practice”.³⁰

In his book, *Fragments of An Anarchist Anthropology*, Graeber attempts to reconcile what he sees as a radical potential in anthropology to understand and deploy anarchist principles of confronting and dismantling hierarchy with the reality of anthropology’s and other social sciences dependence on hierarchy and complicity in violence. Drawing from an ethnography conducted in Madagascar, Graeber borrows the phrase “liberation in the imaginary”, which he sees as one of the biggest problems with anthropology as it currently exists. He argues that many anthropologists are ultimately beholden to the interests of the elite, as they have a tendency to process all political potential through the lens of that which already exists.³¹

In his example of how this happens, he talks about how the Zapatistas, a predominantly Mayan led liberation movement, have been conceptually reduced down to just another indigenous rights group and thus could only be understood as Maya and not applicable to non-Mayans. From his perspective, the only people who have actually followed the lead of the Zapatistas in the hard work of creating a better world for all people everywhere are the anarchists, and so Graeber pleads with anthropologists to shake off their connections to the powers that be and embrace the potential for better worlds.³²

This is precisely what I seek to do with this work of sociology. Sociologist Erwin Rafael makes the argument in his work, “The Promise of An Anarchist Sociological Imagination”, that sociology has a similar inherent radical potential and that anarchism and C. Wright Mills’ famous “sociological imagination” are in many ways fundamentally compatible approaches to viewing the world. In it, he says,

Infusing the sociological imagination with an anarchist sensibility entails moving beyond grasping history and biography and their relations within society. It means posing the aspiration for freedom front and center as the motivation driving the act of making sense of the world. It means substantially living in the present, inhabiting and being attuned to situations in order to find opportunities for resisting domination and expanding freedom.³³

This sentiment is exactly what I aim to do with my analysis of transfeminine sex work, as this is a community that is in so many ways finding opportunities for resisting domination and expanding freedom. Rather than falling into the trap of liberation in the imaginary, as Graeber discusses, we can imbue the sociological imagination with a revolutionary and transformational consciousness. Part of what makes anarchism useful for sociology is that it is endlessly reflexive and always adapting to the conditions of the world, and so in that spirit I will provide a brief overview here of some of anarchist perspectives on the topics inherent to my research that I will be drawing from in my analysis.

First and foremost is the concern of sex work. While anarchists of the past, such as the above referenced Emma Goldman, have been opposed to sex work, many anarcho-feminists of today

have put forward critiques of anti sex work radical feminists in response to growing political and legal shifts surrounding sex worker rights. One such anarchist is Leticia Ortega, who writes in their essay “Sex and Sex Work From an Anarcha-Feminist Perspective”, that

When radical feminists (‘good’ women) feel they have the privilege and the right to exercise power to force sex workers (‘bad’ women) to adapt to the dominant cultural norms with regard to sex, they are simply using the same tools that patriarchy has used historically in order to dictate the social norms that control the lives of women.³⁴

She makes the additional point that, aside from puritanical views on sex, there is no need to criticize sex work specifically beyond that which is already covered under a broader critique of the exploitative nature of all work. This commentary on the primacy of the exploitation of sex workers as workers is also held up and challenged in part by anarcha-feminist and sex worker Luna Celeste.

In her essay “Grin and Bare It All: Against Liberal Conceptions of Sex Work”, she makes the point that in addition to the exploitation of sex workers as workers under a capitalist system, misogyny is further exacerbated by the concerns of the capitalist class, as sex workers are placed in a hierarchy based upon maximizing the extraction of surplus value from them. This hierarchy is itself based upon things such as skin color, weight, ability, and so on. Yet these issues are not properly addressed by turning to the state to intervene on behalf of sex workers, and that criminalization creates what Celeste terms a “whorearchy” in which certain kinds of sex workers face greater or lesser stigma based on their proximity to that which is illegal.³⁵ Celeste’s point is that rather than fall into supposedly radical critiques and analysis of sex work that ultimately require state enforcement on behalf of workers to “save” them exploitation, “we need analysis of sex work, and labor generally, that is born from a synthesis of various anti-authoritarian and anti-capitalist feminisms” that can “...look beyond sex-positive leftist rhetoric around consent, consumption, and sex workers’ ‘rights,’ to a more totalizing critique of capitalism and the sex industry”.³⁶

This view of needing to center the exploitative capacity of all work is shared by many anarchists, such as Bob Black. In his essay, “The Abolition of Work”, Black makes the proclamation that we should abolish work, that people have the right to be lazy, and that we should prioritize reorienting our daily lives around play. Most strikingly in his conclusion, Black states,

Life will become a game, or rather many games, but not — as it is now — a zero/sum game. An optimal sexual encounter is the paradigm of productive play, The participants potentiate each other’s pleasures, nobody keeps score, and everybody wins. The more you give, the more you get. In the ludic life, the best of sex will diffuse into the better part of daily life. Generalized play leads to the libidization of life. Sex, in turn, can become less urgent and desperate, more playful. If we play our cards right, we can all get more out of life than we put into it; but only if we play for keeps. No one should ever work. Workers of the world... relax!³⁷

This is a radical sentiment about the nature of work and sex that I will apply to my the experiences of my interviewees, as many of them spoke of the blurring of lines between pleasure for work and pleasure for its own sake, and how the sex itself is an important incentive for continuing to do sex work.

Structural Pressures and How People Get Into Sex Work

In this section, I will explore the various ways by which the women I spoke with began to do sex work and the ways that structural pressures guide their actions. Organizationally, I will explain in detail the stories of each of the women I spoke with and discuss the most immediate causes of their entrance into sex work as well provide some basic demographic information. The purpose of this section is to demonstrate that transmisogynistic harassment, the failures of the American healthcare system, and the ableist expectations of under capitalism serve as important push factors in the world of transfeminine sex work.

Bianca is about twenty six years old, Afro-Latina, and an escort worker and former camgirl from New York City. Like many of my interviewees, Bianca had worked almost exclusively in retail and customer service positions prior to getting into sex work, with a notable exception to this being working for Amazon. She cited as one of the primary motivations for getting into sex work the reprieve from constant transphobic abuse and harassment in the workplace from all sides, including management, coworkers, and customers. She started off working as a camgirl online, performing live shows over the internet, before branching out into escorting full time.

Anna is in her mid-forties, white, and has been a sex worker across New England and mid-Atlantic states on and off since the early-to-mid-2000's. Her sex work career began around when she began to transition, as she was pushed to move out of her sister and brother-in-law's apartment. The brother-in-law was noticeably uncomfortable with Anna being trans, and so was forced out onto her own. Wanting an opportunity to make money to pay for gender transition healthcare and survive on her own, Anna decided that working as an escort was the right move for her. After several years, she retired from escorting and worked exclusively "civilian" jobs. Nowadays, she works as an online content creator to supplement the income she receives as an airline stewardess and her husband's Social Security Disability Insurance checks, as he developed Parkinson's disease and could no longer financially support the both of them.

Belle Bottoms is thirty years old, white, and first got into sex work while working as a housing case manager for a non-profit organization in Utah. Having already felt a desire to do pornography for the fun of it, and needing extra income to pay for transition related care, it seemed like an obvious path for her. Dividing her time between her non-profit job, working as a barista at Starbucks for the trans-inclusive health insurance, and running an OnlyFans, Belle began to feel the tension between her professional obligations and her increasing need for gender confirmation healthcare. This pressure was further compounded by repeated transphobic and sexual harassment at both the nonprofit and at Starbucks. Working nearly sixty hours a week at the nonprofit along with a part time job at Starbucks was too much, so eventually she left her position at the nonprofit, which opened up more time for her to make content. Yet even with the relatively decent health insurance through Starbucks, there were still major gaps in Belle's financial needs. For instance, Starbucks would pay for her electrolysis sessions and her facial feminization

surgery, but only two-thirds of her weekly income while she was on leave to recover from the surgery. It was at this point that Belle decided to lean full time into sex work, and within a few months she would begin escorting.

Farrah is thirty one years old, Iranian, and is an online adult content creator based out of Michigan that utilizes a variety of platforms across the industry to maximize her passive and active income. Farrah has “hypermobility type Ehlers Danlos, which is a connective tissue disorder, and in practice, what that means is that when [she] was working hourly jobs, [she] would get repeatedly severely injured just from doing normal tasks, which is one of the big reasons that [she] stopped working hourly jobs and eventually started doing sex work” in March of 2020. Already a freelance writer and the owner of a small online print shop and publisher, which if lucky breaks even financially and is primarily a passion project, Farrah decided to leverage her social media capabilities into building a career out of online sex work, and now her entire income is derived from it.

Zee is latinx-Middle Eastern, in her late thirties, and is an escort worker and adult content creator based out of Arizona. Beginning with burlesque, Zee branched out into small queer run production company made pornography before beginning escort work. During those early years, she would audition for two strip clubs and be rejected on the basis of her transness, and so she branched out into escort work. Zee is currently in graduate school and is only granted a stipend that leaves her at the federal poverty line. Her ability to work civilian jobs is hampered though by her degenerative disc disease, which she says hinders her ability to sit and stand for long periods of time. This, combined with managing her autism and ADHD, made sex work seem like the right call, as it allows her to regulate her movement and environment much more carefully than other jobs would.

So what can be gained from looking at the push factors and structural pressure that lead to trans women choosing to do sex work? To begin, I would like to harken back to my discussion of transmisogyny in the literature review. Transmisogynistic harassment creates a hostile work environment that is too physically and emotionally taxing to participate in, so trans women will seek to remove themselves from these situations rather than try to pursue remedy. For Bianca, it was bad enough to make her leave the civilian workforce entirely, while for Belle it was only another additional issue she was forced to deal with, and ultimately she opted out of it at the expense of her relatively generous healthcare. With Bianca, she expressed absolutely no interest in ever working outside of sex work, as she is keenly aware of the rise of transphobia in today’s political climate, and the risk to her mental health is far too great. In Anna’s case, while it was harassment in a workplace, her family forcing her out of the home because she was trans is in of itself a form of violence and part of the broader pattern of marginalization that trans women face.

Because healthcare is not universally and freely provided, accessible, and intrinsically trans inclusive, trans women are often forced to source their own funding for necessary and life saving transition medical care. Belle and Anna both turned to escorting in order to do this, and both described their experiences with dysphoria in harrowing ways. Anna’s primary concern for a long time was saving enough money to pay for facial feminization surgery, as the dysphoria was too overwhelming to bear. During this time, she pursued electrolysis, which is the process by which facial hair is permanently removed via a series of painful and expensive sessions spread out across a number of months. Anna never was able to get facial feminization surgery though,

as it proved to be too expensive, and she ultimately had to make her peace with living with dysphoria.

Finally, the physical and psychological demands of low status wage labour such as retail, customer service, and food and drink service, are often in direct conflict with the needs of people living with physical disabilities and neurodivergence, which then forces these people out of the civilian job market and makes work such as pornography and escorting viable alternatives, as it offers greater flexibility in hours and physical investment. Working in these environments was causing too much damage to Farrah's body on a regular basis, and so being able to work from home without direct supervision and expectations is not an accommodation easily given up. Zee's aspirations of leaving sex work and for working as an archivist are also in line with her needs, as to her both offer the ability to self manage and regulate on her own time.

How Does Sex Work “Work”?

The first step in the process of having sex for money is to create and maintain advertisements that adequately represent the services provided while also remaining within the confines of any given digital platform’s terms of service. For instance, it is against the terms of services on OnlyFans to explicitly discuss exchanging money for sexual services, and the penalty for doing so is having one’s account disabled and taken down. For this study, I looked primarily at Twitter, the popular social media site, and Tryst.link, an escort advertising platform. In the years since SESTA-FOSTA was passed in 2018, it has been illegal and subsequently difficult to advertise and market full service sex work, and so many of the staple websites from years past such as BackPage or the personal listings section on Craigslist have been shut down. Tryst.link is based in Australia, and is therefore more capable to avoid federal regulation, much to the delight of the sex worker community. On Tryst.link, users can create verified accounts with detailed listings that include demographic information, general services offered, preferred means of communication, and so on.

From Tryst.link, potential clients can reach out to users via any of their listed communications such as email, Whatsapp, and so on. With in-person sex work, workers are afforded a little bit more understanding of who they are servicing, as one of the key features of negotiating in-person services is the screening process. Each worker can design their own process, but generally speaking it involves the offering of legally identifying information on the part of the prospective client such as a driver’s license that contains a photo of the client. This is a safety strategy deployed by the worker so that in the event of a dangerous situation or negative outcome from a session, such as physical or sexual assault, the reporting process with law enforcement is made easier, or at the very least the threat of being more easily identified for police is made clear to potential assailants. As Belle put it, “the cops, in theory, will take action. You won’t be able to just vanish into the night...like there’s going to be a paper trail”.

Once a session is scheduled and the parties arrive at the predetermined location, the next major step is the exchange of money. Generally the money is contained in an unmarked envelope that is left in a separate room. Once the sex worker has collected the envelope and insured contains the proper amount of money, the services can commence. A critical component to this is that no aspect of the services can be discussed in detail prior to the exchange of money, as this would legally be considered prostitution and both parties, depending on the jurisdiction, would be criminally liable. As was explained to me by Belle, legally speaking sex workers are not selling sexual services for money directly but rather are selling access to their time and company, which is legally distinct. As Belle said, “I have never committed any crimes, I am only selling my time. I am just hanging out with these folks. [Cops] can say, ‘oh, I really want you to pee on me’ or ‘I want you to fuck my ass’ and I go, like, ‘Nah. If you want to like, hang out, it’s three hundred dollars an hour’”. This is why in negotiating the terms of the session such as time and place prior to the meetup, there is no official discussion of what kind of physical acts can and will be performed. This puts a considerable onus on the sex worker to properly include reference or

in some cases innuendo to suggest specific services and specialties to attract prospective clients. Once the money is exchanged, sex can and does occur.

Online sex work operates quite differently, and it is worth discussing how social media serves an important role in it. Because of its relatively lax terms of service, sex workers, including four of my five interviewees, can use Twitter as a freely available stream and archive of pornographic content that act as marketing materials for their various services. These services can be quite diverse, and I will get into those in a moment, but an important point is that online sex work is not entirely dissimilar from other forms of digital careers in social media such as being an influencer. Much of the work that goes into what we call sex work is actually just editing posts, picking captions, choosing the right time for maximum engagement, and so on. This is true not only of social media sites used for promotion and contact such as Twitter, but also of sites such as Onlyfans in which followers can directly purchase sexually explicit content as part of the site's built in features.

Onlyfans is a subscription-based social media platform that allows users to post photographs, videos, audio, and text posts that are either accessible with a subscription to a user's profile, with the price set by the user, or on a pay-per-view basis. From my sample, Anna, Belle, and Farrah each rely on this site among others. Manyvids is another adult medium platform that allows content creators to publish long-form videos of a sexual nature. These videos are available for sale along with a variety of other services such as sexting, custom artwork, physical items available to order such as worn panties, and what other services the content creator may choose to offer. From my sample, this site is used by Farrah, Zee, Belle, and Anna.

While sites such as OnlyFans and ManyVids offer direct payout to content creators, many sex workers find additional business to conduct outside of these sites. This is for a number of reasons, such as customers not wishing to purchase a subscription or desiring a custom product without making an account on a different platform. It is also because these sites take large percentages of the money earned from subscriptions, tips, and individual sales, leaving sex workers constantly needing to find extra money to make up for it. Belle, who also works as a driver for Lyft, gave me the impression that many of the problems of the gig economy that are often very publicly criticized, such as the lack of worker protections, the onerous middle-man fees, and the worker-unfriendly interface of the apps, are very much present among a number of the largest independent content creator driven platforms. In these cases, payment occurs over a third party platform such as PayPal, Cashapp, or Venmo. Each individual platform has their own particular costs and benefits, such as whether a legal name is required to be visible on your profile (such as in the case of PayPal), but overall these platforms are viewed as secondary sources of income.

And so with all of that talk of platforms out of the way, let's talk about porn. The world of independently produced pornographic and erotic materials on the surface looks very different from that of "industry" produced porn with big production companies, and much of it comes down to the kind of content made and how it is made. In order to be an independent adult content creator, the barrier for entry is relatively low; all you need to do it is to do it on camera and post it using a computer. Seems fairly straightforward, no? Well, there is a lot of room for variation in this. As sex workers become more and more acquainted with the process of filming and posting content, potential improvements can naturally be found, and oftentimes this can take the form of simply watching a couple of Youtube videos on camera angles, lighting, editing, and so on, while other times it can mean substantial financial investment.

The camera picture quality of an iPhone is nowhere near the same as a high quality digital camera, and the difference in visual quality can make a significant difference in the overall quality of the content. The same can be said for lighting rigs (to properly show off one's body during the act), sound equipment (to clearly capture all of those fun sex sounds and potential speaking as well aiding in the editing process), editing software (to more effectively create dynamic long form content that is a level above a single shot video in front of a stationary camera), and countless other things I cannot possibly imagine. To be an independent content creator on Onlyfans that is relatively successful, one has to essentially learn how to be a social media influencer and a fully functional filmmaker that is capable of writing, directing, producing, and performing in every piece of content they ever make.

This is part of why breaking into online content creation is so difficult for many sex workers, as it is a completely different set of technical skills and requirements than in-person work. Farrah has been relatively successful with content creation in large part because she was already fairly well known and successful on social media prior. Before getting into making independent porn, Farrah worked primarily as the owner and operator of a zine publisher and as an artist, and so her online presence was well established, with one of the zines she personally authored having gone viral across transfeminine Twitter spaces. This was part of the reason why she chose to work as an adult content creator under her actual name, which was an anomaly among my interviewees. From her perspective, it made the most sense to leverage her social media following into her sex work, and so far it has worked out reasonably well, as she is able to derive her full income from online sex work and reinvest money into the project.

Others, such as Zee and Bianca, have had less luck. Zee's first foray into sex work began with working as a burlesque dancer pre-transition and boudoir photo subject before doing online work. Initially, this work was with some relatively big production companies, and she would sell clips of scenes shot with partners on Manyvids, and in 2019 she began doing escort work to supplement her income. While she certainly does make money off of her online content, she is not in position to make it her full time job, and as a result she relies on selling content that was shot by production companies and not herself. Bianca is in a similar position, as she works as a full time escort and is beginning to branch out into content creation, but the development process for this is relatively slow. Prior to escorting, Bianca worked as a camgirl performing live shows, but began full service sex work in July of 2021 because the online work was not lucrative enough. Income that can be generated from online work is also incredibly variable and dependent on maintaining consistent subscribers to one's various pages, so unless you are capable of building and maintaining a following through social media and procuring all of the materials necessary to make quality content, it can be very difficult to make a living off of it.

Technical concerns aside, there is also the matter of the sexual nature of their content. Each of my interviewees who primarily earn their income from online work, such as Farrah, regularly and consistently post sexually explicit photos and videos on their various platforms and make up the bulk of the content produced. These can be as simple as nude photos and videos of them masturbating to full on scenes of intercourse shot with partners and themed content related to kinks and fetishes. Most interestingly are the differences in philosophy when approaching what kind of content to specialize in. Farrah and Belle embody two different, but not mutually exclusive, views on what their porn should be and what creative vision they wish to put forward, and so here I will do a breakdown of their specialities.

Farrah's primary creative concern when coming up with what content to create is that has to be authentic to herself and not so much a sexuality foreign to her but more of a heightened version of who she already is. In her words,

The thing that I try to market myself based on is that my porn is an "authentic" peek into my real sex life. I try and market it as very genuine and I feel like that. I try not to do things I would just have zero interest in normally, which isn't to say I wouldn't try whatever, but I try and keep it where people can feel "oh there's chemistry", I'm really enjoying it, I'm really into it.

For Farrah, authenticity to herself is paramount, as authenticity has creative and marketing value. While she is not necessarily an outlier in thinking this, she was the most vocal in our conversations about needing to stay true to her own inner desires in order to perform most effectively.

This stands, at least in part, in contrast to Belle, who is much more interested in taking creative risks and creating space for experimentation in the subject matter of her content. She described in detail the process of a commissioned video from another trans person in which the customer asked for "hypnosis and conditioning focusing on someone becoming more submissive, more horny all the time, being exposed to functionally fantasy elements that would make them produce more ejaculate or breast milk, kind of like some bimboification and breeding kinks, stuff like that". She said to me that "I honestly have a hard time coming up with ideas for my own stuff, so when someone comes to me with a specific idea and it's like, 'hey it would be really hot if you did this'. Kind of like they already have their higher concept fantasy written up for me". For Belle, making content to please others in specific ways, no matter how potentially out there it may be, is her bread and butter, and it is part of the appeal. I will discuss these two perspectives on content creation more intimately in "Overcoming Public Silence and Private Terror in Trans Sexuality", as there are additional political dimensions to this behavior worth analysis.

So now I will establish a typology of people who interact with transfeminine sex workers. This typology will account for the different groups of people my interviewees described as customers, but also will include other forms of interaction that can best be described as parasocial as opposed to transactional. The first group will be referred to as Normies, as they make up the majority of both customer base and online following while also not being particularly notable. The next group discussed will be Time-Wasters, who do exactly what the name suggests. After them, the next group discussed will be the Chasers, which refers to the phenomenon of (predominantly) men who fetishize and "chase" after trans women.

Overall, the primary group of people interacting with trans sex workers are (assumed to be) cisgender, heterosexual, white men with enough disposable income to pay for what are essentially luxury services and products. I will refer to them from this point on as "Normies" to properly embody the jocular tone necessary for these discussions, as many of my interviewees demonstrated a considerable sense of humor when describing these experiences. While the nature of online and in-person work is quite different, the patterns of Normies are fairly consistent and do not need repeating. I say "assumed to be" regarding the demographics of the Normies in large part due to how online platforms enable a great degree of anonymity, but for the most part, all of my interviewees described the above demographic archetype based upon what little information they could access about their customers and followers such as profile pictures, names,

comments and messages they could see, and so on. In general, if you are doing online sex work, you probably have no idea who a lot of the people buying your content are, which leads to all kinds of assumptions such as these, and the customers who are visible tend to be the source of said assumptions.

Normies are just that; Normies are perfectly normal men who like to have sex with or masturbate to trans women and their erotic content. In these seller/customer relationships, they are broadly unremarkable. Given the nature of social media platforms such as Twitter and adult content platforms such as Onlyfans, users can be as anonymous or as public as they wish to be, and so a great deal of online customers and followers are generally unknown and completely unremarkable. Customers will pay for content on these platforms, and that will be the furthest extent of the relationship between seller and customer. They may like and comment or share posts, and they may not. In-person customers can also be equally forgettable, with the only major variations being whether or not the sex was good and whether or not they are boring to be around before and after sex. Like I said, Normies.

Our next category in the typology comes from Bianca directly. She coined the term Time-Wasters for me, and I find it useful to sort of round up all of the various types of people who interact with sex workers in ways that do not yield profit or personal benefit without being outright malicious and harmful. This is not to say that sex workers like Time-Wasters, but they are noticeably distinct from the kind of clientele workers tell horror stories about. Time-Wasters take on a variety of forms. For in-person workers, these can be the prospective clients who refuse to go through the proper screening process that sex workers have in place for safety purposes, clients who bail on scheduled appointments, clients who haggle over prices of services, and any number of other kinds of annoyances that represent a number of sociologically significant themes.

For online workers, prospective customers will also haggle over prices with workers for custom content, push for crossing boundaries with custom requests (for example, if a worker does not feel comfortable using their penis in a sexual way but the prospective customer keeps asking for penis focused content), ask for “free samples”, and so on. There is an additional variety of Time-Waster here worth mentioning, which is the Lurker, which refers to the kind of anonymous online follower who does not pay for content in any way nor do they meaningfully engage with the user posting content. Lurkers are the kind of people who will follow your Twitter in which you post promotional materials such as photos, short video clips, audio, text posts, and so on, yet will not engage with the content itself; lurkers will often not click the like button or share posts, nor will they comment, yet they continue to follow and not tip any kind of money via payment platform such as Paypal, Venmo, CashApp, and others.

Many online sex workers will include in their bio or pinned post a link or a username on any such payment platform with the understanding that customers can directly negotiate with content creators in their direct messages for a one-off purchase of content, or can simply send money as a tip without receiving content directly from the user. These tips are viewed as payment and a symbol of gratitude for viewing free content on the main page that one can easily access, and yet many followers will simply “lurk” and not send tips or buy content. The lack of engagement is not limited to just free platforms such as Twitter though, as monthly subscribers on platforms such as Onlyfans and ManyVids will also lurk, not interacting with posts in any capacity whatsoever.

The next major category in the typology of clients, creeps, and followers is that of Chasers. Chasers, also known as “tranny chasers” are (generally) cisgender men who pursue transgender

women in a way that signals fetishization and objectification. While I could not find the origin of this term's usage within the trans community, Julia Serano refers to them as men "who say that they like "T-girls" because we are supposedly 'the best of both worlds'".¹ This fetishization can take the form of any number of things, such as inappropriate comments on non-sexual posts with selfies, sexually explicit messages sent without provocation, sending sexually explicit images without consent, and generally an uncomfortable emphasis on the recipient trans woman's transgender status. That last aspect can run a wide gamut of experiences; Farrah spoke of people focusing intensely on her "pussy stick" (which is a term she does not use herself and only repeated to me as a quotation of a Chaser), while Belle had quite a bit more to say.

In terms of my work, I am sure that I have got a fuckload of chasers that are following me. And I think when I was starting out, either on this [Twitter] account, or my previous account, I had a lot more of the kind of comments that you usually see underneath like trans porn stars pages that's kind of like, "oh my god, babe, would love to suck on your cock" or like, "totally want to like drink your cum".

Chasers are quite loathed and viewed with extreme discomfort. Belle would go on to describe in more detail the kind of impact that chasers have on her and her fellow transfeminine sex workers,

Humanizing myself and sometimes talking about mental health, the struggles that I experience as a trans woman trying to access healthcare or be treated with respect and stuff like that kind of actually keeps away a lot of those [quoted above] comments. I think it's kind of maybe a little bit difficult to make a dehumanizing and fetishizing comment about someone who you know was really upset last week, because someone was intentionally misgendering them or something like that. So I'm sure they make up plenty of my buyers on Onlyfans and stuff like that. But in terms of interaction... I mean, I still get them in my DMs [direct messages], trust me I don't usually engage with them too much. Oftentimes the really heavy chasers are usually, they're not necessarily the ones that want to give me their money. You know what I mean? It's almost kind of like any man harassing a woman.

A recurring theme in my discussions with full service sex workers of chasers and other kinds of transphobia from customers is the prevalence of queer cisgender customers that can both validate and invalidate the gender of the worker. It is instructive here to discuss the broader societal implications of framing trans identity and status in primarily the language of social constructionist theory of gender. As I discussed in an earlier section, there is considerable debate within the trans community over what makes someone trans, and this debate within the community has parallels to how cis society interacts with trans people and their bodies. A recurring discursive subject regarding transness that exists both in broader political narratives of transness and the world of sex work is the social construction of gender and sex.

In all of my interviews, my interviewees described a range of invalidating behaviours from their customers, but by far one of the most interesting was the way in which gay and bisexual cisgender men would solicit the services of transfeminine full service sex workers as a sort of compromise between heterosexual standards and expectations (i.e. man fucks woman) while also attempting to live out a more authentic queerness in their sex lives (i.e. man puts dick in asshole

of another person with a dick). Belle said that her in-person clients tend to be men who “aren’t necessarily comfortable engaging...they’re not going to be going down to the gay bar, or they’re on the board of an organization and they can’t be seen going down to a gay bar”. In other words, these are queer men who cannot be openly queer, and so they turn to transfeminine sex workers as a more socially acceptable alternative.

While these customers all generally were respectful of pronouns and names, suggesting an acceptance of their gender category being “woman”, they would verbally and physically approach the worker’s bodies in ways more similar to how the men would approach another man. Some customers would even verbally imply that they were seeking the services of trans women because they would be physically closer to what they actually desired, which is cis men. Bianca said,

It’s probably that they are gay and repressing it, and using us as some kind of halfway, in their head, method to deal with it. I have definitely had a client just flat out misgender me and say that ‘they usually don’t like boys but I’m different’, kind of thing. Or they are attracted to trans women, and they don’t feel comfortable with it, they feel like it makes you gay or whatever. So they sleep with me as a way to satisfy that curiosity or that feeling without anyone publicly knowing.

This to me suggests a split between how trans women’s gender would be validated via respectful observance of chosen name and pronouns, but their sex would still be viewed as “male” and treated as a “male” body. This suggests a lack of understanding on the part of the client of how biological sex as a category is equally as socially constructed as gender, as the perceived biological sex of the trans woman in question would be viewed as more true and a more physically important component of the interaction. This is a particularly thorny issue for transfeminine sex workers, as not only does their occupation require a substantial amount of awareness of the body and its role in sexual engagements for both themselves and the customer, but there is also the issue of managing gender dysphoria underlying all of this. Even if being gendered correctly via pronouns and name, cis men can still engage in transmisogyny by insisting during sexual scenarios by framing the sexual engagement as homosexual, thus triggering gender dysphoria. Generally speaking, the women I spoke with have little to no interest in being fucked like men or being referred to in ways that resemble having sex with men; the women I spoke with wish to have sex as women and in ways that frame them as women.

For some, such as Zee and Bianca, this means not having sex using their penises. In Zee’s case, when we spoke, she was currently on hiatus from escorting while recovering from her vaginoplasty, or as we refer to it “lower surgery”. She was particularly adamant that she was not and never had been comfortable using her penis in a sexual way, and so, along with a variety of other reasons, decided to pursue a gender confirmation surgery that would remove the presence of her penis from everyday life. Zee did express considerable anxiety to me however about whether or not she felt she could successfully go back to escorting post surgery recovery. When referencing what clients desire versus what she desires for herself, Zee said, “if and possibly when I get back into work once I’m fully healed, it’ll be really interesting to find out like, okay, ‘how does this work being a post-op trans woman’, so to speak, right? Like what changes?”.

This was a common sentiment among all of my interviewees; each woman described a complex relationship with their penis and varying desires to receive lower surgery, with Zee and Farrah at opposite ends of the spectrum, but ultimately only Zee has been able to pursue it. Not

only is lower surgery expensive and time intensive to recover from, meaning they cannot do sex work while in recovery, but there is a tangible fear that they will not be as marketable or desired by their primary audience of cis men if they no longer have a penis. The chasers who pay for their services, as rare as they may be, might simply look elsewhere for a proper “dick-girl”, as Zee put it, to satisfy their fetishistic desires.

Unlike the Time-Wasters, the disrespect on display in these interactions is not centered on any sort of professional standards or norms being violated, such as canceling a session without proper notice, and instead is centered solely on the lived physical experience of the woman in question. Any guy can waste your time and make you feel shitty without giving you money, but to add onto that the emotional toll of being misgendered is often overwhelming. When a Time-Waster wastes your time by chatting you up in your direct messages and suddenly ghosting when it comes time to send the money for a custom commission, it is interpreted as a form of professional and creative disrespect for the value of the work and energy these women put into their craft; these women’s time is valuable and should be treated as such from both a professional (interactional) and financial (transactional) sense. It is not easy to answer messages all day that go nowhere and yield no rent money, and it wears down on a person. To add the additional layer of casual transmisogyny and misgendering onto this is most unpleasant to experience.

Overall, (cisgender) people who interact with sex workers tend to be either boring and forgettable, an annoying waste of time, or actively participating in transmisogyny. I am not going to lie, I was struggling to find interesting data and quotes in my interview transcripts on these guys because of how completely unsurprising it was that people would resent, if not outright detest, the people they have to interact with at work. But there is something profound in how banal these people are. The way the anti-sex work feminists like Catharine MacKinnon speak about the men who consume pornography or pay for sex, you would expect something a little more interesting to look at. But the women I spoke with tend to dislike the men they interact with not because they are exploitative and evil but because they are just boring or annoying to be around. It is almost as if these women are working a heavily customer service based job and are not going to have a whole lot of opinions of the majority of the people they interact with, and those they do have opinions on are either annoying or make them uncomfortable. Shocking! I worked retail, I can relate.

I know I am speaking glibly here about my typology of customers, followers, and creeps, but my interviewees made the same comparison of sex work to customer service jobs they have worked before. When speaking about managing her emotions on the job, Farrah said, “honestly, it’s no worse than normal customer service, but it’s easier because I’m not looking eye to eye with people...it just feels like customer service, and I’ve worked plenty of customer service”. Bianca also spoke similarly while describing the harassment she faces on the job, as she contrasted her ability to deny service to clients with her time in retail where she was “dealing with harassment from customers and bosses and other things and you’re just kind of stuck where you are. There’s nothing realistically you can do other than get another job”.

In Arlie Hochschild’s book *The Managed Heart: Commercialization of Human Feeling*, Hochschild explored the professional experiences of airline stewardesses and through them theorized “emotional labor”, which refers to labor that “requires one to induce or suppress feeling in order to sustain the outward countenance that produces the proper state of mind in others”.² Elizabeth Bernstein then applied this understanding of emotional labor to her analysis of sex work in her book, *Temporarily Yours: Intimacy, Authenticity, and The Commerce of Sex*, as

she says quotes a sex workers as saying she was “leaving my private me at home so that I can go to work”.³ Based on the perspectives of my interviewees and the kind of emotional management they have to engage in, I argue that Hochschild’s and Bernstein’s points are further supported by my research. In the majority of their interactions with customers and clients, transfeminine sex workers are engaging in some kind of performance and emotional management to get through it like they would at any other job. Overall, they are just doing a lot of the same things other non sex workers do at work, meaning they grin and bare annoyances and verbal abuse from customers, since their job is fundamentally about providing services and fostering temporary relationships long enough to leave a customer satisfied. This leads me to think that maybe work in general just kind of sucks, but I will speak more to this point and other views on labor held by my interviewees in the “Sex Work Is Work and Anarchist Principles” section.

Conflicts and Dangers

The stories of how these women entered sex work are indicative of some of the major struggles currently faced by trans women, but what of the problems present within the work itself? While the women I spoke with enjoyed the work they do currently, both on its own and in comparison to previous work experiences, in our discussions arose a number of concerns in their day to day lives worth relaying. In this section, I will provide an overview of some of the risks associated with transfeminine sex work, and in doing so I wish to address points raised by other researchers and discursive participants regarding the nature of sex work. While I maintain that sex work can and should be understood as a valid and respected part of a broader feminist expression, it would be irresponsible not to mention the very real concerns of the women on the ground, so to speak.

The first primary concern I will discuss is that of finances. As discussed previously, sex work is heavily reliant on networking and advertising, and this labor is unpaid. Because all the women I spoke with are essentially self-employed and operating their own businesses, all payment for labor is dependent on actually getting money in hand or in your bank account from servicing clients and selling content. This means that the necessary behind-the-scenes labor that enables the sex part of the work to occur, such as maintaining online personas with a stream of sample content going out into follower's feeds, editing footage and photos, cleaning and grooming one's self enough to have sex with minimal mess and maximum visual appeal, sex toy maintenance and upkeep, market research, learning new techniques and activities, testing for COVID-19 and sexually transmitted infections, among others goes completely uncompensated directly.

This is one of the downsides to working as an independent entity, which is why Bianca talked with me about her dreams of getting into "industry", meaning production company, shot pornography. Having started about a year ago as a camgirl performing live shows online in which payment is done via website specific token systems on a tipping basis, Bianca has been working as an escort since July of 2021 and was open about her concerns with saving for her future. Contrasting her current work, which she describes as "legally gray", she talked about how she desires a position that provides "stability and consistency" and does not require such large investments of her personal time into doing the work. Conducting her work largely within her own home, she expressed very understandable concerns regarding family planning, as she indicated a desire to potentially have a child in the next few years once her situation was more stable.

Because income is on a customer by customer basis, times can be particularly hard for these women when they cannot get clients to purchase their services. Bianca spoke of having no real retirement funds to speak of, living in relative poverty, while Zee explicitly described herself as living as the federal poverty line. According to Belle Bottoms, her safety net is "other transgender people who are almost exclusively impoverished themselves", while also describing herself as "whore class", indicating that financial precarity is not merely a feature of anyone's individual circumstances but the nature of transfeminine sex work.

In Zee's case, she is currently recovering from lower surgery and cannot service clients while healing. In addition to temporarily losing her escorting source of income, she is also a full time

graduate student living off of a stipend provided by her institution which barely covers rent, food, heat, and so on. For Zee, working as a historical archivist is the primary end goal for her, and so she is ultimately trying to leave the industry for more financially stable and lucrative work. But even with this, Zee recognizes that academia is not all that stable either, as she has existed in this “liminal space” in which she is overqualified for other “civvie” jobs on the labor market, but not qualified enough to retain a position greater than a “teaching or graduate assistantship”. Getting a Masters’ degree is her way into a more stable and reliable career that also matches with her passion for history, even if it has some of the same precarity as sex work. However, precarity is not the only struggle they face.

In recounting her life story to me, Anna introduced me to her community of transfeminine escorts whom she lived and worked with in her twenties, and told me of the comfort and love she found in her fellow trans women. She confessed to me that she was once “madly in love” with her best friend, Lee, and that she “would have been [her] everything”. She regaled me with stories of their wild nights together, partying and getting drunk in Anna’s apartment with their other friend, Deirdre, and taking turns servicing clients as the night went on. Lee was a pillar of the local escort community, and the core of Anna and Deirdre’s friend group, and those were some of the happiest days of Anna’s life.

That was until Lee’s body was found; she had committed suicide. Lee had been struggling with her mental health for a long time prior; she came from an unsupportive family she had not been in contact with for sometime, was raped during her time as an escort which began at age sixteen and struggled to move on from it, caught an STI from a friend, and begun to experience paranoid delusions of being constantly surveilled via hidden cameras in her apartment. Anna described it as a “complete mental breakdown”. But even with this knowledge, Anna has no real idea what exactly things were like for Lee in those final days. She still feels a tremendous amount of grief for Lee, and I do not think she has ever really recovered from that loss.

Death, violence, and trauma are not foreign concepts to any of the women I spoke with. Part of why the screening process for in-person work is such an important part of the order of operations is because every sex worker knows these risks are real. Belle told me of her experience of being date-raped and being disbelieved by the responding officers and even assumed to have been the perpetrator due to her transness and the rapist being a cis woman. The date rape was completely unrelated to her sex work; it was a date with a potential romantic/sexual partner that ended in sexual violence. Yet when the officers arrived on the scene, they were immediately confused and dismissive of Belle’s account, as she was a trans woman and the assault did not involve penetration.

She was then directed to a hospital to have a rape kit done over a day later, which found some evidence of an assault but not enough to conclusively prove that it was the accused. Belle was assigned a detective for the case, and immediately was forced to navigate discussing the details of her occupation so as not to accidentally shift the focus of the investigation on to her, as she presented text messages from the night of the assault she had sent to a friend indicating something was wrong that also visibly included prior reference to running her sex work social media accounts. It was at this point that her case was “just kind of shuffled away”. None of the sex workers I spoke with had a remotely positive view of law enforcement, with some of them outright calling for its abolition because of its failure to assist them in previous situations of physical and sexual assault both within and outside of work.

A powerful tool sex workers wield in defending themselves on the job is being able to scare the shit out of asshole men who do not wish to be outed as the kind of man who fucks a tranny sex worker, let alone one who would commit a violent crime. This is not because there is actual danger to the potential assailant from the legal system worth fearing, but because these men are easily frightened and weak-willed. In contrasting experienced customers with first timers, Belle said to me,

It's the sixty year old guys who have a better life, are married, have important careers, are kind of like "yeah here's my ID and my Facebook and here's fifty dollars for talking to me". And the twenty three year old single men that are like entry level employees at Kinkos that are like "you're trying to blackmail me and ruin my life", and I'm like, "what the fuck, Brandon?".

Men who have solicited transfeminine sex workers before, like the above mentioned sixty year old men, tend to be less cagey about giving up personal information, while the men whose lives are mostly insignificant and unimportant tend to be cowards. This leads to the assumption on the part of the sex workers that all potential clients are so privileged that they lack even a modicum of self awareness to this fact, and thus lack a critical perspective on the criminal justice system. This lack of a critical perspective on cops and the foundational fictions of their existence, such as the rule of law, means that the potential client thinks that there might in fact be consequences from cops if they get caught interacting with a sex worker, so offering up identifying information that might make reporting them to the police easier is an instant red flag if you are trying to cause harm.

The act of asking for identifying information is like a game of fear based on calculated assumptions, which is why many prospective clients will refuse to give up any identifying information for fear of being blackmailed by the sex worker, despite that posing absolutely no benefit to the worker whatsoever. If a potential client refuses to offer up their drivers license, that is a sign that the client does not trust the worker or may be planning to do harm. In either case, it is not worth the risk. Again, the sex workers I spoke with are completely aware that the legal system most likely would not protect them if push came to shove, but they possess an understanding that not everyone is as jaded and cynical as them about the rule of law and the failings of the criminal justice system to protect victims of crimes and promote any notion of "justice".

If a potential client does offer up their identifying information, then the sex worker will feel more at ease about potentially undressing in front of them and bringing them to climax. This does not mean that sex workers will sufficiently deploy their screening processes every single time. Belle said often the transfeminine sex workers who are murdered are, "these are just women that do not have the access or income or an apartment and time to be choose-y, to have a screening process for clients. And so you have clients, and if a client has bad intentions, or if a client is a cop trying to bust you, they're not going to go through all this process".

This is one example of how financial precarity motivates various actions, from the very act of becoming a sex worker to forgoing safety measures, that form part of the process of social marginalization. Simply put, sometimes you really need the money, so you won't be as safe with the strange men trying to have sex with you so long as the cash is enough to pay rent, and that is part of how sex work and sex workers are structurally devalued, dehumanized, and put in harm's way.

Not only is there the risk of physical violence and the hostility of the criminal justice system, but in the online realm, armies of trolls are lying in wait for the most vulnerable members of society to post cringe and provide them an opportunity to rain down digital hellfire. More specifically, transphobic internet trolls have figured out how to coordinate mass harassment and reporting campaigns against transfeminine sex workers, as Belle Bottoms learned first hand. Her original Twitter account which she promoted her sex work content with was fairly popular and had even gone viral a few times, with a post of her removing bathroom gender marker signs from her transphobic workplace gaining wide reknown and visibility across social media. She would also post regularly about her political opinions, which, much like the rest of my interviewees, was fairly far left. According to her, it was around this time that the folks over at Kiwi Farms, an internet forum page similar to 4chan, started keeping tabs on her, and after months of relentless searching for personal data, Belle Bottoms was doxxed, meaning her legal name, address, and other identifying information was publicly posted with the intention of generating and enabling harassment.

The ire of the Kiwi Farms trolls was not limited to purely posting Belle's personal information, as they also took great umbrage with the actual content of her sex work posting. Belle Bottoms, like many other transfeminine sex workers, has a number of niche market interests that she is able to effectively create content for and maintain a following though.

Anna, for example, now creates bimbofication and giantess content, meaning that her content focuses on her physical height and size (in no small part aided by her being a trans woman) and her ability to present in a highly exaggerated, almost Barbie Doll-like high femme appearance with exaggerated sexual features, i.e. like a "bimbo". Much of Anna's content focuses on her ability to physically impose over smaller girls or on her ability to be easily controlled and manipulated to perform degrading and tantalizing acts. To be clear, this is all consensual and pure fantasy.

I preface this part with Anna's specialty because it is far more common and less socially stigmatized than Belle's, and thus generates much less engagement from far right trolls. Even within sex worker communities, there are still some prejudices and stigmas which exist, and so it is prudent to be careful when discussing this. Farrah pointed out to me that those most at risk for online harassment from the Kiwi Farms type of internet trolls are the people perceived as the most "vulnerable or volatile", and that this includes people who draw "furry art", which refers to the furry fandom in which people adopt animal based personalities and identities called "fursonas", people who do not pass as cisgender, meaning are visibly trans, and "diaper fetishists", which is self explanatory.

In Belle's case, she is a practitioner and enjoyer of ABDL, or Adult Baby Diaper Lover. Belle wears diapers, both for fun and for money. When speaking with Farrah, she had no idea that I had interviewed Belle, or at the very least did not know her true identity, and mentioned "diaper fetishists" completely unprompted. This to me, along with my own personal experience in various kink communities, suggests that in terms of the hierarchy of the social acceptability of kinks and fetishes, ABDL, along with other forms of age play such as DD/LG, meaning Daddy Dom(me)/Little Girl, are located right towards the bottom. This is because of the perceived proximity to pedophilia, which is largely unfounded and misunderstands the actual nature of the kinky dynamics.

This assertion is in part based upon Gayle Rubin's theorizing of sexual taboos in her essay, "Thinking Sex: Notes for a Radical Theory of the Politics of Sexuality". In this work, Rubin argues

that cross-generational sexual relationships are highly stigmatized and targeted by law as part of “maintaining the boundary between childhood ‘innocence’ and ‘adult’ sexuality”, and that these barriers between people and characteristics deemed “young” and that which is considered “adult” are socially constructed and at times arbitrary. This concern for exposing children to sexuality as a concept is often at the core of much of the sexual politics of conservatism and its ability to reproduce homophobic and sexist ideology.¹ Communities surrounding ABDL and related kinks and fetishes such as DD/LG, of which Belle is a member of, are cognizant of this, and thus have difficulty finding and producing openly available sexual explicit materials highlighting their kinks to share with their community members.

After months of relentless harassment on all of her Twitter posts, her account was finally disabled due to mass reporting. Her primary social media platform, which enabled her to find and maintain a customer base, was taken away from her, and this sent her into a spiral. She has a new account now, in which she posts with much less personality and investment in maintaining it as a traditional social media page. As a result of this experience though, Belle lives in constant fear of reliving this nightmare of losing her account and her primary source of income. She is a full time sex worker, driving for Lyft on the side, and online content is one of the most important sources of income for her, so losing any access to potential customers via social media takedowns is a cataclysmic threat. She has other social media accounts which she posts more personally on, which is a common feature of my interviewees, as the risk of posting too sincerely and earnestly on the same page that has pictures of your asshole is far too great to justify posting your hot take on the latest Discourse™©®.

This fear of social media takedowns was present among every single person I spoke with, and was far more palpable than any other threat. With dangers such as being arrested by police or physically or sexually assaulted, there are strategies for mitigating risk such as the screening process, discretion in advertising, and so on. But with online attacks on the very accounts which facilitate all work that you are able to do, that is the most effective way to target sex workers, along with attacks on payment platforms, banks, credit card companies, and so on. Online harassment is also diffused and often entirely anonymous, so it can seemingly come from nowhere and everywhere all at once, with no clear face or reason. The stigma against particular kinks, combined with being vocally left wing or at minimum opposed to transphobia, makes transfeminine sex workers act very carefully when cultivating their social media presence, which in effect silences them.

Full service sex workers, as discussed above, have considerable leeway to accept and reject potential clients, and this is often talked about as a safety measure against reasonably understood threats of violence and/or getting ripped off. However this power to accept and reject clients is not without complication though, as Bianca pointed out to me that within her particular community, there is often contentious and ongoing debate over the ethics of rejecting clients on the basis of race. Bianca, living in Brooklyn, exists in a much more racially and ethnically diverse sex worker community composed of a both cis and trans sex workers, and so there is much more space for discussion of issues. The case for rejecting clients on race and ethnicity is as follows: many sex workers in Bianca’s community have experiences servicing “Black, Hispanic, and Middle Eastern men” that produced either a general discomfort with that particular type of man or more pointedly a trauma response, and so they tend to filter those men out of their potential client pool. Some of the women working in this community have come from these communities and

have prior experiences that make them not wish to engage with these men, while others have not and have had bad experiences with these men on the job.

Regardless this is contentious, because on its face, it appears that racial discrimination is allowed if women claim fear. Bianca herself is torn about this, as she sympathizes with the need to maintain safety and security while working, but also sees the potential problems with generalizing all men of a particular racial or ethnic group as more dangerous than others. Being Afro-Latina, it does not sit right with her to exclude particular non-white groups of men from her potential client pool, but she recognizes that she cannot speak for anyone else, as she says,

Obviously this is somebody that controls their own business and their own life, and this is the kind of job where we're at risk regularly. So it's different than telling someone you know you're morally in the wrong for not servicing somebody at any other conventional sort of job, where in this case, they genuinely feel unsafe. So that's kind of the dividing line that makes it hard to discuss.

It gives me pause though when I think about how Belle, Anna, and Zee all described their client pool as primarily white. I have no hard quantitative data from them or their particular communities of what percentage of the men seeking paid sexual services from trans women are white, so I can only speculate. Perhaps living in Brooklyn, Bianca has more opportunities to see non-white men as clients. After all, she was the only person I spoke with who lived within a major city, while everyone else merely lived in proximity to one, usually on the outskirts where rent was cheaper. But I cannot help but wonder if racial bias disguised as safety measures skewed my typology of clients. It is entirely possible that Belle, Anna, and Zee, even with their vocal opposition to anti Black racism, harbor prejudices towards Black and other non-white people and thus self selected against having sex with them. Men, regardless of race, are not entitled to sex, let alone paid sexual services from transfeminine sex workers, but there may be something to say about why non Black sex workers do not wish to be fucked by non-white men. I myself have no idea what to make of this, as I can see both sides. This is messy.

“Sex Work Is Work” and Anarchist Principles

Here is where I diverge from previous research on sex work by putting forth that sex work can be liberating and presents insight in how we can resist domination in an explicitly anarchist way. This argument is based upon a number of divergent views within anarchism, but it is my intention here to explore how the lived experiences of transfeminine sex workers reflect a kind of buffet style sample of different anarchist tactics and principles. The first part of this section will focus upon sex work and conflicting visions of how to interpret the work that sex workers engage in. The second major part concerns the intentional creation of communities built upon solidarity and mutual aid in order to ensure collective survival. Through these two avenues, I will reframe the lives of transfeminine sex workers not as merely exploited and vulnerable subjects at risk of external violence, as discussed in my overview of David Valentine’s research, but as active agents who are engaging with non-hierarchical systems of social organization and resisting domination by the state.

The first major point I will make in this section is regarding conflicting framings of sex work as labor, and my conclusion from this is that sex work can be understood as exploited labor under patriarchal capitalism, in the vein of Ortega and Celeste as discussed in my literature review, but it can also be understood as from an anti-work perspective as a case of workers converting their “work” into “play” as Bob Black calls for. To begin, I would like to discuss Belle’s particular understanding of her class position and subsequent meaning making of her work. As I mentioned in the “Conflicts and Dangers” section, Belle jokingly described herself as “whore class”, and overall exhibited an affinity with the working class more broadly. In her words, she is a “member of the proletariat”, professed an appreciation for Karl Marx and Antonio Gramsci’s writings, and did not express a view of sex work as uniquely exploited any more than other laborers. In our conversation, at no point did she ever demonstrate a form of exploitation that did not have a parallel in her other work experience. For example, she was much more critical of the kind of sexual harassment and devaluation of her labor while working as a barista at Starbucks than of the kind of interactions she has while escorting.

Zee was of a similar perspective, as she finds Marxist analysis of labor exploitation to be useful to her and does not conceive of her sex work as any different from other laborers. When asked to describe herself politically, Zee’s response was, “Anti-capitalist, except insofar as we live in a capitalist milieu that’s all encompassing that you can’t really feasibly escape from and that it guides the basis of modern society. We can’t really change it; I have to operate in that system. So I do have to play the game...so yeah, definitely anti-capitalist”.

Both Zee and Belle spoke of qualitative differences between sex work and other forms of exploited labor as stemming primarily from state intervention via criminalization and the forces of carceral feminism. Zee, as part of her graduate school work, actually has done archival research on historical feminist organizations in her area, and in her own findings, she found that the splitting of sex workers from broader discussions of gender inequality to be addressed by the state through police action was led almost exclusively by white, middle class, college educated non sex

workers. meanwhile resistance to these measures came entirely from sex workers organizing in response and putting pressure on local institutions to not pass these paternalistic laws. She said of these potential measures, “some of them would involve initiatives, sort of like rescue projects meant to kind of assist cis women who are into sex work to find non sex work careers, and sometimes that involved those groups collaborating with law enforcement as a kind of program to get out of a sentence, you do this thing”.

This is precisely the argument that Luna Celeste’s put forward in her writings, as outsiders to the world of sex work are consistently the ones leading the charge against it and making claims about it that are diametrically at odds with the perspectives of actual sex workers. As Celeste puts it, “statist feminists’ rhetoric of ‘fighting the sex industry’ typically relies on State power in the form of legislative reform that criminalizes at least some aspects of sex work, increases the power of law enforcement, and over-regulates the sex industries”, and this is quite literally the view of my interviewees.¹

What this means sociologically is that many of Elizabeth Bernstein’s critiques of carceral feminism are supported, and that we as sociologists need to take seriously critique of the state when talking about the class characteristics of sex work and sex workers, as the role of the state is much more relevant in the specific precarity of sex worker’s lives than that of direct economic and gendered exploitation. While Bernstein is not an anarchist by any means, her critique of feminists’ willingness to use state force over perceptions of exploitation fit well into anarchist critiques of the state and capitalism. Belle and Zee demonstrate a class consciousness that does not distinguish them from the rest of the working class’s exploitation on the basis of the sexual nature of their work, and instead the primary contention is with how the state imposes and maintains hierarchy, or as Celeste would put it, “whorearchy of workers”.²

But what of other anarchist interpretations of work and labor such as Bob Black and his call to abolish work? For this, I turn to Anna and her experiences with escorting in the mid 2000s. As I mentioned before, Anna lived in a community of transfeminine sex workers, including her best friends. She told me how her circle of friends would gather together night after night to hang out, and how during these get-togethers, clients would come join them, get serviced, leave, and more would come to replace them. In essence, a significant chunk of Anna’s experience as a full service sex worker is inseparable from good times and, dare I say, “play”. When speaking of the work itself, Anna could not help but describe it as fun. Even in her descriptions of her current content creation, the lines between her personal and professional lives are often quite blurred. For example, when speaking she rolled the story of shooting her first “girl on girl” pornography scene directly into talking about polyamorous relationships, pursuing crushes, and expanding her horizons for what her life could be.

I will speak more to the specific significance of her romantic and sexual life in “Overcoming Public Silence and Private Terror in Trans Sexuality”, but suffice it to say that Anna’s overall outlook on her sex work career is remarkably similar to how Bob Black envisions a world without work. At the core of Black’s argument is an acknowledgement of the exploitative nature of all work and why it is necessary to consider this when attempting to imagine a world without exploitation. Black defines work as “forced labor, that is, compulsory production...Work is production enforced by economic or political means, by the carrot or the stick. (The carrot is just the stick by other means.)”, and with this model we can see that sex work done by my interviewees is work, as the labor involved in it is compelled by economic means.³

As discussed previously, those economic means by which my interviewees were compelled to do sex work were basic survival needs such as rent and food after leaving transphobic jobs, transition related healthcare, and being forced out of civilian labor through ablesim. In Anna's case specifically, she not only sought to live on her own after being kicked out of her house by family, but also to pay for electrolysis and facial feminization surgery to alleviate dysphoria, and she reentered sex work in order to provide for herself and her husband whose Parkinson's disease forced him out of the labor market.

This discussion of the coercive nature of work is not unique to Black, as many across the left have made similar commentaries. What is unique about Black's argument though is his view on what the solution is: the abolition of work itself. Do Anna and the rest of my interviewees still do work? Of course they do. But in blending work with their own pleasure, there is space for a new and radical form of resistance to the oppressive nature of capitalism. As I stated in my literature review, Bob Black concludes his essay with a call for blurring the lines between our everyday lives and sex, as he says, "in the ludic life, the best of sex will diffuse into the better part of daily life. Generalized play leads to the libidization of life". Black views sex for pleasure as a form of creation that is not work, as he says "conversation, sex, dancing, travel—these practices aren't rule-governed but they are surely play if anything is. And rules can be played with at least as readily as anything else".⁴ Thus sex is play and in Black's view preferable to work.

Anna is not the only one who has fun doing sex work, as Belle and Farrah both spoke favorably of their experiences. As discussed in "How Does Sex Work 'Work'", Farrah prioritizes creating content is that creatively authentic to her and her inner sexuality, and so while doing the work we can safely infer a reasonable amount of enjoyment. This is supported by her saying, "what I have always found sexy in porn and the fantasy that I've always been drawn to is the feeling of attainability. These experiences I'm having, even though they are for porn and professional, these are experiences that I could be having off camera too, and I think that it keeps it attractive for me...". To summarize, while the contexts are different, the sex she has in her private life and the sex in her professional life are intentionally similar and therefore more enjoyable overall, and that lines are intentionally blurred for the sake of creation.

Belle's outlook is similar, as she said, "I remember pre-transition, I was kind of like, 'Darn, I wish I had been born a girl so I could do porn' because I felt like that would be fun". She would go on to say, "I started doing sex work because it was something I felt passionate about, it was something that I could do". Of course all of my interviewees expressed grievances with sex work, but not because it was sex work specifically; none of them like having to work. Work, as per Bob Black's definition of compulsory labor enforced by political and financial forces, certainly is occurring, and in that sense, transfeminine sex workers are not pure work abolitionists. Yet they signify an affinity for the fundamental principles and assumptions about society that lie at the heart of anti-work anarchism. That is why seeing these moments of play, such as Belle's exploration of her ABDL kink or Anna describing her escorting days as "some of the best sex of [her] life" are so important. What we think of as "work" does not just have to be understood as work, and that includes sex work.

Labor is not the only means by which we can find anarchist potential in the world of sex work. To begin this point, I would like to focus on Bianca. In our interview together, Bianca told me of the many pitfalls that young and inexperienced sex workers can stumble into, and the kind of community responsibility for protecting them that emerges. For many sex workers new to the life, there are significant gaps in both local and portable knowledge, especially regarding risks.

One such gap can be not knowing who the “bad” clients in the area are, meaning clients with reputations for violence, non-payment, and so on. Another gap is not knowing basic self defense and safety procedures such as martial arts, screening processes, or having someone aware of your location before a session. These dangers, among others, are often felt by those who simply have no idea what they are doing through no fault of their own, and according to Bianca, knowing how to navigate these risks is what marks someone as not “young” anymore.

And so something remarkable and beautiful happens. The old-timers of the local scene will go out of their way to offer protection tips, training, comfort, and the prospect of community to the new workers purely out of concern for their well being. Bianca spoke of small ways in which sex workers look out for each other, such as giving them a heads-up about a clients history, but bigger things too, such as offering guidance as to how to safely and legally process income earned through illegal means. She says, “you can very easily end up losing all the money you have if you’re not careful when it comes to stuff like taxation, so I’d say the inexperienced are the most at risk, but for the most part, we’ve gotten very good at this point at networking with each other. So I’m seeing that less and less, or at least I think it’s less of an issue as it may have been in the past”.

In Belle’s community, there is a full service sex worker and stripper named Hexx who Belle had the chance to have a sit down with and discuss the prospect of going full time into sex work and branching out into escorting. In Belle’s word, “she just fucking took me under her wing. She sat me down and explained the entire process in detail and what her experiences were and what she thinks my experiences might be. She walked me through her [screening] process and what she recommended for my process”. Hexx also runs a sex worker outreach program to help combat the violent round-ups of local sex workers working the streets, many of whom are homeless.

Prior to our interview, I lacked a real functional understanding of what safety processes for sex workers looked like. When I mentioned this in our conversation, Belle deliberately walked me through every piece of local and portable knowledge that was given to her by Hexx. I am mentioning this because Belle very pointedly asked me to write down “Hexx is cool” in my notes and to include this particular account as a sort of tribute to Hexx and to show whoever is reading this the level of care and concern built into sex worker communities. This exchange got me thinking about where else I had seen this kind of behavior and approach to community building, and so to continue my anarchist intervention into sociology, I would like to discuss anarchist activist and anthropologist David Graeber once more.

In his book, *Debt: The First Five Thousand Years*, Graeber explores the history of debt, value, and money, and while much of his findings far exceed the scope of this project, he discusses three major frameworks by which economic relations can be understood: communism, exchange, and hierarchy. In his writings on what communism is, he defines it as “any human relationship that operates on the principles from each according to their abilities, to each according to their needs”, and puts forward the argument that “...communism is the foundation of all human sociability. It is what makes society possible”. He terms this fundamental kind of communism by which society exists “baseline communism” and explains that save for extenuating circumstances, this form of communism is the bedrock of all social interaction in societies across the globe and spanning thousands of years.⁵

This kind of thinking from anarchists is not unheard of. Anarchist philosopher and activist Peter Kropotkin wrote a collection of anthropological essays entitled *Mutual Aid: A Factor of Evolution* in which he makes similar claims. In it, he writes “the mutual-aid tendency in man has

so remote an origin, and is so deeply interwoven with all the past evolution of the human race, that it has been maintained by mankind up to the present time, notwithstanding all vicissitudes of history”.⁶

I interpret these acts of care within sex worker communities as forms of baseline communism, and I am not alone in thinking this. Belle explicitly described herself as being a member of a mutual aid group and said that “safety training for sex workers”, “handing out blankets to homeless people”, and “fundraisers for local Black people who need affirmative gender care and surgeries” were all part of their regular activities. Zee also spoke of working with mutual aid groups “explicitly dedicated to assisting sex workers without trying to pathologize or rescue”. The driving force behind these acts is the understanding that without solidarity and care for the community as a whole, the individual cannot survive.

It is not unheard of for sex workers politically mobilize to protect themselves and their communities based on an understanding of their interconnectedness and mutual vulnerability. COYOTE (Call Off Your Old Tired Ethics) is a sex worker rights advocacy organization that has existed since the 1970s and has argued that “along with the right to choose prostitution as an occupation, prostitutes must have the right not to be subject to public harassment, such as: stigma, rape, violence, denial of healthcare, denial of protection by and under the law, and denial of alternative job opportunities”.⁷ COYOTE and other groups have made numerous strides in feminist discourses of sex work, and in many ways the sex positive feminists of the Feminist Sex Wars are in direct dialogue with them, in no small part due to the amount of membership overlap between the two.

But what makes the acts of the sex workers I spoke with so significant is the assumption of responsibility for protecting the community as individuals rather than deferring to a broader organization engaging in legal discourses. Belle, Zee, and Bianca expressed no serious interest in organizing around changing legislation to make life easier for sex workers but instead spoke highly of the people working side by side with them and personally investing themselves in the lives of their community members. Hexx’s acts of care and community defense by imparting her accumulated wisdom on new workers is a political act that holds greater significance and meaning to Belle than anything professional feminist activists have done.

There is an anarchist ethos to be found here: no one is coming to save us, and so it is up to us to save ourselves. This is different from the sort of rugged individualism we often associate with this kind of thinking, as it is explicitly about building meaningful relationships and connections to those around us since outsiders cannot be relied upon to understand the material conditions of one’s own circumstances better than the people actually living it. Understanding baseline communism and mutual aid as foundational principles by which to understand social interactions between sex workers is an important analytical tool that can be made portable to other endeavors.

This brings me to my final major point of intervention in sociology from an anarchist perspective, as I have repeatedly established through this work that the role of the state often takes on, at best, an indifference to the well-being of sex workers. This can be seen in Belle’s case of being sexually assaulted and the local police offering no meaningful recourse. At its worst, the state is actively hostile to their existence. In addition to onerous and restrictive legislation such as FOSTA-SESTA that actively stifle the abilities of sex workers to ply their trade, Bianca and Belle both repeatedly expressed to me regular fear of being caught up in police sting operations. This is yet another instance in which the screening processes sex workers develop are potentially life saving, and yet the potential danger is not from being murdered or sexually assaulted, but from meeting an officer of the law.

So how can we interpret sex workers' responses to state intervention in their lives? There is already difficulty and subsequently resentment on the part of sex workers when attempting to pay taxes, as their income comes from largely criminal or at best legally dubious behavior, and so written documentation of this behavior could be incriminating. As I have stated previously, none of the women I spoke to expressed any trust or affinity for the institution of policing, as more often than not, it has existed as a way in which the material conditions of sex workers has been made more dangerous by outside forces such as the state and carceral feminists. With regard to resource provision, sex workers are already working to fill in the gaps left by the state and capitalism with mutual aid and community solidarity. By contextualizing sex worker interactions with baseline communism and mutual aid, we can begin to see alternatives to how society can be organized along non-hierarchical lines and with a concern for justice. If we can accept that sex workers do not want or need police in their lives, then what other forms of state intervention in all of our lives can we as sociologists begin to question?

To be clear, none of my interviewees identified as anarchists, nor do I think they would want to be characterized as anarchists, as they have a range of views on what to do with the state in an ideal world. But ultimately what suggests to me an anarchist ethos in practice among my interviewees is the understanding that the state is an enemy to be avoided at all costs. This is part of what makes the example of the Zapatistas in Graeber's *Fragments of an Anarchist Anthropology* so interesting, for they do not identify as anarchists either, as their political ideology predates and exists outside of Western political philosophy. Yet they find incredible affinity and solidarity from anarchists across the globe, as there is mutual recognition that hierarchy is to be dismantled, the state cannot be trusted to protect us, and that humans deserve to be free to live the way they want to.⁸

Does an ideological label matter if you have the spirit of freedom in you? You do not have to be an anarchist in name if you are standing side by side with me ready to help those around us when things go to shit. It is not just about fighting oppression but building something worth living for, and that is what I find in these women.

Overcoming Public Silence and Private Terror in Trans Sexuality

The final major component of this work is my assertion that the experiences of my interviewees highlight an important conceptualization of sexual liberation and the significance of pleasure as a political goal. Although I am theoretically drawing in part from cis lesbian feminist writers of the second wave feminist movement, this point about sexual pleasure is not universal. I am speaking specifically about transfeminine pleasure. More specifically, I am speaking of the subversive power of trans women resisting societal transmisogyny by unapologetically being themselves and being able to prioritize their own sexual pleasure and relationships. I included my own story at the top of this work for the purposes of showing on a smaller, more intimate scale why owning one's own desires and sexual needs can be so powerful.

To explore the pleasure concern, I turn to Dorothy Allison and her essay, "Public Silence, Private Terror". In this work, Allison talks about the "public silence" surrounding practical questions of sexuality, as many of her fellow lesbian feminists were faced with revulsion and accusations of aiding the patriarchy on the grounds of their practice of BDSM (bondage, domination/submission, and sadism/masochism) and other kinks. This hostility from kink-critical feminists in effect created a kind of silence around deeper questions of the significance of our desires, and as a result a sort of "private terror" was instilled in the minds of those targeted for not having politically correct sexual desires. In her words, "I find myself continuing to wonder how our lives might be different if we were not constantly subjected to the fear and contempt of being sexually different, sexually dangerous, sexually endangered".¹ This private terror would be experienced as a literal terror and sense of shame, of brokenness, of monstrosity, for having the "wrong" desires and therefore being dangerous.

Allison then goes on to say "I promise not to lie and not to require anyone else to lie. I still offer that open book where I hope we can all write out our fearful secrets and sign them or not as we choose, to honor our secrets and break the public silence that has maintained so much private terror".² In making this proclamation, Allison calls for a rejection of shame and self-loathing for one's own desires, and for us as feminists to forge a solidarity that allows for people to freely express themselves and their deepest desires for what their lives can be.

There is a power in being able to see yourself and those like you as being both object and subject of desire rather than revulsion and hatred. Allison's writing conjures to mind Audre Lorde's "The Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic As Power" in which she says, "The erotic is a measure between the beginnings of our sense of self and the chaos of our strongest feelings. It is an internal sense of satisfaction to which, once we have experienced it, we know we can aspire".³ I find these points from Allison and Lorde inspiring, but in some regards it rings hollow for me as trans lesbian feminist, as cis lesbian feminists have failed to make space for us.

In *Whipping Girl*, Serano speaks to this historically as she talks extensively about the politics of exclusion that emerged in the late twentieth century feminist movements. She explores

how radical feminism spawned what is referred to as cultural feminism, and in this context that means the sort of internal feminism within groups and communities and how feminism would be practiced in daily life by creating women only spaces and organizations where they could exist without the intrusion of men. Drawing from Alice Echols, Serano discusses the sharp divergence between the radical feminist and the cultural feminists by arguing that the radical feminist tradition was more capable of creating space for differing perspectives of womanhood, such as transness, while cultural feminists would rally around the idea of womanhood having a sort of “oneness” that is centered around biology and “sisterhood”.⁴ As discussed in my literature review, Echols was specifically criticizing feminists such as Adrienne Rich and Janice Raymond for their exclusionary thinking towards kinksters and trans women respectively, it would appear according to Serano that this is still the case in some ways.

In her book, *Excluded: Making Feminist and Queer Movements More Inclusive*, Julia Serano writes about her difficulties with dating cis lesbians as a trans woman. She says,

One of the most critical functions that queer women’s communities serve is in providing a safe space outside of the heterocentric mainstream where women can express interest, attraction, and affection toward other women. In other words, queer women’s spaces fulfill our need for sexual validation. Unless, of course, you are a trans woman. And personally, with each passing year, it becomes harder and harder for me to continue to take part in a community in which I am not seen as a legitimate object of desire.⁵

When I set out to begin this research project, I knew I wanted to focus in part on queer trans women’s sexuality, as I have myself have had similar experiences to those described above by Serano. I have felt that pain of not being viewed as a legitimate object of desire by other lesbians and thus being socially isolated from what should have been a community I could find solidarity in. Like Dorothy Allison, I felt a sense of private terror from this internalized fear that I was monstrous for being a trans woman, like I was an invader in spaces that were not mine to claim, and like everyone looked at me with fear in their eyes because I was somehow secretly a danger to “real” women. Setting aside the cis male chasers discussed in “How Sex Work ‘Works’”, if cis lesbians have a history of excluding trans women from their spaces and not viewing them as potential partners equally as valid to their cis counterparts among the dating pool, who does in fact find us attractive and valuable?

Something I found in my interviews was a desire to create sexual content that specifically centered the pleasure of other trans people, particularly trans women. I interpret this to be because it is enjoyable to make content for an audience of your community members. When speaking what she is trying to do with her creative work, Belle said,

I do try and pivot my work to be a little bit more engaged with what trans people want, what trans people find enjoyable, maybe displaying and being comfortable with present parts of my body that might make other people dysphoric. My stomach kind of sticks out, and I try to not to necessarily keep it sucked in because trans women have written to me and said that aspect of my work makes them feel more comfortable with their bodies. Some of my work, in terms of commissions for erotic videos or sexting sessions, is primarily with other trans people.

This idea of creating sexual content that highlights and affirms specific aesthetic and experiential characteristics of a particular group was not something I have encountered in the sociological literature on sex work for anyone, let alone trans people, and yet it is something that came up across the majority of my interviews. On the surface, it makes sense; it is not impossible to imagine some people having a desire to see themselves represented in the media they consume, so why would that not be the case in sexual materials? But as a trans person who has sought out gender affirming sexual content myself, this desire gets at something deeper than yearning for representation. Belle creating content that shows off her stomach as beautiful specifically because trans women enjoy it and feel more comfortable about their own bodies as a result is itself beautiful, as it speaks to how visible transness and trans sexuality can be a powerful force in combatting gender dysphoria among trans people and also connecting trans people with each other on the basis of their shared sexual agency and valuation.

Anna had a similar perspective on visibility in transfeminine pornography, as she connected it to her learning to overcome her face dysphoria and start working towards remedying it. She said, “I wasn’t posting my face before [starting online sex work]. I started posting my face because there’s so many [trans] girls doing it now, it feels safer”. So clearly it is not just potential trans clients who are finding solidarity and empowerment in transfeminine pornography, but sex workers themselves can too as they find themselves made more and more comfortable with their own body and physical appearance by seeing their fellow trans women as legitimate objects of desire and possessing sexual agency.

Farrah spoke similarly to this experience, as she also said that a significant amount of her engagement is from other trans and trans adjacent people. She said,

My customer base is split between cis men and trans people as a whole. Those cis men, I think a lot of them have gender feelings, and it’s hard to put a finger on it because some of them definitely engage with me in ways that feel like they don’t have gender feelings, and they just want to see a hot lady. But a lot of them do engage with me in ways that are like the clumsy first steps of talking about gender. They want to talk about being forced-feminized, they want to talk about being humiliated into wearing women’s clothing.

So rather than seeing pornography as a site of gender exploitation and violence, as held by some on the sex critical side of the feminist movement, transfeminine sex workers see it as a space for safe experimentation with gender non-conformity and even perhaps identity. If “cis” men are coming to trans sex workers to be treated in a feminine manner for the first time, perhaps we should see transfeminine sex work as empowering of not just the workers, as seen with Belle, but of other trans people too more broadly. This particular experience of dealing with crossdressing as fetish subject matter and its practitioners, also known as “sissies”, was not unique to Farrah, as all of the women I spoke to at one point or another referenced this. Anna in particular said her customer base currently is primarily “chasers and sissies”. But more importantly, Farrah also spoke of making content for openly trans people, which she sets up in contrast to mainstream production company made pornography, as it is often deeply dehumanizing and fetishizing of trans women.

I would say the other big demographic is trans people, where they just want to see what feels like authentic trans porn made for trans people that doesn’t feel super

fetishistic of transness, or they know they're not going to have to deal with a bunch of tags [such as] "shemale", you know that kind of thing. I'm also leaning hard into T4T, you know, like doing trans porn for trans people".

"T4T" is a popular slang term referring to trans people dating/fucking other trans people, and so it is interesting to see that phrase deployed here in regards to porn. When we trans people speak of T4T, we speak of how we organize our romantic and sexual lives more broadly in ways that can be validating and allow us access to solidarity, not necessarily the intimate acts of sex that we see in pornography. After all, Farrah spoke of her and her partner both being trans at this point in conversation. She said, "I came out after we had been straight-cis married, and then they came out after me, and we hadn't previously talked about it. So we did like the 'trans switch' thing". So T4T as an ethos by which to understand romantic and sexual relationships between trans people is one thing, but perhaps we can and should extend it to how we understand parasocial sexual relationships like those in the world of independently made online pornography.

We can see how trans people making porn for other trans people as a form of T4T can also act as a counter to the kind of material being produced on a wider scale by cis people. Farrah pointedly distinguishing her content from the kind of material promoted as "shemale" porn is in of itself an act of care and love for other trans people as well as herself. "Shemale" is more often than not understood by trans people as a slur imposed upon them by cis people through pornography, and so Farrah's reference to it here means that she does not wish to be identified with a slur, nor does she want her audience of other trans people to be forced to interact with slurs that dehumanize them.

To be your own creative voice depicting trans sexuality by and for trans people in a way free from transmisogynistic stigma is much more meaningful to my interview subjects than the usual garden variety "tranny porn" I described in my opening anecdote. No insult to Natalie Mars intended, but the meaning found in mainstream pornography of trans women made by cis people for other cis people is fundamentally not the same as what trans people make for each other.

I wrote in my literature review about "tranny porn", "chicks with dicks", and other forms of dehumanization of trans women in mainstream pornography, and it came up again in my discussion of chasers and the transmisogyny of cis queer men fucking trans women as a compromise between heterosexuality and queerness because of the existence of the transfeminine penis. But what if the transfeminine penis was actually cool and fun and not a source of intense shame and ridicule? Is it possible to find pleasure and thus liberation in girldick? For this point, I return to Farrah.

A common experience for trans women on hormone replacement therapy (HRT) is that as a result of taking testosterone suppressants, their penis's sexual function is severely diminished. For some, this is ideal as it can alleviate dysphoria, but for others who rely on their penises for work or pleasure like Farrah, this was not, and so she went to her doctor where she received a low dose prescription of a testosterone supplement. The supplement returned the sexual function to her penis, but she said "my dick grew enormously, and that's how my doctor and I figured out that I had some sort of intersex condition where I never had real amounts of testosterone in my body before". So now Farrah has a large penis that she can use to make porn with the selling point, as she says, of "Look! I have this big dick now! It wasn't always like this and it's bigger than most people's!".

What do we make of this? Obviously not every trans woman, let alone transfeminine sex worker, is going to enjoy the existence of their penis. As I discussed previously, both Bianca and Zee refuse to use their penises in sexual context. It is therefore striking to me that Farrah would express such ownership and power in her penis, as there is resentment among all of my interviewees for being viewed as “dickgirls”. What I find to be the difference between Zee’s “dickgirl” framing of the transfeminine penis in sex work and what we see with Farrah is the question of agency. In Zee’s account, she says “I was a girl with a dick so to speak, but I wasn’t a ‘dick-girl’”, and she distinguishes between her penis existing as she understood it to how it would be viewed by cis men seeking her services. Zee’s discomfort, aside from lower dysphoria, was with the framing of her existence entirely in relation to her penis by outside forces.

For some like Bianca, the penis is just kind of there and to be ignored at all costs. In my transcript of our interview, I could not find a single reference to it by name. Instead, she referred to not wishing to “top”, a term borrowed from gay male sex culture to refer to penetration. She said, “I do not feel like I can realistically top somebody enough to satisfy somebody that wants that done. So that’s a big reason I don’t offer that. There’s also an aspect of dysphoria there. You know, I’m not comfortable penetrating somebody”. So Bianca does not use her penis for comfort reasons.

Belle does use her penis, as she told me of a “really good video that I did where I was tied with duct tape bondage and stuff like that, and I was thrashing around trying to get off the bed. You could see my erection through my pants where I was just like [chef’s kiss] delicious”. She also expressed some of the same misgivings about being a trans girl in sex work who uses her penis. In her words, there is a “cis gaze [in pornography] of what trans women are as a kind of erotic subject, which is entirely focused on the dick and the trans woman penetrating someone, yada yada”. This is in line with Julia Serano’s point about “tranny porn” and “chicks with dicks” that I discussed in the literature review.

In contrast to being framed as a “dickgirl”, Farrah says, “It doesn’t feel particularly overly fetishistic because I’m there to be sexual for them, and for them to talk about my dick isn’t unusual because I’m inviting it”. To be clear, Farrah is not saying all talk of her penis is automatically not fetishism because she is a sex worker. Instead, in this quote she is centering her agency and ability to offer consent to her penis being the subject of the sexual engagement rather than it being implicitly assumed by virtue of her being trans. In other words, trans women can give consent to their penises being sexualized during sexual engagement, and it is okay to enjoy having sexual contact with girdick if it is appropriate to the situation. What is not okay is the assumption that consent to sexualizing the transfeminine penis is a given because the situation is sexual.

Having made it this far, I would understand why you, dear reader, may begin to feel my focus on thinking of the penis as a site of agency and potentially joy at least a little suspect. After all, Adrienne Rich wrote in her essay “Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence”, “that female antiphallic sexuality...has actually been a form of subversion of male power”.⁶ As a lesbian whose sexuality intrinsically includes the phallic, reading this passage makes me wonder if it is possible under her framework for my sexuality to subvert male power, as I, like most of my interviewees, have a penis. Is trans lesbianism less meaningful or less radical because of the body which trans women engage in it with? For this point, I would like to turn to the popular zine “Fucking Trans Women”.

“Fucking Trans Women” is primarily an instruction manual for how to physically fuck trans women, and it contains detailed diagrams and guides on where and how to touch them. It also contains asides about trans sexuality and radical new ways of understanding the physical trans experience, such as when Mira Bellwether writes, “we can reshape the way we talk about and understand our bodies...our bodies are bound by the ideas and words we have at our disposal, but we’re like a figure in a painting that has her own, real pencil to draw on top of what is already there”.⁷ What I see here and in the ways my interviewees speak about their penises is a yearning for trans women to not be defined by what is there to begin with, meaning the body, and instead be allowed to create their own meaning.

The importance of this meaning making can also be found in how my interviewees spoke of their attraction to and love of other trans women. As I mentioned in “Conflicts and Dangers”, Anna was in love with her best friend, Lee, who was also a transfeminine sex worker. Her love of Lee was significant to her in part because of her prior experience of facing lesbophobia from the community around her. Anna said, “coming up being a lesbian, they called it ‘Kai-Kai’, and they frowned upon it, it wasn’t accepted. And that was a bummer for me, for sure. I didn’t have anybody. I didn’t believe that I could be with who I wanted to be with”. As an escort, being in a community with other trans women and being “madly in love” with Lee was such a dramatic departure from the isolation of being a trans lesbian in her hometown. After returning to sex work after retiring following Lee’s death, Anna said that “I’m now really interacting with people and making friends with other trans women, other trans lesbians, and we’re like supporting each other. They’re not all co-workers, maybe they will be eventually one day, but I’m so excited to meet other trans lesbians. It’s mind blowing”.

Anna loves trans women so very much, and I was so honored to have been able to meet her and hear her speak on this; Anna’s face lit up and her voice was full of joy and excitement about having a community of people like her once more. Would she have found this joy if not for sex work? Possibly. But when joking about these other trans lesbians being coworkers one day, I gather a sense of appreciation that sex work is the context in which they met. I will put it bluntly: being a lesbian and having sex with other lesbians is fun and fulfilling. So it is not surprising that Anna was speaking so openly about her hope that she would get to have sex with other trans lesbians for work one day.

She even went on to speak about how her marriage to her husband has become open, meaning dating and sex with other partners is allowed, as part of her doing sex work, which enables her to pursue ethically her own desires for other trans women. This pursuit of other trans women has meant that her options for relationships have expanded in other ways too. For instance, Anna spoke of wanting to join a polycule, referring to a group relationship of multiple partners, of other transfeminine sex workers. She said, “I’m like, ‘I wanna join your crew, let me in’. I’m going down there next month [for a content filming shoot] and my heart is going to shine so bright. I know they don’t really want to expand their polycule, but I don’t care at the end of the day. I’m just so happy to have these girls as my friends”.

Anna is not the only one whose relationships have opened up as a result of doing sex work; Bianca and Farrah both practice ethical non-monogamy and each mentioned having multiple partners in addition to their spouses. Nor was Anna the only one who spoke with excitement about having sex with other trans women. Belle told me the story of the day she quit her job as a case manager. She said, “

Someone reached out to me and was like, “Hey, if you would like, my girlfriend and I can fly you out to Chicago”, and these were other sex work performers that were trans and invited me to film some content. I was sitting in a staff meeting with all of these white, Mormon, well-to-do cis-het people, and I was like, “do I want to bite my tongue for the next two years of my life? Or do I want to go get Eiffel Tower-ed by two extremely hot trans girls?”, and in that moment, my mind was made up.

To be clear, in this context “Eiffel Tower-ed” refers to Belle Bottoms having one trans woman’s penis penetrating her anus and another in her mouth. In this moment, Belle chose physical intimacy, pleasure, and connection through sex work with other trans women over her civilian job at a non-profit. Feminist activist and sex worker Nina Hartley make a similar point about her own life, arguing in her essay, “In The Flesh: A Porn Star’s Journey”, that “stripping and adult films provided a safe place to practice lots of sex with lots of different people in lots of different situations. I gained competence and confidence, two things I always wanted”.⁸ Hartley also engages in ethical non-monogamy, and so it stands to reason that sex workers pursuing pleasure in their profession and finding personal satisfaction in it is not unheard of, nor is radically reimagining how long term romantic relationships can operate.

I recognize that I just quoted Adrienne Rich a few pages ago to criticize her and have repeatedly referenced criticism of her for her exclusionary politics, but I think an interesting sort of recuperation can be made here of her theorizing of the lesbian continuum. Rich defines it as “a range-through each woman’s life and throughout history-of woman-identified experience”.⁹ I interpret all of these acts I have described in this section, from making gender affirming porn to not using slurs to loving (and fucking) other trans women, as all part of the lesbian continuum. There is certainly something lesbian about women talking at length about their sexual and romantic relationships with other women, but to love women so very much that you make it your mission to bring them pleasure and joy by embracing them as they are and building community around a shared sense of knowing and being know as women, that I believe is what gets at the heart of Rich’s argument about the lesbian continuum.

Am I interpreting these acts as part of the lesbian continuum out of spite and pettiness towards Rich for her framing of lesbian sexuality as oppositional to penises despite criticism from her fellow feminists such as Alice Echols? Perhaps. But I think in Rich’s text is a genuine love of women and the experience of being a woman, even if to be a woman is to exist in conflict with the violent and coercive forces of patriarchy and compulsory heterosexuality. Rich was a lesbian feminist for reasons beyond the political; it was not solely rage at patriarchy for oppressing women that motivated her to fight tirelessly against it, but rather a deep love for women everywhere and the desire to see them free. To me, this is why she theorized compulsory heterosexuality and lesbian existence in the same paper, as we lesbian women are more than merely victims of violence and can be the most powerful comrades and lovers we will ever know. Is that any different from what these women are doing? Why should the love between a trans woman and her fellow trans women be diminished by virtue of her status as sex worker and the existence of her penis? I find this love of women and trans people in general to be such a powerful force in the lives of the women I interviewed, and to me it is inseparable from any feminist mission.

When I quoted Dorothy Allison earlier in this section about no longer lying anymore and honoring the secrets we have been forced to hide from the world through public silence and private terror, I did so because I understand the trans women I spoke with as doing just that.

Their experiences as part of the lesbian continuum and their openness with themselves in a transmisogynistic society are acts of power and resistance. To be a trans woman and to love other trans women, to hold them close to one's heart and embrace them for who they are, desires and all, is a revolutionary feminist act.

When Belle spoke to me about making that custom commissioned video I referenced earlier in which she hypnotizes another trans woman into being a bimbo capable of ejaculating and producing breast milk in vast quantities, I felt a sense of knowing and being known. She spoke with such pride in her voice for being able to act in service to another trans woman's journey of self acceptance and love, and it makes sense. In effect, she was combining two elements we often view in diametrical opposition: the ability to produce semen/sperm and the ability to breastfeed a child. I do not need to cite another cis person to tell you, dear reader, that our society associates those things with fatherhood and motherhood respectively. In making a pornographic hypnosis video, Belle was attempting the bridge the conceptual gap between what we think of as biologically male and female, and she was doing this specifically because it would make another trans person feel good about their own physical existence. If that is not an act of rebellion against the bullshit trans people deal with, then I do not know what the fuck is. There is hope at the core of these women's actions in sex work, and it is about overcoming public silence and private terror in trans sexuality, both within themselves and in other trans women.

Conclusion

In “Structural Pressures and How People Get Into Sex Work”, I discussed some of the major push factors that lead trans women into the world of sex work. Here I demonstrated that transmisogyny, both at home and in the workplace, acts as a kind of specter that makes sex work the only kind of jobs trans women can work to survive. I also connected this to broader failings in the American healthcare system, as the necessity of paying for transition related healthcare was also a significant motivator for getting into sex work. The final structural pressure I examined was ableism and how opportunities to manage physical disability and neurodivergence are not afforded to people who need them, and thus sex work becomes a more feasible option. The conclusion of this is that sex work is consistently viewed among my interviewees as better than whatever their prior situation was.

In “How Sex Work ‘Works’”, I provided an overview of some of the major processes and practical concerns of doing sex work. In doing so, I found that sex work is much more technical and time consuming than we tend to give credit for. I also found that many of the cis people transfeminine sex workers interact with are either boring and forgettable or are outright horrible and transmisogynistic. This contributed to a feeling of sex work being similar to working other kinds of customer service jobs, as emotional labor acts a critical feature in both worlds.

In “Conflicts and Dangers”, I spoke more in depth about some of the issues facing sex workers on a more intimate level. Here I demonstrated the commonality of poverty and how poverty contributes to interpersonal risks such as murder and sexual assault. It was here I also explored how trauma and sexual violence loom over sex worker communities, and that law enforcement is not to be trusted or highly regarded. This was also addressed through my discussion of the specific risks and attacks in online spaces and how internet whorephobia, kink shaming, and transmisogyny can be weaponized by trolls. I concluded this section with a critical discussion of how sex workers engage with the racial politics of selecting clients for in-person services, and I opened the door to interrogating racial bias in both my sample and my sampling process.

In “Sex Work Is Work and Anarchist Principles”, I made the argument that anarchist theoretical intervention in the sociology of sex work. To support this argument, I first addressed the class consciousness of transfeminine sex workers and how they possess an affinity with the rest of the working class. Built into this class analysis was critique of statist-feminist approaches to sex work as a gender problem to be solved by involving policing and the state more broadly. I then applied a work abolitionist lens to the concerns of transfeminine sex workers. This established that the very concept of work itself is exploitative and put forward that the blending of personal pleasure and labor by transfeminine sex workers can lead to a dissolution of work from daily life. In the closing of this section, I further discussed sex worker’s dislike of law enforcement and other state intervention. I then implored sociologists to take more seriously concerns about the state and to more fully incorporate an anarchist lens when constructing theory.

In “Overcoming Public Silence and Private Terror in Trans Sexuality”, I drew from transfeminist and sex positive lesbian feminist thinking to interpret transfeminine sex work as a site of

liberatory struggle against transmisogyny. To do this, I first focused on how transfeminine sex workers enjoy making gender affirming and validating sexual content for other trans women that is safe from trans fetishism. I also spoke of how many of my interviewees's customers are in the early beginning stages of figuring out their gender, and that transfeminine sex workers are capable of facilitating safe experimental spaces for gender exploration and becoming trans. From here I suggested understanding transfeminine sex workers making sexual content for trans people as a form of T4T, as there is care put into the content regarding transness that transcends mere pleasure. I then discussed interpreting the transfeminine penis as a potential site of liberation from transmisogynistic fetishism. Built into this was discussion of cis lesbian feminism's hesitance to accept the phallic as potentially lesbian, and so I appropriated Adrienne Rich's concept of the lesbian continuum to broadly describe acts of love and care between trans women within the world of sex work and make Rich's theoretical contributions more inclusive.

Overall, this study opens the door for further research and theorizing about sex work, gender, sexuality, the state, and feminism. It is imperative to continue making anarchist and transfeminist interventions in the sociology of sex work, as this study found that for some trans women in sex work, conventional feminist narratives of sex work and womanhood do not match up with their experiences and leave them out in the cold. This study also found that the lines between pleasure and work are much murkier in the world of sex work than would be expected, and that pleasure should be taken more seriously while work should be looked at more critically. Our feminisms need to be more inclusive, and so it is my hope that this work can be continued in the future.

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