

A Disgrace Reserved for Prostitutes: Complicity & the Beloved Community

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I propose to consider a dimension of political life that has to do with our exposure to violence and our complicity in it, with our vulnerability to loss and the task of mourning that follows, and with finding a basis for community in these conditions.

- Judith Butler, from *Precarious Life*

In conversations with communities of color regarding prostitution I am confronted with what oftentimes feels like outright hatred or disgust for people in the sex trade. I am, however, also presented with a lot of legitimate concerns. The sentiment that, “it’s different in our communities” and “women of color do not enjoy the same privilege of empowerment as white women do” are echoed over and over again. As a woman of color in the sex industry who has encountered the paradox of both financial stability or at least disposable income, alongside many hardships in this profession, I can say that much of these hardships were a direct result of how we as a culture tend to perceive women of color when they take on something as perverse as any combination of sex, money and economic struggle.

I grew up with ideas, images and stereotypes regarding prostitution like any other first generation woman of color attempting to represent all the goodness of her race in every scrutinized endeavor. My parents wanted more than anything for their youngest daughter to grow up to become a lawyer, a doctor or a business owner. They imagined that for all their hard work and sacrifices, for the three jobs my mother worked, and all the times they ate less so that we could have more, their children would, in the end, be in a position to be in charge and demand respect. In many black and brown communities a parent's worst nightmare is to have dignity stripped from them by knowing that their children are in a worse position than they were in when they brought us into this world. For many of our communities, failure is synonymous with the continuation of poverty, with dependency and disempowerment, with addiction and dysfunction. For many of us, prostitution epitomizes these very things.

My initial experiences in the sex trade at 17 were coercive to say the least. I have since worked in and experienced a broad range of both sex acts and financial status within what we call the sex industry. But regardless of my experience in backdoor strip clubs, indoor incalls, as an independent escort or in the backseat of a vehicle, I have carried with me the markers of my race, my family's class background and innumerable stereotypes as well as stories about the meaning of success and morality that have penetrated me from all angles. I have experienced suspicion from clients and neighbors because of the way I looked, the way I dressed, the questions I asked. I have lived through dysfunctional relationships with both money and sex, as well as a dangerous combination of the two. I have spent entirely too much of my sex-work-earned money on drugs, and on bailing family members out of jail and countless financial crises. I know what it is like to "have a problem," as well as what it means to find a solution. I know what it is like to be unable to escape the way wealthier and white people perceive me.

Women of color, poor women, or trans women doing sex work, or women who work in places one might find atrocious (like the street, truck stops, or with pimps) are confronted with the weight of racism, sexism, and classism at the same time as they are being told by the world that they have no self-respect, that they are destructive, reck-

less, responsible for the decline of the nuclear family, culpable for the downfall of society. We are made into invisible, disposable targets for violence through the stigma of prostitution, through the illusion that it is *prostitution* and not targeted violence that violates, rapes and murders us. It is these extra burdens that do in fact make it different in our communities.

For a prostitute, her stigma intensifies or lessens in direct relation to how she is perceived racially and economically, relative to whether she is a drug user, homeless, a black woman, a trans woman, gender non-conforming or a woman of color. The stigma of prostitution keeps the conversation silent and keeps us from wanting to (or believing that we can) understand something rather than turning away. The stigma of prostitutes is a reductionist mentality that we participate in actively and in our every day. We often use this stigma to justify our discomfort with or aversion to actually take a look at our own participation in the racism, classism, sexism, as well as our own emotional fears that conceive and perpetuate violence towards prostitutes. In turn, we reduce these larger and deeper issues and instead dismiss, blame and invisibilize the experiences of people who trade sex for resources. Stigma is deeper than ignorance and larger than individual discrimination. Because this stigma is socially sanctioned when we discriminate against someone stigmatized as a prostitute, we not only have the permission of others to do so, but are equally validated and supported by a pervasive cultural belief. Rather than being called out for our actions we will be excused (consoled and even encouraged) as it is understandable to discriminate against, hate, be uncomfortable with, be violent towards, or simply condone negative behaviors and attitudes towards prostitutes. Stigma is constructed from deep fear and then assigned to those of us who cannot escape the disease of wielding our sexuality in the face of capitalist complacency.

For many women of color in my position, prostitution is not what you do when you hit rock bottom. Prostitution is what you do to stay afloat, to swim rather than sink, to defy rather than disappear. For me, this was “financial strategy” and not “easy money.” Please believe that there is nothing easy about being a young woman attempting to figure out how I will ever earn the right to a stable, livable, non-exploitative

income. Prostitution is not an easy task. This profession requires that you are on your game because it will swallow you if you are not. Prostitution is anything but reckless. When you walk into prostitution from a place of chaos and recklessness, the consequences of your actions will be tenfold. You quickly learn that in order to earn income you will have to get your act together. Many times in my life this has been my main source of income; it has informed the way in which I earn and spend money; it has implicated my race; it has implicated my class; it has affected how my work could be leveraged as social capital (or how it could never be). It has become its own category whenever I consider what is my income bracket or financial status. This is what I have chosen to do repeatedly – above office work, above working retail, above being told what to do by a younger white female supervisor – an experience I have found to be degrading and demeaning beyond words.

There is a sentiment out there that engaging in an act of prostitution is the equivalent of selling your soul. But for those of us who have ever been in a position where prostitution could buy us time before an eviction, could afford us the luxury of not going into collection, could give us the “comfort” of cash so that our deviant credit would not be questioned while obtaining something as fundamental as housing, for those of us that have experienced financial relief (if only temporarily) as salvation from the much more costly ramifications of mental breakdown and emotional triggers due to a lifetime of poverty, we understand there is much more at stake than simply our souls.

I write this as a woman who has survived financially by the wisdom of her risk-taking and the resources of men with disposable income, obtained with something as autonomous as personal choice and as inherent as a body. I also write this as a Latina, as a person of color who has grown up poor, who has not enjoyed the same privileges of empowerment as white women or the “educated,” who has not been stereotyped as a minority who has something good to model. For me, sex work has not been easy. As a young woman I experienced my unfair share of hostility and violence. But none of these dangers or issues of racism or classism were created by prostitution and none of them would disappear from the world or even my life if I were to simply exit the sex industry. As a matter of fact, I was experiencing these things

in painful ways long before the thought of prostitution ever entered my mind. I posted my first ad on craigslist because I was exhausted from struggling financially, I entered prostitution in order to escape the oppressive force of limited options. I entered in order to have access to money, and therefore resources. So I acknowledge that there are obstacles and I acknowledge the concerns of people of color regarding prostitution, not only because they are valid, but because I have personally lived them.

The very idea of prostitution as illicit pushes it further underground, causing the women who work within this trade to become isolated, leading to forms of increased exploitation. My lived understanding of the sex industry is that isolation and violence go hand in hand. The exchange of sex for money has been portrayed as so forbidden that the great majority of prostitution occurs out of plain sight. Many laws created around prostitution are directly influenced by this fear of prostitutes. As a matter of fact during the emergence of the HIV test in the mid 80s, policies that were supposedly created in order to safeguard public health did not take into account the civil and human rights of groups of people who were stigmatized (black people, gay men, trans women, and prostitutes) and therefore blamed for the spread of HIV. These communities were immediately marked as a threat to public health rather than as part of the same public these laws were seeking to protect. This is one of the many ways in which the stigma and subsequent silence around prostitution has played a part in halting practical and actual attempts to educate, treat and reduce the spread of HIV.

In this way we as a society use “delinquent” communities as scapegoats. When we scapegoat women in prostitution (or any other group) as the “cause” of disease, drug abuse, poverty or any other societal “ill,” and we don’t really address these issues. In HIV prevention many years were lost policing and criminalizing women who were seen as tainted and therefore worthless. These are years we will never get back that could have been better utilized in understanding the needs of entire communities and addressing the spread of HIV by “how” it is actually spread, rather than “who” is spreading it, something that experts in HIV prevention are now beginning to address. In recent years these same experts are beginning to see sex workers as a valuable resource

for developing and improving safer sex education and the prevention of STIs. In this way a deeper understanding of women in prostitution is essential in addressing not just HIV, but a great many other issues with the understanding that criminalizing people tends to push behavior underground and does more harm than good.

There have been countless other opportunities missed in linking sex worker issues with other movements. That prostitutes are not seen as obvious and valuable allies in the anti-trafficking movement or as part of the migrant workers movement is only to the detriment of these movements and their efforts to build in inclusive and sustainable ways. We as prostitutes understand this because many of us come in direct contact with women who have purposely left their countries to come here and work in “houses.” And we hear about and witness the injustices that are done to them, the exploitation they are vulnerable to because as migrant workers and as sex workers, the law does not protect them; because as sex workers they live with the fear of being arrested; because, as with all migrant workers, there is the additional fear of being deported; and because they live with the stigma of prostitution and the isolation that comes along with it. That we cannot hold complexity in the experiences of sex workers prevents us from seeing this different perspective. It prevents us from understanding the many reasons why women would want to come to this country to work as sex workers. It prevents us from understanding how they could then feel exploited when they are asked to work in unreasonable conditions for very little pay. It justifies our paternalistic tendency to want to save “these women.” It prevents us from understanding how our own beliefs about prostitutes make us complicit in these forms of exploitation. In short, it prevents us from seeing immigrant women who trade sex for money as fully human.

When we speak for experiences that are not our own, that we do not fully understand, and when we engage in a rescue-savior mentality towards prostitutes, we assume disempowerment in women and therefore perpetuate violence towards women, however unintentionally. Rather than empower we disempower, we become complicit in violence, we participate in erasure. When we isolate prostitution as problematic relative to other jobs and other forms of sexual contact, we miss

an opportunity to understand all forms of wage labor as exploitative and minimize the extent to which all women have been confronted (at one time or another) with the choice to leverage their sexuality in order to gain access to resources. When we enthusiastically support physical safety and labor rights for “all women,” only to the exclusion of prostitutes, we assert that our compassion and their humanity is conditional. There is a tendency to simplify the motivations behind entering the sex industry, insisting upon a strong distinction between people who enter consensually by “choice” and those who are “forced.” While it is true that working in the sex industry is a choice that many women have made for themselves, it is equally one that (like most other economic choices) is largely circumstantial. When we fail to see the complexity behind this choice we run the risk of denying, neglecting and erasing the inequalities many women of color continue to experience after they have made the empowered decision to survive.

Personally, I could never bring myself to buy into the rhetoric of empowerment through normalization that the mostly white middle-class sex worker rights movement was selling. To create a language around and an image of a “Sex Worker” that is normalized and free of stigma did not seem very revolutionary to me. To me it said, “accept us because we are just like you.” *Well, what if we're not like you? What then will you do to us?* The campaign to push forward the picture of the fully autonomous and sovereign woman in prostitution contributes to the polarization of ‘The Prostitute’ into two cartoon figures — one of total empowerment and one of total degradation. In reality, women’s experience in the sex industry and their motivations for entering it are vastly complex. This polarization is an oversimplification of both privilege and oppression and of people. There is a disgrace reserved for prostitutes with limited alternatives that women of color know first hand cannot be easily escaped.

Don’t get me wrong, there were many times when I wanted to (and even aspired to) be this image of an independent woman who makes her own income, who is self-respecting and educated. But growing up poor, being Latina, uneducated and a survivor of various traumas, I realized the physical, emotional and psychological barriers that could not be erased by simply claiming a term and believing I had made an

empowered decision. The decision to hustle, to take my income into my own hands was empowering but it did not erase the trauma I had endured because of poverty; it did not erase the dysfunctional dynamics around money I had to continue to navigate, nor did it fully alleviate the fear of being financially unstable. Similarly, when I called myself a Sex Worker as opposed to a Prostitute it did nothing to change the fact that men had put their hands on my lips, their mouths on my nipples, their fingers inside of me. It only made this experience invisible and therefore impossible to talk about. The truth is I had done something with my body in order to acquire resources and to not have this acknowledged made me feel as though my body was being disregarded.

In many ways, the term “sex work” presents me with a marketable and homogenized depiction of something that I have never experienced as such. In fact, out of the countless prostitution exchanges I have engaged in, sex work is the last term I would use to describe any handful of them. Today, I use the word prostitute liberally (and interchangeably with sex worker) hoping that when people hear this word they will challenge themselves to see a bigger picture. Sometimes, in conversation, I want the stigma to be there because it *is* there, because I want real revolution. I want a revolution of true awareness rather than one of denial and elevated status for only some. I want people to acknowledge that there is a stigma in exchanging your sexuality for cash, housing, food, safety, drugs, desires, and resources. I want it to be known that it is not as easy for some to walk away from this stigma. I want it to be clear that the weight of that stigma, oppression and violence in prostitution gets heavier the darker your skin, the less heteronormative you are, the less educated you are and the less value society places on how you are being compensated. I want society to acknowledge a complete picture as complex as a collage of class, race, gender and acts of sex.

Much of the white feminist discourse around prostitution asks us to stop focusing on the sexual nature of sex work and instead consider the labor and human rights implications. There is no doubt that we should be doing this, always considering worker rights, human rights and our humanity within a dominant culture that relentlessly demands that we repress our needs. But considering the sexual nature of prostitution is part of situating it politically and socially. It is part of hold-

ing prostitution as a layered endeavor involving many parts, one of which is undeniably sex. Without accepting sex and sexuality within prostitution as something that cannot be pulled apart from race, class, gender, economics, industry and survival, our acceptance of prostitutes is contingent upon the idea that sex will be left out of the equation. But prostitutes are actually having sex and this is what makes people uncomfortable, so to deny this prevents us from acknowledging the full range of experience of women and men in prostitution.

Looking at the sexual nature of prostitution is essential to understanding prostitution. How could it *not* be? We need to look at it, not in order to scrutinize particular sexual acts that women do in prostitution, but rather to explore the crucial question of *why* it makes us so uncomfortable. As it turns out, intimacy, sex and sexuality not only one activate some of our deepest fears, but also some of our deepest woundings. The immense silence surrounding the sex industry is symptomatic of our society's phobia of sexuality, the taboo of women as sexually powerful, a fear of intimacy stemming from violence and trauma, and the circulation of misinformation. Our homophobia, transphobia, femmephobia, erotophobia, and fear of prostitutes ensures that we remain silent, pushing these issues to the bottom so that we cannot resolve them, so that we cannot heal from them. The fear of prostitutes is so loaded because it drags with it the chains of desire, disgust, judgment, morality, guilt and shame. It is loaded with things we are too hurt and too wounded to recognize; we only recognize it as something to fear and therefore something to stay away from. Never does it occur to many of us to take a closer look because there is no hiding from it, because only by taking a look at an impossible bridge can we ever imagine we will cross it. The crime of prostitution is that we would rather not look deeply at our own pain. Prostitution presents us with a reality that is sometimes too emotionally painful to unravel because as we attempt to do so, we begin to realize that it is our reality too. Sex and intimacy are personally also our own struggle. This illuminates our personal and societal shame around sex and our deep internalization of a misogyny-driven capitalist world.

There is something very vile about being a woman in this world. To choose to be a woman, then, is unacceptable. To choose to be a prostitute is unforgivable. We are fearful and violent against women.

We vilify trans women. We crucify prostitutes. And the feminine concept of change and fluidity is under constant attack. In a capitalist world, to be a woman is to be sexually exploited and subordinated, disempowered and oppressed, to the benefit of men. The wealthy profit from, and industries are built with, the exploited sexuality and labor (whether sexual or not) of women and the poor. When women do not default into this scripted form of disempowerment, they are in danger of retribution. Any choice a woman makes, any coercion a woman experiences, happens within the context of a world that is violent towards her. Prostitution, then, oftentimes becomes an logical choice in the context of a violent world. That a woman enters prostitution by choice, however, does not erase the oppressive context she must continue to live in, and neither does it make her liable for it. And it certainly does not give any of us a pass to deny, excuse or ignore this as violence. We live in a rape culture that asks women repeatedly to be accountable for their own oppression.

However complex, layered or illusory the decision, I did choose to enter prostitution. What has been oppressive has sometimes been the nature of my work, but most often it has been the social isolation, the lack of emotional support, the violent jokes about sexual assault and murder, as well as the fear of being arrested, attacked, raped or killed, that has felt the most difficult, impactful and traumatizing to navigate. For women of color in prostitution, our very choice to enter prostitution makes us criminals, and our only salvation from this is our victimhood. That we are neither victims in need of rescue or criminals deserving of punishment is never fully held. For many it is hard to accept that women struggling within an industry that is thought of as the most demeaning act for a woman are not necessarily looking to be rescued but are instead in need of resources. Our inability to hold this complexity prevents us from fully accepting women who trade sex for resources. But I am no longer willing to dismember or disembodiment myself for the sake of salvation. I am not pure and I am still sacred. And I am certainly not available to assimilate into an impossible system in order to be given the liberation that should already belong to me.

Prostitution is loaded with the battle for power and the audacity of fallen women to claim empowerment. Prostitution raises questions

about what power is for us, and challenges the faulty equilibrium we've created about being empowered in a world designed for our exploitation. Prostitution is the convergence of many forces in our society—the economic hierarchy created by capitalism, the struggle for resources, the sexism stemming from patriarchy, the objectification of women, the impressive ability of women to survive within impossible systems, the ingenuity of people who hustle and make something where there previously was nothing, who reveal entire worlds amidst rubble. Prostitution not only reflects the coming together of all these pieces but it is in actuality a physical manifestation of them.

We have been taught to believe in a world that is good and bad, up and down, righteous and evil, and this serves us. It validates us when we are called to separate our vulnerability, and therefore our intimacy, from our work. It informs our logic that there is never any choice or agency in poverty, in being oppressed, in prostitution. We are manipulated into ignoring broken systems and are instead coerced into seeing broken people who will only choose survival if they are desperate enough, as if survival were some extreme option. But no one can say “prostitution has nothing to do with me.” It exists precisely because of the economic and misogynistic system we participate in every day. The incredible tragedy of it all is that when we see the result of our own complicity, we are disgusted by it. But if there was no one to be poor and exchange their sexuality for capital, the world would not turn. There are not enough jobs for every woman to exit prostitution. Our economic system is not set up for wealth to flow in the direction of poor communities. It is interesting that we make women into criminals when they exchange sex for capital, yet most non-prostitute women (knowingly or unknowingly) exchange sex for resources or access. Prostitution allows us to deny all this.

In the same way that the feminist movement tried to exclude the experiences of women of color, and more specifically black women, many movements have tried to exclude the voices of sex workers. Within the very Sex Worker Rights Movement, the significant and even crucial voices of trans women of color, who are the first targeted when it comes to violence, specifically black trans women, are oftentimes

overlooked. As a woman of color in the sex trade, it is difficult for me to see how it is possible for us to orchestrate our liberation when we are seldom (if ever) given the opportunity to explore and speak the ways we have experienced our own sex work. The experiences of people of color in the sex trade have been repeatedly stigmatized, pathologized, invisibilized, scapegoated, vilified, and dehumanized. When you consider how expansive something like prostitution really is, it should be alarming that we rarely hear the actual voices of people who have first-hand experience in this industry. When I think about the relevance of prostitution in social movements as well as its stark exclusion from them, I cannot help but wonder about the compelling opportunity for linkage, about the aspects of radical social justice movements that parallel the prostitution rights movement, that of visibility, autonomy and equanimity from the ground up. I think of the burden of responsibility experienced by any group of people who have been historically denied voice, visibility and agency. I think about the cost of our complicity when we accept targeted violence done to others. And I think of our collective accountability to bridge these conversations and find a basis for community and healing.

I hear the concerns of communities of color, that liberation will not come from assimilating to empty western notions of empowerment, that lack of resources is a form of oppression and trauma, and that for some, the subversion of capitalism is a long and complex road. I sincerely hear this, because having worked in a scary, underground and illicit industry, I have these concerns too. But I also believe that it is these communities, our communities, who will most readily understand and be willing to fight against the stigma experienced by women who trade sex for money, who have been made vulnerable through invisibility. These are the communities who understand with their own bodies what it means to have tangible barriers created by society because of the color of their skin, the proficiency of their language and the way they are perceived. A deep analyses of prostitution as an economic phenomenon with complex cultural layers, along with struggles within the sex trade, are necessary to the fight against the violence of colonialism, patriarchy and white supremacy. Prostitution overlaps with every aspect of society. Women and men who move in and out

of the sex trade are part of our economy, our schools, our health care system, our legal system, tourism, recreation, alternative modalities for mental health and emotional support, in addition to being part of our communities. It is essential for the liberation of all of us that we begin to understand this.