

Is Sex Work? Re-assessing Feminist Debates About Sex, Work, and Money

Gerald Hunt et Line Chamberland

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REVIEW ESSAYS / NOTES CRITIQUES

Is Sex Work? Re-assessing Feminist Debates About Sex, Work, and Money

Gerald Hunt and Line Chamberland

Michel Dorais, *Rent Boys: The World of Male Sex Workers* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press 2005)

Viviane Namaste, *C'était du spectacle! L'histoire des artistes transsexuelles à Montréal, 1955-1985* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press 2005)

Chris Bruckert, *Taking it Off, Putting it On: Women in the Strip Trade* (Toronto: Women's Press 2002)

SEX WORK IS USED as an umbrella term to encompass a variety of acts involving a commercial transaction for a sexual activity, such as stripping, escorting, erotic massage, telephone or internet sex, and prostitution. Sex worker is used as a less offensive, non-discriminating alternative to terms such as whore or slut. The term sex work is also used as a political statement, one that helps to legitimize and rationalize the sex industry, and help empower a pro-sex, sex workers' social movement. Sex workers represent a continuum: at one end are children or adults who are forced into sexual acts against their will, with little opportunity of escape; at the other end, are adult sex workers who voluntarily and willingly select sex work as their principal occupation.

Over the past few years there have been significant shifts in the philosophical, social, political, and legal contexts surrounding sex work in Canada and elsewhere.

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One visible marker was the awarding of best song to the pimp-sympathetic “It’s Hard Out Here for a Pimp” at the 2006 Academy Awards. On a more serious level, in the past year, there have been three major international conferences about sex work (Montreal in May 2005; Brussels in October 2005; New York in March 2006) and a fourth scheduled to be held in Las Vegas in July 2006. Some of the most dramatic shifts have been in the legal framework in which sex work takes place: Germany, New Zealand, the Netherlands, and Switzerland, amongst others, have recently amended their legal codes to at least partially decriminalize sex work (in 2003, for example, New Zealand decriminalized adult prostitution and brothels). Canada has not amended its legal position on sex work but in 2004 created a Parliamentary Subcommittee to review solicitation laws. Organized labour has also been undergoing a rethink. In November 2005, the Canadian Labour Congress released a discussion paper on the sex trade, following in the footsteps of the October 2004 release of a background paper on sex work by the Canadian Union of Public Employees. Brothel workers in the Netherlands unionized in 2001, and a group of sex workers in San Francisco formed a union in 1997. In 2002, the International Union of Sex Workers formally aligned with the trade union, GMB, in London, England. In Canada, the Service Employees International Union has identified sex workers as a group warranting a certification drive. Yet another signal has been the growth and strengthening of sex work advocacy, education, and research groups, such as SWE@&R in Vancouver, STELLA in Montreal, and MAGGIES in Toronto. All of these developments speak to the idea that sex work is increasingly being reconfigured as legitimate work, and sex workers as legitimate workers, albeit with unique features, problems, and dilemmas.

Not surprisingly, given these developments, there has been a flurry of publications dealing with the sex trade. In this essay, we consider three recent publications that deal with sex workers in Canada. The first offers a look at the world of male sex workers based in Quebec, the second considers the history of transsexual artists in Montreal in the mid-1950s through the mid-1980s, and the third examines female strippers based in Ontario. After reviewing each book individually, we undertake to assess the potential of the three books to enhance our knowledge about sex work and sex workers.

Rent Boys

Rent Boys: The World of Male Sex Workers is Michel Dorais’s latest book dealing with male sexuality. *Rent Boys* follows on *Dead Boys Can’t Dance: Sexual Orientation, Masculinity, and Suicide* in which Dorais highlighted the link between anti-homosexual prejudice and suicide in males who are, or are perceived to be, gay, and *Don’t Tell: The Sexual Abuse of Boys* where he examined the impact on the emotional and sexual life of the nearly one in six males who have been the victims of sexual abuse during childhood or adolescence. As a result, Dorais, a professor of

social work at Université Laval, has carved out a specialty niche that deals with the intersections of sexuality, masculinity, marginalization, and prejudice in Canada.

Rent Boys is only a hundred pages and can be easily read in one sitting. The book is based on semi-structured interviews with 40 young male street hustlers, strippers, and escorts, based in Quebec City and Montreal. It deals with a topic that most people know very little about — men who sell sex — and it is easy to read, interesting, and engaging, in spite of some irritations about its scholarly merits (more on this later). The focus of the book is the personal and familial background of male sex workers, their modes of entry and operation within sex work, as well as their perceptions of themselves, their trade, and their clients. The study focused on the three most common types of sex work: street hustling, stripping in specialized bars, and escorting. Street hustlers were the most numerous, followed by strippers and then escorts. Almost half of the men identified as homosexual, and the others as either heterosexual or bisexual. Their clientele was almost exclusively male. Most of the respondents had been sexually precocious. While not trying to explain their entry into prostitution as the result of psychological factors, Dorais reports the problems which confronted many of these men at an early age. A majority experienced physical or sexual abuse prior to their entry into sex work, a far larger proportion than in the male population as a whole. Many had serious relational problems with their parents or foster parents and had their first contact with prostitution after running away from home. Many had come from a poor economic background and only six had made it to post-secondary institutions.

The third chapter contains two parts: a brief and somewhat superficial history of male prostitution from Antiquity to modern times, and a presentation of the social organization of sex work. The conclusion of the historical part is quite simple and presented within an essentialist framework: the universality of the existence of male prostitution. In all times, men (and sometimes women) who had money and power were able to convince young men to satisfy their sexual desires. The second part of the chapter introduces us to the four categories of actors who constitute the social world of prostitution: sex workers, clients, sex entrepreneurs, and moral entrepreneurs. Clients are diverse in age, appearance, and sexual tastes. The clientele include married or recently divorced men who, in the anonymous context of paid sexual services, can explore/satisfy their homosexual desire without questioning their sexual identity (or self-definition). The sex entrepreneurs group include all those who make a profit out of the sex-work business: drug dealers, escort agencies, and bar- and strip-club owners. Although pimps or gangs do not appear to be predominant in male sex work, Dorais argues that this economic world is largely under the influence of organized crime. Finally, the moral entrepreneurs — a concept borrowed from Becker in its interactionist analysis of deviancy — are the fourth component of this world. It is loosely described as including legislators, judges, and police forces as well as the opinion leaders who create or enforce the moral norms in society. Its main impact is the need to keep sex-work activities discreet in order to

avoid repression or too much public attention. Dorais concludes quite rightly that “sex work takes place within a network of competing interests, tensions, and opposition” between these four groups. (24)

The next three chapters are the most engaging. In the fourth chapter, Dorais describes the working conditions of the three groups of respondents. Sex work is a learned profession and the apprenticeship involves more experienced individuals (family, peers, and clients). There is a hierarchy among the forms of sex work: street hustling is considered the lowest because it pays least and is the most dangerous. Working conditions are difficult and prices fluctuate. While club-strippers must learn to observe potential clients and to entice them, they have more control over many aspects of the work, such as the selection of clients and the sexual acts they will perform. It is made safer by the fact that there are others around. Those who work as escorts get the highest status. They offer a variety of sexual services and sell them at high prices. Most escorts, unlike the others, perceive their activities as a “job.” There is some mobility between the three forms of sex workers, but over the longer term descendant mobility is inevitable since youth and beauty, the key ingredients for success, are ephemeral traits. The interpretative framework used in this chapter is very helpful in assessing prostitution as a trade or a job, across various categories of male sex workers.

In the fifth chapter, Dorais draws distinctions between four life styles or life patterns among these men, using the following criteria: feelings and impressions, images of self and clients, and mode of entry into the profession. (36) The Outcasts are the most numerous (22/40), living in extreme poverty, barely managing to survive day-to-day, often trapped in the vicious circle of hard drug habituation and prostitution. This group make an early entry into sex work (half of them before 16 years of age) and this entry is frequently a sequel to a painful childhood. (37) Stable friendships and love relationships are rare among this group. The three other groups are equally represented (6/40 each). Part-timers work sporadically in order to get money. They tended to enter sex work at a later age and consider it as a temporary means of facing economic problems. Most work as strippers or escorts. Many are married and have children, and do not reveal their commercial sexual activities to their family. The Insiders are the ones who were “born” into the world of prostitution, introduced to it by family members (i.e., a mother working as a prostitute) or friends. Precocious, they consider sex work as a temporary way of earning a living. They know the risks but consider themselves well fitted for this profession; some of them have made the progression from the street to stripping or escorting. They often have stable relationships. Finally, there is the Liberationist group who view sex work as a “way of living out fantasies, exploring new experiences and partners, and profiting from these discoveries.” (41) This group share more positive characteristics in terms of family experiences and education, and tend to have a more positive outlook on their activities and clients. For this group, sex work can be not only a source of money but a gratifying job. In the sixth chapter, each of these life patterns

is illustrated by a testimony, providing one of the most engaging chapters in the book.

In the seventh chapter, Dorais compares more systematically the different viewpoints among the interviewees in order to outline the contrasts and resemblances. To schematize his findings, he constructs three figures, each one comprising two axes representing factors which differentiate the respondents. The first figure refers to their professional identity and their perception of their professional choice. Liberationists have the most positive perception of their trade — a chosen and gratifying occupation, while the Outcasts feel they are trapped into prostitution because of their drug habits. Perceptions of work and clients can also be analysed in terms of a double opposition: while both Part-timers and Liberationists seem able to keep control of their working conditions — a capacity that is lacking among Outcasts and Insiders — they differ from each other in their perception of the clientele. Finally, the Outcasts have the weakest level of self-esteem, feeling like the “garbage can” of society, while the Liberationists have the highest. The Insiders and the Liberationists have a stronger sense of comfort and security in this social world than the Outcasts — whose life is constantly at risk — and the Part-timers who do not always understand or identify with the codes of the gay world. Dorais concludes this section by affirming that these perceptions of sex workers vary according to the power relation between sex workers and clients.

In Chapter 8, Dorais discusses the health risks of the sex trade. He rightly criticizes the rationalist approach which is predominant in public health discourse, where risk-taking is analysed as a lack of information, of skills to negotiate, etc. In fact, Dorais observed that sex workers are well informed about the risks. He argues that we must analyse the behaviour more globally as strategic choices which tend to maximize the gratifications (sex, money, affection, and drugs) and minimize the hazards. He then goes on to analyse how each group perceives and reacts to the hazards of the trade. Dorais utilizes Mendès-Leite’s concept of imaginary protection which means “to reinterpret and adapt the social rules of prevention to the circumstances” (74) in order to minimize the perceived risk. A good example is to judge a client by his appearance, or to get a sense of security with a regular client, or one with whom there is some intimacy or mutual desire. Overall, this chapter is very interesting. It compares the four groups while taking into account their general feelings about themselves and their job, and it includes many quotations from the interviewees.

The ninth chapter proposes some basic principles for helping these sex workers. Dorais argues that sex workers should get the same rights and responsibilities as everybody else. Many do not trust professionals (police, social workers, health services), and do not get the same level of services. Recent experiences with street workers and nurses, though, have been relatively positive. Considering all their negative life experiences (with family, clients, etc.), trust is something that has to be built. Dorais identifies their needs (housing, small-scale personal health services,

respectful treatment in the detoxification centres, adapted employment counselors, and programs) and concludes that they are not different from those of young adults in general. In an afterword, Dorais takes a position in favour of decriminalizing prostitution in order to give more help and support to sex workers.

Overall, this is a worthwhile and useful little book, but it does err on the side of oversimplification. Dorais's series of ideal types in the classical Weberian sense, and comparisons among the categories of the created typology (resemblances and differences), seem almost too neatly categorized to be true. He does acknowledge that there are exceptions, that the categories are not absolutely exclusive (one person can go from one to the other, or be in-between), but on the whole he constructs a smooth, almost too coherent representation of the phenomena he is studying. Dorais tends to avoid what has been previously published about the same subject, or gives it short shrift, tends to simplify theoretical issues, and is inclined to sidestep or avoid important debates about sex work. It would, for example, have been very interesting if he had engaged with feminist debates regarding female sex work (such as the argument that all sex work exploits and objectifies women — no exceptions), if only to see how these ideas fare when the sex worker is male.

C'était du spectacle!

During its heyday from the 1920s to mid-1950s, Montreal's famed Red Light district was known across North America as the place to go for a "dirty little weekend." There were bars, clubs, bordellos, gambling clubs, and during prohibition it was a magnet for drinkers since Quebec was the main place in North America where it was legal to produce and sell alcohol. By the end of the 1960s, police surveillance and moral campaigns (especially around Expo 67), had tamed the area sufficiently that it had lost much of its reputation and many of its underworld charms. One of the many appeals of the area was its cabaret culture, largely made up of transsexual and transvestite artists. Viviane Namaste's book, *C'était du spectacle!*, brings some of the excitement of this period back to life through her recounting of the history of transsexual artists in Montreal during the 1955-1985 years.

Namaste's book is based on archival research and interviews with fourteen male-to-female transsexual dancers, singers, magicians, and strippers who helped to create the "spectacle" of Montreal's alternative cabaret scene. The book provides an engaging portrait of the way these people lived, worked, and played. Among other things, it provides a window onto the experience of the first generation of men who underwent sex reassignment surgery, the working conditions of the cabarets where they were employed, the role of organized crime in this subculture, the pattern of police abuse, the regulation of sex, and the uneven access to health care. Namaste gives priority to her informants' testimonies because she wanted to retrace their daily lives, problems, fun parts, challenges, and "victories" as reported by the transsexuals themselves. Her archival sources include the "popular and yellow" press that covered the nightlife in Montreal at the time, and judicial archives that

help her trace the way municipal and provincial laws were applied. The archival research serves mainly to complete and support information from the interviews.

Namaste highlights the fact that transsexuals found each other in the world of cabarets (mainly the nightclubs located in the Red Light district). In this world, they could work as artists or as prostitutes or both, and could earn a living (sometimes a good one) while living as women and validating their sexual identity (as women). Namaste is not the first one to write about nightlife in Montreal in the 1950s-1970s, but her approach is original in that she looks at it from a unique and important perspective: transsexuals as workers, and cabarets as a work environment.

The book is organized into five chapters. The first describes the participation of transvestites and transsexuals in the shows and revues presented in the cabarets. During the period 1940-1950 transvestites tended to work alone, performing in numbers that were part of a variety show. In the 1960s, they were able to work together in “revues,” shows that included only or mostly transvestites. Some of these shows proved to be very popular in the 1960s, so popular that they contributed to the ongoing success of some cabarets at a time when nightclubs were declining for various reasons, but in particular because of competition from television. Transvestites were not only able to bring in a heterosexual public, but also between the shows they worked as “entraîneuses” who helped entice clients to consume “diluted” drinks. As a result, they contributed to the profitability of the cabarets, in exchange for which they had a job, recognition (in some cases “stardom”), a measure of protection in a criminalized and violent environment, and an opportunity to socialize with peers. By the end of the 1960s, these performers had made the transition to topless (once it became possible to get breast implants), and gradually to full nudity. Most clients were unaware that they were genetically male.

Sex work was the only other possibility to make a living, and many of Namaste’s respondents did sex work full-time or as a second source of income (the first coming from their job as dancer or singer). As a result, the second chapter explores sex work in Montreal at this time (referring to her interviewees for material on transsexuals but also to Lacasse, Limoges, and others, who have written about female prostitution). Namaste concludes the chapter by saying prostitution was a well-paying and valorizing job for many of the interviewees. Some of the transsexuals used the money to pay for sex-change operations. Over the period she studied, Namaste found that the sites and forms of prostitution changed in response to the decline of cabarets, increased police repression (especially under Mayor Jean Drapeau), new regulations, and the rise of escort agencies and massage parlours.

The third chapter is about the health of transsexuals. With some well-known figures like Christine Jorgensen and the French Coccinelle, the media helped to popularize the idea of sex change, to make it a concrete possibility. This chapter covers in depth the obstacles that confronted transsexuals who wanted to change their sex: getting information about the procedure, getting access to hormone therapy, having to go to another city for surgery, finding post-operation follow-up, deal-

ing with discriminatory attitudes from the surgeons, and facing the risks related to silicone injection. Paradoxically, there were some advantages. Sex-change surgery was new, and though transsexual identity was not recognized by the health system, most medical acts were paid once a cooperative surgeon was found.

Chapter 4 is about the web of Canadian and Quebec laws that constrained transgendered living. For example, until the end of the 1960s, it was forbidden for a man to be on the street dressed as a woman. So transvestites had to change clothes before and after the shows, or they had to be able to pass successfully as women. Namaste collected documents attesting to the severity of the judicial system towards transvestites and transsexuals, and the strict surveillance over those who did sex work. Strictly speaking, the Criminal Code aimed at women prostitutes, so transvestites and transsexuals (those who hadn't changed sex) were in a grey area. They could not be arrested as women or prosecuted as women. But in practice, police harassed them and arrested them for disturbing the peace. Namaste concludes that transvestites and transsexuals were among the sex workers who were most watched over and who most frequently experienced what she terms "sustained harassment."

The last chapter is about the treatment of transvestites and transsexuals when they were arrested. Namaste documents cases of harassment, abuse of police power, threat and intimidation, physical abuse, and sexual abuse. The police often associated transsexuals with robbery, and, in fact, some transsexuals did admit to robbing clients' wallets to make money. Even when transsexuals were able to obtain "regular" jobs, the police would often expose them to their employers and they were immediately fired.

These five chapters are followed by four appendices that provide comment on methodological issues, a list of articles from the popular press of the time, a list of performances, and a list of the cabarets where transvestites and transsexuals performed. These appendices do not add much to the book's content, but will be very useful to subsequent researchers. Overall, the book is well written and easy to read, although it will have a somewhat limited audience since it is available only in French. The book has a number of excellent illustrations (mainly of performances and announcements, along with photos of performers) that help to bring the period to life. It offers an engaging portrait of transsexuality based on the lived experience of fourteen people during a formative period in Montreal's alternative entertainment industry. There is respect for the interviewees, and a real desire to listen to what they have to say and to be influenced by it. For example, many interviewees said that it was a fun period, despite the harshness, and Namaste acknowledges this reality without any overlay of critical comment. As we sometimes find with other marginalized and stigmatized groups, the insider experience can feel special and affirming.

Namaste's main contribution is to analyse "le spectacle" as part identity construction and part job. For these people it represented a source of money, an occupa-

tion, a work environment, and a possibility to live as a woman (to learn how to act like a woman, to get money for a sex change, to validate a new identity, etc.). The focus is on the link between the job (as artist, as sex worker) and the building of an identity as a transsexual. The job and a personal transformation went hand in hand. The job experience helped these men to learn how to act like women because they had to “pass” in order to succeed as performers or sex workers. In other words, it was part of the training toward becoming a woman. They were men working as women and their new identity as transsexuals is linked with their job experience. That is a key in Namaste’s book: as artist or sex worker (and many interviewees did both), the job was also an apprenticeship for and validation of a new sexual identity as a woman.

Taking it Off, Putting it On

Strip clubs are a ubiquitous feature of many Canadian cities and towns. In some settings, stripper bars are hidden along a dark road on the outskirts of town; in other locales, such as Yonge Street in Toronto, such clubs boldly proclaim their legitimacy in bright neon lights shaped to look like a nude female body. What goes on in these strip clubs? What are they like for the people who work there? Are these venues devoted entirely to the exploitation of women, settings for dirty old men to drink and salivate? Or do these clubs have a more complex cultural-political-social story to tell? In *Taking it Off, Putting it On*, Chris Bruckert tackles these sorts of questions, by taking the reader inside strip clubs through the eyes of the strippers who work in them.

Bruckert has been thinking and writing about the strip trade for a long time. She herself was a stripper before completing her PhD at Carleton University in 2000 (“Stigmatized Labour: An Ethnographic Study of Strip Clubs in the 1990s”). She now teaches in the Department of Criminology at the University of Ottawa. *Taking it Off, Putting it On* is an extension and expansion of her previous experience and research. Bruckert says she wrote *Taking it Off, Putting it On* in order to give strippers a voice. She claims that the stereotype of strippers as drug-addicted prostitutes is erroneous and needed to be put to rest. Overall, she finds the work of stripping to be analogous to a job in a service industry, albeit with unique aspects and problems.

Taking it Off, Putting it On is a relatively short book, running at 160 pages before notes and bibliographic information. It is divided into eight chapters, each looking at different aspects of the strip trade. In the introduction, Bruckert charts her own preferences as a researcher. She rejects what she calls the “usual feminist analysis of strippers,” taking inspiration for her research from the work of Dorothy Smith. Bruckert argues for a “critical social-scientific perspective,” one which makes the voice of marginal women audible. Bruckert indicates that the main goal of her project was to understand the lives of her subjects from their own perspective. (2) To do this she used a variety of research strategies. In addition to using her

own experience as a stripper, she became a participant-observer-employee in a bar for twelve months in a strip club located in a mid-sized southern Ontario city. She also conducted detailed interviews in the 1997-1998 period with fifteen female strippers, aged 21 to 46, all working in Ontario.

Bruckert begins the second chapter with the assertion that the exotic-entertainment industry does not fit easily into existing labour theory. (19) Even though the strip industry is part of the market economy, it is stigmatized work, burdened with moral disapproval, and lacking in legitimization. From this starting point she launches into a discussion about working-class women generally, and concludes that stripping fits the criteria for a working-class occupation: it may not be a nice job, but neither are many of the other choices facing working-class women. She suggests it has an advantage of offering more flexibility and in some cases better money than many working-class jobs. In the last paragraph, however, she pulls back from this economic determinist analysis, leaving the reader with the impression that she is ambivalent about her position.

Bruckert's ethnographic style shines throughout the third chapter. In this chapter she takes the reader inside a strip club, introducing him/her to the club's overall environment and the various actors, on and off stage. She suggests strip clubs have morphed over time into quite homogeneous and predictable models, so much so that she calls them "McStrips." First there is an entryway with coat check and someone to take money if there is a cover charge, then a bar, pool tables, a stage, sometimes a kitchen, and inevitably pornographic videos. At the far back or perhaps upstairs may be "champagne rooms" where customers can have a private dance. These private venues may or may not afford sexual encounters. A strip club is a male space with few frills and limited conversation. No females are in the audience per se, but strippers are expected to wander around when not performing on the stage. Some clubs hire strippers at a per-hour rate, but most require them to act as freelancers, requiring them to pay the club fees in order to access customers. Besides the dancers and managers/owners, there are bartenders, servers (usually female), bouncers, and disc jockeys. And last but certainly not least are the clients. Bruckert categorizes clients into three types: the boys, the regulars, and the loners. The boys collect in groups, talking, joking, playing pool, horsing around, with occasional glances at the stage. This group rarely pays for private dances (the stripper's best opportunity for high income), and as a result they are tolerated but not popular. Regulars drop by the bar often and tend to form social relationships with the dancers and other staff, but they rarely contribute to the dancer's income. In contrast, the loners often pay for extras and are the main source of income for the dancers, but tend to be pitied or despised.

Next Bruckert covers the regulations that club owners and strippers must understand and negotiate as part of their work world. She cites a complex web of laws at the municipal, provincial, and federal levels that may or may not be enforced. Equally important is the role played by community agitators, the media, and the po-

lice. Since most dancers are required to operate as freelancers, management is able to operate outside of employment standards laws in terms of benefits and protections, and can set the rules governing the work environment. As punishment they impose fines, or refuse to let the stripper “freelance” in the club. At the same time, management is dependent on the stripper to generate clients and income from the bar, creating a delicate juggling of control mechanisms on both sides.

In Chapter 5, Bruckert returns to the actual work of the stripper, which she characterizes as performance. Sustaining the illusion of sex and sexiness is not easy and, in fact, she argues, is hard work. The stripper must not only perform on stage, but she must walk around encouraging customers to drink, and, with any luck, seduce them into purchasing a private show. Many customers want someone to talk to, so she must also be a skilled communicator and is often put in the role of counsellor. Some strippers deal with the performance aspect of their work by imagining they are doing the laundry or the dishes. (72) On the down side, this chapter repeats some of the points made earlier, and needed a more assertive edit.

In Chapter 6, Bruckert asserts that nude entertainers epitomize the objectification of women, since the owners, managers, and clients are male, and the dancer is female, symbolically disempowered through her nakedness. (122) But, in fact, she views the relationship as much more complex. In this chapter she discusses the collective and individual strategies strippers use to exercise power, contest authority, and resist. She argues that the construction of strip work as “freelancing” acts against unionization, but strippers do use collective action to improve their conditions. One example is the pressure exerted on other strippers who hustle more aggressively than the group norm. Another example is the way strippers can collectively boycott new managerial rules. Nevertheless, she finds that individual forms of resistance such as refusing to maintain a continuous presence “on the floor” are more common. (104) Dancers also resist by creating “hidden transcripts” in which customers are cast as infants, or of questionable intelligence, or as simply desperate.

Strippers are labeled as deviant by the state, general public, many customers, and management. In Chapter 7, Bruckert highlights the ways strippers negotiate and manage this stigma. One of the main ways is to play a psychological game that inverts or projects the stigma onto customers (once again, the hidden transcript idea). Another is to maintain strict boundaries between work and other aspects of their lives by keeping the stigmatized portion hidden from friends, relatives, and even spouses.

In the final chapter, Bruckert argues that over the past few decades strip clubs have changed from being part of the entertainment industry to being part of the service industry. This change has meant that strippers act as free agents, paying club owners to access the work site. It has forced strippers into more intimate contact with clients in the provision of personalized, fee-for-service private dances and other services, whereas before they functioned primarily as performers on a stage.

Overall, this book is interesting and informative, and is strengthened by incorporating and combining different analytical perspectives. Bruckert combines interactionist ideas (subjective) with more traditional analyses of labour and resistance. She provides an overlay to these analytical strengths with a coherent discussion of the social, economic, and structural contexts in which the strip trade takes place. Even though this represents one of the book's strengths, and will enhance its appeal to the academic market, it sometimes made the prose ponderous. It was hard not to wish at times that she would back off the analysis and let the women speak. A short, personal profile of her subjects would have been a welcome and useful addition to the book.

Bruckert's book is actually about "skin work" not sex work. She hints at times that some of these women engage in a broader range of activities than stripping (blow jobs and penetration), either in-house or off-site, but this is not her main concern. As a result, we get few insights into the ways these women manage direct sexual activities and encounters.

Is Sex Work?

Collectively, these books offer a unique window on a little understood and under-researched population. We learn about men who have sex with other men for money, women who strip down in a bar for men, and transsexuals who commandeered cabarets as venues to express their true feelings and identities. All of the books are strengthened by an approach that draws directly from the experience of the subjects. Namaste's book is the most successful of the three since she was able to identify her informants by name, provide photographs, and trace their individual histories, passions, and careers. The other two books were constrained by the need for anonymity, but through interview clips we do get a sense of the people behind the quotations.

There is ongoing controversy about the legitimacy of sex as work, and these books offer insights that help move the debate forward. At one spectrum of the debate, all sex work is denounced as illegitimate, serving only to exploit, subordinate, and perpetuate violence against women (male sex workers are almost never considered). At the other end of the debate, sex work is equated to a job like any other job. What these books help us appreciate is that neither end of the debate adequately reflects the lives, experience, and motivations of sex workers. On the one hand, sex work is highly stigmatized and subject to moral and legal regulation, so it is not ordinary work. It is different from selling real estate, and it would be hard to imagine anyone wanting to set up a college program to train sex workers. On the other hand, it is work that some people voluntarily choose, and benefit from as much or more than other work in the service sector. These workers do not want sympathy, moral disapproval, or condemnation. These books help us to understand that sex workers are on a continuum. For some, such as the hustlers in *Rent Boys*, it is not a voluntary choice; it is very destructive, and the personal costs are high. For others, sex work

represents a path to economic independence, one that can be manoeuvred without significant psychological damage (some of the strippers and the escorts in *Rent Boys*). For others, such as the transvestites in Montreal, being part of the strip and sex trade provided the opportunity to make money, live as women, and find personal validation. The key lesson we can draw from these books is that sex work must be assessed on the basis of such factors as working conditions, worker attributes, power relations, and the “costs” of employment before we should draw conclusions about its value or status as work.

Still, it is much easier to assimilate sex work into a kind of work when we are dealing with stripping, lap dancing, web-cam performances, and dirty phone calls, than when we are talking about direct sexual services such as penetration. It is more difficult because it is not only a matter of learning how to do the job (dance and flirt in a certain way, deal with clients, keep accounts), but the body itself is being appropriated (the Marxist distinction between the exploitation of the workforce and the appropriation of the whole body). It is in this realm of analysis that all of the books fail to perform. These books do not explore this dichotomy (sexy work versus sex work) sufficiently, nor do they adequately explore the difference that gender might make. Is it different if a male is being penetrated? Bruckert goes the furthest, noting that strippers like to distinguish themselves from prostitutes, but she does not mine this idea deeply enough. Namaste also highlights the ways the transsexuals in her study created a line between performance on the stage and in the bedroom, but she does not linger sufficiently over what this means analytically. Dorais also notes that some of his subjects, especially the strippers, prefer to entice customers up to but not including direct sexual activity, but he fails to subject this observation to analysis.

Sex work is a commercial activity: the worker gets access to money and the client gets access to the worker’s personal capital. As a result, the sex worker is “selling” a variety of potentially desirable attributes such as body type, body size, age, gender, skin colour, breast size, communication skills, etc. It is odd then that none of these books sufficiently explores the role played by race, ethnicity, and other factors in determining commercial value in what is in fact a complex financial transaction. Do racism and other forms of discrimination operate the same in this work environment?

One only needs to look at a Calvin Klein underwear advertisement to observe that the world is more and more sexualized: in these ads, youthful-looking men and women wear genital-hugging briefs clearly outlining what is under the thin layer of cotton. What was considered soft pornography yesteryear is now on giant billboards along major highways. With the increased sexualization of everyday life, what is the future of sex work? How will technology further influence access to sexual activities? Will the demand for sex workers increase as sex work becomes less stigmatized, or will this change extinguish some of its appeal? What will be the impact of the aging baby boom phenomenon on the demand for commercial sex?

While none of these books attempts to predict the future of sex work, they challenge us to think about it, and open the door to more nuanced research.

All of the books are written within the context of either Ontario or Quebec. Although we might reasonably generalize from the experiences of these workers to the rest of Canada, and perhaps to most other “westernized” settings, it would be wrong to see these conclusions and insights as valid in many other parts of the world. In far too many settings, commercial sex remains inextricably linked to human rights crimes such as child abuse, forced migration, slavery, confinement, torture, and violence.

Sex for money has always been a fact of life. These books help us to appreciate and better understand the supply side of the sex work economic equation. All of the books frame sex work as more and more like other service-sector labour, and they challenge us to make sense of this development. These books also remind us that there is great diversity in sex work in terms of location, working conditions, type of work, type of worker, and power relationships, and that one analytical lens or pre-supposition is too limiting. For some workers, pride is a driving force, and they see themselves as part of a pro-sex, sex workers’ movement. For others, it is a temporary route out of poverty. For yet others, sex work operates in conjunction with a decline into drugs and decay. Sex work may be work by many measures we might use, but, given the range of activities it involves, distinctions do need to be made about its boundaries. Sex work is more and more a diversified phenomenon. One size of analysis does not fit all situations.