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## **Female Subversion through Sex Work: Transgressive Discourses**

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**Abstract** The main objective of this article is to provide a multi-faceted and spatially-sensitive reflection on sex work. Taking as a point of departure subversive feminist politics on the one hand and the much contingent notion of citizenship on the other, I intend to present various forms of prostitution as potentially positive and empowering modes of sexual and emotional auto-creation. Informed by the leading research of the subject, as well as inspired and educated by Australia-based Dr Elizabeth Smith from La Trobe University in Melbourne, who had researched and presented female sex workers as self-caring and subversive subjects who make own choices and derive satisfaction from their occupation, I wish to seek academic justice for all those women (and men or trans people, for that matter) in the sex industry who feel stigmatized by political pressure and ultra-feminist circles across Europe. Translating Dr Smith's significant research into European (and Polish) social realities would be a valuable contribution to the local discussions on gender and sexuality, and axes they intersect with. More importantly, however, a framework of a conceptual interdisciplinary approach needs to be adopted—one in which a specific queer form of lesbian feminist reflection is combined with human geography, both of which have much to offer to various strands of sociological theory and practice. Therefore, as a queer lesbian scholar based in Poland, I would like to diverge a bit from my usual topic in order to pay an academic and activist tribute to the much neglected strand of sociology of sex work. However, my multi-faceted and interdisciplinary academic activity allows me to combine the matter in question with the field of lesbian studies. Both a female sex worker and a lesbian have been culturally positioned through the lens of what so-called femininity is, without a possibility to establish control over their own subjectivities. Hence, on the one hand the article is going to be an academic re-interpretation of sex work as such, but on the other, methodological possibilities of acknowledging and researching lesbian sex workers will be additionally considered with special attention to feminist epistemologies and praxis. While a sensitivity to a given locality is of utmost importance when dealing with gender and sexuality issues, I would like to suggest a somewhat overall approach to investigating both female empowerment through sex work and lesbian studies inclusive of sex workers. Importantly, the more common understandings of the sex industry need to be de-constructed in order for a diversity of transgressive discourses to emerge.

**Keywords** sex work, human geography, feminist epistemologies, citizenship, lesbian studies

**Marta Olasik**—I am a last-year PhD candidate in the Institute of Applied Social Sciences at the University of Warsaw. My area of expertise is lesbian studies, but spans across various perspectives and disciplines, including sociology of sexuality, queer studies, feminist perspectives, geographies of sexualities, or post-structuralism. My background is queer perspective and so my efforts concentrate on reconciling the queer with the lesbian; I see queer as a tool, through which the lesbian can be recovered and appreciated properly. This entails the cultural concept of femininity to be de-constructed. My PhD dissertation is therefore a pioneering interdisciplinary conceptualization of lesbian (non)identities and self-identifications, and aims at introducing a proper and separate lesbian-studies discourse in the Polish academia on the one hand, and increasing lesbian

social visibility on the other. I have been especially happy to have participated in numerous international conferences, and privileged to have been working with Prof. Kath Browne from the Maynooth University in Dublin. Also, I am honored to have been invited to run a seminar for post-docs and senior academics in the International Gender Studies Centre at the University of Oxford. My general objective is to promote an intertextual attitude, where the lesbian is an open field of possibilities for emotional and sexual auto-creation. Importantly, human geography is becoming increasingly significant in my re-investigations of the discourses on gender and sexuality, as well as I am promoting interdisciplinarity as an actual methodological path.

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## Queer Introduction

This article is hopefully going to be a thought-provoking analysis, whose ultimate objective is to draw attention to—and promote—a particular approach to sex work and sex work research. It adds to the so far limited body of explorations regarding “the different ways that women in sex work experience sexual pleasure” (Smith 2017: 360). Promoting this ‘subjective sexual pleasure’ paradigm, I will draw from—and build on—the work of a number of scholars, whose collaborative effort in de-pathologizing sex workers and the sex industry has been considerable; they will be mentioned accordingly. Although the article is going to be a conceptual work that spans across disciplines, I will be referring to empirical research done or mentioned by other authors. Though this itself is not a preferred way of getting involved in social sciences, my interdisciplinary background

has a particular method of analyzing and re-organizing knowledge, and as such proves useful. This is especially significant when working with a subject area, whose stigma-profiled character, image or properties have prevailed over decades through the reiteration of the standard anthropological dynamics that led to establishing the descriptive—and thus ‘expert’—authority of the researcher. This, in turn, seems to have overshadowed the academic potential of what I call moments of intervention—much needed ones when dealing with gender and sexualities in contemporary societies. I believe one way of tackling this problem is through re-using and adjusting language in a way that addresses the stigma production and accommodates various needs of the stigmatized. From this viewpoint, an academic enterprise becomes part of the much controversial engaged theory, whose objectives are inextricably linked with emancipation processes of various

kinds. Personally, I choose to carry out this task through my own re-interpretation of queer studies. Because this is the perspective I assume in the background, it is significant to clarify what exactly is to be expected. Namely, I believe that queer is quite an underestimated area of possibilities, and that this underestimation seems to come from a misunderstanding. Most sources and scholars speak of queer in terms of 'queer theory', but this is, I daresay, incorrect. While there should be no actual and solid definition of what queer is, it is easier to engage in a debate about what queer is not. Along these lines, I am able to point out that 'queer' and 'theory' are, in fact, contradictory terms. In the sociological (and humanistic, for that matter) thought, 'theory' is supposed to be something universal, grand, unifying, general<sup>1</sup>. This usually comes down to "generalizations about, and classifications of, the social world," where "the scope of generalization varies from theorizing about a particular range of phenomena to more abstract and general theories about society and history as a whole" (Marshall 1996: 532). None of this is even close to satisfactory in the case of gender and sexuality studies, where the world must be seen from the perspective of everyday experience of various oppressed minorities, whose social world is usually excluded from the bigger picture. Theory, then, is everything that queer cannot be. Thus, it seems fair to admit that queer was conceived of as a *perspective* and a strategy, with 'perspective' understood as a "[s]ubjective evaluation of relative

<sup>1</sup> Although contemporary course books give options as to the interpretation of what a theory or social theory could mean, as well as it must be said that the sociological theory seems to have become more flexible since around the 1960s, this standard understanding is the most prevailing one and still seems to be the default application.

significance" and "[t]he ability to perceive things in their actual interrelations or comparative importance"<sup>2</sup>. Perceiving queer in these terms translates into a grassroots way of communicating one's positionality and subjectivity through a subversive experience and processes of self-identification. It is in this respect that the title of the article should be understood—female subversion is when the alternative voices of the subjects are allowed for and heard rather than being created externally. I will cite Elizabeth Smith, who is a fine example of how female subversion can be re-created through the researcher's approach on the one hand, and the subjects' transgressive experience on the other. Taking all this into account, there cannot be a universal (or unifying) queer. Though queer first emerged in the context of sexuality<sup>3</sup>, it does tend to engage intersectionally nowadays. However, while this is surprising, not many analyses employ queer to the research of sex work and sex workers. Also worth noting is the fact that an increased attention to language and linguistic tools is a significant part of working with queer. This results from the awareness of language as a representation of the patriarchal culture we live in, and manifests in the provocative and subversive

<sup>2</sup> See <http://www.thefreedictionary.com/perspective>, which is one of the more reliable and professional English dictionaries available online.

<sup>3</sup> Importantly, it was a grassroots social initiative first (rooted in the social and political reality of the USA in the 1980s) and only then became a starting point for what was labelled queer studies in the early 1990s. That social component has been quite forgotten and queer was quickly changed into a paradigm that seemed to reinforce power relations that it had been created to question and subvert. This is why the author of the term 'queer theory', Teresa de Lauretis, disengaged from it just three years after she had first spoken of it as a potential and a change (de Lauretis 1991). As I see it, the recovery of that social component is what is essential for the queer perspective to encompass those objectives, be inclusive, and remain in power.

usage of concepts and terms that had been previously designed to serve the patriarchal power relations. Queer seems to serve as a certain meta-analysis of what *is*.

Taking all this into account, what follows is a re-conceptualization and re-configuration of certain aspects of the sex industry and its presence within scholarly sources from the point of view of a transgressive social science. The nature of this analysis is theoretical and intertextual, and the emphasis will be put on revisiting the concept of “cultural citizenship”<sup>4</sup> in relation to sex workers. Altogether, this is a scholarly attempt at recognising sex workers’ subjectivities in place of giving them an identity. Although this question would require a separate analysis, the point of departure for my considerations is the much too neglected distinction between identity as—by definition—‘sameness’ and subjectivity as the means of agency-driven departure from being an object on the one hand and an abject<sup>5</sup> on the other, both of which characterize women in general and sex workers in particular. As I tend to argue, identity is a category of comparison, while subjectivity is the ultimate expression of the self<sup>6</sup>. Since the interventions I propose are often of symbolic character, it should be visible by now how the language of empowerment is the ultimate objective of my academic work and as such requires a great dose of interdisciplinary efforts. I will, however, also make

recommendations regarding *stricte* methodological possibilities of conducting research with regard to sex workers from different spatialities.

Two important caveats are in order before I start properly. The first one pertains to literature. The objective of the analysis herein is to suggest a certain way of approaching sex work research; Smith serves as an adequate example that, combined with my queer method, will hopefully result in more sensitivity and attention to sex workers’ manifold subjectivities. With this in mind, the aim of this article is not to provide another recapitulation of what has been done regarding the research into the sex industry. European literature in the field is quite substantial and it does not seem useful to engage with yet another review; adequate references will be provided, as well as bibliography offered. This approach of mine is not tantamount to my ignoring the heritage of European (and Polish) academic and activist enterprises regarding sex work. Rather, what I offer is a shift of attention away from the obvious achievements to a new conceptual solution. With this in mind, the second caveat pertains to notions I apply. Though it would seem that the considerations herein employ a number of concepts that can potentially lead to a chaos, it is not exactly the case. Rather, the queer approach behind my objectives requires a certain sensitivity to a network of interrelated notions and the quality they offer when interdependent. For this reason, concepts like that of femininity or citizenship in the light of the sex industry are not simple terms that could or could not be chosen to be explored, but they create a subtle web of inextricably linked axes that would lose their meanings and potential if pursued separately.

<sup>4</sup> See: Pakulski 1997.

<sup>5</sup> See: Kristeva 1982.

<sup>6</sup> This, however, is an oversimplification made somewhat purposefully. I have recently begun to explore how chaotic and problematic the concept of identity is both within the social sciences and in non-academic life in general.

Although lesbianity [sic!]<sup>7</sup> can indeed be seen as an addition to the analysis that follows, and as such takes relatively little space, it nonetheless closes a gap that has been left in many a research and should therefore be considered an encouragement for future reference and analyses. Altogether, with queer as the actual background, the other concepts in use are analytically valid through the relationships they create.

### Sex Work in Principle

The provocative phrasing is supposed to draw the reader's attention to *what*, *how*, and *why* is said and researched about the sex industry and sex providers within it. Clearly, there seems to be a principle in place—one that tags sex workers in the hierarchy of power relations. The much influential 1984 work of Gayle Rubin provided us with a considerable insight here. Rubin is famous for her conceptualization of “the sex hierarchy” (1984: 13-14), which clearly shows how certain sexual behaviors predominate and are socially desirable, while others have been placed as subordinate, unwelcome, ‘dirty’<sup>8</sup>. In Rubin's analysis, commercial sex<sup>9</sup> had been historically placed on “the outer limits” and labelled as “bad sex” and sexuality, the definition of which comes down to adjectives like “abnormal, unnatural, damned, sick, sinful, ‘way out’” (1984: 13-14). What is more, this

particular form is part of “worst” behaviors, ending the very hierarchy together with “cross-generational” sex that seems to be the only form of sexual relationships that is even less acceptable (Rubin 1984: 13-14). Although one would be compelled to think that thirty years must have changed the stratification and the patterns of social acceptance within many a society, this does not seem to be the case. This is connected with what Jacques Derrida (1967) called “the logic of supplementarity,” which is a continual and a relatively steady over time and (‘Western’) space phenomenon. Although the author used it for proving a point in a deconstructionist discourse on the processes of speaking and writing (the analysis of text,) the mechanism he described explains how all binary oppositions work. Namely, the two components are not equals, but one is superior and the other one serves as an important addition. A feminist analysis captured it nicely by stating, “What makes dualisms distinctive is that one of the terms provides a ‘core’, and it is in contrast to the core that the other term or terms are defined. Thus dualisms structure meaning as a relation between a core term A and subordinate term(s) not-A” (WGSG 1997: 84). The “not-A” phrasing is a very accurate one, for the second term is not simply a B; what we would call ‘B’ needs to entail everything that A cannot be. We will further see this mechanism in action, but for now it is crucial to realise that our ‘Western’ culture is organized around this sort of constructions<sup>10</sup>.

<sup>7</sup> See: Olasik 2014, 2015a and 2015b.

<sup>8</sup> What also comes to mind here is the work of Michel Foucault on the segregation of people into those who are ‘sane’ enough to walk the streets and those who are not worthy of being part of the society. The author analyzes how these categories and norms emerged; what followed was the creation of asylums and prisons for those who do not fit in (Foucault 1988).

<sup>9</sup> The focus here is selective, but obviously this is only one of the many “bad” and even “worst” forms situated in the hierarchy (Rubin 1984: 13-14).

<sup>10</sup> To put the word ‘Western’ in single quotations marks is another queer strategy of mine, whose objective is to raise awareness regarding the role of language in the culture we share. What we came to call the West and the East are social constructs that provide a characteristic example of the “supplementarity.” This, as post-colonial studies have shown, serves to support a particular hierarchy of identities. Although I am forced to use this kind of language and its constructs in order to convey meanings that would be comprehensible, I choose

A number of consequences follows and they are especially visible in the discourses on the sex industry; sex providers seem to be situated at the intersection of gender/body/sexuality norms and as such they escape the “subjugation” process pertaining to these, thus provoking anger and falling into “disciplinary power” to a larger extent than the rest of society (Foucault 1977). The best manifestation of this is an everlasting lack of agreement as to the status of sex work within feminist communities and movements. The so-called ‘sex wars’ are a tangible proof here<sup>11</sup>. Parallel to this, it is hard to ignore the everlasting socio-political discourse that has been shaping the lives and working conditions of sex workers worldwide. This too has been widely discussed<sup>12</sup>, but worth concluding are the most dominant discourses regarding the status of the sex industry. The simplest differentiation has been between what Roland Weitzer calls “the oppression paradigm” and “the empowerment paradigm”—two most prevailing frameworks that sociologists and others have used to describe sex work (2009: 214). As the author explains, the former one is connected with analyzing the phenomenon in terms of power relations, while the latter one considers the sex industry a distinct occupational sector. In other words, while the oppression paradigm tends to divide sex workers into either victims or survivors,

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to do this subversively, drawing the reader’s attention to the terms’ actual value and roots. The same can be said about other binary divisions that came to organize and rule our culture, for example, man—woman, heterosexual—homosexual, white—black.

<sup>11</sup> This has been widely discussed and is easily accessible through many sources. See: Ferguson 1984; Rubin 1984; Liskova 2008; Showden 2016.

<sup>12</sup> See: O’Connell Davidson 1995; Sanders 2005; 2008; Brooks-Gordon 2006; O’Neill et al. 2008; Weitzer 2009; Hardy, Kingston, and Sanders 2010; Prior, Hubbard, and Birch 2012.

claiming that the act of prostitution is something done to them without their conscious choice and rational will<sup>13</sup>, the empowerment paradigm overcame this somewhat paternalistic attitude by respecting the sex industry as an actual occupation involving the process of conscious decision-making. In Weitzer’s words, “[The empowerment paradigm] focuses on the ways in which sexual commerce qualifies as work, involves human agency, and may be potentially empowering for workers” (2009: 215). These two seem to create the most common dualistic discourse regarding the matter in question, but the author also mentions “the deviance framework,” where sex working is regarded, simply and more broadly, a form of deviant behavior (Weitzer 2009: 214). However, what is considered dominant/secondary in one locality may not be such in another one. Along these lines, Izabela Ślęzak notices that, in spite of a long tradition of research, it is deviance that still seems to be the leading paradigm for analyzing sex work in Poland (2014: 57). The author goes through the history of researching the Polish sex industry, observing how the discourse changed from ‘blaming’ the workers’ backgrounds and environment to seeing economic factors as the ones primarily responsible for the women’s ending up in the business (Ślęzak 2014: 58-60). Ślęzak herself suggests the concept of the “collective engagement” (2014) when it comes to explaining the reasons why the women in question decide to continue with the chosen path often in spite of other discouraging circumstances. Although this concept comes from

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<sup>13</sup> Unwilling to reinforce the discourse of victimization by devoting space to recapitulating the oppression paradigm, I should perhaps merely indicate a competent source. For a simple example see: Prior, Hubbard, and Birch 2012.

a strictly empirical study and does not attempt to engage with empowerment processes, it significantly broadens the scope of discourses available and as such it complements the foregoing sides of the debate, leaning towards diversity and multiplicity of grassroots experiences.

Taking all this into account, this article of mine would obviously have to be situated within the empowerment paradigm. Although to some extent it is certainly the case, this itself is quite a simplistic framework to be using again and again, as well as it does have its limitations, which is why I would like to further stretch the discourse by mentioning possibilities that see through the complexity of the sex industry and, indeed, advance the discourse of transgression. What I have in mind is an interdisciplinary enterprise that involves the queer approach on the one hand, and the discipline of geography on the other. I should start this by re-focusing on the concept of femininity as a basis for de- and re-constructing sex workers' cases.

## Femininity

Since gender and sexuality are designed to complement each other, it is impossible to analyze one without the other. I should thus start this section by refuting a possible accusation that by devoting a separate space of the article to the question of femininity I fall into the trap of essentializing the sex industry, either excluding sex workers that are not female (or do not self-identify as such,) or, simply, acting sexist. This is certainly not the case, and there is another reason why I consider this section essential to the analysis herein. The sex industry is

hardly limited to female providers and their male customers. Therefore, rather than an acute lack of sensitivity, the objective here is quite different. Namely, I aim to explain as clearly as possible that (and why) the concept of femininity has always been, and still is, the major driving force behind the very same power relations that have made sex workers of any gender stigmatized, undervalued, ridiculed, and forgotten<sup>14</sup>. In other words, it is femininity that lies at the heart of knowledges about the whole sex industry (and the whole 'Western' culture, for that matter,) regardless of who the provider will be and what clients they have. Thus, breaking down femininity into small parts has to be a vital part of this project. Since gender has been designed and used to justify sexual desire, it is quite impossible to successfully get involved in sexuality studies in general, and sex work research in particular, without having a clear idea of how gender operates. Thus, the priority is to understand how femininity works.

What is femininity, then? My perspective is informed by a form of queer approach to cultural mechanisms and as such it aims to uncover certain processes. According to this strategy, I daresay that femininity is merely *an idea* and a concept, but not an actual identity, let alone a subjectivity. Based

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<sup>14</sup> I am obviously referring to the processes permeating the 'Western' culture, where sex work has been hugely problematized due to specific power relations based on the social construction of gender and sexuality, with little flexibility allowed. Therefore, this analysis does not pertain to cultures which did not develop strict social norms regarding the duality of gender and complementary sexual desire. These include, for example, Native American tribes, some of the African communities, Polynesian societies, or the Thai society, where transgender and sex worker communities enjoy a very different status from what we have come to recognise as the default identities and behaviors.

on the aforementioned “logic of supplementarity,” we know that femininity serves as a supplement to the concept of masculinity in that it should encompass everything that masculinity cannot be. More than this, however, the primary role of the subordinate part of the binary division is to confirm and reinforce the authenticity, power, and superiority of the chief component of the pair. It is thus necessary that women act emotionally, obediently, calmly, passively, and irrationally, for it is the only way that male rationality, aggression, self-confidence, business qualities, and sexual activity are to be confirmed, verified, reiterated, and proven right. One can easily see how, culturally, a woman is not an identity *per se*, but rather a desexualized tool with a specific role to fulfil. Further, it is not enough that femininity itself is made ‘worse’ and therefore stigmatized; it is additionally quite common for *any* “not-A” component in any given pair to be labelled *through femininity*. The WGSG collective explained it well by stating, “[...] dualisms are very often gendered and hierarchized, so that the core term A is masculinized and prioritized, and the subordinate term(s) not-A are feminized” (1997: 85; Rose 1993; Massey 1994). This is why the binary structure masculinity-femininity is *the* one through which our culture operates. The conclusion could be that, quite clearly, not only is femininity in itself a stigma<sup>15</sup>, but it also becomes an offence. It is therefore crucial to be continually reclaiming it through various re-configurations of cultural meanings, possibilities, and structures. Sex work is one of the fields that can provide just this, while its controversy comes precisely from

<sup>15</sup> See: Goffman 1963.

the sexualization that a woman recovers, in which case the money component seems to be, on a deep level, merely an excuse<sup>16</sup>. From this perspective, a female sex worker is courageous in her attempt to de-stabilize the cultural assumption about what womanhood should be, regardless of the often unfavorable circumstances that made her do this in the first place. Any analysis of this phenomenon should therefore encourage an ethical approach, where her efforts, actions, attitudes, and feelings are actually acknowledged and appreciated rather than devalued. This can be successfully done through the reflexive approach<sup>17</sup> and a certain degree of ethical engagement on the part of the researcher. Sex work is subversive by definition, for it denaturalizes the ‘Western’ culture’s interpretation of gender and sexuality. It can, however, be additionally meta-subversive in the researchers’ and commentators’ efforts to delineate and support the role of agency and experience in reshaping the discourses available.

### Further Empowering Female Sex Workers

This section is to be understood twofold. First, it is about sex workers’ own processes of reflective subversion, empowerment and self-identification, and as such it would very much fall into the aforementioned empowerment paradigm. Second, though, it is also about the role of the researcher in aiding and promoting such processes and reflexivity. This is where I would like to acknowledge the research done by Australia-based Dr Elizabeth Smith from

<sup>16</sup> Which is silently proven by the fact that male sex workers do not fuel as much controversy.

<sup>17</sup> See: Mascia-Lees and Johnson Black 2000: 92-99.



La Trobe University in Melbourne. Having worked within the university's Australian Research Centre for Sex, Health and Society (ARCSHS), where she completed her doctoral dissertation and then worked for several years as a research officer, Smith made it a point to shed some much needed light on female sex workers from Victoria, Australia. Inspired by work and techniques of much established in the field Maggie O'Neill (see: 2001; 2008; 2010), Smith developed a unique framework for interviewing female sex workers as a part of her PhD project. *Women Making Meanings: Practising Ethics of Care of the Self in Sex Work* (Smith 2012<sup>18</sup>) is the outcome of that enterprise and as such is a good example of how to re-focus a discourse. Upon commencing the project, the researcher, who is a sociologist, acknowledges the limitations of both sides of the so-called 'sex wars' by suggesting an alternative. As the researcher says,

A third feminist perspective [...] locates sex work as a space where both things can happen, simultaneously. This is a space of contradictions that argues that sex work can be empowering and exploitative, safe and unsafe; as well as a space that can involve free and restrained choice while both resisting and reinforcing gender stereotypes. Scholars in the third feminist 'camp' generally view sex work as *a location where heteronormativity and rigid gender stereotypes can be both challenged and upheld*. They argue that *sex work should be viewed with ambivalence*. [...] By thinking creatively about discourses, researchers are able to *bridge the gap between the victim/agent binary* to see

how sex work can be both influenced by discursive power relations and a site of agency. (Smith 2017: 346<sup>19</sup>, emphases mine)

With this debate in mind, Smith further recognises that, as she states,

While there has been ample research on: how women sex workers maintain boundaries between their personal and professional lives; how sex work is a job like any other; and how they perform manufactured sexual and intimate engagement with their clients<sup>20</sup>, *there has been little empirical engagement with sex workers' agentic sexual pleasure at work*. (2017: 347-348, emphases mine)

This being the point of departure, Smith chose to rely on two research questions, which are, "How do women negotiate community understandings of their work, including negative and stigmatizing meanings?" and "How do women think about their sex work in positive<sup>21</sup> ways, including how they gain access to other ways of giving meaning to sex work" (Smith 2012: 11-12)? With the first two theoretical chapters aimed at explaining the intri-

<sup>19</sup> Throughout this fragment, Smith references a number of authors, among whom perhaps the most notable are: O'Neill 2001; Scoular 2004; Scoular and O'Neill 2008. See also Phil Hubbard's activity as well as sexual geographers' contributions for some of the most recognized attempts at the discourse of empowerment (Hubbard 1999, 2000, 2008; Hubbard, Gorman Murray, and Collins 2016; Hubbard, Gorman Murray, and Nash 2015; Hubbard and Prior 2012).

<sup>20</sup> The researcher herself further engages with some of her respondents' feelings regarding the so-called 'girlfriend experience', which is "one extreme [example] of manufactured intimacy" that "includes personal intimacy such as cuddling, kissing, and concern for the feelings and life of the client" (Smith 2017: 347, 359).

<sup>21</sup> Rather than being the researcher's judgement, the term 'positive' was dependent on how the women in question chose to understand it.

<sup>18</sup> See Smith 2014 for an article that encapsulates the PhD research process and findings. However, the author's dissertation is easily available online.

cacies of sex work discourses on the one hand and constructing her own underpinnings on the other, Smith explains why she subversively chose Michel Foucault's concept of the 'care of the self'<sup>22</sup> as the actual framework for the research she has done. What eventually follows is the description of the research design and ethical choices, as well as the elaboration on "a myriad of meanings" that the researched women assigned to their work and various axes of their identities (Smith 2012: 209). Though the construction of the whole volume is quite diversified and shows great sensitivity to the matter in question, as well as the language used, for the purpose of the article herein I should focus on the approach Smith applied, the empirical methods she used, and the results she got. As implied, the researcher managed to recruit nine female sex workers, all of whom "understood their sex work in positive ways" and agreed to participate in a qualitative interview based on a vignette technique (Smith 2017: 351). As the researcher explains, "Constituting hypothetical situations, decisions, and ethical dilemmas, vignettes are basically tools designed to *elicit narrative*. [...] Their overarching aim is often 'to study attitudes, perceptions, beliefs, and norms within social science'" (Wilks 2004 qtd. in Smith 2012: 105, emphases mine). As Smith adds, "[B]ecause vignettes provide a third person narrative, through which the participant can talk about their values and ethics, vignettes provide an ethical way to engage with sensitive topics" (2012: 105-106). Back to the framework of this article of mine, this would be precisely what a transgressive and emancipatory research on sex workers would entail and as such should be encouraged

and reproduced. To further acknowledge Smith's contribution to the process, six of the women attended a second interview at a later date; this one was based on a participant-driven photo elicitation. After a long introduction into the method itself, as well as its ethical considerations in this particular case, the researcher comments, "The women were asked to photograph things that represented any of a list of feelings, emotions and actions. [...] There were over 100 photos in total that the participants brought to the interviews and which all had their individualized meanings for the women" (Smith 2012: 115-115). All in all, both techniques led the author to explore processes of self-creation on the part of the sex workers. The one objective was, as Smith herself puts it, "to look at how they maintained senses of the self" (Smith 2015). As she also admits, autoethnography was an essential part of it. With all the utterances and responses the researcher obtained in the course of the interviews, the most important result was that of "alternative knowledge" being constructed by sex workers who "engage in ethical self-creation through operating within and against various discourses about sex, gender, and sexuality" (Smith 2014: 49-50). This knowledge constitutes a much needed and significant body of sociological interventions based on the paradigm of engaged theories. As the author later commented, "[T]he women's narratives [...] support the third feminist perspective of sex work, in that sex work remains ambivalent, where it can be simultaneously empowering and exploitative, and women can have both positive and negative experiences with their clients" (Smith 2017: 359). It is therefore through allowing for sex workers' subjectivity to emerge that the paradigm of empowerment takes place in an at-

<sup>22</sup> See: Foucault 1986.

tempt to establish and re-construct the multiplicity of the subjects' voices. "This discourse about agency is what is missing from much scholarship on women's sexual pleasure at work" (Smith 2017: 358).

Smith's work is, perhaps, just one example. Its significance, however, comes from the author's initiative to transform the discourses available *and* from doing so in a scholarly environment other than that of the typical 'West'<sup>23</sup>. Also, the author's scholarly background enabled her to stay engaged in reaching a wider audience and raising public awareness of sex workers' realities<sup>24</sup>. Translating such strategies and promoting alternative methods and attitudes is precisely what both Europe and Poland need from the academia when researching the stigmatized. Altogether, the type of work that the researcher has done would be very much in line with interpretive sociology, as well as with a process that Krzysztof Konecki (2007) called "identity self-work." He explains, "It is mainly the very individual's work on identity understood as developing the content aspects of the individual's self-perception; the process of developing the content of identity with regard to a particular primary activity. [...] The work is therefore not only on the content of identity but also on initiating and

maintaining the process of comparing, evaluating and permanent self-affecting in relation to the desired identity content" (Konecki 2007: 6, translation mine). Further, what Smith did, both for sociology and for the researched subjects, is also a step towards recognising all sorts of sex workers as cultural citizens—a concept that Jan Pakulski explained as "the right to be 'different', to re-value stigmatized identities, to embrace openly and legitimately hitherto marginalized lifestyles and to propagate them without hindrance. [...] Full citizenship involves *a right to full cultural participation and undistorted representation*" (1997: 83, emphasis mine). This perspective falls into human geography and as such will be further looked into.

## Geographies of Sex Work

Correspondingly to the aforementioned Rubin's 1984 work, contemporary researchers also notice that, "The city is a map of the hierarchy of desire, from the valorized to the stigmatized. It is divided into zones dictated by the way its citizens value or denigrate their needs" (Califia 1994 qtd. in Hubbard 2001: 60). As mentioned before, not much seems to have changed in the area of validation and superiority of some sexual patterns, behaviors, and needs over others. Legal proceedings and consequences aside<sup>25</sup>, the social status of sex work depends on the geo-temporal and spatial reality we speak of.

<sup>23</sup> Which, perhaps, influences the number of researchers investigating such a contentious area, as well as potentially restricts the quantity of resources and possibilities available to those researchers who do. It is also important to note that the history of feminism and feminist approaches to the sex industry in Australia differ significantly from those in the USA or UK, with Australian mainstream feminists of the 1970s actually supporting sex workers and regarding their activity as an occupation already.

<sup>24</sup> See Smith's (2013a; 2013b) publishing with *The Conversation*, which is an independent online source that gives platform to scholarly and research communities; to become an author one needs to be affiliated with a university or a research center.

<sup>25</sup> These are quite varied both in time and space. See: Godwin 2012; Hubbard 2015; Smith M. 2015; Abed 2016. The most common thread in discussions about the decriminalization and/or legalization of sex workers revolves around the questions of citizenship, agency, and job security. Proponents of these legal actions maintain they open doors to medical care on the one hand and social respect on the other. The opponents are reiterating and manipulating discourses on 'moral panic' that pertains to groups, whose behaviors and traits are considered

Different cultures have different approaches to the phenomenon of sex work and configurations it assumes, and even within one culture circle (like, for instance, the 'West') the viewpoints are far from unified. Here is where human geography comes, with a significant input from geographies of sexualities or feminist geographies. Human geography<sup>26</sup> is a fascinating—if underestimated—arena of possibilities in that the way this discipline developed and proliferated makes almost any project within the social sciences worthy of a geographical intervention as well. One thing to derive from the geographical praxis is the seemingly obvious conviction that what we talk about always depends on *where* we talk about it. In a geographer's words,

Space [...] does not simply exist as a 'given' but affects (and is affected by) things which are always *becoming*. Or, to put it another way, space is not just a passive backdrop to human behavior and social action, but is constantly produced and remade within complex relations of culture, power, and difference. (Hubbard 2001: 51, emphasis original)

As a consequence, it will be quite different to elaborate on the sex industry and sex workers in France<sup>27</sup>

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anti-social. All this, however, is a whole other subject to be properly covered in many a separate analysis.

<sup>26</sup> A significant difference needs to be emphasized regarding the formation and perception of the discipline. In the academia of the English-speaking world, human geography is considered a paramount discipline that then branches off into several fields, one of which—perhaps the crucial one—is social geography. In Poland, however, human geography does not seem to exist as a separate discipline, let alone a major one; whenever it is mentioned occasionally, it is only considered a synonym to social geography, which is clearly not in line with the history of its development. Both in this article and in my academic activity as a whole, I obviously embrace the original position of the field.

<sup>27</sup> See: Kurbanoglu 2011.

or the UK<sup>28</sup> (or Australia<sup>29</sup>, for that matter) than it will be in Poland<sup>30</sup>, and then none of these spatial and social realities will share the discourse with that of Egypt<sup>31</sup> or some Asian regions<sup>32</sup>. It is therefore quite impossible to speak of the experience of sex work in grand theories and universal terms, and this is especially crucial with conceptual analyses like this one, where there is no actual data or a grassroots experience to zoom in and focus on. On the one hand, one could say that the possibilities within such a project are limited and do not constitute a proper social-sciences work<sup>33</sup>. On the other hand, unlike most empirical data analyses—where the space is pattern-driven and tightly organized—a conceptualization in question is a favorable opportunity to delineate certain mechanisms, reveal cultural processes, and get involved in the educational component of the academia. This, however, needs to be done with special attention to language on the one hand, and an increased awareness of something that I call 'geotemporal ethics' on the other. The latter one is basically about the sensitivity to a given locality (in contrast to a general picture driven by a global understanding of things). Given that we still operate within the engaged-theories paradigm, this consideration

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<sup>28</sup> See: O'Connell Davidson 1995; 1998; O'Neill 2001; 2008; 2010; Browne, Cull, and Hubbard 2010; Hubbard 2015.

<sup>29</sup> See: Sullivan 2010; Prior, Hubbard, and Birch 2012; Smith E. 2012; 2013a; 2013b; 2014; 2015.

<sup>30</sup> See: Ślęzak 2013; 2014; 2015.

<sup>31</sup> See: Abed 2016.

<sup>32</sup> See: Godwin 2012.

<sup>33</sup> This comes down to the endless debates about the validity of theoretical sociology and its divorce from empirical research; there is still much prejudice towards conceptual analyses and articles within many of the disciplines within the humanities. To some extent, alternative epistemologies and interdisciplinary research seem to overcome this barrier. See: Browne and Nash 2010; Chmielewski, Dudzikowa, and Grobler 2012; Konecki 2014; Kurczewska and Lejzerowicz 2014.

of spatial, social, historical, and linguistic conditionings of a place is a must. Too often discarded as non-scientific and subjective, it actually allows for more accurate data analyses due to a more engaged and qualitative focus on the researched subjects of a given reality. The sex industry is one such arena, where generalizations do harm—much as it is with other subjects, whose social status is stigma- and stereotype-driven. Here the particularity and attention to grassroots detail, as well as to the plurality and multiplicity of experiences, is desirable and can sometimes prove much more valuable than unreflective ‘objective’ research<sup>34</sup> that will backfire at a later time. It is in the power of various human geographers to restore the balance between the actual research and the sensitivity to local dimensions of phenomena.

As was visible before when I suggested “cultural citizenship” as a certain objective, one dimension of the enterprise in question comes through the rethinking of the notion of citizenship. This has ob-

<sup>34</sup> Criticizing empirical sociology is too often considered an attack on science. I should therefore point out that the objective of my remarks is not to discard empirical research as not valid or unimportant. It is, however, crucial to understand that, on a meta-level, there is and can be no objectivity in science, for what we call ‘objective’ will always be knowledge conceived of by Eurocentric, colonial, and capitalist standards (Sium and Ritskes 2013), as well as objectivity is “inappropriate” and “unattainable,” for “social action and relations are constituted by shared meanings not amenable to objective analysis; human social life is radically unpredictable because of the special properties of voluntary agency” (Marshall 1996: 362). (see also: Mascia-Lees and Johnson Black 2000: 96-99) This discussion can obviously go on and on, the point being that a bridge between standard research methods and actual knowledge could come through alternative understandings of a problem that “[stress] the non-neutrality of the researcher and the power relations involved in the research process” (Rose 1993). This is why in engaged theories the practice of story-telling is valued over the truth-telling, for ‘truth’ is a very problematic and contingent notion. Also, the question is not whether to do empirical research or not; it is when, how, and how much that matters in this debate. See also: Freire 1996; Foucault 1997; WGSG 1997: 87-89; Browne and Nash 2010.

viously been done many a time and in different social and spatial contexts, but I believe that the sex industry reveals a different extent of the problem. First of all, I should acknowledge that citizenship itself has traditionally been an extremely normative and exclusive concept, and as such it relies on the exclusion of womanhood; the only way a woman could become a full citizen was through motherhood, and even then she would enjoy the social benefits at the price of her body being symbolically and literally controlled. Since then, citizenship has been reinvestigated, reframed, and reclaimed by geographers and social theorists alike<sup>35</sup>: David T. Evans introduced the concept of ‘sexual citizenship’; Diane Richardson spoke of ‘partial citizens’; Jeffrey Weeks conceptualized ‘a moment of transgression’ followed by ‘a moment of citizenship’; Bell and Binnie see the sexual citizen through the global lens; Kenneth Plummer famously spoke of the ‘intimate citizenship.’ Not only are all of these classic texts on this subject, but the ideas are still very much applicable when considering current states of affairs regarding sexuality in many a locality. Some years into the discourse, Phil Hubbard is one of key researchers applying this contingent notion of citizenship to sex workers’ needs and realities. Analyzing how the so-called moral panic is constructed as a very much needed tool for restraining citizens’ intimacy and naturalizing heterosexuality, he then goes on to say, “The female prostitute, in particular, represents a paradigmatic figure whose legal and social regulation symbolizes the contradictions inherent in notions of equal citizenship,” which is the result of the notion of “‘feminine’ sexuality” being trapped

<sup>35</sup> See: Evans 1993; Richardson 1998; Weeks 1998; Bell and Binnie 2000; Plummer 2003.

in the literally domesticated discourse of a monogamous and procreative relationship (Hubbard 2001: 58). In other words, “the whore stigma,” which involves “the labelling of prostitutes as a threat by agencies of the state” (Hubbard 2002: 374) prevents sex workers from becoming full sexual citizens and actual subjects rather than objects of a normalizing discourse. The aforementioned empowerment paradigm has been one side of a direct response to this state of affairs, but what human, social, and feminist geographers have pointed out is very much in line with what Weitzer calls the “polymorphous paradigm” (2009: 215). For him, the empowerment paradigm is not a sufficient reaction; the latter one is his own suggestion of stretching the discourse beyond the other frameworks in order to account for “a constellation of occupational arrangements, power relations, and worker experiences” (Weitzer 2009: 2015). He also explains that, “[T]his paradigm is sensitive to complexities and to the structural conditions shaping the uneven distribution of agency, subordination, and job satisfaction” (Weitzer 2009: 2015). I admit that the concept of empowerment is by no means one-dimensional. To my mind, however, what makes it especially attractive and practical is that the sensitivity the author conceptualizes is quite reminiscent of feminist geographers’ intersectional agenda. Additionally, the idea is compatible with the concept of ‘inclusive citizenship’<sup>36</sup> and as such it could lead to the deepening and refining of positive—and transgressive—discourses on sex workers. It therefore seems inevitable that further analyses of the sex industry require a cooperation between several fields and academic angles. Geog-

raphy itself is one such intervention since the discipline has much to offer to these considerations, but sex work as a whole becomes an interdisciplinary field of possibilities for personal and social liberation regarding both the emotional and the sexual.

Altogether, whether we consider geographies of sex work as an official and separate field or merely a tendency within, let us say, geographies of sexualities, there is a number of components to take into account, citizenship being merely one of them. Because of this complexity and the necessary intersection of several social and academic axes in dealing with the subject under scrutiny, I would very much like to suggest feminist epistemology and feminist practice as the default framework for undertaking this task in order to advance the rights of, and discourses on, sex workers of any gender. These perspectives, obviously already present within feminist geographies, offer a “[redefinition of] the knower, knowing, and the known,” as well as they make sure that the methodology used is feminist in that it “*recognises* the social relations of research and has *emancipatory goals* for all those involved in the research process, *leading to social change*” (WGSG 1997: 87, *emphases mine*). Although feminist geographers have suggested a number of more standard research methods to be applied<sup>37</sup>, participatory action research (PAR) seems to be their contemporary upgrade. To end this section with a quote along the lines of the opening one, “If cities contain sites of sexual confinement, these

<sup>36</sup> See: Lister 2007.

<sup>37</sup> See WGSG 1997: 88-94 for a detailed analysis and comparison of the qualitative and quantitative tools from the feminist perspective; *what* is an issue too, but the focus is mostly on *how* one chooses to apply a given method.

spaces are also potentially sites of sexual liberation” (Hubbard 2001: 60; Binnie 2000). As I have tried to show, feminist epistemologies in general, and PAR in particular, are one effective mode of aiding this multifaceted liberation.

### A Sex Worker and a Lesbian?

This is where I would like to draw the reader’s attention to two things. First, it has already been mentioned that academic analyses to date have devoted disproportionately much space to female providers and their male clients (Weitzer 2009: 213, 222). To a large extent, this focus has been somewhat automatic, with male customers receiving less actual attention, but being there by default. Second, as Weitzer put it, “Little is known about commercial sex transactions between women” (2009: 227). It seems safe to say that, in our culture, the aforementioned concept of femininity serves as the driving force behind both of these facts and researchers’ preference and/or inclination. This is not to say that there are as many lesbian sex workers as there are heterosexual configurations in the industry. Perhaps this is not the case. The point, however, is a distinct lack of academic interest in whatever does not seem to be a dominant form of sex work, which is additionally reinforced by the overall status of femininity and the at least double exclusion of female non-heterosexuality. To further understand this, another thing needs to be clarified. I have already presented who a woman is from a cultural point of view, but who is a lesbian?<sup>38</sup>

<sup>38</sup> In this place the reader is reminded of the importance of the process of queer re-focusing regarding the terms and definitions that organize our culture. Therefore, the language used is more of a philosophical and analytical value, not to be interpreted literally or individually.

As mentioned before, the ‘true femininity’ hinges upon particular components, among which the most significant is the one pertaining to sexuality: to be a woman means to be an object of male (sexual) desire<sup>39</sup>. In other words, to be a woman (culturally) means to reinforce the status of a man as a sexually active being. Here is where a lesbian comes and violates the core of the female construction; not being sexually passive, she<sup>40</sup> interferes with the *status quo* of the male-dominated culture. For this very reason, a lesbian feminist, Monique Wittig, famously stated in 1978, “Lesbians are not women” (1992: 32). Although this statement has provoked emotions and controversy for decades now, it is important to understand this on a meta-level: to be a woman is to be involved in the institution of compulsory heterosexuality<sup>41</sup> and a more general institutional and economic dependency on men; it is to be part of what Wittig calls “heterosexual systems of thought and heterosexual economic systems” (1992: 32). Lesbians simply do not meet this requirement. As a certain punishment for this breaching of what sociologists call the ontological security—or, to quote Foucault

<sup>39</sup> Again, this is not to be interpreted on the individual level. Also, as a queer lesbian scholar I am used to employing terms like ‘man’ or ‘woman’ only conventionally and with reference to what we call biological sex. This is, however, a complex issue that I have to ignore in this analysis; part of my academic and educational projects is to be methodically detaching ‘the lesbian’ from ‘the womanhood’. In fact, it is possible for a ‘biological male’ to identify as lesbian. Empirical research of such dimensions is of great value to the uncovering of discriminatory cultural mechanisms that tend to ‘marry’ (sic!) gender identity with sexual desire.

<sup>40</sup> Unfortunately, the language that we have available does not fully allow for a truly transgressive practice; indeed, the themes of alternative gender and sexuality are not easily conveyable with the linguistics that has been constructed as a representation and fulfillment of the culture in which it is used. Thus, ‘she’ is the only form we can use here in order to be comprehensible. Again—this is done conventionally and with the full awareness of the limitation it imposes on (and the invisibility it causes) non-conforming subjects who choose to self-identify otherwise and whose experience is as authentic as that of the rest of people.

<sup>41</sup> See also: Rich 1980.

(1970), “the order of things”—lesbians are treated much less seriously than gay men are, whose cultural role and position is very different<sup>42</sup>. This lack of seriousness is a complex cultural phenomenon not to be covered in detail here, but one of its important consequences on the social and academic levels is much less interest in lesbian experiences, emotions, sexualities, and subjectivities. From this point of view, a lack of research into lesbian sex workers is well-expected.

Now that I have clarified the cultural position of a lesbian, it is time to state that non-heterosexual women can be—and are—sex workers too, as well as there is probably a number of heterosexual women who have decided to provide commercial sex to other women. In any case, the phenomenon of sex transactions between women (whatever their actual self-identifications) remains largely unacknowledged; there really is an acute lack of research (and theory, for that matter) regarding this aspect of the sex industry. However, I would like to acknowledge that when this subject does appear, it is mainly with-

<sup>42</sup> Indeed, gay women suffer from very different social consequences from that of gay men, because the discriminatory practices behind the exclusion of these two groups are not the same due to different cultural merits of masculinity and femininity. Men as social actors have different things and aspects of identity to prove (see: Kosofsky Sedgwick 1990; 1992; Badinter 1995), and the violation of the compliance on their part is punished otherwise. This is partly why it is gay men who spark more aggression on the public level, but it also results from the de-sexualization of femininity. One important note—since these have mainly been gay men who initiated LGBT organizations since the 1950s, lesbians could never find a proper representation within homosexual movements and mainstream feminist agendas later on; even today, the ‘LGBT’ abbreviation rarely encompasses real interests and presence of non-heterosexual women. This changed only for a brief period in history, when lesbian feminism emerged in the 1970s. Although this is not a proper place and space to be exploring this theme, many a misunderstanding results from an equalization made between the positionalities of gay men and women. It is essential to know why this is incorrect.

in local initiatives among researchers and scholars, whose background, positionality, and perspectives, like mine, allow them this larger scope. This certainly is a desirable thing; it is precisely within feminist epistemologies and the perspective of engaged theories that researchers do decide to take up this subject in order to participate in a social change and the process of awareness-raising<sup>43</sup>. Again, PAR, the vignette technique and the participant-driven photo elicitation are all valuable methods of doing this, and I believe that lesbian women would particularly appreciate their form, merits, and the potential change they could produce. Importantly, one cannot ignore a level of conceptual complexity that researching a lesbian as a sex worker would entail. As mentioned before, a non-heterosexual woman is culturally defined through her violation of the sexual passivity that is supposed to be *the* trait of womanhood. So is a female sex worker. Both of them are symbolically punished for similar reasons and it is only logical to suspect that a sex worker is a problem not because of the ‘money’ component, which seems to be the general excuse justified by discourses on morality, but because of her control of the body as a site of the sexual<sup>44</sup>. A *lesbian* sex worker, then, is a whole new level from the point of view of discriminatory mechanisms, since the exclusion she will experience is multiplied due to a number of stigmas that fall into layers. As a woman, a lesbian, a sex worker, possibly not a ‘Westerner’, not white, and middle-aged or older, et cetera., she will be the exemplary

<sup>43</sup> See: Browne, Cull and Hubbard 2010. The authors’ research project explores the phenomenon and distribution of sex work within the LGBT community of Brighton, UK.

<sup>44</sup> Because, radical feminist discourses of victimization aside, this is what she is conceptually doing through the process of conscious decision-making.



Other, with the intersection of subordinate categories of identification defining her socially, individually, and economically. It is only fair to assume an academic position where these intersections will actually be taken into account in order to do justice to these subjects and their experiences in a way that will symbolically grant them full cultural citizenship. Due to the limitations that an article like this one imposes on both space and the number of threads, I admit that the concept of intersectionality has been somewhat neglected in the considerations herein. Its full development, as well as a closer look into the role it plays in the economic status of various types of sex workers across many a locality on the one hand, and their self-understandings on the other, is of paramount importance in future research.

### Conclusion and Recommendations

This article provided only a glimpse into possible benefits of a certain degree of theoretical and empirical transgression on the part of a researcher dealing with gender and sexuality themes in general, and sex work in particular. The objective has been to promote a somewhat new approach to the sex industry and sex workers of any gender—one that is both subversive in relation to other, more standard and normalizing discourses on the subject, and queer in its ways of re-evaluation. Part of this is being able to reach behind the more popularized understandings of sex work and show ‘sociological imagination’ towards the less commonly investigated aspects of the subject. Another aspect of the novelty, however, is, quite simply, the method. What I have presented herein is merely a conceptual analysis, whose heart lies in its interdisciplinarity. Sociological, geograph-

ical, and philosophical at the same time, my re-conceptualization applies various perspectives with the aim of arriving at as conscious and multifaceted image of the studied phenomenon as possible. An important caveat seems in order, though—queer works here as a paradigm of respect and emancipation through subjectivity understood in terms of agency and self-understanding. Since I encourage that all sex work research should employ this, it may sound as if another generalized theory were to be introduced. It is, however, not the case; I clearly stated how necessary the departure from any grand theoretical standpoint is. The incorporation of such a method is to be treated as a clear stance against all the externally-driven interpretations of the sex industry whereby the subjects performing work are reduced to the sexual act rather than given voice with which to express their own subjectivity. With this unconditionally dominant frame of respect, these voices will then always be plural, with significant differences arising across localities based on the social, political, and legal statuses on the one hand<sup>45</sup>, and complex cultural characteristics on the other<sup>46</sup>. Queer as re-interpreted in the beginning of this article is therefore fulfilled manifoldly.

Taking this into account, what is needed is a corresponding empirical study that would follow a similar theoretical path of subjectivity-driven, engaged critique. First, this would have to involve what Weitzer called “under-researched topics”, namely “customers and managers, male and transgender

<sup>45</sup> E.g. in Australia, Finland, Sweden, France, Poland, Great Britain.

<sup>46</sup> These are mindful of a variety of behaviors and individual expressions.

workers, indoor prostitution, legal prostitution,” as well as “the invisibility of escorts and call girls” (2009: 222). However, such shift of focus would not prove fulfilling or satisfactory enough from the point of view of queer studies on the one hand and the eight-year period that has elapsed from Weitzer’s article on the other. In order for the research to be inclusive of sexuality studies, geographies of sexualities or sociology of gender, lesbianity in sex work needs to come under scrutiny (as well as increased focus on male homosexual providers). Similarly, the position of ethnic minorities in the industry should be taken into account. Of course, unless the intersectional approach to identities and processes of self-identification is adopted, this all could seem too big a chaos. However, this is supposed to remain an engaged-theory project and in order to facilitate this I would like to suggest feminist epistemology as a possible course of action. One way of applying this would be through the aforementioned PAR and the qualitative methods of the vignette technique and participant-driven photo elicitation.

Again—since this article has been a conceptual work, a question about a possible course of action regarding a corresponding empirical research on the subject emerges. As suggested before, queer studies with feminist epistemology seem to offer just the amount of engaged criticism that is needed for an actual awareness-raising process to be taking place, and—as shown before—PAR/vignette techniques/photo elicitation seem to be perfect tools for carrying out this task. Of course, the defence of the merits and usefulness of bringing one’s own subjectivity to the research, or getting involved in the actual social change, has not been a direct objective

of this article. However, this has been a common theme that has been particularly explored through feminist and minority researchers in the humanities. Kath Browne and Catherine J. Nash (2010) seem to offer one of the most penetrating insights into methodological possibilities in this regard. Importantly, though, the cultural turn from the 1970s (Warf 2006: 78-79) is one good reason for researchers and scholars alike to *not* be afraid of thinking of the researched groups and individuals as not merely informants, but actual subjects with perspectives and experiences, whose value, potential, and grassroots power is sociologically valid and helpful. Queer studies and feminist theories and research—which share this objective—show that the merits of interdisciplinarity in carrying out this task have been noted and are hard to dispute.

The re-conceptualization herein is supposed to provide scholarly food for thought, so to say, and start a discussion about what can be done academically to provide an accurate image of what has been going on in the sex industry throughout Europe (and Poland) on the one hand, and to raise the level of awareness regarding various kinds of sex work and sex workers on the other—all this without the use of the standard anthropological approach that continues to keep the researched in a lower position in the hierarchy of power relations. The actors in question have been one of the most stigmatized groups within many a society<sup>47</sup>. To provide a sociological analysis of the roots

<sup>47</sup> See Ślęzak 2013 for a thorough analysis of Goffman’s stigma as applied to female sex workers and their relationship with the researcher. The study and reflection is based in the Polish context and the author—though she does try hard—is not always transgressive and empowering in the language she uses, but the study is a much needed one in the local context and offers a fine interpretation of the processes of re-normalization.

of these discriminatory mechanisms—rather than prove them real through reiteration—is vital for a better world to be made. For this to happen, more daring and alternative methods need to be taken seriously into consideration (or translated from other localities). Of course, it is important to note that, “To theorize *is* a social practice” (Heckert 2010: 50, emphasis original). There is, however, a significant tip for those still opting for the priority of empirical research over conceptualizations like this one. It came from those early geographers who saw the way gender had been treated in the social sciences, and who wished to fill the gap between which reality one needs to investigate and how to do it. They were the first to say,

*The research process is always social: it involves academic debates and protocol; it recognises the complex relations between people carrying out research and the informants who are often called the researched; it considers the social contexts in which the research is made available for several audiences. Research methodologies are never considered by feminists as abstract processes of knowledge-seeking. Rather, the social identities and power relations in which research is embedded, like any other social action, are given careful consideration in an effort to construct research which will contribute to the feminist project in all its diversity. [...] The intersection is complex because it is not possible to list a method which is used for investigating a particular theoretical approach. There is much more diversity in the ways in which feminist methodologies are used. (WGSG 1997: 89, emphases mine)*

Whatever it is that a researcher will personally consider a definition of feminism, it cannot be denied that ethics involved in the above-mentioned ap-

proach is overwhelming, beneficial, and rational. Sex work, which has been made a focal point of how societies had organized gender and sexuality, is one field worthy of such reflexive and empathetic intervention from a social scientist regardless of their personal affiliations with, or detachments from, a more general feminist movement. It is increasingly becoming a question of respect for subjects and citizens, whose often academically exploited personal stories and processes of self-identification can actually provide a researcher with a more informed reflection on many social and personal dimensions—and possibilities—regarding their own gender and sexuality. As Smith concludes,

This discussion would benefit from a deeper exploration of the role of sexual pleasure at work and the multiple ways that women experience and understand it and how these relate to the multitude of dominant, and subjugated, discourses that female sex workers, and women in general, have available to them. (2017: 360)

It is in this regard that I have suggested the subjectivity-driven approach to the sex industry, as well as extended this paradigm to sex workers of various genders and sexuality expressions. Yet another reason why sex work needs scientific engaging and empowering is because the researchers involved had too often focused on investigating only the negative aspects of circumstances surrounding the subject. It is not often the case that positive influence of sex workers is taken into consideration, for example, their role as sex educators who instruct clients and raise awareness of safe practices<sup>48</sup>. Concepts like

<sup>48</sup> See: Weitzer 2009: 223; Smith 2012: 186-18.

that of “cultural citizenship” and practices like that of PAR, vignette technique, or participant-driven photo elicitation, are examples of an academic intervention that is particularly in line with feminist praxis and as such gives sex workers a voice—not the kind of grand scholarly voice, but a plethora of their own voices, which makes it possible for the subjects in question to actually express their own experiences, needs, and subjectivities. Or, as Smith concludes, “[T]he act of imagining how one consti-

tutes one’s subjectivity is imperative to being able to interrogate the truth of one’s self. This is where self-reflection and self-understanding enable individuals to look at their thoughts, behaviors and understandings. It is necessary for changes to be made” (Smith 2014: 44).

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## Kobieca subwersja poprzez pracę seksualną. Dyskursy transgresji

**Abstrakt:** Głównym celem niniejszego artykułu jest przedstawienie wieloaspektowej i przestrzennie świadomej refleksji na temat pracy seksualnej. Biorąc za punkt wyjścia z jednej strony subwersywną politykę feministyczną, a z drugiej bardzo przypadkowy koncept obywatelstwa, zamierzam zaprezentować różne formy prostytucji jako potencjalnie pozytywne i wzmacniające podmiotowość tryby seksualnego i emocjonalnego samostanowienia. Opierając się na kluczowych badaniach nad tematem oraz zaczerpnąwszy inspiracji i wiedzy od dr Elizabeth Smith z uniwersytetu La Trobe w Melbourne w Australii, która badała i przedstawiła pracownice seksualne jako troszczące się o siebie i subwersywne podmioty, dokonujące własnych wyborów i czerpiące satysfakcję ze swojego zajęcia, chciałabym poszukać akademickiej sprawiedliwości należnej tym wszystkim kobietom (jak również mężczyznom oraz osobom trans) w przemyśle seksualnym, które na dzień dzisiejszy mają pełne prawo czuć się stygmatyzowane przez presję polityczną oraz kręgi ultrafeministyczne w całej Europie. Przełożenie znaczących badań dr Smith na europejskie (oraz polskie) rzeczywistości społeczne byłoby cennym wkładem w lokalne dyskusje na temat płci i seksualności, jak i osi, które one przecinają. Co jednak ważniejsze, trzeba przyjąć ramę koncepcyjnego interdyscyplinarnego spojrzenia na omawiane kwestie; jest to model, gdzie partykularna, queerowa forma refleksji feminizmu lesbijskiego łączy się z geografiami człowieka, ponieważ oba te elementy mają sporo do zaoferowania różnym odłamom socjologicznej teorii i praktyki.

Wziąwszy to wszystko pod uwagę, a będąc pracującym z Polski badaczem studiów lesbijskich i perspektywy queer, chciałabym nieco odbiec od mojego przewodniego tematu, by tym razem złożyć akademicko-aktywistyczne uznanie dość zaniedbanemu nurtowi socjologii pracy seksualnej. Moja wielopoziomowa i interdyscyplinarna działalność naukowa pozwala mi jednak połączyć temat pracy seksualnej właśnie ze studiami lesbijskimi. Zarówno pracownica seksualna, jak i lesbijka są kulturowo pozycjonowane przez pryzmat tego, czym jest tak zwana kobiecość, bez możliwości ustanawiania kontroli nad swoimi własnymi podmiotowościami. Dlatego też z jednej strony artykuł ten będzie akademicką reinterpretacją pracy seksualnej jako takiej, lecz z drugiej metodologiczne możliwości uznania i eksplorowania pracownic seksualnych będących lesbijkami będą dodatkowo uwzględnione ze szczególnym naciskiem na feministyczne epistemologie i praktykę. Pomimo iż wrażliwość na określoną lokalność jest rzeczą najwyższej wagi, gdy badacz zajmuje się sprawami płci i seksualności, chciałabym zaproponować nieco bardziej ogólny stosunek do badania zarówno procesów wzmocnienia i upodmiotowienia kobiet poprzez pracę seksualną, jak i studiów lesbijskich uwzględniających pracownice seksualne. Co ważne, te bardziej popularne przekonania dotyczące przemysłu seksualnego muszą zostać zdekonstruowane po to, by możliwe było przyjęcie się różnorodności dyskursów transgresyjnych.

**Słowa kluczowe:** praca seksualna, geografia człowieka, epistemologie feministyczne, obywatelstwo, studia lesbijskie