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# A Brief History of the Anthropology of Sexuality, and Theory in the Field of Women's Sex Work

## **Abstract**

This article provides an overview of the historical development of theory in the Anthropology of Sexuality. Taking a Foucaultian perspective, the discourse on sexuality that emerged in the Victorian era will be critiqued as a constructed tool to ensure social and moral conformity. Discourse, particularly with respect to sexuality, has been a means to conscript bounded groups of people to serve historically defined goals in the production of knowledge. The application of discourse on sexuality in an attempts to understand the "primitive Other" will be contrasted to the discourses of sexuality applied to prostitution. Building on this knowledge and evolution of anthropology theory on sexuality, post-modern conceptualizations of sexuality, resistance, and social constructionism will be explored and applied to sex work in a contemporary female-bodied context.

## **Keywords**

Anthropology of Sexuality, theory, history, knowledge, power, discourse, sex work, Foucault, "the Other", social constructionism, resistance

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## **A Brief History of the Anthropology of Sexuality, and Theory in the Field of Women's Sex Work**

**Sophie Maksimowski**

### *Introduction*

Since the Enlightenment, Western discourse has employed reason as a tool in prevailing over irrationality through the pursuit of scientific fact over fiction. As theorists such as Michel Foucault (1980) argue, the dawn of scientific professions and specifically the medicalization of the body enabled the production of discourses on sexual deviance and normality, justifying the need for regulation and control of the sexual body, and the criminalization of non-conformity by the state. Foucault theorized that the ultimate representation or manifestation of such power is the self-regulating, conforming individual. The use of public and academic discourse as a tool for the construction of sexual bodies, identities, practices and communities politically and historically situates them in a manner that reifies categories, creating people within them as objects for control, as well as subjects for community and disunity. However, Marshall Sahlins (2002) on Foucault wrote that power in this sense comes from above and below; as it constructs *and* embodies us, individuals can potentially harness this power for other purposes through resistance to counter hegemonic discourse and its (re)production. Carole Vance (2005) also writes that marginal groups who do not fit within the dominant discourse are able to “create their own subcultures and worlds of meaning” (26).

As numerous authors have noted, “[m]uch writing on the history of anthropology occurs as though the discipline existed in a social vacuum” ignoring the

political and social upheavals of the times (Lyons and Lyons 2004:119). This is especially true of the Victorian attitude of discovery, in which upper-class men sat down in their studies or set out on ships to collect and analyze information about sexual practices in exotic climates. Spawning cultural evolutionist models, the purpose of these exploits was to gain a better understanding of the path of progress within European civilization through knowing the Other – the savage at the bottom of the evolutionary chain from whence we came. Thus, to know ourselves and understand our human nature, we must understand our former Other self.

These early first-contact accounts were merely a starting point in the production of discourse on sexuality as a tool to conscript bounded groups of people to serve historically defined goals in the production of knowledge. Lyons and Lyons apply the term conscription to the

deployment of data about sexual discourses and practices among ‘Others’ within discourses of power, morality, pleasure and therapy in the metropolitan cultures where anthropological texts have predominately been produced and read. Conscription may imply the reaffirmation of existing social hierarchies or it may involve what Marcus and Fischer (1986) call ‘cultural critique’ (2004:18).

Thus, conscription is a diachronic process, entailing forces of power and inequality, and the privileging of certain voices over others through dialogue formation: the authoritative ethnographic account. It can be positive in its Othering, viewing processes of colonization as assimilative toward the sexual behaviours of peoples. It can also

demonstrate sexual difference in the practices and customs that serve beneficiary purposes in some cultures, such as two-spirited individuals in First Nations cultures, who often act as community mediators or healers occupying both gender fields. Negative conscription is exemplified in the racialization of primitive sexuality, a process in which early anthropologists like Mead and Malinowski were complicit. Ethnographic accounts also demonstrate that conscription can be more ambiguous: questioning the basis of sexual fact is the manner in which the same ethnographic data can and has been used to support both negative and positive conscription of peoples to specific categories and discourses (Lyons and Lyons 2004:18-19). Regardless of their use, conscription and discourse creation are largely a means for essentialism, and the representation of difference; they are tools to delineate boundaries of what things are and what they cannot be. This essentialism can be strategic in its exotification, as a tool for the political representation of identity to gain access to community or rights.

Rousseau (1991:xiii) writes that the purpose of theory is “to reinvigorate historical studies” through the critique of the paradigms and discourses that produced them. In this essay, I seek to apply the above conceptualizations of discourse, and discourses of sexuality, to female sex work. This essay will focus on predominately cis females following the continuum of Western discourses on sex, sexuality and prostitution since before the Victorian era. Trans refers to individuals whose gender and biological sex cannot be conflated, while cis is a categorical representation of women whose biological sex aligns with the socially accepted gender role they perform (The Peak, October 2011). In this paper, I use the term prostitute in a historical sense and sex worker in a more contemporary context.

Recognizing the ambiguity of the term sex worker as an individual whose work may not entail heterosexual intercourse, given the limitations of space, this one aspect of sex work is generally what I will refer to in this paper. Taking such a simplistic definition of the term sex worker in this way does not adequately grant space to GLBTQI (gay, lesbian, bi, trans, queer, and intersexed) sex worker voices, yet it complies with mainstream understandings of what sex has come to be defined as: an invented term with a typically heterosexual (though also male homosexual) understanding of implied penetration.

#### *Victorian discourses on sexuality*

Foucault wrote that in the nineteenth century, public discourse about sexuality was effectively used

...to bring the sexual behaviour of women, children, patients, church members, and private citizens under the control of agents of authority (husbands, doctors, teachers, courts) but also to aid in the legitimation of that authority by providing, as a major justification of the hierarchy upon which it was based, evidence of a dangerous sexual depravity among the lower ranks (Foucault 1980, in Lyons and Lyons 2004: 52).

His use of discourse in this sense implies that discourse is a means through which power becomes rationalized and enacted upon the individual. Discourse determined “where and when it was not possible to talk about such things in which circumstances, among which speakers, and within which social relationships” (Foucault 1980, in Lyons and Lyons 2004: 55). How discourses are conceived and perceived is historically

determined, and discourses change throughout human history as does culture.

In the eighteenth century, European society needed to talk about sex in order to sanction what is normal and morally allowed, and to control sexual practice. Publications on the dangers of masturbation and the immorality of contraception served this purpose. Further, laws against prostitution and homosexuality between consenting adults acted to police deviant persons and prevent the spread of immorality and disease to non-deviant families. Medicalized discourse in the later nineteenth and early twentieth century naturalized the status of the middle-class heterosexual, problematizing other-sex lust as perversion, along with masturbation, and the use of contraception (Foucault 1980; Freedman and D'Emilio 2005; Katz 2007; Lyons and Lyons 2004). This discourse served to control citizens and bring them under the authority of the state and its institutions. Under this discourse, "the Victorian concept of the 'true' mechanically linked biology with psychology" as "anatomy equaled psychology" (Katz 2007:33). The 'normal', married heterosexual was never the object of study, as they were legitimate and did not need to be studied and fixed (Foucault 1980). Foucault (1980) theorized that we have repressed sexuality, but that it has been used as a key tool in constructing identity around a powerful discourse, defining normal and deviant sexual practices and conflating those with sexual identities (Foucault 1980). To an extent, prostitution has been tolerated throughout history as an institution necessary to maintain social order and prevent other deviant acts, such as sodomy, from challenging the heterosexual order and patriarchal values (Truong 1990). However, prostitutes along with other 'lustful' women were medicalized, labeled as nymphomaniacs, 'hysterical' and nervous creatures

who suffered from a biologically-determined predisposition to immoral and lewd sexual behavior (Foucault 1980; Rousseau 1991; Truong 1990). All these aspects of Victorian society set as the preferred standard a monogamous Christian family that practices sex as reproduction.

Early anthropological discussion of sexuality in the Victorian era silenced female voices and privileged the voices and sexual concerns of middle-class male Europeans. The discourses on sexuality that emerged from these dialogues were then applied to contemporary topics such as the institution of marriage or slavery and the debate between polygenesis and monogenesis - of whether savages and civilized Europeans belonged to the same human species (Lyons and Lyons 2004). Weston (2011) argues that this "search for a missing link" between primitives and apes "cannot be understood apart from the concomitant search for a rationale for domination" (15-16). Early anthropologists explored human sexuality at a distance during this period, studying exotic sexual practices of other far-away peoples in order to better understand human sexuality. Lyons and Lyons (2004) write that through these discourses, "the Other or the primitive [was] conscripted in the service of pressing contemporary concerns, whether or not that conscription [was] expressly acknowledged" (55).

Early anthropologists such as Maine and Morgan viewed primitive societies as less morally evolved, as they lacked European-like institutions of marriage. Human evolutionary progress was equated with decreased sexual license and challenges against primitive promiscuity (Lyons and Lyons 2004). Thus, the evolutionary model of family forms privileged notions of patriarchy and ignored the possibility for equality between the sexes, naturalizing unequal sex and gender relations in Victorian society (Lyons and Lyons

2004:75). Binaries of civilized and savage women were maintained by evolutionary theorists of the time, describing all Africans as oversexed, sensual, immoral and without shame (Lyons and Lyons 2004). Early anthropology was imbued with a male sense of exploration, which defined the Other “female as the object of discovery” (Gilman 1985:108). Female sexual nature was medicalized within scientific discourse with the aid of ethnographic accounts. For example, this statement from the 1819 *Dictionary of Medical Sciences* theorized that the higher degree of lasciviousness among black females could be attributed to “their sexual organs [which are] much more developed than those of whites” (Gilman 1985:85). Like prostitutes, African slaves – through their pathological sexual difference - were said to contribute greatly to the spread of syphilis and venereal disease to European men and their families. European women and men were alternatively believed to be respectable and sexually controlled, the epitome of progress (Lyons and Lyons 2004). Thus, we can see a very early equation of prostitutes with anomalous sexuality, savagery and a lack of civility and morality – as opposed to the European men who acquired sex from prostitutes, slaves, and other primitives. These constructions of the oversexed savage women and the ‘criminal’ or ‘insane’ prostitute, contributed to the discourse on sexuality the need to control the Victorian female body (Gilman 1985:107; Lyons and Lyons 2004:104).

It was deemed appropriate to theorize about sex and sexuality removed from a civilized Western Europe that had surpassed the stages of promiscuity being studied in the habits of Other, non-Europeans. This was a necessary part of constructing one’s own (Western European) history, and knowing how civilization (defined in male European terms) had emerged. It was acceptable for

anthropologists of the day to report on observed primitive sexual practice such as marriage by capture and other forms of ‘barbarism’ as real. However, imaginations of these acts, or fictions, such as literary novels on primitive-European sexual encounters would not be acceptable to a Victorian public readership (Lyons and Lyons 2004:76). Early ethnographies in this way were removed from the imaginary contexts of the persons who had constructed them, were read as true, scientific accounts of sexual difference, and granted moral implications in a public discourse of sexuality.

#### *Late 19<sup>th</sup> to early 20<sup>th</sup> Century and the emergence of anthropology as a discipline*

Ideas of racial and sexual difference were circulating in a period in which Victorian moral ideals were being questioned, along with the institutional arrangements they maintained (Lyons and Lyons 2011). Social upheaval and liberalism during this period called into question the prevailing discourse on sexuality within European society, and these trends were reflected in the discipline of anthropology (Lyons and Lyons 2011). The replacement of the “promiscuous savage” with a more ambiguous primitive sexual nature occurred during a period in which “...the institution of marriage and sexual relationships of all kinds had become a matter for public scrutiny” (Lyons and Lyons 2004:119). But insofar as this was occurring, state control filled spaces in which religious control had become more lax (Foucault 1980; Vance 2005). Thus there existed in this time multiple and conflicting discourses of social purity and liberalization (Lyons and Lyons 2004). Feminism grew in response to the double standards set in place for men and women, and feminists positioned themselves on either side of the social purity movement of the late 18<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> Centuries.

Some called for male abstinence on the basis of disease prevention or morality, and others for women's liberation (Lyons and Lyons 2004:121; Truong 1990).

Anthropological representations of primitive sexuality were radically altered during this time period, but this does not mean that evolutionary fantasies were replaced by true accounts featuring native voices. In these new discourses, primitives were often cast by anthropologists as under-sexed, not possessing the basic human sexual drive. Margaret Mead's ethnographic work during this period highlighted the rigidity of Western notions of social morality rather than danger in the primitive sex. Mead did not believe in a universal human nature, but saw sexual behavior as socially conditioned by culture and environmental factors. We could study these specifics of sex and sexuality in other cultures to better understand our own and its limitations, as Mead did in 1928 with *Coming of Age in Samoa*. However, functionalism took an apolitical and ahistorical approach to the study of sexuality. It failed to question in whose interest these controls were placed, on whose bodies and which particular sexualities (Lyons and Lyons 2011).

Through anthropologists such as Bronislaw Malinowski, there was a greater attempt to bring ethnography into the realm of science, and to be more precise in the discipline's use of language applied to social groups and customs (Lyons and Lyons 2011). Malinowski (1929) wrote that sex permeates everything and that one can study its cultural meaning in a scientific way. He studied Trobriand Island culture and wrote *The Sexual Life of Savages* in 1929. According to Malinowski, less organized societies also conceived of sexual morality in a rather loose way, and thus prostitution was absent (Malinowski 1929; Truong 1990: 22-24). Similarly, notions of homo/hetero-

sexual identity are absent in many groups, though the ethnographer was able to label sexual practices in accordance with Western discourse. As a functionalist, Malinowski viewed a society's role in regulating sex as necessary to its functioning, since human sexuality was an instinctual force needing regulation. Rather than focusing on sexual difference as a product of racial difference or cultural evolution, anthropologists in the early twentieth century wanted to explain sexual practices in the context of specific bounded cultures – the ways in which culture naturalizes sex and a fixed sexual identity (Vance 2005). Institutions thus functioned to control the sex drive, and reproduction, irrelevant of a need for labour organization within economic systems (Truong 1990). More complex societies were able to progress through the control of sex through such institutions.

To the extent that early anthropology questioned sexuality as universally biologically given, they made a significant contribution to cross-cultural studies of sexuality. These studies, especially those popularized by Mead, caused the West to question its discourse on sexuality as natural and necessary for the functioning of human society. While Mead described the existence of sexual norms and taboos in Samoa, she also demonstrated the absence of Samoan conceptualizations of adult sexual perversions, and an accepted fluidity of gender boundaries and sexual practices outside of institutional confines, such as marriage (Lyons and Lyons 2011:127-8; Mead 1928). She also demonstrated this in *Sex and Temperament in Three Primitive Societies* (1935). Thus, anthropologists like Mead and Malinowski presented practices from other cultures in a way that necessarily challenged the dominant Western discourse on sexuality.

*Mid to late 20<sup>th</sup> Century and anthropological discourse on sexuality*

From the 1930s until the 1970s, there was a silence in anthropology on the topic of sexuality (Lyons and Lyons 2004; 2011), which was subsumed under the subfield of kinship studies – sexuality as marriage and reproduction (Vance 2005). To this day, a great deal of the material written by anthropologists regarding sexuality has remained peripheral to the discipline's theoretical and practical framework. Weston (2011:9) argues that anthropologists typically have taken a “flora-and-fauna approach” to sexuality, collecting accounts of sexual acts as ‘facts’ occurring in the natural environment and recording them in the ethnographic form. Carole Vance (2005) similarly argues that the theoretical framework structuring anthropological studies of sexuality remained little changed between 1920 and 1990. Institutional forms were privileged over human practice, especially silencing same-sex narratives of sexuality (Lyons and Lyons 2004). This silence also applies to the study of sexuality in the West, predominately of white and working-class sexuality (Freedman and D’Emilio 2005:169).

In the 1970s, early Structuralism à la Levis-Strauss took an ahistorical account of sexuality through its focus on ideology and social systems as manifestations of deeper, all-pervading cultural and psychological structures (Truong 1990). Feminist anthropologists like Sherry Ortner (1972) used structuralist theory and the binary oppositions of Levi-Strauss to question the passive role assigned to women in the domestic sphere as Others, outside of men’s domain of culture. There was a recognition of women’s oppression as specific to historical processes and social and economic systems, and perpetuated through cultural structures and discourses (Truong 1990). The second wave feminist movement of the

1970s questioned male dominance and patriarchal institutions that perpetuated women’s oppression and sexual exploitation. Conflicting views of prostitution arose in which female sex workers could be viewed as victims or as rational actors, paid for a service women are traditionally expected to give for free (Truong 1990:31). The 1970s debates about prostitution and pornography were rooted in the discourse on gender of the times, which viewed prostitutes as either exploited by male patriarchy or complicit in its reproduction (Freedman and Thorne 1984). This victim/agent debate is largely ongoing among sex workers, activists, scholars, and organizations today in the debate over sex work as exploitation or empowerment.

During the late 1970s, Marxism grew as a theoretical paradigm within anthropology. Political economy deconstructs ideological assumptions about gender roles and relations within historical and economic processes of production and exploitation. Under this paradigm, “[s]exual morality and ideological assumptions about sexual roles are analyzed in terms of the formation of subjects fit for historically specific socio-economic relations” such as slavery, or prostitution (Truong 1990:4). This approach tends to theorize about and categorize people based on their class or ethnicity and is not as subjective (individual-focused) as a social constructionist approach (Truong 1990:3-6).

In the 1980s, feminist anthropologists like Henrietta Moore (1988) were critiquing the discipline for its white male bias, and the dynamics of power involved in knowledge production within a sexist ideological framework. The impact of feminism politicized sexual theory and brought theories of biological determinism and essentialism under question, contributing to social constructionist approaches (Vance 2005). The essentialist tradition had

privileged male/female sex as a dichotomy, ignoring the contextual issues of gender, class, and ethnicity as they inform one's understanding of sexuality and one's sexual identity (Truong 1990). Social constructivists conceived of gender and sexuality as formulated by the individual, through their roles and identity within community and society. In this way, gender as a biological construct is de-naturalized. Carole Vance (2005) notes that, "at minimum, all social construction approaches adopt the view that physically identical sexual acts may have varying social significance and subjective meaning depending on how they are defined and understood in different cultures and historical periods"(20). Gender and sexuality came to be understood as distinguishable, rather than a unified system. Similarly, behavior and identity, which had been fused together in Western discourse since the seventeenth century were severed (Parker and Gagnon 1995; Robertson 2005; Vance 2005).

Feminist anthropologists have questioned the status of sexuality in feminist theory and the ways in which power divisions, such as class, race, ethnicity, age and gender construct sexual freedoms and meaning (Lyons and Lyons 2004). Thus, sexual meaning is not fixed and neither is identity. Ideologies can be challenged through practice (Robertson 2005). Ortner (1996) in her theory of practice wrote that "...the denial of the intentional subject, and of 'agency', both misreads and works against the intellectual and political interests of women, minorities, postcolonial and other subaltern subjects"(8). Female agency had been unmade through an emphasis on a bourgeois discourse by writers such as Foucault, and an overemphasis on structure (Ortner 1996). Ortner's (1996) view of agency is one structured by social life, its categories and rules, in which relationships among agents positioned within webs – the

"structures of agency" - are also able to transcend them (12-19). Thus, agency is not acted out in a social vacuum but within relations of power.

*Postmodern discourses on sexuality within anthropology, 1990s to the present*

Postmodern theorists have critiqued the discipline for its approach to sexuality, its failure to challenge the dominant discourse, and its treatment of the many voices silenced throughout historical accounts. Freedman and D'Emilio (2005: 170) note that we must be especially careful in making assumptions about the place of such voices within the dominant discourse either as victims, or as agents complicit in or resistant to the dominant ideology. It is important to recognize the ability of people, such as sex workers, to challenge discourses that constrain them, and to build discourses of their own that may remain peripheral, but are still powerful in affecting the lives of the people who shape and are shaped by them.

Postmodern discourse attempts to deconstruct the numerous sex discourses within their varied historical and social contexts along with their situated methods of control and regulation. It adopts a social-constructionist conceptualization of gender, which considers the relations of power and control in creating and maintaining sexual categories, as well as the power of individuals to challenge those categories, create identities of their own, and condition sexualities (Parker and Gagnon 1995:10-12; Valentine 2011). Sexuality is fluid and is continuously being redefined. Carole Vance (2005) notes that the non-essentialist discourse on sexuality emerged less from the discipline itself than from its periphery, particularly from the humanities. It was integrated from theorizing in other disciplines, and from the participation of GLBTQI theorists, as well as representatives of racialized and colonized groups.

Anthropological theorizing continues to view sexuality as informed by practice. Judith Butler (1999) explains that femaleness is a learned and performed role, in which societal expectations and regulations condition behavior to conform to, and in turn reproduce, traditional categories of gender and sex. Harvey and Gow (1994:8) speak of persons as “gendered through daily practice”. This adds dynamism to an understanding of gender as more relational to interpersonal experience than identity *per se* (Robertson 2005). Parker and Gagnon (1995), for example, see theory moving from viewing sexual desire as being determined from within the individual to ways in which the environment frames how desire is “elicited, organized and interpreted as a social activity” (12-13). In the context of a commoditized world, desire for things can be linked to the desire for “sexual experiences” (Parker and Gagnon 1995:13). The distinction between identity and behavior, between “who I am” and “what I do” speaks to a modern ability to compartmentalize aspects of the self (Parker and Gagnon 1995:13). The notion that the individual can create multiple identities allows for the distinction between the kind of sex women can *do* for work and for money, and their sexuality, which is an expression of who they are and who they choose to be sexually intimate with. A woman can identify as a sex worker who has sex with men, but also have a personal sexual identity that aligns with a non-heterosexual orientation or a fluid identity that does not associate with a categorically defined sexuality.

Society structures and limits sexual expression, as do institutions and the people with whom we interact who have a vested interest in our sexuality (Parker and Gagnon 1995:15). For example, the notions of pleasure and danger in sexuality have changed dramatically since the emergence

of HIV/AIDS and other sexually transmitted diseases. The global transmission of a lesbian and gay discourse has contributed to the process of political identity formation in a global cross-cultural community of self-identified GLBTQI peoples. Entailed in this process is also the constitution of more locally-defined communities that differently incorporate members of this mega-category along lines of class, age, race, ethnicity and status. The same applies to sex workers on a global, national and local community scale, as essential categories cannot represent the sexual diversities they represent.

The meaning of terms like repression and freedom, erotic, lust and sex have changed dramatically throughout the development of discourses on sexuality (Freedman and D’Emilio 2005:16;4-5). Like reading past anthropological theorists, when looking at sexual history we understand the terms being used in their own historical context. Readings into the meaning of the term prostitute in literature from Britain and the United States in the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> Centuries does not correlate with more contemporary understandings of stigma and fixed identity, as these women could move in and out of prostitution and were integrated into communities in various other ways. Rather, “shifting modes of state regulation and the changing structure of urban life and politics, not simply the fact of selling sexual services, have accounted for the phenomenon of the prostitute as a woman apart” from society (Freedman and D’Emilio 2005:165). This relates back to Foucault and the sexual discourse created by professional institutional authorities on sexualities. Under a medicalized discourse, behavior had to be framed in terms of categories of deviant and non-deviant sexuality and “people were persuaded to think of themselves as possessing single identities and consistent sexual desires” (Lyons and Lyon 2004:185). Many could

argue that the powerful discourse of prostitution as promiscuity that emerged from the Western scientific view of sexuality has been maintained, in our minds and institutions, in the way many view sex workers in their communities (Truong 1990).

However, in the context of multiple and shifting modernities, we are continuing to question, what is sexual? This especially pertains to same-sex studies of sexuality in cross-cultural contexts (Blackwood and Wieringa 1999; Freeman and D'Emilio 2005:168). Our understanding of 'the sexual' has been conditioned by prevailing discourses on sexuality, which have tried to condition human sexual behavior according to defined parameters of what sex can be, where, when, and with whom.

#### *Anthropology, Exotification, Colonialism and Sexual Violence*

Anthropology as an early discipline developed as an extension of the ethnographer's exotic gaze, penetrating those cultures most opposite from his own. This desire first manifested itself in historical sexual accounts of other peoples and cultures, complete with pictures of half-naked primitives, viewed as pornographic by Western standards of the time. In Malinowski's case, he took many such pictures, and admitted in his personal diary that he was very sexually attracted to Trobriand women, and had "pawed" at least one during his research stay (Lyons and Lyons 2011:127). Indeed, as Weston (2011) writes, "hypersexualization was integral to the invention of the primitive"(15). Mead was also guilty of such exotification, describing Samoan youth as a period of sexual promiscuity with many accounts of "love under the palm trees" (Lyons and Lyons 2011:127). Imbued with authority, successive ethnographers could re-visit those cultures, creating newer, truer versions

of how they know the other and their sexual nature.

Employed under the colonial project, the anthropologist was asked to help "do something about the other" (Harvey and Gow 1994:4), at times bringing others under the control and regulation of the colonial authority. Ann Laura Stoler (1996) draws upon Foucault's (1980) *History of Sexuality: Volume 1* to trace the application of bourgeois discourse and the colonial treatment of other sexualities in the context of empire "in which biopolitics was registered and racial taxonomies were based" (Stoler 1996:53). The colonial project was gendered, and its politics contributed to the management of sex both abroad and at home (Stoler 1996:180-4). The self-other dynamics of desire and power operated in the context of the discourse of a dominant race justified and strengthened by imperial rule (Stoler 1996:194). This can apply to particular sex-work relations today, in which "images of the 'exotic' are entwined with ideologies of racial and ethnic difference: the 'prostitute' is defined as 'other' in comparison to the racial or ethnic origin of the client" (Kempadoo and Doezema 1998:10).

The contemporary dynamics of power, domination and racialization have been imbued with the discourses of sexuality from Western history. Remnants of these discourses persist and can shape relations around sex. Paying for sex may encompass "the desire for participation without responsibility" (Harvey and Gow 1994:2). As a gendered relation, a sex worker-client encounter can be framed in terms of object-subject. For some clients, "the acting out of fantasy and gratification is part of the experience being paid for, the object or objective" (Day 1994:186). These fantasies can focus on "the eroticization of domination" (Harvey and Gow 1994:2). This process of eroticization entails distance

(removal from subject) and through such ambiguity, the objectification of sex-workers as sexual subjects. Erotic exoticization compels Westerners, predominately heterosexual men, to embark on adventures of sexual tourism. Their destinations are generally the exotic former-colonies in which women of exotic sexual difference exist to be discovered and experienced. In this way, national identity becomes tied up with an erotic sexual nature (Donnan and Magowan 2010:90). Eroticization on the basis of actual or perceived difference in gender, sex, class, age, race or ethnicity can entail power inequities and situations of exploitation (Harvey and Gow 1994).

According to Anthropologist Sophie Day (1994), sexual violence occurs when conflicting discourses meet. This can entail on the one hand, agreed upon parameters of what is and is not allowed in a paid sexual service conflicting with client expectations and objectification of the service provider, informed by a misogynist consensus that “consent is written into all sexual relationships involving women” and with sex workers specifically (Day 1994: 186). This violence can be physical, emotional and/or economic. She discusses the conceptualization of rape among sex workers in London as breached consent and broken contracts. For example, a client’s refusal to wear a condom during the session as previously agreed upon. When this kind of breach of consent occurs, it is especially hurtful and physically damaging in the event an STD were contracted or if the woman became pregnant. This form of rape does not fit with the standard definition of rape as blatant physical coercion, but it is necessary to understand its complexity. The legitimization of sex work as work is essential, and in this it is integral that contractual consent building and respect are imbued in the discourse on consent (Day 1994). This discourse is evolving through the particip-

ation of women around the world, and this greatly includes sex workers.

However, the dominant Western discourse on sexuality and sex work exists within a framework of implied consent rather than an obligation to obtain consent. An economic exchange of sexual service for money can easily connote the objectification of women as sexual objects. Whether this violence consists in racialization, breached consent or violence, it is representative of structural inequalities that pervade the economies of desire and sexual labour. Typically, violence and work continue to be defined in the public domain and sex and consent are viewed as private, subjective and domestically constrained. This separation perpetuates the idea of the bounded self, when really the self and the sexual cannot be viewed in isolation from the context in which they are actualized (Harvey and Gow 1994). This is not to restrict the exercise of sex worker agency in negotiating these structures, but merely to acknowledge their embeddedness within them and their impacts on how gender and sexuality may be variably constructed and articulated.

#### *Discoursed Peoples’ (De)Construction and Reconstruction*

Returning to dominant debates on sex work and concerns over structure and agency, it is imperative to recognize both sides of the coin. On the one hand, some women are conscripted into sex work through coercion and lack of choice, while conversely we must recognize the agency of women to challenge that system, and to capitalize on the desire implicit within it or on its periphery. But there has existed a strong discourse throughout history to conflate female prostitutes to either end of this spectrum. Sex workers continue to be labeled either as victims or as licentious vagrants of society, threatening the morality of institutions like the family and spreaders

of vice and disease. This was the Victorian view of the prostitute, and its stigma remains largely intact. Wright (2004) illustrates this in her analysis of street sex worker identity in La Paz, and the conscription of these women to the discourse of whore or puta as a powerful tool in devaluing their labour, and their presence in public spaces. If female sex workers are cast as victims, this undermines their categorization as workers as they are coerced and agent-less. If on the other hand, they are viewed as professionals, in a sense this serves to further institute male-female relations based in patriarchy and to entrench male sexualities as lustful and dominating. In either sense, homogenizing women sex workers under either discourse is a disservice and misrepresentation (Truong 1990:13). Sex work encompasses a variety of economic, sexual and psychological factors that determine choice and agency, and the degree of pleasure and danger experienced.

Sex workers necessarily engage with and operate within public (and academic) discourses on gender, sex, work and sexuality (Donnan and Magowan 2010). They operate within constructed realms of power and sexuality, which allow their profession to exist. Ideologies and economies enable the body to be commodified and for sexual services to be bought and sold. In as much as one could talk of bodies and sexualities being conscripted within discourse, we can speak of individuals choosing a place for themselves within economic relations of power, and conscripting clients to discourses of desire. Ultimately, this entails creating political and economic subcultures of desire and bringing those into public spaces as discourses of pleasure, danger, power, morality, therapy and liberation. Vance (2005) discusses the ways in which culture and history play a role in creating sexualities, but she also writes that "...sexual

acts, sexual identities, sexual communities, the direction of erotic interest (object choice), and sexual desire itself" may also be constructed in various ways (20). As sex-positive feminist pornstar and sex educator Nina Hartley wrote:

I love that my job is sex. I like sex work. I like how cut and dried it is. I'm a sex nurse. Our sexuality as a society is not well. It's sick. People so desperately need nursing around sex. I was a trained nurse. I'm a registered nurse. Only now I nurse people's sexuality (Hartley 2009:221).

Sexual acts, identities and communities are fluid, and people construct and contest these in different ways across time and space. Seemingly definitive categories like sex worker, homosexual or queer, may be crossed repeatedly by the individual in their daily life, as practice deconstructs discourse concerning what these categories mean or ought to mean. Relationships among sex, gender, sexuality, identity and work are ambiguous, which is part of what enables sex workers to have separate sexual lives; the one in which sex is work, and may at times represent risk, danger and pleasure, and the other in which sex is personal, emotional, and ideally about pleasure.

### *Conclusion*

This essay has attempted to demonstrate the historical and political contingency of discourse as it constructs our ability to theorize about human sexuality. Sexuality is constructed within historical relations of difference, "embedded in political, ideological, social and economic systems" (La Font 2003: 69). As articulated through a multitude of discourses, sexuality itself is an ambiguous term (Lyons and Lyons 2011). Robertson (2005) notes that

“[p]roblems of accurate interpretation and representation arise when local, everyday sexual practices are diluted and distorted by an ethnographer’s fealties to a particular theory or theoretical matrix”(7). She argues for the need to continuously deconstruct these theories on sexuality and to apply their new forms with the greatest caution. Essentialisms of race, gender and sex have softened but they continue to persist throughout dominant discourses on sex work and in our imaginations.

Sexual alterity, whether real or perceived, can be used to justify dominance of one group over another. However, essentialism and reference to sexual categories can also be used as a tool to articulate identity in transnational movements. Thus, in so far as discourse can be said to conscript individuals, individuals are also capable of challenging these conscriptions, or reconstructing them to their advantage. It is impossible to land on either end of the agent-structure spectrum in this brief theoretical application of discourse to sex work. Lastly, through the analysis of discourse about the other – sex worker, prostitute, primitive – we learn as much about our own history, and the politics that frame knowledge, than we may ever truly know about the other.

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