

# CoMing bEtWeeN the LiNeS

## A FreSh lOOk at the wRitINgS of aNti-pORn and wHoRe fEMiNiStS

by Kathleen Shellrude

*Cet article dévoile et déconstruit les outils du langage en comparant deux perspectives divergentes: celles des écrivaines féministes anti-porno et celles des prostituées féministes. Ces travaux assument que les différentes voix féministes sont englouties lors d'une expérience partagée.*

How do feminists use language? Feminist linguist Deborah Cameron asserts that there is no uniform “female voice,” and that “the assumption of shared experience overlooks both the instability of gender divisions and the many differences between women” (177). I uncover and dismantle power dynamics in the language use of two self-consciously feminist perspectives. One perspective can be located in the anti-porn writings of Andrea Dworkin and Catherine MacKinnon, and another in the feminist-whore writings of Drew Campbell and Nina Hartley. After having located differences and faults in these perspectives, I will borrow the useful and void the caustic literary tactics to create my own feminist account of the sale of sex. This narrative is linguistically self-conscious and allied with the whore feminist stance. It shows how the denial of sexual labour in “normal” jobs makes problematic and stigmatizes the “sex industry.”

I have chosen to examine passages from Dworkin’s *Intercourse*, MacKinnon’s *Toward a Feminist Theory of State*, Hartley’s “In the Flesh: A Porn Star’s Journey,” and Campbell’s “Confessions of a Fat Sex Worker.” The commonalities and variances of these writers’ perspectives can be located through an in-depth analysis of their language use—how they position themselves and their own experience in their work and the extent to which they do or do not assume a single unified category “woman.” I am not suggesting that these are statistically or otherwise representative of all these writers’ work. The anti-porn passages employ a seemingly objective omnipotent stance, dictating that the reader who does not believe their theories is not truly feminist. The whore feminist, in contrast, advocates tolerance and appreciation, while accepting the anti-porn/sex writer, and indeed most women, as sisters.

Let’s begin with Dworkin:

One does not make choices in freedom. Instead, one conforms in body type and behaviour and values to become an object of male sexual desire, which requires an abandonment of a wide-ranging capacity for choice ... Can intercourse exist without the

woman herself turning herself into a thing, which she must do because men cannot fuck equals and men must fuck: because one price of dominance is that one is impotent in the face of equality. To become the

**Dworkin defines women as not only heterosexual objects compliant and passive with respect to sex, but also as willing subjects, compliant and passive with respect to her theorizing.**

object, she takes herself and transforms herself into a thing: all freedoms are diminished and she is caged, even in the cage docile, sometimes physically maimed, movement is limited: she physically becomes the thing he wants to fuck. (139-40)

In this passage Dworkin makes two general statements. First, she supposes that “one,” meaning every woman, abandons freedom in favour of sexual objectification. She offers no alternatives to this conformity, but clearly states that sex “requires an abandonment ... [of] choice” (139). Second, Dworkin asserts that men cannot have sex with women, only with “things.” Her reader *must* accept that women are “things” when they are engaged in sexual activity, and that all men only want to have sex with such commodities. Without actually saying so Dworkin defines women as not only heterosexual objects compliant and passive with respect to sex, but also as willing subjects, compliant and passive with respect to her theorizing.

Dworkin is speaking for women, all women, seemingly with no exceptions. The passage above fails to address lesbian women, gay men, paid sex workers (who may enjoy their jobs), masturbators, participants of s/m sex, the transgendered, and many others. Indeed, her argument suggests that they *cannot* exist as she writes only about “women” who are fucked by “men.” Dworkin does not position herself within this discourse. The writer of the above passage speaks as an absent authoritative knower.

Similarly, Catherine MacKinnon defines and describes pornography within a context of rape, submission, and gender inequality:

Pornography, in the feminist view, is a form of forced

sex, a practice of sexual politics, an institution of gender inequality.... Pornography, with the rape and prostitution in which it participates, institutionalizes the sexuality of male supremacy. (197)

MacKinnon understands women (and especially women who participate in pornography and prostitution) as yielding and demeaned individuals. The passage implies that these conclusions are inevitable from *the* “feminist perspective.” Here MacKinnon, like Dworkin, universalizes her opinion and uses feminism as an umbrella. The effect is to shield her perspective from the critical eye. If you’re a feminist, you agree with her; if you don’t you’re not. Again, like Dworkin, MacKinnon also theorizes only

**“Sex work has taught me that I own my body. It has taught me that sex is a choice. That work is a choice. That what is attractive about me is not a lie.”**

about mainstream—man fucking woman—sex, to the exclusion of all other forms of sexual contact.

A second passage even more clearly reveals MacKinnon’s assumptions about women, feminism, and sex:

In a feminist perspective, pornography dehumanizes women in a culturally specific and empirically descriptive—not liberal moral—sense. In the same act, pornography dispossesses women of the power of which it possesses men: the power of sexual, hence gender, definition. (209)

As before, she’s generalizing—any feminist perspective would agree with hers. Pornography, women, and men are also single unified subjects. She says that, “All feminists believe that pornography dehumanizes and disempowers all women.” Read thus, it *cannot* be taken as truth by *all* women. Yet her use of powerful, academic language seems to transform a theoretical statement into one of simple fact. In her position as the authoritative feminist, MacKinnon herself suppresses the alternate perspectives that might come from paid and unpaid sex workers, women who use pornography, men, gay and lesbian people, and the transgendered, among others. She allows only one account of pornography. Like Dworkin, MacKinnon does not locate or contextualize her own experience within these texts. Her person, her individuality, is absent. In contrast, self-described feminist whore Drew Campbell writes from her own personal experience, and uses it not only as a starting point for her understanding, but also as her politics:

I like giving blow jobs—but only to my dyke Dad-

dies—and I like getting fucked in the ass—but only by women with really small hands who know how to say bitchcuntslutwhore.... I like kneeling at the feet of a woman who’s just put six perfectly spaced cane stripes down the front of my thighs. (190)

Campbell uses explicitly sexual terms to show where she is coming from; “blow job” and “fucked in the ass” express what she experiences. With “vulgar” language she is, as linguist Deborah Cameron suggests:

Mak[ing language] mean new things, not by creating new words for each situation, but by putting existing resources to variable use, deploying language’s inherent metaphoricity and open-endedness. (Cameron 1992, 192)

Negative or “vulgar” meanings may startle her reader into a different understanding when they are used in a feminist, even academic, context.

She also employs this personal space and sexual speech to undermine definitions of sex and gender. She applies terms like “blow job” to refer, not to the heterosexual pleasuring of man, but instead to performing fellatio using the dildo of one of her woman lovers. She counts fists and hands in her descriptions of getting fucked, not only penetration with a penis.

Campbell also uses humour to indicate possible as well as actual evaluations of her life choices:

Sure, I worry about the political implications of what I do. Are the divorce courts in Arkansas that much busier because of me? Am I oppressing my sisters by perpetuating myths of feminine beauty?... And is there anything so bad about American dollars making their way from the pockets of rich straight white men into the pockets of fat leatherdykes? Sex work has taught me that I own my body. It has taught me that sex is a choice. That work is a choice. That what is attractive about me is not a lie. (190)

Campbell’s sarcasm articulates her political awareness and its implications. Through her anti-racist, anti-fatist, anti-capitalist, and pro-choice feminist discourse, she does not presume to be talking for all women, or even for all paid sex workers. She speaks for herself—explicitly a fat, lesbian, feminist whore.

Nina Hartley, like Campbell, draws on her personal experience to found the aims and objectives of her writing. She asserts the same positive attitude toward her body and its relation to her work:

Interestingly, my sex industry experience has ... helped decrease my longstanding fear of men and their sexuality ... I have learned that my body was attractive to many different men ... I found that ...

men feel victimized around sex just as women do. (61)

Her frank talk about herself, and her “I” expound her positive political position about the sex industry. Hartley’s work has taught her, as it did Campbell, to have confidence in herself, her body, and her sexuality. She implores other women to take charge of their own sexual lives, rather than shutting sex out as a necessarily demeaning objectification.

Also much like Campbell, Hartley directly confronts anti-porn feminists. She asserts that:

I’ve come to believe that those individuals that universalize their self-appointed victim status do so at least in part as a way of avoiding taking responsibility for their own dissatisfaction with the state of their intimate lives. I say this because I was once one of those women. (63)

While she suggests that women other than herself are influenced by their sex lives, she indicates that this is true only for *some* women—not all—leaving room for alternatives and exceptions to her theory. She is not speaking *to*, nor *for*, all women. But her understanding comes from her own subjective reality. She locates herself within her own discourse, employing subjective statements (rather than ones that are objectively “real,” or “what is”).

The primary and most obvious differences between the writings of these two feminist perspectives are in their contents. MacKinnon and Dworkin’s porn talk in these passages defines sex in heterosexual terms only, while Campbell and Hartley include diverse sexual practices and sexualities. And while both sets of writers want to liberate women from their current sexual conditions, their definitions of sex contrast strongly. The two feminist whores refer to sex in its unadulterated form, the raw fuck: an interaction between two bodies, not necessarily determined as female or male. They believe that if current middle-class European-Northern American restrictions about sex are removed, (for e.g., the idea that women should be having sex only for love and procreation in the context of legally and religiously sanctioned marriage, etc.) women will be sexually emancipated. The anti-porn writers see sex as an imposition, raw only in that it is the violent carnal act of man. Their writings imply that the absence of sex itself will lead to freedom. Dworkin may use the same language as the feminist whores, but her “fuck” means rape.

However, I’ve also shown that underlying the content of their writing are linguistic differences. Indeed, as one feminist whore organization points out:

What we have to get feminists to look at, honestly for once in their fucking lives (and I say “fucking” because they do fuck, these madonnas), is their own investment in keeping us ostracized. Where is their

crown of honour without us to point at? (Scott, Miller and Hotchkiss 205)

Placing the self in language and avoiding unwarranted generalizations about women, men, and others are issues that extend beyond questions specific to feminist whore and anti-porn writers. Linguists Black and Coward suggest, “there is no reality of a particular individual before the word ‘I.’ The linguistic entity ‘I’ calls the identity of the speaker into existence” (qtd. in Cameron 161). Deborah Cameron in *Feminism and Linguistic Theory* warns:

In constructing the competing account, women will replicate men’s exclusion of women in a different

**“What we have to get feminists to look at, honestly for once in their fucking lives (and I say “fucking” because they do fuck, these madonnas), is their own investment in keeping us ostracized.”**

form: some women—the most privileged—will universalize their own experience as “women’s experience,” and this will be false for other groups of women. (12)

In avoiding these pitfalls where feminists are more attendant to current trends in feminist thought, that is, inclusion and acceptance of different realities and contexts. They do not universalize experience and thus do not generally discriminate and marginalize others. In harmony with this perspective, I sought to present my own account of sexual labour. I had seen the damage of the anti-porn writers’ literary techniques and revelled in the joys of whore feminist writing; thus, I longed to put into practice this wisdom in writing about sexual services, both here, and in an upcoming thesis.

Preliminary thoughts for using the feminist whore stance and for talking about my own perspective included: chronicling my sexuality, creating a linear history of my interest in prostitution, or discussing the ways my life may be similar or dissimilar from the lives of prostitutes. None of these ideas seemed complete on its own. Further, I was of course, comfortable writing about how I became interested in prostitution, but writing about my own sex and sexuality put me ill at ease. I rejected the idea of chronicling my sexuality because I did not feel comfortable discussing such matters in an academic setting (I didn’t think I wanted the class to read it, let alone professors, advisors, and other readers). Ideally, what I would like from the sex workers I’d be interviewing for my thesis is a discussion of very personal aspects of their sexualities. So, when I began my autobiographical exercise, I decided to try to be as honest as I would like the participants in my thesis

research to be: I called it, prostituting myself for free drinks and tips.

I come from a dysfunctional home, where despite my single mother's part-time (working-class) income, we lived as a middle class family. I grew up without a father and I come from a "broken" home—(prostitutes are often stereotyped as coming from broken homes, despite the fact that over half of us come from them, and far less than half of us become prostitutes). After leaving home at 15



Jennifer Moreau, "Prostituted Woman," Acrylic, Paint, Charcoal, 5.5" x 10", 2001.

years old, I lived a working-class life. I enjoy the privileges of passing as heterosexual, as white, and as a mainstream-culture identified woman. However, I also know about, and have lived in some of the "deviant subcultures" looked down upon in our society. For example, I drink, I smoke, I know how to cook crack, I don't believe in God, I listen to punk rock, I've been arrested and I have had meaningless sex. I have not and continue to not conform to the norms and mores of mainstream white, Christian, heterosexual, Canadian culture. These experiences may give me a different insight into

sex. I don't think sex should be (let alone always is) about love or procreation. I imagine that I have lived through some of the things that are stereotypically associated with the life of a prostitute.<sup>1</sup>

Sexual labour is not reprehensible, if not because the moral reasoning against it is stupid (my body is my own, not god's, society's, or someone else's—and I can do with it what I want), but because it happens everywhere. People are always performing their sexuality and giving hints as to their sexual positionings. Although, I have never sold sex *per se*, I have sold the *possibility* of sex, and have used my sexuality and my body to make money, drinks, and other things that were to my advantage.

I am thinking of one conversation I had with a co-worker named Jane. Jane was simply one of the most conventionally beautiful people I have ever met. She

argued that she never flirted with customers, never "dressed up" for work, and never "prostituted" herself for tips or drinks. I argued of course that she may not have had to, given that she was just so gosh darned pretty and naturally nice/sweet, but that if she denied the fact that these things worked to her advantage, that she was fooling herself. A battle ensued. She was very offended. I imagine she thought: 1) that she was just a very very good waitress, and 2) that the thought of selling her body and sex (symbolically) was offensive. I think that it's possible that many servers cannot see the impact their personal appearance and attitude has on how much they make. Even more so, I don't think they even realize when they are "flirting" with (or selling the possibility of sex to) the customers.

1. Management (or "the Pimp"): Management has a certain look they would like their cocktail waitresses to present. When I went in on Halloween as a playboy bunny with armpit hair my boss suggested to me that the hair was unhygienic. I was offered a razor, but declined. Instead I had to put a shirt over my outfit. So I smooth my hair and buy plenty of short skirts. I do this because I know that management once put out an ad for servers, and all the experience needed was modeling. For "the pimp" it goes like this: sexier waitresses = more and longer staying customers = more money. I "prostitute" myself for money, and "the pimps" profit off me.

2. Kitchen Staff (the cops): When I go to work the kitchen staff say to me "Hey, good lookin'! Thanks for last night!" Though most certainly I did not go home with them I reply, "No, thank you ... best night I ever had!" I know if I do not play along with this sexual game my food will come out late, burnt, and wrong, and the night will be bad. All the girls complain in the back about the sexist pigs in the kitchen, but we know about "Sherry" who got fired because she threatened to sue management for knowing about the harassment and not doing anything, and we all know if our food comes out burnt, the customers will blame us, and hence the tips will be scarce. The equation is this: sexual play = food on time = happy customers = tips for me. I prostitute myself for money.

3. The Customers: Men are the biggest tippers (except for other waitresses and staff). Generally I pretend that I am truly interested in them, until they leave (or until it is proven that they will not tip). I never announce that I am dating, or married, or not interested. If anyone asks, I am who I think they want me to be. I am single, straight, and an easy lay, etc. Much like a prostitute I am who the customer wants me to be: available, and available specifically for them. If I make friends with the customers (and mainly I am talking about men), and you remember their names, what they drink, and most importantly when they are straight, single, or lecherous—I can get them to do various things for me. I could get my regulars to pay extra for drinks, order doubles, buy me drinks, buy rounds, etc., which meant either free drinks, bigger tips, or the management being nice to me because I can sell doubles.

I never felt bad about any of this. If you are willing to give up your tip (at most \$50 per customer or so), then you can pretty much say fuck off. So I had the power in that way; I controlled the relationship between customers and myself.

Women are in a different position, generally, than men are in using sex. Our weaker economic position and long history of objectification leaves us with the impression that our bodies can be bought and sold by men. Sell the un-buyable (the only person who truly sells their body is a slave). It's a resource that never runs out. It is far better for a woman's body to be sold (symbolically) by her than by anyone else.

The really problematic part about prostitution and its use in different spaces is both the denial and disrespect that goes along with it. If someone from a poor background makes money on the stock market we call that "pulling one's self up by the bootstraps." If a woman makes a lot of money selling her body, we call that dirty and stupid. If people stopped denying that what they are doing is using their sex(uality) to get what they want, then prostitution wouldn't be so stigmatized.

The lines that are drawn between personal sex and work sex are usually clear for me. I generally have known that I was not really attracted to customers, but that I was putting on an act for them. But other times I think that I enjoyed being a sexual object. That is, there is a certain esteem boosting part of being paid for being "attractive." Also, after becoming genuinely fond of several of the customers, I cannot honestly say that the line between personal and work sex was carved in stone. I suppose the fact that I was drinking had something to do with this as well. I imagine that it's possible that this happens to some prostitutes as well. When someone really is a nice person, how do you decide if you are doing work sex, or whether it has gone on to personal sex. I know that I would not accept money from partners who were buying drinks from me in the bar, but I have accepted money from sexual partners that I was not having continuing relationships with. Is the line drawn with money? I know it isn't drawn with the act of intimacy itself.

For years I have searched for an academic feminist perspective that would incorporate a sex-positive, sexually explicit stance, and more accurately portray the (almost necessarily sexual) lives of women. As a woman who enjoys, or at the very least, regularly partakes in sex I hoped for a more realistic and accepting account of sex, sexuality, and sexual agency. As Helene Cixous writes, "[women's] libido will produce far more radical effects of political and social change than *some* might like to think" [emphasis added] (83). I want a feminism in which my sex, my sexuality, and my libido work together with my intellect to transform the world.

*Kathleen Shellrude is in the final year of her double honours undergraduate degree in women's studies and sociology at the*

*University of Winnipeg. She is currently working as a research and editorial assistant and as a marker/demonstrator at the University of Winnipeg, and at Street Connections, a drop in centre for prostitutes and other street related people. She hopes to continue her education, with the ultimate goal of earning a Ph.D. and teaching up and coming young feminists.*

<sup>1</sup>Prostitutes are often assumed to have come from broken homes, histories of drug abuse, street life, and to be involved with non-religious, non-heterosexual, and non-mainstream or deviant sub-cultures (Canadian Advisory Council on the Status of Women; Comack; Inciardi, Lockwood and Pottieger; Lutt).

## References

- Campbell, Drew. "Confessions of a Fat Sex Worker." *Whores and Other Feminists*. Ed. Jill Nagle. New York and London: Routledge, 1997. 189-190.
- Cameron, Deborah. *Feminism and Linguistic Theory*. Second edition. Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire and London: Macmillan, 1992.
- Canadian Advisory Council on the Status of Women. *Prostitution in Canada*. Ottawa: Canadian Advisory Council on the Status of Women, March 1984.
- Cixous, Helene. "The Laugh of the Medusa." *The Women and Language Debate: A Sourcebook*. Eds. Camille Roman, Suzanne Juhasz and Christanne Miller. New Brunswick and New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 1994. 78-93.
- Comack, Elizabeth. *Women in Trouble: Connecting Women's Law Violations to Their Histories of Abuse*. Halifax: Fernwood Publishing, 1996.
- Dworkin, Andrea. *Intercourse*. New York: The Free Press, 1987.
- Hartley, Nina. "In the Flesh; A Porn Star's Journey." *Whores and Other Feminists*. Ed. Jill Nagle. London and New York: Routledge, 1997. 57-65.
- Inciardi, James, Dorothy Lockwood, and Anne Pottieger. "Prostitution and Crack-House Sex." *Deviance: The Interactionist Perspective*. Eds. Earl Rubington and Martin Weinberg. Toronto: Allyn and Bacon, 1996.
- Lutt, Melanie. *Project T.A.P. Towards An Awareness of Prostitution: An Empirical Study of Street Prostitution in the Prairie Region*. Ottawa: Department of Justice Canada, 1984.
- MacKinnon, Catherine. *Toward a Feminist Theory of the State*. Cambridge, Massachusetts, London, and England: Harvard University Press, 1991.
- Scott, Valerie, Peggy Miller, and Ryan Hotchkiss. "Realistic Feminists; an interview with the Canadian Organization for the Rights of Prostitutes (CORP)." *Good Girls Bad Girls; Sex Trade Workers and Feminists Face to Face*. Ed. Laurie Bell. Toronto: The Women's Press, 1987.