

## 24 ‘Someone you know is a sex worker’

### A media campaign for the St James Infirmary

*Rachel Schreiber*

Sorry I’m late for this interview. I hate the 28 cross-town bus, it’s always late! I had to drop my kid off after my nursing shift, then catch the bus but it’s so unreliable.

I think it’s great that my wife has a job she finds fulfilling. Yes, it can be a bit challenging to separate work from personal life but I think we all face that. In any case, I support her emotionally as best I can and she provides significant income for me and our children.

I love my job. I wanted to pursue this career ever since I was a teenager. My parents are fairly supportive of it; of course they wish I had more job security. But it’s a worthwhile trade-off to me because I love going to work!<sup>1</sup>

What do the above quotes have to do with ‘queering sex work’? The issues faced by these individuals as they juggle work, family, partners, career choices, transportation and job security pertain to almost anyone who labours for a living. The above quotations are, of course, all from sex workers. Taking a bus to work, dealing with child care, negotiating family support regarding work choices, and pursuing a career that’s been a lifelong ambition *seem* to be issues pertinent to nurses, plumbers, teachers, lawyers – not issues facing sex workers, who are presumed to be nefarious, underground figures. These interlocutors queer sex work if we understand ‘queering’ very broadly to be a challenge or disruption to normative expectations, in this case the expectations of what constitutes ‘work’. However, these individuals – all of whom work within the community of activists who operate the peer-run St James Infirmary in San Francisco, California – queer sex work in other ways as well. St James is a free occupational health and safety clinic for sex workers and their families.<sup>2</sup> On a demographic level, there is a prevalence of queer-identified activists in this community. The clinic is also intimately connected with the web of non-profit agencies in San Francisco that serve the LGBT population.

Many at St James view the sex worker rights movement as deeply allied with gay and queer rights movements, because of their shared location at the ‘outer limits’ of the sexual hierarchy, as Gayle Rubin theorises in her articulation of the sexual value system (Rubin 1992: 280–81).<sup>3</sup>

The above quotations are taken from 27 interviews conducted by my collaborator, artist Barbara DeGenevieve, and I in 2011. Naomi Akers of the St James Infirmary had invited us to create a media campaign for the clinic.<sup>4</sup> The intention was to counter the so-called ‘anti-trafficking’ campaigns, which are extremely well funded and therefore command the lion’s share of the media spotlight when it comes to public visibility for issues surrounding sex work in the USA.<sup>5</sup> Naomi wanted to circulate a different message – the message of the St James Infirmary and affiliated rights groups such as the Sex Workers’ Outreach Project, the slogans of which include ‘sex workers’ rights are human rights’, ‘nothing about us without us’, ‘sex work is real work’, and ‘someone you know is a sex worker’.

The complexity of ideological approaches to the rights of sex workers, centrally their rights to workplace protections and equal access to health care, which coalesce in these pithy slogans, form the core of the mission of the St James Infirmary. Two main elements comprised our media campaign. The first was a bus advertisement, which appeared on the side of San Francisco buses during the month of October 2011 (see Figures 24.1 and 24.2).



*Figure 24.1* Someone You Know is a Sex Worker, bus advertisement



*Figure 24.2* Someone You Know is a Sex Worker, installation shot

As the buses traversed the urban landscape, in neighbourhoods of differing socio-economic residences and businesses, they carried the message to consider the needs of this group of labourers. The second component of the campaign is a series of posters, each of which features a portrait and a quote from that person's interview (see Figures 24.3 to 24.5).

Through our campaign, we hoped to provide a very visible message that would upend the stereotypes of sex workers as desperate drug addicts lurking in the shadows. Using the visual strategy of head and shoulders photographic portraits, we wanted to provoke the general public to reconsider who among them might be a sex worker, and to broaden the definition of who a sex worker is.

During our interview process, as Barbara and I spoke with those who volunteered to be part of the campaign, we were struck continually by the stories of our interviewees, and the ways that they upended our own assumptions about sex workers. Many of the sex workers with whom we spoke had thought in very considered, intellectual terms about the work they do. For example, Angela is a cisgender female sex worker who identifies as queer, has completed coursework towards a degree in gender studies, and caters to a straight male clientele, working most often as a stripper and as a dancer at bachelors' parties.<sup>6</sup> She sees sex work as a feminist practice that allows her to flip expected gendered relations of power, and thinks there is something deeply sexist about most approaches to theorising sex work which posit women as victims of men's limitless sexual appetites. As Angela told us, 'what could be more patriarchal than having men tell me that I'm oppressed?'<sup>7</sup>



Figure 24.3 Poster from Someone You Know is a Sex Worker



Figure 24.4 Poster from *Someone You Know is a Sex Worker*

As consumers of her performances, Angela’s straight-identified male clients may believe that they are exercising their socially sanctioned prerogative of access to the female body (whether physically, or psychically through fantasy). For Angela, however, the joke’s on them: she takes their money and goes home to her FTM transgender partner. Her clients ‘buy’ (literally and figuratively) her staged persona, yet despite their economic agency she feels that she maintains the power in the transaction not only through her knowledge of the artifice of her presentation but also through her profit. The highly performative nature of her work came through when Barbara and I asked Angela what she thought the reasons might be for the disproportionately high number of queer people working in the sex industry. In response, she described why in some ways it’s easier for her to do this work *because* she is a queer woman:

There’s definitely something to the fact that, when you’re firm in your queer identity, you don’t live for men, you don’t care about the male gaze, your entire life is lived in ways that were culturally coded to *not* be for men, it becomes easier to play this cartoon character of femininity that’s trite and easy. I moved past [that character] long ago.<sup>8</sup>

It is precisely from her position as a queer subject that Angela feels empowered to play, and play with, the role she has chosen to take on.

Angela’s practice queers sex work much the way a drag performer queers gender by manipulating, interpreting and rehearsing its codes to a different end from its more accepted cultural meanings. Angela’s literal assumption of



Figure 24.5 Poster from Someone You Know is a Sex Worker

a 'trite and easy' caricature of femininity works to undermine existing power structures. As Judith Butler writes:

That gender reality is created through sustained social performances means that the very notions of an essential sex and a true or abiding masculinity or femininity are also constituted as part of the strategy that conceals gender's performative character and the performative possibilities for proliferating gender configurations outside the restricting frames of masculinist domination and compulsory heterosexuality.

(Butler 1990: 141)

By 'proliferating gender configurations', Angela exposes the artificiality of stereotypical, binary identities, queering the cultural meanings associated with being the object of men's desire. As such, each time Angela dances, she chips away at normative, gendered power dynamics.

To be sure, we also met and interviewed individuals whose involvement in sex work did not challenge its social or cultural signification. The fact that some sex workers' engagement in commercial sex subverts its stereotypes should not obscure from view those who do not see their experience of sex work as positive or empowering. A number of our interviewees did not freely choose sex work – they were either pushed to this work by a lack of other economic choices or by an abusive and controlling person in their life. Some of these interviewees had left sex work; others expressed a desire to leave the work behind. The St James Infirmary clearly expresses its policy to assist

individuals with their own choices: if the decision has been made to leave the sex industry, a participant can find at St James guidance towards that goal, but if the choice is to stay in the industry, that too is supported. The activists whom we interviewed insist on political unity among all sex workers – those who choose the work and those who do not. In fact, they prefer to speak of a spectrum rather than a polemic of choice and force; after all, most of us who work for wages see what we do as some mix of free will and obligation.

One activist whose engagement in sex work has shifted along this spectrum is Shannon Williams, who began sex work out of economic necessity but then stayed in the industry even when that was no longer her primary motivation.<sup>9</sup> For Shannon, people take all kinds of jobs for a wide variety of reasons – out of desperation, or because of what works for them at a particular time. As Shannon states:

I was a single parent and I was going back to school. Taking care of my toddler without a partner, and being in school full time, I just couldn't see how to make it work. I had two friends who were in the sex industry, and I thought wow, this is great, I'll do this while I'm in school. I can work part time, and have total control over when I work. And then, I loved it. So it started as a practical solution to my problem, but then after I [finished school and started teaching at a local high school], I realized that I really loved it. I think I'm good at it, I feel like I have a calling for it. I'm a healer, I'm a sexual educator, a companion, a counselor, and I bring a lot of joy into the world.<sup>10</sup>

As a high school teacher, mother and sex worker, Shannon defies stereotypes and troubles normative ideas about sex work. Moreover, throughout this time, Shannon's livelihood was known to her partner, family, friends and co-workers. In this way too, Shannon contrasted the expectation that sex workers are closeted, secretive or deceitful.

Unfortunately though, society could not tolerate her choices. When Shannon was arrested in 2003, her story was picked up by a range of newspapers, radio stations and media outlets, including Bill O'Reilly of Fox News, who excoriated the Berkeley public school system for having a schoolteacher on its payroll who was also a prostitute. Within a matter of days following Shannon's arrest, her story was broadcast nationally and she was demonised as someone unfit to teach children.<sup>11</sup> Obviously, this was a stressful and trying time for Shannon – but not for the reasons one might expect. She was already out to those closest to her, but she was fired from her teaching job, and forced to deal with a lengthy legal battle that entangled her family and strained their financial resources. Ever the activist, Shannon realised very quickly after her arrest that her story would be nationally visible, and it was important to Shannon that she did not appear publicly to be ashamed of being a sex worker. She contacted activists whom she knew and offered to let herself become a cause célèbre for the sex worker rights movement.<sup>12</sup>

If Shannon's story sounds familiar, it might be because it reminds us of similar sagas experienced during the 'lavender scare' and other dark periods in our history, when being gay was reason enough to ostracise members of our society, take away their means of earning a livelihood, and trample their rights to privacy regarding their sexual lives.<sup>13</sup> For Shannon, this similarity to the historical oppression of gay men and lesbians is not coincidental. Sex workers live in fear that those who do not accept their decisions regarding their sexual lives will use these choices as a source of shame and discrimination, and Shannon is eager to see that change. Shannon believes that 'the sex worker community needs to do the same thing that the gay rights movement started doing in the 80s, doing a really big propaganda campaign that states that we're normal people, we're just like everybody else'.<sup>14</sup> Shannon acknowledges that this could only come alongside decriminalisation: it is hard to expect people to come out as sex workers when the labour they perform is illegal. Because she has already faced arrest and is out in her community, Shannon embraces her ability to self-identify, using words to describe herself such as prostitute, whore and 'ho'.

Shannon is in the vanguard among those who are amenable to taking the risk to be open about their work in the sex industry, willing to speak about their motivations, why they love their profession and why they should not be stigmatised. Shannon advocates that the sex worker rights movement address decriminalisation in tandem with public awareness, as she sees this dual approach as being at the root of the successes of the gay rights movement.<sup>15</sup> This might be, then, another definition for 'queering sex work'. Due in large part to the gender, gay, queer and trans rights movements, we have moved beyond scenarios where someone might be fired and have their life completely disrupted for being gay. We hope that someday sex workers' rights will achieve a similar status, and maybe the queering of sex work will advance this goal.

## Notes

- 1 These quotations are taken from interviews conducted by Barbara DeGenevieve and the author for the media campaign discussed below. The participation of all interviewees was solicited jointly by the author, Barbara DeGenevieve, and the St James Infirmary. Interviews were conducted at the St James Infirmary in January 2011. All interviewees signed release forms which were reviewed at the start of each interview, and included questions about self-identification (i.e. the interviewees were asked if they agreed to be identified as sex workers in public presentations). The release form, the interviews, the images in the media campaign, and this article have all been reviewed and approved by the Executive Director of the St James Infirmary.
- 2 Margo St James founded the St James Infirmary in 1999, and it has been in operation ever since. Known to all manner of health care activists internationally, the clinic sets the standard for non-judgemental care for sex workers. Harm reduction is the central tenet – the clinic runs a needle exchange programme, transgender hormone programme, STI testing, general medical and holistic services, peer-based counselling and other outreach services, all free to participants

- who self-identify as having current or past involvement with the sex work industry. See: [www.stjamesinfirmiry.org](http://www.stjamesinfirmiry.org).
- 3 Rubin diagrams the sexual value system as concentric circles with an inner, 'charmed circle' comprising 'good, normal, natural, blessed sexuality' and contrasts this to outer circles that include 'bad, abnormal, unnatural, damned sexuality'. As she describes her sexual value system further, in contrast to 'good sexuality', 'bad sex may be homosexual, unmarried, promiscuous, non-procreative, or commercial', thereby collocating homosexuality and sex work (Rubin 1992: 280).
  - 4 At that time, Naomi Akers was executive director of the St James Infirmiry.
  - 5 Certainly, there are those who are forced to sell sex for the profit of others and I am not questioning the need to do all we can to stop this practice, but I follow the lead of Laura Maria Agustín, who asks why some who travel for work are described as 'migrant workers' but women who cross borders in search of a livelihood selling sex are described by the passive adjective 'trafficked'. Agustín explores, too, the 'Rescue Industry' that has arisen to 'save' these women. See Agustín 2007. Although Agustín focuses on a few case studies in Europe, I believe she provides the most cogent language we have to understand what is problematic about the 'anti-trafficking' movement.
  - 6 Angela's story has been used with her permission. By her request, her name has been changed to ensure her anonymity.
  - 7 Interview with author, 22 July 2011.
  - 8 Interview with author, 22 July 2011.
  - 9 Shannon Williams's story and her name are used here with her permission.
  - 10 Interview with author, 6 January 2011.
  - 11 To this day, Shannon cannot work as a teacher, even though her teaching credentials were not revoked.
  - 12 Robin Few and Stacey Swimme announced the formation of the Sex Workers' Outreach Project at one of the news conferences they held in support of Shannon's case.
  - 13 The term 'lavender scare' refers to the persecution of anyone suspected of being gay or lesbian in the USA in the 1950s. Both the lavender scare and its better-known parallel witch hunt, the 'red scare', were propagated by Senator Joseph McCarthy and his legions. Homosexuality was, in this era, diagnosable as a mental illness; accusations of homosexuality could lead to blackmail, loss of employment or incarceration.
  - 14 Interview with author, 26 January 2011.
  - 15 In fact, at one of the press conferences following Shannon's arrest, she quoted the United States Supreme Court case *Lawrence v. Texas* that had concluded only months prior to her arrest. This landmark decision struck down anti-sodomy laws in 13 states. The ruling stated that consensual sexual activity between adults was a liberty protected by the US Constitution. However, the ruling also cited prostitution as an exception to this liberty, along with incest.

## References

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