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Book Review: Revolting Prostitutes: The Fight for Sex Workers Rights¹

By Evania Pietrangelo-Porco²

Molly Smith and Juno Mac's *Revolting Prostitutes* (2018) opens with the following:

*Sex workers are everywhere. We are your neighbours. We brush past you on the street. Our kids go to the same schools as yours. We're behind you at the self-service checkout, with baby food and a bottle of Pinot Grigio. People who sell sex are in your staff cafeteria, your political party, your after-school club committee, your doctor's waiting room, your place of worship. Sex workers are incarcerated inside immigration detention centres, and sex workers are protesting outside them. Although we are everywhere, most people know little about the reality of our lives. Sex workers are subject to a lot of curiosity and discussion in popular culture, journalism, and policy. When we are visible as workers- on the street, in signposted brothels, in digital spaces- our presence provokes disquiet. We are increasingly visible as workers in political spaces, and here too our presence provokes disquiet. Many people want to stop us from selling sex, or just ensure they don't have to look at us. But we are notoriously hard to get rid of, at least through criminal law.*¹

The above excerpt is significant as it highlights the realities, mundane and otherwise, of sex workers' lives and the difficulties they face. Smith and Mac's *Revolting Prostitutes* examines the harms people experience in sex work, such as assault, exploitation, deportation, arrest, eviction, and deportation.² Their analysis includes sex workers in the United States, South Africa, Sweden, Norway, Canada, Germany, the Netherlands, and New Zealand. However, Smith and Mac focus on the United Kingdom- where they both live and work.³ As authors and sex workers themselves, Smith and Mac asserted that they did not want *Revolting Prostitutes* to be about "enjoying sex".⁴ They are not interested in making an argument for sexual freedom and do not intend on making their work a memoir of "sexy escapades".⁵ Alternatively, Smith and Mac, moving away from the narrative sometimes undertaken by those supportive of sex workers' rights, assert that the sex industry contains both sexism and misogyny.⁶

Women, transgender and cisgender, are at the centre of Smith and Mac's politics and are, therefore, the centre of their text and the methodological framework through which they construct the book.⁷ People of all genders sell sex, and it is "...important to acknowledge this because peoples' gender shapes their route into sex work, their experiences while selling sex, and their lives beyond".⁸ Nonetheless, the sex industry is gendered in particular ways.⁹ The majority of those who sell sex are women, and most of those who purchase sex are men.¹⁰ As such, Smith and Mac often refer to sex workers as "she" and clients as "he".¹¹ This choice is deliberate because, as Smith and Mac state, "...in our view it reflects the gendered reality of the sex trade, as well as our own feminist politics and priorities".¹²

Concerning the book's focus and aims, Smith and Mac anticipate that their audience may be expecting statistics and numerical data to "prove" that prostitution is "one thing or another".¹³ They

¹ Smith, M. and Mac, J. (2018). *Revolting Prostitutes: The Fight for Sex Workers Rights*. London, United Kingdom: Verso.

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claim that existing sex work literature argues for and against decriminalizing sex work using statistics and numerical data.¹⁴ In such instances, data is both useful and crucial as a means to support either argument; however, a heavy reliance on statistics risks becoming a form of “argument by authority”.¹⁵ Someone “... cites a study saying one thing, others cite a study saying another, and the argument is ‘won’ on the basis of whose numbers are more memorable or whose study was published in the more prestigious journal”.¹⁶

Smith and Mac use data. Still, it is not central to their approach.¹⁷ Instead of focusing on figures that “prove” sex workers’ rights movements, Smith and Mac want their readership to think empathetically about the impact of criminal law on sex workers and the interconnected effects of client, police, managerial, and landlord intention on sex workers’ lives.¹⁸ If individuals can understand the role of intent in criminal law, they will have a deeper understanding of how legality impacts the safety and well-being of sex workers.¹⁹

From an overall perspective, *Revolted Prostitutes* is an informed text. Smith and Mac manage to discuss issues facing sex workers and the debates that plague feminist discussions of sex work as they unfold in numerous geographic locations. They, for example, discuss sexual relations as a site for both trauma and pleasure.²⁰ Feminist conversations about sex work, and sex, often focus on either sex-positivity or sex-negativity, pro- or anti-prostitution.²¹ Surfaced is how viewing work as inherently “good” undermines the work conducted by sex workers and prevents sex work from being viewed and treated as an occupation. Smith and Mac also discuss the issues surrounding sex trafficking. They note that the term is often not clearly defined and is often used to refer to all forms of commercial sex and or sexual transactions involving migrants.²² Most significantly, Smith and Mac also examine the ways partial criminalization, full criminalization, the “Swedish Model”, regulationism, and full decriminalization impact sex workers’ lives in unequal and dangerous ways.

Regarding the discussion of the issues and debates addressed, Smith and Mac are not unique. The topic of prostitution is popular within the academic realm. In my research as a sex work historian, I have encountered the following books: Peter Aggelon’s *Men Who Sell Sex: International Perspectives on Male Prostitution and AIDS* (1999) and Luise White’s *The Comforts of Home: Prostitution in Colonial Nairobi* (1990). Within the Canadian discourse on the subject, there is an extensive body of work. For example, Emily van der Meulen et al.’s *Selling Sex: Experience, Advocacy, and Research on Sex Work in Canada* (2013), like Smith and Mac’s piece, attempts to discuss sex work from the perspectives of sex workers. Leslie Ann Jeffrey and Gayle MacDonald’s *Sex Workers in the Maritimes Talk Back* (2006) discuss sex workers’ lived experiences in Canada’s Maritime provinces. Amber Dean’s *Remembering Vancouver’s Disappeared Women: Settler Colonialism and the Difficulty of Inheritance* (2015), Shawna Ferris’ *Street Sex Work and Canadian Cities: Resisting a Dangerous Order* (2015), David Hugill’s *Missing Women, Missing News* (2010), Elya M. Durisin et al.’s *Red Light Labour: Sex Work Regulation, Agency, and Resistance* (2018), and the seminal works of criminologist John Lowman withal comprise and shape the Canadian scholarly collection. Even within popular Canadian literature, there are memoirs, such as Amber Dawn’s *How Poetry Saved my Life* (2013) and Maggie de Vries *Missing Sarah* (2008), that discuss the lived realities of sex work.

I have also encountered multiple articles that discuss sex work. These include: Janet Lever et

al.'s "Racial and Ethnic Segmentation of Female Prostitution in Los Angeles County" (2005). Becki L. Ross and Rachel Sullivan's "Tracing Lines of Horizontal Hostility: How Sex Workers and Gay Activists Battled for Space, Voice and Belonging in Vancouver, 1975-1985" (2012) does as its title suggests; this aligns with Ross' other works. Other significant titles are Sarah Hunt's "Representing Colonial Violence: Trafficking, Sex Work, and the Violence of Law" (2016) and Hallgrimsdottir et al.'s "Fallen Women and Rescued Girls: Social Stigma and Media Narratives of the Sex Industry in Victoria, B. C., from 1980 to 2005" (2006).

Amongst such an extensive body of literature, it can be challenging to differentiate contributions. However, Smith and Mac's contributions to the existing literature are evident in the text's comprehensiveness. *Revolting Prostitutes* discusses many of the issues raised in other texts that focus on sex work and brings together these significant conversations and topics into a singular piece. Not only does *Revolting Prostitutes* show depth and breadth through its geographic foci and subject matter but presents its arguments in linguistic terms that can be understood by academics and non-academics alike. Smith and Mac's use of women and the gendered nature of sex work is particularly significant as, by and large, the impacts of sex work and sex work regulation tend to affect poor racialized women more negatively.

As mentioned, Smith and Mac assert the importance of terminology and the proper definition and use of specific terms. "Sex work" is a broad term used to describe various aspects of the sex industry. It includes some of the following: prostitution (on-street and in-doors), escorting, stripping, pornography, body rub parlours, sex phone hotlines and Internet chat rooms, and webcamming (which can consist of sexual or non-sexual [ex. watching someone eat on camera] acts people gain pleasure from). It is important to note that while all prostitution is considered sex work, not all sex work constitutes prostitution. This distinction is significant, especially when devising effective legislation; however, it is a distinction often ignored by non-sex workers in positions that can initiate change. Smith and Mac alleviate this confusion by explicitly defining the terminology that in their text that "sex work" refers to prostitution unless indicated otherwise.²³

Smith and Mac utilize an array of interviews but do not explicitly state whether they conducted these interviews themselves or acquired them from outside sources. These interviews are a part of the methods used to comprise their source base and, therefore, impact their overall methodological approach. Furthermore, Smith and Mac, perhaps unintentionally, disregard memoir as a medium to discuss sex work. They present memoirs about sex work as books of "sexy escapades"; making these literary mediums appear as though they detract from the issues sex workers face and appeal solely to the male gaze. While the glamourization of sex work does occur in popular forms of media, the medium of memoir is also a way for women and men to share their lived experiences. It can also express grief and loss- as is the case with de Vries' piece. By delineating memoirs as "sexy escapade texts", Smith and Mac do not credit the medium with the full range of expressions and experiences it can display. Nonetheless, Molly Smith and Juno Mac's *Revolting Prostitutes: The Fight for Sex Workers Rights* is exceptionally well-written and manages to solidify its significance within and among such a vast network of scholarly and popular literature.

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¹ Molly Smith and Juno Mac, *Revolting Prostitutes: The Fight for Sex Workers Rights* (London: Verso Press, 2018), 1-2.

² Smith and Mac, *Revolting Prostitute*, 4.

³ Smith and Mac, *Revolting Prostitute*, 19.

⁴ Smith and Mac, *Revolting Prostitute*, 3.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Smith and Mac, *Revolting Prostitute*, 4.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Smith and Mac, *Revolting Prostitute*, 5.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Smith and Mac, *Revolting Prostitute*, 22.

²¹ Ibid.

²² Smith and Mac, *Revolting Prostitute*, 57.

²³ Smith and Mac, *Revolting Prostitute*, 1.