Legal Prostitution as Sex Work: Discourses of the Moonlite Bunny Ranch

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Legal Prostitution as Sex Work: Discourses of the Moonlite Bunny Ranch

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Abstract

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Historical, cultural, and media discourses of prostitution characterize prostitutes as victims in need of saving or deviants in need of punishment and restraint. HBO’s reality television series Cathouse takes place at a legal brothel in Nevada and shows a very different view of prostitution. Using methods of rhetorical criticism, I demonstrate how the media, form, and content of this show interact to construct a narrative of the Moonlite Bunny Ranch as a “typical American business,” in which the prostitutes are “sex workers” who are empowered by their work and provide a service to the community. This narrative stands in stark contrast to dominant discourses of prostitution, which begs the question: How does this representation of legal prostitution compare with the lived experiences of the women who work at the Moonlite Bunny Ranch? To examine this question, I employ ethnographic methods of participant observation and in-depth interviewing. I interviewed 9 women and conducted observations over a 5-week period in November and December 2007. I used qualitative thematic analysis to examine these discourses. I suggest that these women both invoke and resist dominant discourses of prostitution in the ways they live and make sense of their lives. Additionally, I argue that these women’s narratives are influenced by the organizational narrative of the Moonlite Bunny Ranch as reflected in Cathouse and in daily life at the Ranch. My use of rhetorical and qualitative investigative practices in conjunction with one another demonstrates how
they can make useful partners when conducting research that compares representation with lived experiences. Additionally, recognition that the lived experiences of these sex workers do not simply rehearse dominant discourses lends support to my contention that a counter-narrative of prostitution has been constructed in *Cathouse* and at the Moonlite Bunny Ranch. Additionally, I show that the relationship between how prostitution is theorized and how it is lived are often in conflict in the context of this legal brothel.

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Introduction

In a survey of a thousand girls between the ages of 15 and 19, 63 percent “aspired to be a glamour model, while 25 percent plumped for lap-dancing.”\(^1\) Despite the fact that sex workers, from strippers to prostitutes, from *Playboy* models to porn stars, are as stigmatized in society as they have ever been, these women have increasingly become part of mainstream media representations over the course of the last ten years. Recent examples include the widespread television coverage of the life and death of former *Playboy* centerfold, Anna Nicole Smith, the E! Entertainment network reality series the *Girls Next Door*, which follows the lives of *Playboy* entrepreneur Hugh Hefner’s three live-in girlfriends, the ever-increasing presence of internet pornography, and HBO’s *Real Sex*, and *Cathouse*.

HBO’s original series *Cathouse* is a documentary-style reality television program that takes place in the legal Nevada brothel the Moonlite Bunny Ranch. As prostitution is illegal in most states in this country, it is hardly surprising that most media representations do not portray the practice in a positive light. Whether they take place in Nevada or elsewhere, whether they are fiction or non-fiction, media portrayals of prostitution remain locked in reform/punishment discourses.\(^2\) In contrast, life at the Moonlite Bunny Ranch, as portrayed in *Cathouse*, presents a very different picture of prostitution.

Unlike media depictions that focus on the need to reform or punish sex workers for their deviant lifestyles, *Cathouse* shows empowered sex workers kept safe by the legal protections Nevada provides for their business. The protection of the women does not act to “save” them; rather, it leads to safety for the customer and allows the women to
provide a necessary service to the community, according to the show. The sex worker is a businesswoman, not a deviant. The freedom of choice they enact in their career selection and the daily choices they make at work, as well as the money they make providing this service are shown to empower the women.

Inspired by the seeming disconnect between dominant media discourses and what is shown on *Cathouse*, my goal for this project is to conduct an analysis of the show and the lived experiences of real women working in the sex industry. By examining both media depictions about these specific women and conducting an ethnographic study, which includes both participant observation and in-depth interviews with the women, I hope to avoid the pitfalls of other studies. These limitations include only speaking with prostitutes working illegally, basing conclusions on prurient interests of biased groups, and/or only using media discourse as the basis for drawing conclusions about prostitution in general. There are precedents for research of prostitution from the perspective of sex workers, especially those working illegally or in The Netherlands legally, and, specifically, of the Nevada brothel system in studies from feminist, health, and sociological perspectives. What have not been widely researched are the lived experiences of legal sex workers in the United States.

Despite the prevalence of both fiction and non-fiction media discourses about prostitution, little research exists about these texts. More importantly, there is virtually no research that examines both these texts as well as the contexts in which they are produced. Douglas M. Kellner argues that a cultural, or media, studies approach to research suggests examination of three stages of a text: production of texts, textual
analysis, and audience reception and use of texts. Kellner does not say that all analysis of cultural texts must undergo all three stages. Rather he argues that cultural studies are the strongest when all three stages are analyzed.

Although audience-based research about texts based on prostitution would be interesting for a future study, it is beyond the scope of this one. What is of primary interest here are the lives of the women of the Moonlite Bunny Ranch. Examining audience reception and interpretation would not tell us much about these women’s lived experiences. To get at the experiences of these women, this research will first focus on both the textual analysis and the cultural context of Cathouse by first conducting a rhetorical, or textual, analysis of the HBO series Cathouse. I then carry out an ethnographic study at the Moonlite Bunny Ranch, the brothel at which Cathouse films. This study, therefore, aims to fill the gap in research about the communicative practices of legal sex workers by interacting with the women themselves. I attend to what they say about their work, lives outside work, and negotiating the in-between, as well as how they say it.

There are potential methodological, theoretical and substantive contributions of this project. Methodologically, by focusing on both the media text and the cultural context in which it is produced, this research aims to expand how communication scholarship about mediated discourse of non-fiction television is conducted. Most studies of reality television to date are based purely on the textual analysis of these types of shows. In contrast, this study examines both what is represented and the context from which the source material has been taken. Theoretically, I explore the role narrative plays
in constructing the story of the Moonlite Bunny Ranch on *Cathouse*. However, the role narrative construction plays in shaping discourses on reality television has been theorized before this. So, since my study involves both the media representation of these women and their lived experiences, I had to see how their lived stories compared to what is represented on television. Beyond just their stories, my additional research into discourses of prostitution facilitated my ability to situate their narratives within the context of stories of prostitution overall. Ultimately, I have been able to contribute to what we know about multiple levels of this narrative, including the historical, cultural, community, and individual, actually interacting in everyday talk of the women at the Moonlite Bunny Ranch.

Substantively, there are a number of potential contributions I offer with this project. First, as already noted, prostitution is illegal in all but the state of Nevada in this country. As Chapter 1 demonstrates, how we think about prostitution is limited either to characterizing prostitutes as in need of saving from the evil men who have forced them into the practice, or as stigmatized women who need to be punished for breaking the law and transgressing the mores of society. The contrary message in *Cathouse* has the potential to challenge what we believe to be true about prostitution with its counter-narrative of prostitution as work. At a time when Nevada may be considering expansion of legal prostitution and when sexual women are increasingly a part of the mainstream, this work could contribute a needed voice to the public discussion of this issue.

The voice that the public needs to hear, but most of the time does not, is that of the sex worker herself. There are a number of sex workers who have written about their
experiences, but much of this literature has not found a mainstream audience. I hope that this work brings the voices of these sex workers to a wider audience. More importantly, however, I hope this work gives these women the opportunity to share their perspectives as they live them and make sense of them. Comparing the situation of the working girls at the Moonlite Bunny Ranch to what is described in academic discourse and/or media portrayals has the potential of benefiting not only our societal understanding of the practice of prostitution from the workers’ points of view but also for the workers themselves to be able to give voice to their experiences.

There are several important concepts that need to be outlined before getting into the analysis provided by the following chapters. First, I will establish the conceptual issues grounding this project. These concepts include the process of identity/ies construction as it relates to women and work, and how we both live stories and use them to make sense of our lives. Each of these concepts is related in this work and contribute to how these women live, make sense of their lives, and why they feel the need to construct the meanings they do. Next, I will outline the organizational narrative of the Moonlite Bunny Ranch. I constructed this narrative based on what was on *Cathouse* and what I observed and learned from the women at the Moonlite Bunny Ranch about their lives and work there. The procedures I used to identify this narrative are discussed in Chapter 4. Since this dissertation is situated in relation to this narrative, it is necessary to explain it here. Finally, I will outline the chapters to follow and provide elements of my overall argument that the business narrative constructed on *Cathouse* reflects the lived experiences of the sex workers at the Moonlite Bunny Ranch.
**Conceptual Grounding**

There are a few key assumptions, or concepts, that guide the exploration of this contention in the chapters that follow. These ideas will be crucial to the framework of this study and therefore will be discussed before going any further. I begin with perspectives of identity, work identity, and the performance of identity.

*Identity/ies Construction/Performance*

Who are you? Is there a question that is more difficult to answer? When compelled to answer this question, I usually start with the ever popular, “it depends,” which merely serves to highlight the indeterminant nature of identity as a concept. To complicate matters, there is little agreement in current research about what identity “is.” First, although I use the term “identity,” I do not view it as an individual, static, uni-dimensional construct as early theories of identity have conceived it. Rather, I believe that it is constructed through interaction, involves change, and is multi-dimensional. Second, since identity is performed through communication, it is as much a process as it is a construct. The processes through which identity is constructed and performed are also context specific. Finally, although I intend to explore the characteristics of identity of legal commercial sex workers, I do not believe there is an identity of the legal commercial sex worker. For this reason, this research focuses on the interactionally constructed identity/ies of the women of this legal brothel.

Research in organizational and family communication studies has explored issues of role and identity negotiation, especially for women. However, little work has been done examining identity and women in marginalized or stigmatized work environments.
despite the need for “studies of high-risk populations whose identity formation potential is impeded by persistent social structural and economic obstacles.”¹³ No work has been done that examines how these identities are performed in the media as well as in “real” life. These are issues that are explored in Chapters 5, 6, and 7.

One of the most influential theories of identity comes from Erik Erikson. Erikson conceptualizes identity as an individual psychological process through which young people learn who they are. This process is one that virtually concludes in late adolescence from his perspective. For Erikson, “everyone has some subjective sense of ‘who they are’”¹⁴ that is developed individually, through psychological development. Psychological theories of identity have taken much from Erikson’s contributions to develop their perspectives of identity. Joseph E. Marcia, for example, notes that identity is “an internal, self-constructed, dynamic organization of drives, abilities, beliefs, and individual history.”¹⁵ From this perspective, identity is viewed as a “thing” that belongs to an individual. Although psychological theories of identity might have the advantage of attributing agency to the individual, these same theories are limited in that they tend to ignore the influence of social processes and assume that identity is a singular, finished product possessed by individuals.

These limitations are addressed by social approaches to identity. Drawing on work of social interactionists, social approaches to identity, in contrast, argue that identity is defined in relation, in interaction with others. Identity, from this perspective, is not the property of an individual but, rather, is part of the interactive process of communication and is “relational in the sense that it is embedded in interpersonal relationships.”¹⁶
approach allows both for subjective understandings of identity while also allowing us to view identity as something that can change according to a given interaction and/or context. James A. Côte summarizes:

a social focus, holds subjectivist epistemological assumptions, and takes a critical or contextual orientation. Accordingly, “identity” is located by those taking this approach (a) in the interactional realm as people engage in their day-to-day social engagements; (b) as a manifestation that is best understood in terms of its emergent and transitory properties; and (c) as varying by the specific context in which the interaction takes place, some of which can be transformative, some sustaining, and some debilitating.17

Although Côte might be glossing over real differences when he argues that we can create a “social science of identity,”18 which incorporates both the individual and social approaches to the concept, he does offer valuable insights into both perspectives.

While social approaches to identity might address some of the limitations of psychological conceptions, social approaches do have difficulty with the question of agency. If the self is defined in relation and as a process, how do individuals have agency? Or, is agency attributed to others and our surroundings? I would argue, although Côte does not, that social perspectives do not necessarily strip individuals of agency. Rather, agency must become defined from a social perspective as well as that which exists “between.”

Eura Jung and Michael L. Hecht further clarify identity from a social perspective. They argue for a Communication Theory of Identity which posits:
that social relations and roles are internalized by individuals as identities through
communication. Individuals’ identities, in turn, are acted out as social behavior
through communication. Identity not only defines an individual but also reflects
social roles and relations through communication. Moreover, social behavior is a
function of identity through communication.¹⁹

From this perspective, focusing only on the individual would give a distorted, if not
totally false, view of identity.

Given this perspective, Jung and Hecht further argue that there are multiple loci or
frames of identity that are interdependent: the personal, the enacted, the relational, and
the communal. They argue that individuals can experience internal conflicts when these
frames of identity are not consistent with one another. They contend that, when
individuals experience gaps, individuals feel the need to bridge these gaps in order to be
consistent and avoid contradictions. Although Jung and Hecht discuss how this process
might occur using two such gaps as examples, they do so under the assumption that
individuals must resolve conflicts and be consistent. Additionally, they focus on variables
related to communication competence as the tools to fill in communication and identity
gaps. Jung and Hecht’s perspective on identity gaps does help us to recognize that there
are multiple dimensions of identity that might not always be consistent with one another
and that the points of interpenetration between and amongst these multiple loci are what
give identity its dynamic nature. We should consider, however, whether or not
individuals do indeed wish the multiple dimensions of their identities always to be
consistent.
Related theories support the social perspective of identity and characterize the concept in similar ways. Hartmut B. Mokros claims that it is only through self-reflection in talk and interaction that identity is constructed.\textsuperscript{20} Stella Ting-Toomey argues that identity is negotiated through mutual communication and that it is through this process that mutually agreed upon identities are constructed.\textsuperscript{21} R. D. Laing describes a “spiral of reciprocal perspectives” “to capture the notion of how one views him/herself and others’ view of him/her play out in social relationships.”\textsuperscript{22} George Herbert Mead discusses identity as the construction of an “I” in relation to the “me” as reflected between the self and societal perceptions of the self.\textsuperscript{23} And, finally, Charles Horton Cooley described a “looking glass self” as that self in which our identity is reflected back at us by others.\textsuperscript{24}

Consistent with Jung and Hecht’s assumption that identity gaps must be resolved, most of these perspectives assume that agreement, whether it is between an individual and others, or within the individual, is necessary to construct a whole identity. From a social perspective, then, identity can be considered a multi-dimensional concept manifested in relation and through interactional communication processes.\textsuperscript{25}

In his analysis, Erving Goffman also approaches identity from a social perspective. He argues that not only are our identities defined by our interaction with others, but that individuals perform their selves in relation to our perceptions of the expectations of others. Unlike these other theorists, however, Goffman discusses the existence of multiple identities that cannot always be resolved. He characterizes these identities as “front-stage” (public) and “back-stage” (private). He characterizes the front-stage identity as that which individuals construct in order to represent the self in
particular ways to the other while, at the same time, conforming to what the individual
perceives the other expects. From Goffman’s perspective, individuals in relation to one
another always involve constraints, manipulation, and a division between public and
private selves as performed. Back stage identity is considered the more “true” identity
from his perspective because, although it still remains a construction, individuals are not
performing it for others. Where Goffman is limited, as with many of the other theorists, is
in the assumptions that 1) individuals cannot resolve the differences between these two,
seemingly different, faces, and 2) that the front- and back-stage parts of identity are
different, with the private standing as more “true” than the public.26

Analyses that problematize the idea of a stable, singular self are helpful in
expanding our understanding of identity. However, reducing this problematic to simple
binaries does not truly expand our understanding. As Vincent R. Waldron notes, “(t)he
dichotomous portrayal of emotion as real or expressed, private or public, genuine or
fabricated, lends itself to oversimplification of the role of communication processes in the
emotional lives of organizational members.”27 Because the sex workers I worked with are
a part of the organization of the Moonlite Bunny Ranch and I am interested in their lives
at work, a look into organizational communication literature regarding the negotiation of
women’s public and private selves at work and home is helpful.

*Negotiating Public and Private Selves at Home and Work*

Much work has been done in organizational literature about identity and role
negotiation. The beginning of our current understandings of women’s public and private
work roles is supplied by Helena Znaniecka Lopata. Before the industrial revolution, few
jobs, for anyone, existed outside the home exclusively. But with industrialization came a whole world apart from the home. Lopata provides a historical overview of the rise of separate public and private spheres, and discussed the implications of this division for women. She argues that the rise of separate spheres led not only to the idea that men should be the only actors in the public sphere but to the rise of the ideology of the "ideal woman" and of "patriotic motherhood" to provide the rationale for women's exclusion from public workplaces.28

Women's exclusion from the public had two important consequences. The first is that women had to acquire new sources of influence if they were to participate at all. The second involved making "invisible many aspects of actual work and activities of women that were important to the whole society."29 In recent years, as women have become increasingly involved in public life in general, and in organizational life specifically, the interdependent and interwoven nature of public and private life have become apparent.30 Yet, there exists tension because of the interdependent and overlapping of these areas of life.

This split of the public and private spheres has significant implications for identity construction and has particular importance for women in organizations. Dennis K. Mumby argues that feminist critical perspectives offer a way to recognize and examine the gendered nature of organizations. He argues that within the workplace, what is public and what is private are considered in dualistic tension. Traditional examinations of the workplace exclude what is private. However, feminist critical perspectives question the validity of this perspective while at the same time recognizing the gendered nature of this
assumption. What Mumby's argument suggests is that both the separation and intersection of the public and private spheres have implications for how we conceive of the roles of women in the workplace.

Caryn E. Medved and Erika L Kirby extend organizational communication literature by focusing on the work women do in the private sphere. They argue that mothers have difficulty defining their identities in a society in which their work is not viewed as "work." As definitions of self are inherently tied to careers, mothers are in crisis as to how to define their selves. In response to dominant definitions of self through corporate models, mothers are using the discourse of organizations to attach value to what they do. Medved and Kirby's work offers significant contributions to the problems of where work takes place, as well as how we evaluate the worth of what we do. Additionally, their research problematizes the types of work that are considered legitimate and how the location of that work can affect its value to society.

Erika Kirby, et.al., provide a rich overview of research that broadly examines the discourse of work and family communication. Reviewing literature from work and family research over the years, these scholars offer several areas of problematics which deserve our attention. They argue that issues of boundary, identity, rationality, and voice are in need of problematizing. They systematically explore the problematics in each area before offering suggestions for future approaches to research. Their work provides an excellent basis from which to begin problematizing issues such as public/private spheres, work/family identities, technical/practical knowledge bases, and whose voices are used/heard in organizations.
This organizational communication literature provides a valuable basis from which to problematize the types of work that are considered legitimate for women. This research further problematizes public/private binary perspectives of identity performance and construction. However, most of it remains focused on traditional roles for women, both in public and private spheres. Additionally, this work focuses on fairly mainstream locations where this work takes place, that is, at home or conventional corporate settings. While valuable in providing new ways to think of women’s roles in the workplace and at home, there is other research that further challenges the notion of separate front- and back-stage identities and addresses issues of role and identity negotiation. The context of the total institution is one in which the public and private dimensions of identity might not be separable at all.

Identity Performance in the Total Institution

Arlie Russell Hochschild defines the total institution in the context of her study of flight attendants. She argues that the total institution is one in which workers and customers are confined, such as on an airline flight. She contends that flight attendants must put on a fake self when serving passengers that is separate from their real selves. She further reasons that employees tend to either “become” their fake selves at work in order to tow the company line or are able to separate their real selves from their fake selves. Either way, due to the confined nature of the total institution, employees risk negative psychological effects from the clash between their inner and outer feelings, such as numbness, stress, alienation, burnout, exhaustion, depersonalization, and a decreased sense of personal accomplishment. Hochschild claims that the negotiation of emotions
required in work situations, as opposed to in private life, and the “profit motive (that) slips in” at work requires “emotion labor.” Thus, emotion becomes “processed, standardized and subject to hierarchical control.” In other words, the negotiation process required of employees in a total institution between their public and private identities necessitates emotional labor which can lead to negative effects. Hochschild, however, reinforces the dichotomy between public and private contexts which, in turn, reinforces the fake self/real self binary.

In her study of the total institution of the cruise ship, Sarah J. Tracy challenges this binary. She argues, in reference to Hochschild, that “employees are paid to create a ‘package’ of emotions. On a cruise ship, employee emotion is not just a response to work situations but actually is the work.” On the ship, employees work 5- to 10-month contracts with no days off. They are expected to be “on” whenever there were passengers around. As Tracy notes,

Total institutions control, in an unbroken way, the time and space of organizational members (Goffman, 1961). As such the emotions of those within such institutions are regulated in a more totalizing manner than is possible in most 9-to-5 jobs. Furthermore, pressures that we might traditionally conceive of as either public or private become blurred if not entirely indistinguishable.

While Hochschild contributes to our understanding of the emotional labor that can occur at work, Tracy’s analysis takes us further in raising our awareness to the artificiality of such public/private, and even work/not-work boundaries.
Tracy gives an example to demonstrate how her public and private identities came into conflict while working on the cruise ship. One day she received news that a relative had died. Despite her grief, she still had to sing, dance, and smile in a show that night, as if nothing were wrong. She argues that her discomfort in this particular performance did not arise from feeling one emotion and showing another (emotive dissonance) or disagreeing with the emotion labor norms (faking in bad faith). Discomfort came in trying to perform two acts at once….total institutions decidedly limit the discourses (acts) available for employees to understand and make sense of their identities.  

This example highlights the need to understand identity as multiple rather than as two-halves, public and private, of a whole that can only be enacted within particular contexts, while still bringing to light potential conflicts that can occur.

**Performance/Construction of Sex Worker Identity**

Identity as performed/constructed through social processes, the overlap of public/private selves, and emotional labor and its effects on identity in a total institution are all particularly relevant concepts when it comes to the life of brothel-based sex workers. Tracy describes the management policy on the cruise ship as one in which employees were considered “public property” whenever they were in passenger areas. This resembles Alexa Albert’s description of the hiring process at the now-defunct Mustang Ranch. She explains that the women, who were required to work 3-weeks on/1-week off each month, during which time they were not to leave the premises of the brothel, were always expected to perform their roles as prostitutes whether they were
with customers or not. Management policies such as these affect the constructed working environment at the Mustang Ranch in many ways. As Tracy describes the total institution:

…individuals within total institutions tend to coconstruct a single dominant discourse that essentially blankets dialogue and suffocates conflict….Through a Foucauldian lens, the pain of emotion labor in a total institution has less to do with losing the real self and more to do with having to understand and construct one’s identity in an arena wherein a conflictual landscape and a dialogic conversation are relinquished. Of course, employees may talk about a real self, cut off from organizational discursivities, but this may only be an attempt to keep from feeling as though they are lying to themselves or being brainwashed. Foucauldian theory tells us that ‘real’ identity is produced and constrained through disciplinary forces and organizational norms.

The expectation always to be performing was one norm imposed by the institution of the Mustang Ranch. The clothes the women were expected to wear and the process of running into the common area for a “line-up” every time the door buzzer rang signaling the arrival of a customer were others. As Albert characterizes them, sex workers at the Mustang Ranch closely resemble the cruise ship workers Tracy describes.

As it appears in *Cathouse*, this same phenomenon of co-constructing a single dominant discourse appears to be part of the process of identity construction for the women at the Moonlite Bunny Ranch as well. The women of the Moonlite Bunny Ranch are not required to stay on-site as the women of the Mustang Ranch were. However, the
sex workers at the Moonlite Bunny Ranch work 12-hour shifts and many of them live at the Ranch as well. While they are working, the women have runners who will do their errands so that they do not have to leave the premises. What this means is that the concept of identity construction in the total institution is relevant to the lives of the women at the Moonlite Bunny Ranch. Even so, along with Tracy, I did not want to assume that their identity/ies are wholly subsumed by the institutional discourse within which they operate. Rather, I questioned whether their representation on Cathouse might have only reflected the institutional discourse. So, there was more work for me to do to examine their processes of identity/ies construction within this larger discourse to see how they are related. This approach is not how most research characterizes media portrayals of prostitutes nor the lived experience of sex workers.

_Narrative Inquiry_

Social theories of identity assume that identity is constructed through interaction. Underlying these theories is the idea that reality itself is part of larger social processes in which reality is constructed. As Peter L. Berger and Thomas Luckmann propose, analysis of the social construction of reality involves “not only the empirical variety of ‘knowledge’ in human societies, but also with the processes by which any body of ‘knowledge’ comes to be socially established as ‘reality.’” Perspectives of narrative, as a way to live and make sense of our lives, and as a research methodology are consistent with social theories of identity. As Cathryn Kohler Riessman put it, “The meanings of life events are not fixed or constant; rather, they evolve, influenced by subsequent life events.” Both temporal and spatial features of our lives influence the shifts in meaning
we experience. These features are inherent in the way we live our lives, not imposed through story structures later. Events as experienced have beginnings and endings. As such, they are structured temporally.\textsuperscript{48} The roles of temporality and spatiality in narrative, additionally, help me to address issues of contradiction that may occur over time, making it an appropriate approach for this study. Before discussing the issues of temporality and spatiality, it is first important to discuss some common characteristics of narrative identified in studies of stories from a variety of disciplines.

As Michael Bamberg and Allyssa McCabe summarize, “With narrative, people strive to configure space and time, deploy cohesive devices, reveal identity of actors and relatedness of actions across scenes. They create themes, plots, and drama. In so doing, narrators make sense of themselves, social situations, and history.”\textsuperscript{49} Bamberg and McCabe’s perspective is consistent with characteristics of narratives identified by Riessman. In her review of theories of narrative, she identifies common characteristics as ordering and sequence, plots organized to make sense of experiences that act as unifying mechanisms, temporality and spatiality, and linguistic devices that are used to hold stories together and make stories meaningful to listeners.\textsuperscript{50} Each of these perspectives points to the need to understand narratives as stories, involving plots, characters, and settings.

Like conventions of fictional stories, these devices are used to create coherence, or wholeness in our lives.\textsuperscript{51} Unity, coherence and structure are crucial for the examination life stories.\textsuperscript{52} Therefore, coherence and structure become ways to study narrative and
identity as well as ways to evaluate the “authenticity” of one’s story. As David Carr explains,

inauthenticity can be a matter of either too little or too much coherence.

Authenticity is not a matter of this or that social role, or of the fact that it is a social
and thus traditionally prescribed role; it consists rather in the recognition that,
whatever the role, it is I who choose it in the end, one way or another.\textsuperscript{53}

Coherence, then, becomes important for the stories we choose to tell \textit{and} a means for
evaluating stories.

However, unlike fictional stories, issues such as temporality and spatiality tangibly
affect how we understand and use these stories. Temporality refers to the idea that we
live in the present but are also connected to the past and future in particular ways. In
addition to temporal issues, spatial ones are important as well. Spatial issues concentrate
primarily on how embodied individuals exist in relation to one another as well as to
communities, cultures, and how we are situated historically.\textsuperscript{54} Both of these issues are
crucial to understand in a study of narrative. Therefore, it is important to explicate further
issues of temporality and spatiality.

\textit{Temporality}

Stories are the frameworks for our lives, as we both live them as well as make
sense of how we have lived through them. While Louis O. Mink would disagree with this
thesis, his concentration on the temporal nature of stories has led others to assert it. Mink
argues that “to know an event by retrospection is categorically, not incidentally, different
from knowing it by prediction or anticipation.”\textsuperscript{55} The basis for this argument is the idea
that when we describe an event in retrospect the description is subject to the conventions of storytelling through which it is told. It then becomes what we make it in the present rather than what it was in the past. Despite directing our attention to the temporal nature of narrative and sense-making, Mink does not believe that stories are also how we live our lives. For him, making meaning of our lives only happens through stories in retrospect.

Many other theorists have taken Mink’s lead and put the temporal nature of meaning making at the center of their analyses. However, many of them argue, contrary to Mink, that we do indeed live our stories in the present. Even so, the stories we live are not the same as the stories we use to make sense of our lives in retrospect. As Carr explains, meaning making structures are in the midst of experience and action, not in some higher-level linguistic construction or reconstruction of the experiences and actions involved. They are structures and relations that exist for the experiencer or the agent in the process of experiencing or acting; they constitute the meaningfulness or direction of the action; it is in virtue of them that these things “make sense” prior to and independently of our reflecting on them and explicitly recounting them to ourselves or to others.56

As his words imply, the idea that we live stories does not preclude also using stories for reflection. It is the “protentional-retentional” structures that span past, present, and future that allow us to create coherence in our lives despite changes over the course of time. So,
we create coherence as we make sense of the past from the perspective of our present selves.\textsuperscript{57}

Stephen Crites also agrees that we both live stories and use them retrospectively to make sense. However, he reserves the word ‘experience’ for what is incorporated into one’s story, and thus owned, owned up to, appropriated. It will follow from this usage that many things are experienced retroactively\ldots (He prefers) to say that most of the things that are sensed are never experienced, and that only those that are attended to are experienced.\textsuperscript{58}

Crites concludes that our strength includes “a strong sense of self-identity, rooted in the past, and an equally strong power of self-transcendence, directed toward the future. This strength must be concentrated in the present, which is the point of tension between self-identity and self-transcendence.”\textsuperscript{59} It is also the point at which social, cultural, and historical narratives create further tension. It is storytelling that gives us the ability to create coherence\textsuperscript{60} whether we experience contradiction over time or not. For example, we may do something in the past that we would not do now. But these actions are not necessarily wrong or out of character. Rather, the time and place in which the original events occurred are taken into consideration when making sense of them later. In this way, narrative as a way to examine identity/ies addresses some of the weaknesses of theories of identity alone.

\textit{Spatiality}

As human beings we are situated not only within time but also within space, in a particular universe, on a planet, in individual countries. How much we travel and interact
with others, what we do for a living, what we do for fun, and how we do all of these things are important to who we are and who we become. Mark Freeman argues that cultural texts, whether they are mediated or experienced proximately through conventions and practices passed down through families or communities, become woven into our memory and influence the development of the self. He contends that much of what influences people culturally is unconsciously woven into our selves. Therefore, we often do not recognize the influence they have upon us. He, thus, reasons that “recollective processes of the sort most often tied to individuals, to selves, coming to terms with their own personal histories, were also taking place on the plane of culture.” What Freeman’s argument points to is the idea that personal narratives are only one level at which narratives operate. They also function at the level of culture.

Freeman maintains that the site where our conscious, agency employing, acting selves meet the unconscious part of us that acts or believes out of habit, without consciousness, reflection, or necessarily intent, is our “cultural horizon” – the point where cultural narratives influence us in ways that we do not recognize. He further explains the idea of the “narrative unconscious,” as that which we become aware of precisely during those moments when our own historical and cultural situatedness comes into view. Hence, in addition, the idea that alongside the manifest narrative of one’s life there exists some form or other of counter-narrative, one that indeed ‘comes up against’ those ordinary understandings that conceal even as they reveal.
Hence, the self is influenced not only by the personal (or, individual) and cultural, but also the historical. Carr further contends that “a community exists wherever a narrative account exists of a we which has continuous existence through its experiences and activities.” Therefore, narrative can be said to influence people at personal (individual), social (community), cultural, and historical levels. At any given time, we may be living any combination of these narratives, consciously or unconsciously. Each level of which may have more or less influence on us as individuals, as a community, or culture, at any given historically situated time.

This perspective is consistent with Jung and Hecht’s multiple, interdependent loci or frames of identity, – including, the personal, the enacted, the relational, and the communal. Whereas individual-based theories of identity assume that there is at least some level on which individuals are not connected to others, social theories assume that the individual cannot exist outside of relation with others. This means that what makes us unique individuals is not a sense of distance from others, but the amalgam of relations we have with others. Carr argues that interior narration can be taken as evidence that narrative structure and structuring are essentially intersubjective, suggesting a social aspect to narrative.

For this project, the multiple, intersecting levels of narrative are as important as the multiple loci of identity. As you will see, media narratives, academic narratives, community narratives, and personal narratives of prostitution are just a few of the different types of narratives operating at any given time about this topic. They do not operate merely as interior narration either. These narratives are both personal and public,
individual and community, and can be examined through the stories told in mediated and in-person discourses. Many of these narratives are contradictory both among each other as well as within themselves.

Arjun Appadurai provides an important explanation of the role of media in influencing discourse and self-making. As such he worth quoting at length:

Electronic media give a new twist to the environment within which the modern and the global often appear as flip sides of the same coin. Always carrying the sense of distance between viewer and event, these media nevertheless compel the transformation of everyday discourse. At the same time, they are resources for experiments in self-making in all sorts of societies, for all sorts of persons. They allow scripts for possible lives to be imbricated with the glamour of film stars and fantastic film plots and yet also be tied to the plausibility of news shows, documentaries, and other black-and-white forms of telemediation and printed text. Because of the sheer multiplicity of the forms in which they appear (cinema, television, computers, and telephones) and because of the rapid way in which they move through daily life routines, electronic media provide resources for self-imagining as an everyday social project.67

For this project the role of media in constructing a cultural narrative of prostitution and how that narrative compares to the lived experiences of the women represented are central issues. Examining the media narrative and these women’s lived experiences allows me to explore various implications both of how those narratives compare and the narrative that was communicated to the broader television audience.
Finally, to the extent that narrative is part of the fabric of experience, Freeman concludes:

(T)here are narrative ‘reserves,’ untold and unwritten stories, cultural as well as personal, that are in important respects constitutive of experience. Narratives are with us in ways we don’t quite know; they are part of our deep memory, which is itself comprised, in part, of sedimented layers of history. By recognizing this, we open ourselves to the possibility of exploring new and different forms of making sense of personal life.68

For this reason, we must focus an examination centered on narratives as both lived and reflected upon experiences as well as on multiple levels, to see how they operate (to reify, normalize, and resist) and identify the possibilities that remain open.

This point about possibilities open to us is not to be ignored as it speaks to the issue of agency. Carr says that we choose which stories to tell and how to tell them and therefore that storytelling is key to agency.69 Crites contends that the role of the author of a narrative and the role of narrator of a story are not necessarily the same.70 This is due to the multiple levels of narrative at work at any given time as well as due to the role of the audience with whom stories are shared. As both author and narrator, however, storytellers have agency and choice in what to tell, how to tell it, and with whom to share. This positionality in telling is important in the analysis of both Cathouse and the sex workers’ stories.
Performance

I will briefly mention the concept of performance before concluding this section as it is an underlying principle in much of the literature discussed above. Susan E. Chase connects qualitative ethnographic field methods, such as participant observation and oral life history interviews with the idea of performance. Chase holds that when narratives are communicated publicly they become “performance narratives.” Drawing on considerable research of narratives that has occurred across a multitude of disciplines, Cathryn Kohler Riessman further supports this perspective when she states that personal narratives may be analyzed textually, as conversation, from a cultural perspective, in their political/historical contexts, and performatively, when considered as public performances. As noted above, Erving Goffman’s metaphor of identity as performed “front stage” and “back stage” explicitly calls upon us to view our/selves as actors. Kristin M. Langellier observes that telling the stories of our lives amounts to performing our identity/ies. As such, it is important to take the study of identity and narrative as performed into consideration. More importantly, the participants in this study perform in different contexts for different audiences. On one level they performed for the television cameras while filming Cathouse. On another level, they performed particular aspects of their identities for their customers, with one another, and with the people with whom they interact outside of work. Each of these must be taken into consideration in their negotiation of identity/ies.

Riessman identifies common characteristics in the performance of identity/ies that ought to be the focus of analysis of personal narratives. These include how
performers negotiate their identity/ies in collaboration with their audiences, how contextual features of personal narratives allow performers to adapt to local situations, and how performers position themselves socially in relation to audience, characters, and themselves. Each of these characteristics accounts for the study of identity/ies as a fluid, process-oriented concept, as well as allows us to focus on the stories of the performers themselves as a way to make sense of their identity/ies. For this reason, the concepts of identity, narrative, and performance are important throughout the chapters of this work.

Cathouse Narrative

In addition to explaining the underlying concepts and assumptions of this work, it is also important for me to outline the organizational narrative of the Moonlite Bunny Ranch before proceeding as it plays a significant role in every chapter to follow. I identified a narrative of the Moonlite Bunny Ranch as a “typical American business,” where the prostitutes are “sex workers,” who provide a service for which they are economically rewarded. This was the narrative constructed in Cathouse, as well as the narrative I observed at the Moonlite Bunny Ranch when I was there. How I identified this narrative is explained in detail in Chapter 4. The themes that emerged from this story, themes which fell outside of its bounds, and the implications of the narrative are discussed in depth in Chapters 5-7, and in the conclusion. Here I will outline the important elements of the narrative and provide examples that demonstrate how it was constructed.
Setting

The immediate setting of Cathouse is the legal brothel, the Moonlite Bunny Ranch, located just outside Carson City, Nevada. This was also the setting of my observations and interviews. From both of these sources, I learned that although the women who work at the Ranch are free to come and go as they please, services are provided for them so that they will not have to go out while they are working. One implication of this is that the women often stay at the Ranch all day and night, since most of them live there as well. None of the scenes in Cathouse show the women off the property of the Ranch, and most present them inside the Ranch. So, although they are shown as free to be the sexual women they are on the show, it also suggests that these “oversexed” women are kept away from society. Therefore, they also would not pose a threat to society in this environment.

It is also important to note that the location of the Moonlite Bunny Ranch, in the only state where prostitution is legal, affects how it is portrayed and how life is lived there. Additionally, the Moonlite Bunny Ranch was the only brothel that enjoyed so much media attention – from Cathouse to the Howard Stern Show – at the time that I was visiting it. This fact distinguished this brothel from other legal brothels in Nevada as well. So, the setting impacted both the way that the Ranch was represented on television and the way that life there is lived.

Characters, Narrators, and Events

The main characters in Cathouse are the working girls, the general manager, Madam Suzette, and the owner/proprietor, Dennis Hof. The main characters also serve as
the narrators of the narrative. There are also minor characters, including the customers and the Bunny Ranch staff. Events, both major and minor, in the show can be broken down into like-structured segments. Each segment consists of a “party” (these are what the interactions between customers and working girls are called) negotiation in which a working girl brings one or more customers to her room, negotiates a deal, entertains the customer(s) (which is not shown), and a brief post-party interview with the working girl and/or customer(s) in which the value of the interaction is discussed. Between each of the party segments is a narrated section in which one of the narrators explains part of how the business works. During this part the camera shots alternate from direct-to-camera narration to action shots, and back again. An example segment from the show will serve to demonstrate the roles the characters, narrators, and events played.

The show opens with an establishing shot outside the Ranch before the camera moves inside the Moonlite Bunny Ranch. During the opening, Dennis Hof’s voiceover begins to explain the history of the Ranch, when it opened, when he bought it, etc. Then we are shown the working girls in a line-up. The camera focuses on their bodies as we hear Hof explain the atmosphere of the Ranch as a “spring break party, 24/7, 365.” Then the girls are shown rubbing against Hof and licking frosting off one another. The camera then cuts to show Madame Suzette on the phone in the office. She explains that they have reasonable prices that fit any budget, that they are open 24/7. She hangs up the phone and then explains directly to the camera that the surveillance screens in front of her allow her to see the customers and the girls, and to make sure that everyone is doing their job at any given time. Then someone tells Suzette that Sunset’s “date” had arrived.
A titlecard then announces the “Mother and Son” party. During this segment we learn that a 22-year old man has come to the Ranch to lose his virginity. His mother has brought him and is paying for the service. This section shows the mother and son meeting working girl and porn star Sunset Thomas. Although the mother does go into the room while they negotiate, she leaves before their party starts. They agree on $1000 for an hour party. Screen cuts to a titlecard that reads: “Once negotiations are complete, Madam Suzette comes in to collect the fee. Mom leaves and the session begins.”79 We are then shown the son talking directly to the camera with his mother sitting on his side behind him. He explains some of the details of what he did with Sunset and concludes that the party made him feel alive and more comfortable with himself.

After the party and post-party debriefing are over, the show moves to another transition piece in which we learn more about the business of the Ranch. Madame Suzette explains that pay is based on a 50/50 split, how much room and board are, and that earning opportunities are virtually unlimited. During her speech, we are shown credit cards and cash changing hands and Suzette on the phone explaining the business.

A few of the lessons I learned from this segment that pointed me toward the overarching narrative constructed in the show were that men choose women from a line-up, but that some women, like Sunset work by appointment only. I also learned that parties are negotiated, that Sunset makes around $1000 an hour, and that her services really can help someone like the virgin she serviced. Although each segment focused on a different party, such as “The Anniversary,” “Two Brothers,” “The Virgin,” and the sections between include different information about the business – from medical testing
and licensure to how much money the girls make and their independent contractor status - the framework of the show was the same throughout. Suzette, Dennis, or one of the girls narrates each segment, and they play the major roles in them as they direct the action. Events are made up of the parties and the information segments in between.

Temporal and Causal Relations

Temporal and causal relations in Cathouse were related to one another. Temporal relations involve how a story is constructed in and over time. Causal relations have to do with what makes something else happen. There were two temporal/causal structures in Cathouse. The first I suggest is related to the overarching narrative of the Bunny Ranch as a “typical American business.” The show begins with Dennis Hof explaining the history of the Bunny Ranch and how he came to be a part of it. He explained that it was a dump when he bought it. The show ends with a celebration of the best April they have had, in terms of profit, since Hof took over the Ranch in 1992. This suggests a temporal structure that begins when Hof took over and where it has progressed to now. The causal relationship here is that Hof taking over the Ranch and his business decisions and management in running it the way he does has resulted in the Ranch becoming financially successful for all involved.

The secondary temporal and causal relationships involve the party segments of the show. In each segment, customers come in with a need, such as wanting to lose their virginity, fulfill a sexual fantasy, or get what they cannot get other places, and by the time the party is over, that need is said to be fulfilled. These segments begin with customers meeting a working girl; the middle is the party negotiation (and suggested party); the end
is punctuated with a post-party interview. The causal relationships involve the needs the customers come in with that are fulfilled by the services these women provide at the Ranch. Each party serves the additional purpose of demonstrating how this business works and is packaged in a way that is exciting for television viewers.

*Audience(s)*

I argue in Chapter 5 that as “reality television *docuporn*” *Cathouse* is constructed to appeal to a number of audiences. This argument is based on the idea that the medium of television and the reality television show form contribute to the show being acceptable to audiences that might not otherwise watch a show explicitly presenting prostitution. Additionally, the content, the “typical American business” narrative in which the prostitutes are “sex workers,” makes this show both entertaining (it focuses on sex and fun) and informative (it includes information about how a brothel operates as a business that provides service to the community). I can speculate that this show is designed to titillate viewers inclined to watch shows about sex. Simultaneously, I suggest that because it stands in contrast to dominant discourses of prostitution, it could also instruct broader audiences about legal prostitution at the Moonlite Bunny Ranch. However, I must also note that audience analysis was not a big part of this project because it goes beyond my interrelated focus on the *Cathouse* text and how these women communicate about their work.

The final element of the narrative involves the themes included in it. The narratives and themes I identified in *Cathouse* and in my observations and interviews at the Bunny Ranch provide the basis for most of the chapters that follow. Accordingly, I
will outline the chapters to follow and identify which narratives and/or themes are included in each.

*Preview of the Dissertation*

In Chapter 1, I discuss what historical and cultural discourses, including media depictions, addressing prostitution say about the practice. In Chapter 2, I trace themes that emerged in my review of literature authored by sex workers themselves. Taken together, I construct the cultural context of prostitution in the United States. I identify overarching themes of punishment and redemption to characterize dominant discourses of prostitution in Chapter 1. Redemption refers to the idea that women who work as prostitutes are forced to do so by oppressive patriarchal structures that prevent them from making money other ways or by men who prey upon their vulnerability, get them addicted to drugs and unable to get out. In this narrative these women need to be saved from the patriarchy, from men, and from themselves.

In the punishment narrative, prostitutes are punished or killed. In these stories, exemplified by procedural dramas, the risks involved in their illegal work find prostitutes put in jail or suffering the effects of violence from pimps, cops, or even family members. What is not shown in this representation is the normative idea that these women transgress societal expectations that govern relationships among women, money, and power, as well as the portrayal of sexual women challenging societal mores. These two perspectives dominate mainstream discourses of prostitution, be they academic or popular, written or performed. The *Cathouse* narrative identified here stands in stark contrast to these discourses.
The cultural context of prostitution in the United States would be incomplete without the voices of the sex workers themselves. Consequently, in Chapter 2, I review published material from sex workers. Although what they had to say included punishment/redemption perspectives, their points of view were more complicated than this simple dichotomy. These women, working in contexts from legal strip clubs doing legal and illegal work to illegal street work, described both positive and negative experiences. Some women found the work uncomfortable and degrading, while others found it liberating and empowering. The specific details of their lives complicated the punishment/redemption dichotomy constructed in dominant discourses. What was particularly interesting was the theme of ambivalence that permeated so many of these women’s stories. Even more interesting for this project, I learned that the Cathouse narrative also did not depict with total fidelity the contexts of these women’s experiences. There were both similarities and differences. The differences mainly arose from the (il)legal status of work in the various contexts where these working girls labored.

Having outlined the broader social contexts situating this topic, I then move in Chapter 3 to describe in general terms life at the Moonlite Bunny Ranch. The question I am most often asked when I tell people about this project is what it is really like to be there? Most people, including me before this project, have no idea how business works in a legal brothel. How much do they charge? Are they tested? How do men pick a girl? Because the Moonlite Bunny Ranch is such a unique situation, I describe it specifically, explaining where the work takes place, what the daily practices are, how customers choose women, how prices are negotiated, and other details about how things work at the

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Ranch. I learned all of this information during my visits to the Ranch. Interestingly, while I was there, I noticed that the Moonlite Bunny Ranch involves strikingly more daily routines than excitement and sex, which supports my claim about the business narrative of the Ranch.

After establishing the particular context for this study, in Chapter 4 I explain the investigative practices I used as a rhetorical critic and qualitative researcher. I began this process with a rhetorical criticism of *Cathouse*. I performed a close textual analysis of the pilot episode of the show. Through this work I began to identify elements of a narrative that seemed to structure the show. For this reason I turned to techniques of narrative criticism to analyze what the show communicated in storied ways. Additionally, I went to the Moonlite Bunny Ranch and employed ethnographic methods – participant observation and in-depth interviews – to learn about life and work there. In Chapter 4 I outline these methods and also discuss issues and choices I faced working in both capacities.

Thus, I began this process first working at a rhetorical critic and then as a qualitative field researcher. However, when I commenced my systematic analysis of these discourses, I experienced myself as a rhetorical critic *and* qualitative field researcher. I was constructing discourses that included texts rendered in writing and “texts” performed in person. My work involved me reconciling lived experiences with televisual and written texts. My writing process reinforced how these investigative roles came together during this project as it involved both rhetorical and qualitative methods of
analysis and interpretation. I discuss the compatibility of these investigative practices and roles at the end of Chapter 4.

In Chapter 5, I explain how the form (reality television), the content of this narrative, and the medium it was assembled for (television) interacted to construct and package a narrative of the “typical American business.” I contend that the “authenticity”\(^82\) achieved through the “double logic of remediation”\(^83\) and narrative structure of reality television makes this narrative appear real and plausible to audiences. Additionally, because this show appears on television, as opposed to film or the internet, the narrative is more palatable to audiences as they invite television shows into their home. Finally, the narrative content is constructed in such a way that it confirms dominant images of prostitutes (as hypersexual) yet opposes them at the same time (as sex workers are shown in control). I argue in this chapter that this narrative and the way it is packaged both resists and reifies dominant discourses of prostitution and creates a counter-narrative of “sex work.”

Chapters 6 and 7 discuss what I learned during observations and interviews on-site at the Moonlite Bunny Ranch. One of the most interesting findings I made while interacting with and analyzing the discourses of these working girls was how extensively dominant discourses and the organizational narrative of the Moonlite Bunny Ranch pattern how they live and make sense of their lives. When deciphering themes in their discourse, I found moments when dominant discourses were involved with what they said. At other times what they said was connected with the narrative of the Bunny Ranch
as it appeared on *Cathouse* and as I observed it. In both chapters, I include examples of when they invoked each type of discourse directly or indirectly.

Chapter 6 focuses on the interrelatedness of dominant discourses of punishment/redemption and the perspectives of individual prostitutes working in other contexts and the narratives of sex workers at the Moonlite Bunny Ranch. Themes emerging in these moments of their talk include: 1) times these women felt they needed to respond to cultural assumptions about them; 2) occasions when these sex workers resisted cultural assumptions about who they are; and 3) moments when describing when they negotiated their lives inside and outside the Ranch.

There are theoretical and substantive implications of this analysis. I address the possibility that these women can experience empowerment in their work at the same time they are working in an oppressive structure. I *demonstrate* this argument by showing how these women’s individual narratives invoke and resist dominant discourses. Additionally, the work I do in this chapter suggests that what these individual sex workers experience in their daily lives problematizes and contrasts greatly with the punishment/redemption binary constructed in dominant discourses. For this reason, I suggest that perhaps we should question the assumptions upon which dominant discourses are based rather than dismissing counter-narratives such as the one on *Cathouse*.

In Chapter 7, I explore the connections between the organizational narrative of the Moonlite Bunny Ranch and the individual narratives of the women who work there. Themes emerging in their discourse that were related to the narrative of the Ranch include how their work is fun, but that it includes more than just fun. Additionally, these
women characterized what they do as “a real job” as it provides their primary financial support and a service to the community, in spite of the fact that it can be fun, and temporary. These perspectives are in line with the Bunny Ranch narrative but in opposition to dominant discourses of prostitution. These women’s relationships inside and outside of the Ranch were also crucial to their lived experiences. Their relationships with the management of the Ranch and with one another conformed with the Bunny Ranch narrative. However, the importance of their relationships with their families transcended the boundaries of this narrative. These themes suggest that there are dynamic relationships between the organizational narrative of the Ranch and their individual stories.

The implications I explore at the end of Chapter 7 include my discussion of the “authenticity” of reality television. I argue that my visits to the Ranch and the ways these women talked about their lived experiences for the most part confirm what is represented on Cathouse. For this reason, I do more than theorize the “authenticity” of RTV. I also demonstrate that the working conditions depicted on the show are possible. Additionally, I problematize the concept of what “a real job” is just as the working girls at the Moonlite Bunny Ranch did. Rather than devaluing the work these women do according to external, corporate/capitalist criteria, I suggest we should re-think the criteria utilized to define their labor. For these women, “a real job” includes all the parts of their job.

In the conclusion, I explore some issues that I did not discuss in other chapters. While relevant to the topic of prostitution in the United States and at the Moonlite Bunny Ranch, I did not mention the roles race, class, and sexuality play in the lived experiences
of the sex workers at the Ranch. So, in the conclusion I talk about how some of the women I interviewed characterized race and class. I also comment on the lack of a role that lesbian sexuality plays at the Ranch, despite its relevance to *Cathouse* and dominant discourses of prostitution. I also include a brief overview of the role of male sex workers and the predominance of male customers in the conclusion. I suggest that race, class, sexuality, and the roles of male customers and sex workers are all areas in need of further research.

In addition to reviewing issues that were not a part of other chapters, I also discuss some theoretical, methodological, and substantive implications in the conclusion. I contend that my subjectivity as a researcher implicated me in the discourses of the Moonlite Bunny Ranch while I “worked” there. There were theoretical, methodological, and substantive consequences of my positionality as a researcher at the Ranch. Additionally, my roles as a rhetorical critic and qualitative researcher affected all these parts of my project as well. I explore the implications of all these issues in the conclusion.

As you read the following chapters, I hope that whatever your beliefs about prostitution are now, you will appreciate what I am trying to contribute to the conversation. More than that, I hope that you will listen carefully to what these women working legally at the Moonlite Bunny Ranch have to say. Regardless of your opinion at the end of reading what follows I hope that you will understand that what most people know about prostitution derives from dominant discourses and paints too simple a picture. Bringing individual sex workers’ perspectives into that discourse is definitely not
an easy or simple task but I believe it is necessary if we want to have an informed conversation about the topic.
Chapter 1: Cultural Context of Prostitution in the United States: Part I - Cultural Discourses

It is time to take a break from feminism. Jane Halley argues that feminism has become exclusionary and outdated, especially when it comes to sexuality. She proposes a test, anyone can perform, to see if feminist thinking has limited the possibilities available to us when theorizing sexuality:

(I)f someone says that we should really take into account the pleasure (some) female prostitutes take in their work; the pleasure they are able to provide for their johns; the vulnerability of pimps in the economic systems that sustain prostitution; and/or the vulnerability of johns and pimps to exploitation by prostitutes – do you have a problem with that? Are you tempted to say something like the following? “Exposing the possibility that women sometimes use a posture of suffering powerfully, thus harming others, and especially exposing the possibility that they harm men, is tantamount to a denial that women suffer and thus also a denial that they are subordinated.” If so, you are probably conducting at least part of your thinking and politics on the assumptions embedded in the Injury Triad (female harm, female innocence, male immunity).85

In other words, if women being associated with sexuality through prostitution is objectionable on its face, then prostitution will always be a practice in which women are harmed because they are innocent, but this harm has no effects on the men involved in the practice. Additionally, there is no possibility that these women are enjoying their
work and empowered by it. Feminism, then, prevents seeing the possible agency of women to make the choice to be sexual and powerful.

Are prostitutes merely victims? Are they sexual deviants? Do we make unfounded assumptions about who they are and what they do? In this chapter, I will explore what it is we think about prostitution and why we think the way we do. There are a few key concepts that should be clarified before moving on to this analysis though. In the introductory chapter, I explained the centrality of the concepts of identity/ies and narrative to this project. Identity/ies should be understood from a social perspective as a multi-dimensional process constructed through interaction that involves change, while narrative is understood both as a way of knowing and as a retrospective way of making sense of our lives that takes place, often simultaneously, on personal (individual), social (community), cultural, and historical levels. In order to understand the process of identity/ies performance and construction through narratives, then, it is important to understand the socio-historical context in which such interactions occur. For this reason, I borrow upon theoretical perspectives from Cultural and Media Studies and narrative inquiry for this study of the HBO reality series *Cathouse*, which takes place at the Moonlite Bunny Ranch, a legal brothel in Nevada, and the lived experiences of sex workers to develop the cultural context of legal prostitution in the United States as it relates to *Cathouse* and the Moonlite Bunny Ranch. In this chapter, I will focus primarily on the totality of the culture of prostitution in the United States and in the next chapter I will bring together the voices of individual women who have shared their experiences
working in the sex industry. In Chapter 3, I will focus on the Moonlite Bunny Ranch specifically and the historical context in which it is situated.

Before developing this cultural context of prostitution in the United States, I will first clarify the guiding theoretical perspectives that suggest this context is important to understand. Specifically, I will discuss how Raymond Williams’ and Pierre Bourdieu’s viewpoints of culture coupled with assumptions from narrative inquiry can help us to understand prostitution in the United States. Second, I will give an overview of how we think about sexual women in the United States today and why we think the ways we do. This section involves both dominant thinking about sexual women and feminist responses to these dominant ways of thinking. Third, I will review media representations of sexual women, in general, and prostitutes, specifically. Interestingly, dominant perspectives and media representation offer rather consistent, yet simplistic, notions of what it means to be a sexual woman. In the conclusion, I will explore some implications of these cultural discourses of prostitution before turning to Part II of this cultural context of prostitution.

In contrast to these cultural discourses, Chapter 2 will explore the more complicated and nuanced experiences of individual sex workers.

**Defining Totality of Culture**

Borrowing on the work of Michael Calvin McGee, Raymond Williams and Pierre Bourdieu, I conceptualize cultural context broadly. For Williams, truly understanding hegemony requires this totalizing view of culture. Yet, in the postmodern condition in which we live today, knowledge is necessarily fragmented. Michael Calvin McGee explains that although “texts” are fragmented, “One can get a more developed picture of
the whole ‘text’ by considering three structural relationships, between an apparently finished discourse and its sources, between an apparently finished discourse and culture, and between an apparently finished discourse and its influence.” By including these three structural relationships a critic can account for the context in which a text appears in the world and the meaning can be explored. In order to define the boundaries of such a context, then, McGee suggests that critics should

Look for the particular locutions that implicate its sources. Show where cultural conventions are presupposed. Locate the places where (a speech) is trying to create, or is seeking, its audience. Show where and how the speech anticipates its own ‘everyday’ critique….Certainly, every fragment is a map of the structures that will make it complete, and in that sense focus on a part can be a speculative ‘incomplete’ study of the whole.

So, while every study may be incomplete as it will always make up a fragment in a larger discourse, a critic can admit this limitation while still accounting for the context and creating boundaries that define what the “totalizing” view of a culture may be.

McGee’s perspective, in line with narrative inquiry, informs this project as a whole. Narrative inquiry presupposes that narratives operate on multiple levels at any given time which influence both our ways of knowing and how we make sense of our world. Therefore, in order to study properly how we know what we know about prostitution and what sense we make out of the practice, it is necessary to look at historical, cultural, social or community, and individual narrative perspectives of sex work. Directing attention to these multiple levels of narrative that create the context and
the texts being examined here are what can give us a “totalizing” view of the culture of prostitution.

Viewing culture in its totality highlights hegemony as lived, ubiquitous, “constitut(ing) the substance and limit of social experience,” according to Williams. This point is not to be taken lightly. According to Williams a totalizing perspective on hegemony directs our attention to how it “saturates society to such an extent (that it)...even constitutes the substance and limit of common sense for most people under its sway.” Yet, given its role in the totality of society, not merely as exerted top-down by a ruling class, hegemony can also be seen not as singular but full of “variation and contradiction” with “sets of alternatives and...processes of change” that are carried out through various practices, meanings and values, which are “organized and lived.” Therefore, hegemony is not a constant state, but changes according to dominant practices and values and must be continually reaffirmed, or, can change. Such an understanding of culture as totalizing and these guiding concepts will help carry out the type of research Williams recommends: that which looks “not for the components of a product but for the conditions of a practice.” Focus on the conditions of practice directs our attention to the work of Pierre Bourdieu.

In Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste, Bourdieu argues that the economy of cultural goods has its own logic. This logic is based on being able to read a work properly and assumes an “intellectualist theory of artistic perception” in which some hold privileged knowledge and others do not. Those in the know hold dominion over those who do not know due to their superior knowledge. However, this theory does
not hold water in everyday practice. With or without such privileged knowledge, people interpret and make judgments about artistic works. Interpretations may still reveal class or social influences (read: boundaries), but these boundaries do not limit the ability to interpret. Rather, interpretations reveal the social location of the interpreter.

While useful in understanding the reasoning of some about what constitutes “art” and what does not, this distinction does not hold up today given the increasing commodification of what has been called “high art” and the collapsing of boundaries between “high” and “popular” forms of expression. Pierre Bourdieu’s logic of practice is a useful guide in interpreting such a culture today. He explains a theory of practice as one in which “objects of knowledge are constructed, not passively recorded, and, contrary to intellectualist idealism, that the principle of this construction is the system of structured, structuring dispositions, the habitus, which is constituted in practice and is always oriented towards practical functions.” In order to examine these practices, therefore, we must look to where they occur: in everyday life, communication, and interaction. As Bourdieu puts it,

To do this, one has to situate oneself within ‘real activity as such’, that is, in the practical relation to the world, the preoccupied, active presence in the world through which the world imposes its presence, with its urgencies, its things to be done and said, things made to be said, which directly govern words and deeds without ever unfolding as a spectacle…(O)ne has to return to practice, the site of the dialectic of the opus operatum and the modus operandi."
One could argue that the series, *Cathouse*, makes a spectacle of the everyday, which Bourdieu might claim removes it from the everyday, but I contend that the process of viewing television is part of our, most Americans, everyday practices. Therefore, what is seen on television becomes part of that unfolding. What we see in the series contributes to the structuring of our knowledge about prostitution. Additionally, I am not merely relying on acting as a viewer to expand knowledge of how this show is constructed and operates. For the purposes of this study, I will act as viewer and critic to direct my attention both to the television series, *Cathouse*, and to interact with the sex workers, staff, and management at the Moonlite Bunny Ranch, the site at which the everyday actions that are represented on the series take place. I do this to situate myself within the “real” activities.

*Cultural Constructions of Prostitution*

In order to be able to speak about the cultural context of the Moonlite Bunny Ranch and *Cathouse*, it is essential to explore the totality of the culture of legal prostitution in the United States. Put more simply: what do we believe to be true about prostitution in this country? And, why do we believe these things to be true? Interestingly, addressing the “why” question before the “what” is useful in demonstrating some answers to both questions. From Plato and Aristotle to Descartes, Christianity, and the dominance of Enlightenment thinking, the mind and body have been disassociated in Western thought. Descartes was successful at linking the mind/body dualism with the foundations of knowledge itself, and therefore, has influenced the very way we know that which is associated with the mind (male) and body (female). Cartesian dualism is the
“assumption that there are two distinct, mutually exclusive and mutually exhaustive substances, mind and body, each of which inhabits its own self-contained sphere. Taken together the two have incompatible characteristics.” As Elizabeth Grosz contends:

These terms function implicitly to define the body in nonhistorical, naturalistic, organicist, passive, inert terms, seeing it as an intrusion on or interference with the operation of the mind, a brute givenness which requires overcoming, a connection with animality and nature that needs transcendence. Through these associations, the body is coded in terms that are themselves traditionally devalued. Most relevant here is the correlation and association of the mind/body opposition with the opposition between male and female, where man and mind, woman and body, become representationally aligned. (emphasis added)

These mind/body, male/female dichotomies affect our perspectives of men, women and sexuality, in particular. For these dualisms speak to what it means to be masculine or feminine.

When it comes to women and sexuality, prostitution is a particularly contentious issue. Examining how prostitution and sex workers are represented in the media, on film and television, is, therefore, a site in which we can further our understanding of how mind/body dualism influences our thinking about women and sexuality. Having an understanding of dualistic thinking in general, representations of women and sexuality in the media can then be explored beginning with a discussion of pornography, and then turning to media representations of prostitution specifically. In order to accomplish this task, however, it is first important to discuss ways in which discursively constructed
dualistic thinking has affected our perceptions about women and sexuality in general, especially in feminist scholarship.

_Dualistic Thinking about Women and the Body_

Feminism in the Western world has been heavily influenced by the Cartesian dualism of philosophical thought as well as by beliefs from Christianity, especially when it comes to the body. As Elizabeth Grosz notes, “Feminism has uncritically adopted many philosophical assumptions regarding the role of the body in social, political, cultural, psychical, and sexual life…”\(^{103}\), such as the common view of the human subject as being made up of two dichotomously opposed characteristics….This bifurcation of being is not simply a neutral division of an otherwise all-encompassing descriptive field. Dichotomous thinking necessarily hierachizes and ranks the two polarized terms so that one becomes the privileged term and the other its suppressed, subordinated, negative counterpart.\(^{104}\)

This dichotomous, hierarchical thinking has produced hegemonic discourses which constitute the reality of how we think of the body and what we associate with the body, women and sexuality.

There are three areas in which Cartesian dualistic thinking has had particular impact in the ways we think about the body. The first involves how we think of the body as primarily an object for scientific study; theorized as functioning instrumentally, or as _merely_ physical. The second regards the body as an instrument that operates according to the will of the mind. The third line of investigation considers the body a “signifying
medium, a vehicle of expression, a mode of rendering public and communicable what is essentially private (ideas, thoughts, beliefs, feelings affects).” That the body “plays a constitutive role in forming thoughts, feelings, emotions, and psychic representations” is ignored, as is its role in connecting the social and the natural. As women are associated with the body, recognizing the constitutive role of the body would mean recognizing women’s roles in contributing to the development of public thought.

Jane Caputi characterizes the mind/body split as necessary to pornographic thinking where “some women are denounced as particularly sexual, animalistic, and dirty – women of color, prostitutes, poor women. Other women are designated as impossibly ‘pure’” such as white women with money who work “respectable” jobs or do not work at all. Dividing men and women, mind and body, is only one step removed from dividing women into pure/impure, white/non-white, Madonna/whore, i.e., mothers and wives versus sexual beings. These dualisms put women in a double bind where either they have to be pure and the caretakers of societal morality, or they are sexual and stigmatized (and society is in need of protection from them).

There are several ways in which feminists have theorized the body in an attempt either to overcome mind/body dualism, or to reclaim value in the female body. Elizabeth Grosz groups these theorists into three categories: egalitarian, social constructionist, and those concerned with the “lived body.” Egalitarian feminists, from Simone deBeauvoir to Shulamith Firestone, theorize the female body according to its nature and bodily cycles. These feminist theorists attempt to (re)appropriate characteristics that have been used to limit women’s rights as positive. As limitations unique to women these characteristics are
seen as needing to be overcome in order to achieve equality. Alternatively, (re)appropriating these characteristics as positive comes from theorizing differences as a different way of knowing that should be recognized and celebrated. Both views rely on the belief that women (but for some unexplainable reason, not men) are biologically determined.

Social Constructionist feminists, including Julia Kristeva, Nancy Chodorow, and Marxist and psychoanalytic feminists, see the body not so much as an obstacle to be overcome as a biological object whose representation and functioning is political, socially marking male and female as distinct. Instead of being coded by a nature/culture opposition, as it is for egalitarian feminists, the mind/body opposition is now coded by the distinction between biology and psychology and the opposition between the realms of production/reproduction (body) and ideology (mind).109

While the biological determinism and mind/body dualism of egalitarian feminists are retained by social constructionists, there are several differences as well. First, is the idea that it is not biology but the social system that has organized and given meaning to biology that justifies the oppression of women. It is therefore, through creating different meanings associated with the body (and by association women) that women can overcome oppression, not through the body itself. Social constructivists maintain a distinction between sex and gender, where sex is a fixed category and definitions of gender allow transformations of meaning. In other words, the body is not the vehicle for change, rather, we must change our attitudes, beliefs, and values.
The last group, including Luce Irigaray, Helene Cixous, Gayatri Spivak, Monique Wittig, and Judith Butler, is characterized as concerned with the *lived body*, that is, the body as lived that both signifies meaning and has meaning ascribed to it, both of which consider the body as an “object of systems of social coercion, legal inscription, and sexual and economic exchange.”¹¹⁰ This group is distinct from the other two in that there is a rejection of mind/body, and sex/gender dualisms. The body plays a role in material, political, social, and cultural life. Although these feminist theorists do believe in the difference between the sexes, they do not attribute it merely to biology. Additionally, these scholars see that class, race, sexuality, and other differences are constructed between and amongst women as well. Unlike the egalitarian and social constructionist feminists, these feminists do not see the body as neutral or pre-existing society but as discursive.

Grosz ultimately argues in *Volatile Bodies* that what need be changed are our attitudes and beliefs when it comes to the body (and the mind). The body must be understood as key to understanding women’s (and I would argue men’s as well) existence as it is constructed within a particular socio-historical context. This would allow us to examine the lived body as it is constructed, represented, and as women experience it. In other words, we must approach theory, (everyday) practices, and scholarship from an understanding of people as *embodied*, rather than as separate minds and bodies. Altering the way we think about the mind and the body may allow us to overcome deterministic thinking about women and sexuality.
Dualistic Thinking and Sexuality

Beyond different ontological and epistemological perspectives of the body held by various camps, theorizing sexuality further complicates the idea that there is a feminist view of sexuality. Feminist commitments about sexuality cannot be categorized the same way as feminist thoughts on the body despite the fact that feminist perspectives on sexuality remain heavily influenced by Cartesian dualisms. These viewpoints include those that exclude sexuality altogether, those that paint women as victims or objects of male sexual desire, or, the more marginal view, celebrate female sexuality as empowering. This final view, which honors female sexuality, has splintered feminist factions further leading to some unfortunate implications as well.

Except for a single scene in the 2004 HBO movie Iron Jawed Angels in which suffragette Alice Paul masturbates in the bathtub, sexuality of American First Wave feminists is rarely discussed, let alone represented in mainstream literature or media. First Wave feminism developed out of broader movements for social change such as those advocating abolition of slavery and societal temperance. Temperance movements were largely populated by middle- and upper-class white women, who, under Christian-influenced Cartesian thinking, were pure, wives and mothers, considered the arbiters of societal morality. As such, they believed it to be their duty to direct others away from the sins of alcohol and other forms of debauchery. These women acted as the essentialized feminine of society.

Advocates of abolition often used this same position of women in society and within Christianity as justification for their activism within the abolition movement. They
reasoned that in God’s eyes, slavery was wrong. However, women in the abolitionist movement faced challenges those in the temperance movement did not, namely, they were challenged for their participation in public debate. Temperance advocates were also speaking about their cause in public, however, because it was on an issue typically associated with women, these women were not often criticized. Women speaking out in public about slavery, however, was another matter. Advocates such as Sarah and Angelina Grimké answered charges against their speaking in public by using the same reasoning that motivated them to become involved in the first place: if something is wrong, it is one’s Christian duty to speak and act against it – man or woman. However, even when claiming church support (which they sometimes had and other times did not), their participation in public life was still a point of contention. This exclusion led many women to advocate for suffrage and the formation of the Suffrage Movement. The use of biblical support and focus on egalitarian application of rights trapped women of the First Wave of feminism into discourse in which sexuality was excluded. First Wave feminists were characterized, by themselves and others, as moral arbiters for society worthy of the same public rights as men. Sexuality was not considered a subject appropriate for public discussion except when being condemned.

The rise of Second Wave feminism occurred in much the same way as First Wave. That is, as a result of the exclusion of women’s rights issues within the student and civil rights movements of the 1960s. Initially, Second Wave feminism focused on equal rights under the law and equal opportunities to work in the public sector for equal pay. The issue of sexuality, again, was excluded from the discussion in part because it was not
deemed relevant to egalitarian goals of the Women’s Movement, but more importantly because it was not easy to discuss. Keep in mind that by the early 1970s birth control and abortion made voluntary motherhood a possibility at the time and put reproductive rights at the top of the agenda of the Women’s Movement. However, discussing what went on in the bedroom between a man and a woman remained topics for discussion in private or, at best, in consciousness-raising groups within liberal Second Wave feminism and, at worst, for marginalized populations of sexual women such as prostitutes.113

Though virtually excluded from the feminist agenda during the First Wave and beginning of the Second Wave, sexuality did not remain excluded. Work of small consciousness-raising groups led women to realize the patriarchal oppression involved in heterosexual relationships. The rise of the radical branch of Second Wave feminism led to public discussion of such relationships. The outcome of which led to women either being characterized as victims of male sexual oppression and/or to radical feminists’ choosing the empowerment of life outside the heterosexist patriarchy. The latter either involved the celebration of essential female traits (referred to both as egalitarian feminism, above, or cultural feminism, below) or for women, such as Gloria Anzuldua and Andrea Dworkin, to choose to become lesbians. The former erased women’s sexuality while the latter reasoned that without men was the only way for women to be in non-oppressive sexual relationships.

Amber Hollibaugh and Cherrie Moraga argue that this second response, to eschew heterosexuality for lesbianism, became fodder for the conservative political right and mainstream press who then equated lesbianism with feminism. This move served both to
discredit feminism in the mainstream, given the marginalization of homosexuality in American society, and led to the exclusion of heterosexual sexuality as feminist. Hollibaugh and Moraga counter this position by arguing, “There is heterosexuality outside of heterosexism.” They are also critical of essentializing male as oppressor and female as oppressed as this behavior not only excludes heterosexual female sexuality, but also limits acceptable sexual play for lesbians. They conclude that play with forms for lesbian sexuality (such as the desire to be objectified or to participate in S&M) that are not readily accepted by mainstream feminists can lead to greater understanding of sexuality of women in general.

The first response, the structural perspective of patriarchal male sexual oppression, is best characterized by the work of two of the most influential radical feminist theorists of sexuality, Andrea Dworkin and Catharine MacKinnon, as their views became the “paradigmatic understanding of sexuality in sexual-subordination feminism in the United States.” Although cultural feminism provides an alternative view of sexuality from MacKinnon’s radical feminism, according to Janet Halley, both characterize male sexuality as a vast social problem. But while MacKinnon focuses on the unjust male domination of women through power, cultural feminism emphasizes the unjust male derogation of women’s traits or points of view through male-ascendant normative value judgments. And the early MacKinnon regarded male and female sex, gender, and sexuality to be fully constituted by the eroticization of male domination; whereas cultural feminism reserved a special place for the
redemptive normative insights that women derive from their sexuality and their role as mothers.117

Characterizing male sexuality as an inherent exercise of power and domination essentializes men as overly sexual and inherently bad. While at the same time, heterosexual women have limited choices: to not have sexual desire because they are constrained to roles of wife and mother (which, strangely, are not sexual) or as victims/objects of male sexual desire.118 No wonder the only choice in this structure is to become a lesbian. Otherwise, women would not be able to be sexual at all! But what about those heterosexual women who were actively sexual, the 1970s was the decade of free love after all? Those women were characterized by radical feminists as transgressive and suffering from false consciousness not realizing the state of their oppression, leaving no room in the feminist movement for sexual, heterosexual women.

Radical feminism, cultural feminism, and gay-identity politics had the power to define and limit how we think about sexuality because of a number of events during the 1970s and 1980s. First, the AIDS crisis became a major issue that brought visibility to gay men, especially, and to their activism. Second, power and cultural feminists found specific, visible targets for activism, such as, rape, domestic violence, pornography, commercial sex, sex between unequals, and public sex. Third, postmodernism arrived in the U.S. Its arrival signaled legitimacy for anti-foundationalist politics and movements.119 Fears of disease associated with sex, violence against women associated with heterosexual sex, and challenges to holding the white, heterosexual male at the
center of analyses all contributed to the power to define sexuality by men, subjected onto women. As a result, everyone’s ability to theorize female sexuality was limited.

Ann Snitow, Christine Stansell, and Ann Thompson conclude that after the major feminist arguments exposing the unequal power relationship exercised during sex with men,

virtually no grounds remained for desiring sexual intercourse….Certainly, it was very difficult for a feminist to admit that she found penetration pleasurable or orgasmic; later, in the face of lesbian-feminist ideology, it became almost impossible to explain theoretically, anatomically, or socially why any woman might want to go to bed with a man.120

While celebrating one form of sexuality, radical feminists contributed to further marginalization of the feminist movement and shutting down sexuality for heterosexual women. Interestingly, sex workers themselves often propagate this divide when they refer to feminist academics as good girls and reference themselves as bad girls based on the idea that their sexual practices are outside mainstream roles available to women.121

Another consequence of no-sex or anti-sex feminist perspectives of female sexuality has been to counter them with what has been called the “pro-sex” feminist stance. Hollibaugh and Moraga’s “What We’re Rollin Around in Bed With: Sexual Silences in Feminism,” previously described, demonstrates one such pro-sex perspective. This response was initially prompted though by the anti-sex stance of feminist theorists such as Dworkin and MacKinnon and contributed to what has become known as the “sex wars” of the 1980s. One specific early example of this “war” can be demonstrated by
Jessica Benjamin’s response to Andrea Dworkin’s critique of *The Story of O*. Dworkin uses this story to demonstrate how pornography and male sexual desire are inherently oppressive to women due to the dominance/submission that occur between the female character, who is being raped at the start of the story, and the male characters. She argues that the enjoyment of the main character illustrates how women are characterized as submissive to male sexuality and duped into a pornographic culture in which women are taught to enjoy their own objectification and the violence committed against them.122

In “Master and Slave: The Fantasy of Erotic Domination,” Benjamin exposes the limitations and constraints of Dworkin’s assumptions and argument. Benjamin argues that sometimes there is eroticism in domination/submission that is by choice. We must not dismiss this out of hand as enacting unequal power relations upon women without some agency involved. Rather we should examine the source of the feelings. Although Benjamin uses a psychoanalytic framework, her point, that we should not examine women’s motives from the point of a “lack”, is still a good one. She concludes, “Rejecting a feminist moralism that treats women involved in seemingly exploitative and objectifying relations as ‘brainwashed’ victims of ‘false consciousness’…insists that erotic pleasure is intrinsic to women’s engagement in such relations.”123

Other works from postmodern and/or what are increasingly termed Third Wave feminists attempt to embrace these same types of contradictions. At their root, these seeming contradictions, perhaps perpetuated by previous feminist theories and practices, involve traditional roles of women as wife, mother, caretaker, etc., in conflict with sexuality, freedom, and simultaneous enactment of multiple dimensions of self. Rebecca
Walker’s and Barbara Findlen’s collected works include postmodern and Third Wave feminist thought that resemble work from Second Wave theorists along side works that embrace female sexualities – homo- and hetero-sexual (and in between).¹²⁴ Theirs are the more mainstream voices.

At the extremes are women such as performance artist Annie Sprinkle who invites audiences to view her cervix through a speculum in an attempt at demystifying the female body, normalizing female sexuality, and entertaining at the same time. Or, Carol Queen who describes herself on her website as a “writer, speaker, educator and activist with a doctorate in sexology.”¹²⁵ She calls herself a “sex worker and a practitioner of alternative sexualities,” who teaches from her own experience while drawing on academic work of others to help situate her knowledge and practices. Queen advocates for the celebration and understanding of sexualities, and is a self-proclaimed feminist. Queen, like other sex-positive theorists and practitioners, does not want “sex negativity (to) be such a profound influence on all our lives.”¹²⁶

Although increasing in exposure, these pro-sex voices are not particularly mainstream, meaning that when the feminist perspective of sex is called out, it is usually the Dworkin and MacKinnon theories that are cited. Or, as previously noted, lesbian sexuality is the only type claimed as “legitimate.” Theories that embrace embodiment, choice, and contradiction, rather than dualism, limitation, and unification, are those that increase possible understandings of sexuality. Interestingly, it seems that post-feminist perspectives embodied in popular press, popular culture feminism, while often dismissed by academics, have invaded the thoughts, feelings, and actions of young women today.
However, this is due to their presence in the mainstream media, not necessarily in academic circles.

*Media Representations of Sexual Women, Prostitution, and Sex Workers*

Understanding the academic feminist perspective about the body and women’s sexuality is one important aspect of the totality of culture of prostitution in the United States. Even so, today, the most prevalent influence on our perceptions comes from the media. As Fred Fejes notes in his work on the political economy of lesbian and gay identity, “Updating Foucault, it would seem that today the consumer-based media, and not the state, the church, or the scientific professions, are the far more effective creators and regulators of identities and desires.” For this reason, any analysis of our perspectives on men, women, and sexuality, should be conducted based on our most watched and highly influential image systems, film and television. As Sut Jhally argues about image-based culture, “visual images are the central mode through which the modern world understands itself. Images are the dominant language of the modern world.” Therefore any analysis or potential for social change must take place on this terrain.

This terrain includes representations, or the content of what we see, as well as an understanding of the *conditions of production* which influence both the representations themselves and audience’s reading of them. Pierre Bourdieu argues that part of the conditions of production include the medium being shaped by its profit motive. Particularly relevant, he contends:
In the 1990s, because it must reach the largest audience possible, television is intent on exploiting and pandering….It does so by offering viewers what are essentially raw products, of which the paradigmatic program is the talk show with its “slices of life.” These lived experiences come across as unbuttoned exhibitions of often extreme behavior aimed at satisfying a kind of voyeurism and exhibitionism.129

Since the mid-1990s, the proliferation of reality television programs, cable documentaries, and the type of “behind-the-scenes” shows such as E!’s True Hollywood Stories, proves Bourdieu’s point. Whereas he singled out the talk show, today, the reality television show has taken over as seemingly “raw” programming that promotes such voyeurism and exhibitionism.

The power held by programs that appeal to participants’ and audiences’ desires for voyeurism and exhibitionism is twofold. First, they make effective use of the medium to draw in great numbers of viewers. Second, they use the power of the medium and of the size of the audience to structure particular perceptions about topics such as prostitution. While Bourdieu gives ultimate power for shaping perceptions to the news media, he does allow for transformation and change (as well as preservation of the status quo) within the medium, dependent upon profit motives and the structures created.

HBO’s Cathouse operates as an example of a television representation of prostitution which both preserves as well as challenges dominant conceptions of prostitution. Before discussing Cathouse in depth in Chapter 4, I first need to trace various media representations of women and sexuality. I will begin with the most influential of
representations, pornography, before discussing more general television and film representations of prostitution and sex workers.

**Pornography and Anti-Sex Feminism**

Media representations of sexuality in the form of pornography have been heavily researched since the 1970s from both feminist and “non-feminist” perspectives. The feminist perspectives on pornography have served the interests of many mainstream feminists as well as their political opposites, the conservative, religious right. Because of their appeal both to feminists and the right, feminist research on pornography has influenced our understanding of how pornography operates upon both men and women. Our perceptions of pornography, as with sexual women in general, are heavily influenced by dualistic thinking previously discussed. As Jane Caputi argues, it is patriarchal interpretations of the influential story of Adam and Eve through which “sex becomes synonymous with sin and active female desire is transmogrified into masochism. Pornography and the pornography of everyday life enthusiastically affirm these same messages.”130 This is the perspective not only of patriarchal institutions and practices in society but of influential feminists Andrea Dworkin and Catharine MacKinnon we must revisit. MacKinnon argues that “sexuality is socially organized to require sex inequality for excitement and satisfaction. The least extreme expression of gender inequality, and the prerequisite for all of it, is dehumanization and objectification.”131 For Dworkin and MacKinnon, pornography is always oppressive to women. For Dworkin, prostitution, pornography, and even heterosexual sex are all inherently domination of women by men.132
Whenever scholars argue for or defend anti-pornography positions, Dworkin and MacKinnon’s is the most commonly used definition of pornography. Their definition emphasizes the “violent, dehumanizing, and subordinating nature of pornographic representation.” Dworkin and MacKinnon’s definition reads:

Pornography is the graphic sexually explicit subordination of women through pictures and/or words that also includes one or more of the following: (i) women are presented dehumanized as sexual objects, things or commodities; or (ii) women are presented as sexual objects who enjoy pain or humiliation; or (iii) women are presented as sexual objects who experience sexual pleasure in being raped; or (iv) women are presented as sexual objects tied up or cut up or mutilated or bruised or physically hurt; or (v) women are presented in postures or positions of sexual submission, servility or display; or (vi) women’s body parts – including but not limited to vaginas, breasts, or buttocks – are exhibited such that women are reduced to those parts; or (vii) women are presented as whores by nature; or (viii) women are presented being penetrated by objects or animals; or (ix) women are presented in scenarios of degradation, injury, torture, shown as filthy or inferior, bleeding, bruised, or hurt in a context that makes these conditions sexual. The use of men, children or transsexuals in the place of women above is also pornography.

Dworkin and MacKinnon argue that under this definition, “pornography is what pornography does.” More importantly pornography is what pornography does to women. Women, not men, are the focus of analysis and yet they are denied any agency.
or choice in the matter. Any action done to women, according to Dworkin and MacKinnon, is abusive and oppressive.

Dworkin’s definition of prostitution is not much different. She defines it as “the use of a woman’s body for sex by a man, he pays money, he does what he wants.”136 Within Dworkin and MacKinnon’s model, women are never empowered by pornography and prostitution, never enjoy it, and only do it because they are forced to, whether through physical coercion or the economic realities of our capitalist system. Given most of their analysis is of illegal prostitution, some of their conclusions are valid. However, their perspective also completely dismisses any potential for the agency of the individual women involved and actively denies the possibility that not all prostitution is alike.

Despite widespread citation and acceptance of feminist research on pornography, there are numerous problems with the focus of and the ways in which pornography research has been conducted. In her discussion of the pornography debates of the 1980s, Karen Boyle notes that the most cited effects based pornography research137 is based not on real world interaction, but on laboratory experiments. Effects studies tackle problems backward. They should look at those who commit social violence, identify their characteristics, practices, lifestyles, etc., and then theorize reasons people commit social violence rather than starting with media, such as pornography, looking at its representations, and deciding that those who watch porn commit violence because of these representations.138 This type of analysis positions pornography as an active agent and denies agency, choice, and responsibility of individual actors.
Effects research sees media in isolation, does not account for the cycle of abuse on which much audio-visual porn depends, precludes consideration of potential harm done to women, men, and children in the production of pornography, provides little detailed information about what is actually in media texts, assumes conflicting and/or ambiguous definitions of terms (which means that often what is used in effects in research may or may not be porn), masks ideological assumptions of researchers, and ignores differences in porn developed in/for and displayed on different types of media. Violence effects research focuses on male-on-male violence which masks male-on-female violence. Finally, no distinction is made between actual and simulated sex and therefore we do not know if there is a different relationship between consumers and texts of these different types, nor if there are different effects on actors in the production of different types of materials. Conflicting affective responses cannot be accounted for in effects research. Given all of these limitations it might be easy to see how Dworkin, MacKinnon, and other anti-pornography researchers could be dismissed. However, they have not been. Rather they have been greatly influential because they allow us to ignore “broader questions about society, culture, and individual responsibility” and feed into the same male/female, mind/body, Madonna/whore binaries that shape discursive constructions of female sexuality.

In order to address some of these concerns and to evaluate pornography more accurately, Boyle suggests that five key areas of concern should be addressed. First, key terms should be clearly defined and distinguished from one another. Second, different types of materials and media in which pornography is produced should be studied.
separately and compared. Third, individual use and understanding of pornography should be the focus of study. Fourth, research should explore how and why individuals act in the ways that they do in relationship to pornography, including focus on production, representation, and consumption. Fifth, we should problematize the assumption of men as active agents who act upon women, and women as the passive receivers of that action. “Such analysis would,” Susan Cole argues in *Pornography and the Sex Crisis*, “allow for asking questions, such as, who the women in the pornographic photographs and films actually are, how they got there, what our relationship to them is, and who profits from their sale.” Conceptualizing pornography research, production, and use in such ways problematizes structural analyses such as those discussed and allows us to look at the totality of pornographic culture. Such a perspective is helpful in guiding how we look at prostitution as well.

Focusing on individual accounts *alone* though is problematic whether talking to male consumers or female participants and consumers. For male consumers, as noted previously, effects research does not answer the “why” question of why they watch pornography or the “how” of how it is consumed. Further, any conflicting affective feelings of consumers, male or female, cannot be taken into account in these studies. Representation, what appears on the screen, has been analyzed at the expense of production and circulation. This neglect is particularly relevant when women who claim to have enjoyed participation in the production or consumption of pornography or participation in prostitution are ignored. So the pornography (and prostitution) debate about sex becomes one in which anti-anti-pornography campaigners take up the pro-sex
position while anti-pornography campaigners are labeled anti-sex\textsuperscript{143} with little to no middle ground.

Despite some advances for women reclaiming their sexuality, there are still many theorists, such as Jane Caputi, who would follow the standard set by Andrea Dworkin and Catharine MacKinnon. In her analysis of “Everyday Pornography,” Caputi examines advertising, film, and television, and categorizes sexual messages from anti-Bitch to animalistic and snuff. She argues that pornography is about desensitization, disconnection, and control. It is objectifying and acts to create the perception that women can be bought, sold, abused, and used for the ends of others. She further contends that “(w)omen learn our status as objects through not only the harassment and surveillance we encounter regularly on the streets and at work but also through art, pornography, prostitution, fashion, cheesecake, beauty contests, tourist advertising, and so on.”\textsuperscript{144}

These perspectives are what inform media representations of prostitution and pornography. Where much theory ignores sex entirely, the pornography debates of the 1980s served to bring discussion of female sexuality front and center. Unfortunately, this discussion of sexuality remained constrained by particular perspectives of what it means to be a woman and sexual (read: oppressed by male sexuality). Although there has been a recent rise in “pro-sex” feminism, this perspective is not widespread or mainstream.

\textit{Kill Them or Save Them: Dualism & Representation of Sexuality}

Examining the production, circulation, and consumption of pornography and other media representations of sex, such as those of prostitution, not only at the institutional level but also at the individual level will enable us to have a more accurate
picture of what they mean in terms of women’s agency and empowerment. One way in which to do this is to look beyond pornography to everyday filmic and television representations of women and sexuality. Today, when women’s sexuality is so much a part of mainstream media representation this is all the more important. As Sut Jhally contends,

In advertising, gender (especially for women) is defined almost exclusively along the lines of sexuality….Sexuality provides a resource that can be used to get attention and communicate instantly. Within this sexuality is also a powerful component of gender that again lends itself even easier to imagistic representation….The iconography of culture, perhaps more than any previous society, seems to be obsessed with sexuality. The end result is that the commodity is part of an increasingly eroticized world – that we live in a culture that is more and more defined erotically through commodities.  

Young women’s desires today to be sexual and to have more possibilities open to them suggests an examination of the representation of commodified sexuality would be helpful in understanding the representation of sexuality in general.

Sex is a literal commodity in the form of prostitution. The Moonlite Bunny Ranch grossed $1.5 million dollars in April 2002 alone from selling sex (Cathouse). Cathouse commodifies prostitution, while at the same time television commodifies Cathouse and legal, brothel prostitution. While most of this is not revolutionary thinking, the idea that the show packages and sells a particular vision of prostitution is important. It is this process of co/modification between television and the show that is the site in
which the narrative of prostitution is constructed. This site warrants attention for its portrayal of legalized prostitution today. Before delving into the representation of prostitution and sex workers at the Bunny Ranch, though, it is important to understand how television and film have traditionally represented and currently represent sexual women and prostitutes.

Today’s representations of strong women on television include aggressive, yet sexy women. As Lewis Beale notes, “Mark down 2000 as they year of the Butt-Kickin’ Babes. On TV and in movies, sisters are doing it for themselves in numbers that haven’t been seen since the Amazons took on Hercules and the Greeks.” Beale cites examples such as *Dark Angel, Buffy, the Vampire Slayer,* and *Xena: Warrior Princess* on television, and the *Charlie’s Angels* films, *Girlfight,* and *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* in film. He claims that these trends can be linked to several factors: the feminist movement’s influence, rise in targeted programming, maintenance of male fantasy, and desire to reach lesbian audiences. Interestingly, appealing to male fantasy maintains the body as spectacle which has been part of the visual bias of television and film for many years, yet maintaining the appeal to men can sometimes lead to appealing to lesbians as well. Though usually coded ambiguously, the rise of queer theory and queer representation studies allows for multiple interpretations of the bodily spectacle, especially when it is focused on strong women. Of course, the question that remains in my mind, is how feminists interpret this same spectacle, as empowering or oppressive? Or, possibly, empowering and oppressive? In true journalistic style, Beale concluded
neither way, but allows for the voices of both those who find these trends empowering and those who see it as a return to oppressive roles for women.\footnote{147}

John Leland, Julie Dunn, and Maureen Balleza come to similar conclusions to Beale in their discussion the *Kill Bill* films. They cite Henry Jenkins, director of the comparative media studies program at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology as saying, “In popular culture, power gets represented through violence…It tells us who has the ability to kick, slash or shoot an opponent,” but, they argue, “even in these violent roles, screen heroines still cannot have it all. Unlike classic Homeric male action heroes…the protagonists of ‘Kill Bill’ and the ‘Charlie’s Angels’ movies do not drop the armor for amour. They are…literally impenetrable, in love or in war.”\footnote{148} Jenkins is further quoted as saying, “Audiences still maintain the Victorian prejudice that the sex act compromises women…There is the sense that for women to have sexuality is to give themselves over to the dominance of men.”\footnote{149} So, even when women are shown as strong and sexual, they are not allowed to be in relationships with men (or women, except in independent films) when represented in mainstream films.

A recent French film, *Baise-Moi* (which has been translated variously as “Fuck Me” and “Kiss Me,” but that the director prefers to call “Rape Me”) problematizes the representation of sexual, empowered women. This rape-revenge female buddy movie, in the tradition that arguably began with *Thelma and Louise* in 1991, is problematic in both the actions taken by the female leads in the film as well as in the production and representation of the women and acts in which they engage. The actresses (and actors in the film) engage in real sex. The actual penetration of the initiating rape in the film is
shown on film. So, the actress is engaged in real sex, which simulates a rape, and the film shows the actress’ reaction to “being raped.” Additionally, the female buddies in the film enact violent and sexual revenge on seemingly random victims, not just the rapist. Their revenge takes the form of robbing and killing others, as well as in having aggressive sex with random men (and some women). The director, Virginie Despentes, says,

I think some girls would feel relieved watching this movie, a reaction I understand. It’s a catharsis – you have lots of frustrations and then during the one hour and 20 minutes you get rid of them. It’s not real but it just feels good. I was raped when I was 17 and I would have enjoyed seeing this movie afterwards. It would have made me feel less lonely.¹⁵⁰

However, author and critic Linda Ruth Williams notes the problematic not only between the combination of “forced penetration and pleasurable fornication” shown in the film, but also of how the “real sex makes an uneasy bedfellow with the fabricated violence.”¹⁵¹ This is especially true if interpreted from a structuralist perspective in which both the real sex and the fabricated violence are defined as violence against women by men.

Williams goes on to explain that it is not just men who are watching these types of films today, however. This perspective calls into question this structuralist notion of pornographic violence. As Williams puts it:

(t)he female market for sexual material on video, designed to be enjoyed on the sofa rather than in the grindhouse cinema, has exploded over the last 10 years, and it may be that women viewers would be the most obvious target audience for this
Despentes, though acknowledging that ‘some women were very angry’, sees her ideal viewers as ‘girls and women’. She also wants the film’s dark pleasures to encompass more than just sexual spectacle; when asked if the sex was meant to be arousing, she replied: ‘Arousing not in the sense of touching yourself, but in the sense of feeling that sex can be great even without love, even without perspective.’

Despentes sees herself as a feminist and believes that the film could not exist without the feminist struggles that have preceded it. However, this film is also ripe for criticism by Dworkin, MacKinnon, and anti-sex feminists for adhering to their perspective of heterosexual intercourse: sex as rape.

When it comes to representations of prostitution, the story is nearly the same as that in mainstream film. In their study of media narratives of the sex industry in Canada from 1980 to 2005, Helga Hallgrimsdottir, Rachel Phillips, and Cecilia Benoit argued that “media narratives offer a voyeuristic and consumerist interpretation of the sex industry” in which sex workers are consistently characterized as either dangerous fallen women from whom the general public needs to be protected, or, alternatively, as victims in need of protection from evildoers (usually men) who seduce innocent girls into this life of deviance. Likewise, Lisa McLaughlin traced the evolution of representations of prostitutes from nineteenth century literature through to television and film of the early 1990s. McLaughlin argued that although depictions of prostitutes have changed over time, from fallen woman to femme fatale to sex worker, the end messages of these
narratives remained the same: society needs protection from these women, these women need saving from themselves, and/or, deviance requires control/punishment.\textsuperscript{154}

Hallgrimsdottir, Phillips, and Benoit’s research concluded that media depictions of prostitution and sex workers contained narratives that perpetuated stigma around the sex industry. They examined 425 articles in the \textit{Victoria Times Colonist} published between 1980 and 2004 that dealt with prostitution and/or prostitutes. The results of their content analysis showed that prostitutes were characterized as vectors of contagion, morally culpable women who were engaged in risky behavior. Additional themes depicted prostitution as sexual slavery in which pimps preyed upon helpless women whom society had failed in some way.\textsuperscript{155} The purpose of their study was to compare these media representations with the way sex workers characterized themselves. While there is value in this comparison, their claim that media portrayals frame how society views prostitution implies that other forms of media that reach broad audiences would be of great value to study. Television, a medium that reaches billions of people the world over, deserves the same type of attention.

McLaughlin expanded her focus to include literature, magazines, and a variety of different types of television shows. In her examination, she found similar themes and narratives of prostitution. Overall, these prostitution narratives operated around male/female, virtue/evil binaries. Four narrative strategies recurred throughout the portrayals to construct these binaries: 1) the prostitutes were not the protagonists of the stories, 2) conflict was constructed between the protagonist (a virtuous female figure or institutional protector, such as a cop) and the prostitute, 3) the same conflict, between
good and evil, was played out *within* the prostitute, and 4) the prostitute was associated, or made responsible for danger, death, drugs, or disease.\(^{156}\) McLaughlin mentioned a few examples of prostitution narratives constructed on talk shows as well. However, these narratives did not differ greatly from the fictional accounts. In all, McLaughlin remained focused on the discourses and the narratives constructed.

In “Documenting the Sex Industry,” Jane Arthurs gives a more complicated vision of the representation of the sex industry on television. She compares similarities and differences of different types of media representations of the sex industry, from journalistic accounts to docuporn - “documentaries whose purpose is entertainment through erotic display and talk (that) have been joined by others that are designed with more ‘proper’ purposes”\(^{157}\) such as educating the public about stigmatized work. Although she recognizes the same punishment/redemption narratives as those outlined by Hallgrimsdottir, Phillips, and Benoit, and McLaughlin, Arthurs argues that definition as “sex workers” by prostitutes themselves has led to increased acceptance and legitimization of women formerly considered transgressive or victims. This different view of working women, along with increased popularity and commercialization of television has led to more complicated representations of sex workers. News programs and documentaries about domestic and international prostitution (from the U.K.) still fall into the punishment/redemption dichotomy, whereas docuporn, soft core, auteur films, and reality television accounts, on the other hand, include both these dominant narratives and also incorporate the business side of work. In these business narratives, the women are shown as economically empowered through their work.
However, constraints of the television medium require privileging of the sensational coupled with normative judgments of the women involved. As Arthurs explains, “(s)ensationalism is the product of fascination with stories of sexual transgression in which the moral righteousness of exposing wrongdoing is entwined with the often unacknowledged pleasure of vicarious participation.”158 So, while she sees positive possibilities for challenging dominant representations of sex work through feminist critique in alternative forms such as documentary and auteur films, she is cautious in her optimism. She warns that forms that succumb to profit motive and rely heavily upon spectacle to draw in viewers have “spurious appeal to feminist legitimacy” as they are “undermined by the restricting codes of its limited erotic vocabulary and its institutionalized relations of consumption that are characteristic of this type of sex industry documentary.”159

Conclusion

I began this discussion of the cultural context of the culture of sex work with two guiding questions: what do we believe to be true about prostitution in this country? And, why do we believe these things to be true? By tracing how Cartesian dualistic thinking has influenced how we think about women and sexuality, how feminist theory has both challenged and, ended up in some cases, reified this type of dichotomous thinking, I have shown why we think many of the things we do about women and sexuality. Additionally, by explaining the breadth of both academic discourse about prostitution as well as dominant media depictions of sex work, I have also begun to explain what it is we think about prostitutes, which is primarily that they are either victims of or threats to society.
But, none of this is new. I have merely brought multi-disciplinary work together to demonstrate a point. What is interesting is when a seeming counter-discourse emerges. It is my contention that Cathouse, in its portrayal of legal, safe, economically empowering sex work, operates as a counter-narrative of prostitution on television.

Looking at life at the Moonlite Bunny Ranch as it is portrayed on television and as it is lived has the potential of expanding what we know about prostitution as well as exposing false assumptions based on limited definitions of prostitution. Situating this view of prostitution within the socio-historical context of what we think about prostitution and why we think the way we do is a necessary first step in getting there. Within Cartesian dualistic thinking and dominant feminist responses to these binaries, sexual women are caught in a double-bind: either they are punished for their sexuality or characterized as non-sexual victims of male sexual oppression. Media representations of sexual women and prostitutes replicate these perspectives. Challenges to these views from lesbian feminists allow for the celebration of sexual women, but only outside heterosexual dominant discourse.

Rejection of heterosexual sexuality creates the further difficulty of female sexuality being confined to female to female relationships that do not involve dominance or objectification, which some authors indicate eliminates particular types of female sexuality. Author and former sex worker Jill Nagle argues that it is “…high time to stop excluding the perspectives of sex worker feminists, time to stop assuming that traditional feminist analysis of sexual oppression alone exhausts all possible interpretations of commercial sex, and time to stop reproducing the whore stigma
common to the larger culture. As such, pro-sex feminists and some television and film depictions of strong sexual women have attempted to remedy these faults of dominant discourses of female sexuality. However, such arguments remain marginalized when it comes to what society thinks about female sexuality.

Bringing the life experiences and voices of individual sex workers to the mainstream might be another way to combat such marginalization. It is also way to round out the cultural context of prostitution in the United States. In this chapter, I have traced the evolution of cultural discourses of sexual women and prostitution. In Chapter 2, I will explore what individual sex workers have to say about prostitution and their lives.
Chapter 2: Cultural Context of Prostitution in the United States: Part II - Sex Workers

Speak Out

In some ways, what sex workers write about their work echoes the reform/punishment discourse of dominant popular and academic forums. There are victims, many of whom are in need of saving. There are women who threaten society. Those who threaten values and beliefs that others hold dear are considered in need of punishment or restriction. But this dichotomy, just like the virgin/whore binary of Cartesian dualistic thinking discussed in Chapter 1, is too simple. While there are women in need of saving, this does not mean that all prostitutes, therefore, need to be saved. Further, being a victim does not mean that a prostitute needs to be saved in the way that conservatives or liberals believe she needs to be saved. Additionally, there are women who are a threat to society. What they threaten however are negative, simplistic dominant discourses of sexual women. In addition to the similarities and differences within reform/punishment discourses, there are many other issues that are ignored within dominant discourse which sexual women bring to the fore.

The words, beliefs, and experiences that prostitute women themselves share point both to overarching issues that tend to affect the job no matter where it takes place as well as reveal specific experiences which can differ from woman to woman. The legal status of sex work is a central issue that is related to and/or encompasses many of the other issues in these women’s lives. The illegal status of prostitution in the U.S. in all but brothels in Nevada and the questionable legal status of many other types of sex work is seen by sex workers as fundamental to how sex workers are treated by management,
clients, and legal authorities. Social restrictions and treatment by various groups perpetuates the social stigmas that pervade all of these women’s experiences of their work. Many sex workers believe that these issues can only be addressed with a shift in the way we conceive of them, that is, as “sex workers” rather than by socially stigmatized terms such as prostitutes, whores, strippers, etc. Sex workers also share ways they make sense of their experiences that allow them to take action against matters they consider unjust – from the legal status of prostitution to workers’ rights, from treatment by customers and society to ways of communicating that allow them to express the power they hold.

The following discussion of issues facing sex workers comes primarily from a review of various writings by sex workers. These women are or have been nude models, strippers, writers of erotica, street prostitutes, massage parlor employees, and brothel workers. Sex work includes a broad range of activities which have in common sex, but could be anything from having (multiple forms of) actual sex to writing about it, from facilitating sex to performing it, as in stripping. It is of great importance not to make distinctions between types of sex work when discussing women’s experiences in the industry for making distinctions merely operates to include those privileged to meet particular definitional standards while excluding those in the figurative same boat. For the present discussion, distinguishing types of sex work is not important for what is included and excluded within sex work. However, it will be important in Chapter 3 to identify characteristics that distinguish one type of sex work from another for my specific analytical purposes.
Although the perspectives included in this chapter reveal experiences in a wide range of jobs within the sex industry, it is crucial to note that these are sex workers who not only have written about their lives but have been published as well. This means that this analysis suffers from focusing on the experiences of a privileged group of women who are lucky enough to be comfortable sharing their lives with others and to be considered important enough, or marketable enough, to justify publication. That said, Jill Nagle, Frédérique Delacoste, and Priscilla Alexander, editors of two of the collections from which I have drawn extensively, are all current and/or former sex workers. So, their experiences come from within the sex industry. Their insider status not only gives credibility to what they have to say, but to their qualifications to include perspectives of other sex workers that speak to the lived experiences of a broader range of sex workers. Finally, the insider status of these editors also gives them a way to contact women who would not normally have access to the publishing world. So, although the viewpoints included in this chapter are limited to a privileged few, those included have been sought out and chosen by those who are in-the-know.

In this chapter, I will discuss how individual sex workers conceive of their status as victims in need of saving and as threats to society as they are typically characterized in cultural discourses of prostitution in the United States. Rather than fall into the same binary classification of prostitute women occurring in these discourses, I have also included the more complicated perspectives of individual sex workers both within and beyond this dichotomy. Issues such as being forced into this work or choosing it, the relationships amongst sex, money, and power, and the ambivalent experiences of this
type of work challenge the simplistic vision of prostitutes as victims. Discussing the influence that the (il)legal\textsuperscript{165} status of prostitution has on how the work is restricted, the abuse these women face, and the stigma it promotes complicate the categorical status of prostitutes as threats to society. Beyond problematizing the victim/threat dichotomy, individual perspectives of sex workers attempt to define prostitution as “work.” Before concluding this chapter, I will explore how conceptualizing prostitution as sex work might affect the lives of these women.

\textit{Victims in Need of Saving?}

As she strolled past the likker store, she looked down the street at the elementary school she usta go to wondering what her mother would say. Well, she thot, least I ain’t on welfare…. “Psst! Wanna date? Huh honey? How ‘bout it?” She almost ran; she couldn’t have taken another feebly dick, pink, hairy son of a bitch if he’d been shittin’ fifty dollar bills….Willie wouldn’t be upset ‘bout her not gettin’ no whole lot of money. Shit! Wet as it was the muthafucker oughtta be glad she got what she got….He opened the door, grabbed her arm, yanked her around and placed a well aimed patent leathered foot in her ass and said, “Bitch u get in when u got my money.”\textsuperscript{166}

Sapphire’s story is a familiar one. An innocent young woman embarrassed to tell her mother that she’s become a whore just to stay off welfare. She wouldn’t do it if she really had a choice but as her story shows, it is not her choice to work or not, it is up to Willie, her pimp. If we were to create a backstory for Sapphire drawn from similar experiences of prostitutes, it might include abuse during her childhood that led her to do drugs and
run away from home. Alone and vulnerable, like so many runaways,\textsuperscript{167} Sapphire then sought salvation in a “nice guy” who promised to help her. Instead he got her addicted to drugs, made her dependent on him for money, food, and safety, and then he pimped her out. With nowhere to go and no way to support herself, Sapphire gets used by men until she does not know who she is any more.

This is the “victim in need of saving” story that mainstream media and cultural discourses tell of prostitutes. As the excerpt from Sapphire’s story demonstrates, it is not far from her truth. It begs the question though: is this the truth for all prostitutes? The simple answer is: no. However, this is not a simple question. There are women who are victims of abuse, drug addicts, and women without the financial means to support themselves or their families who turn to prostitution. There are women who need to be saved from prostitution. However, to say that all prostitutes fit this model or that they all need to be saved is too simple an equation. Here, I will trace how some sex workers write about issues of abuse, drugs, poverty, and financial need, which reveals a myriad of experiences.

First, women who are abused are said to go into prostitution. Interviewing Denise Turner, Lyndall MacCowan asks, “\textit{What about the statistics that say some 50 percent of the women who work are abuse survivors?}” To which Turner, incest survivor and former sex worker turned legalization advocate, responded,

That’s not much higher than for the general population. Prostitution is a different situation. Maybe some people feel abused in prostitution if they associate it with the abuse to such a strong degree that they just, no matter how much control they
have, feel humiliated just to be sexual with a man. If they’ve really bought into the stigma of prostitution, then that would be their feeling.”

Feeling abused may only be part of the equation for women who have come from childhood abuse. In her review of empirical studies of “Childhood Sexual Abuse as a Risk Factor for Subsequent Involvement in Sex Work,” Evelyn Abramovich concludes that although the studies collectively suggest sexual abuse is common among female prostitutes, it is not evident that these individuals have chosen prostitution as a result of being sexualized at a young age. Rather, this research seems to suggest that these individuals are attempting to flee from chaotic family circumstances and are utilizing prostitution for financial livelihood.

These studies do not account for whether or not the participants acted out sexually before going into prostitution, nor do they utilize random samples of prostitutes on which to base their conclusions. While random samples of such a hard to access population are difficult to come by, convenience samples cut against generalizable conclusions regarding causality. Therefore, Abramovich concludes that there is not enough evidence to support the overall conclusion these studies attempt to make regarding abuse being a significant risk factor for later involvement in sex work. So, yes, there are victims of abuse who go into prostitution. However, there are also women who are abused who do not go into prostitution in comparable percentages.

Additionally, how women who were abused make sense of the experience are not monolithic. There are women who may be “acting out” due to the childhood abuse. For
Turner, though, she says her molestation made her feel out of control. She says that in prostitution she has found a place she feels in control. She can say who she will be with, what she will/will not do, and how much she will get paid. She says that prostitution allowed her to find a way out of feeling the helplessness of abuse. As I will discuss later in this chapter, this feeling of control in sex work is not unique to victims of abuse.

Second, poverty and/or drug addiction can lead many women to prostitution. The number one reason women give for going into prostitution is the money. Many of these women are working not just for their own survival, but that of their families, including husbands, children, and/or extended families. Prostitution and drug addiction are often coupled in studies about sex work. In Priscilla Alexander’s review of literature about sex work, emotional stress, and substance abuse, she summarized that the prevalence of depression among street prostitutes can lead to drug addiction or dependence. However, she also found a study that indicated that “almost half (48%) did (drugs) before becoming involved in prostitution, and began prostitution to earn enough money to pay for the drugs.” For women who began using drugs after going into sex work, most were found to have at least tried drugs, whereas more street-prostitutes (84%) than “high-class” prostitutes (22%) who worked indoors were found to have used and become addicted to heroin. She notes that sex work establishments, such as brothels and massage parlors, often have policies against drug use that can result in workers being fired for use. Finally, Alexander notes that the stresses of the job, easy access to drugs, the pleasure of some drugs, exploitative work conditions, and the impact of stigma and isolation are all factors in drug use and addiction.
So, yes, there are prostitutes who do drugs. Some even do it in order to get through a work day. However, experiences of prostitute women are more complicated than saying that prostitutes do drugs. First, drug addiction often leads to prostitution. Second, women are often pulled into a cycle in which they do drugs, work as a prostitute to pay for their addiction, do more drugs, and then need to go back to work in order to continue to buy drugs. Cecelia Wardlaw’s story shows that this cycle is true to her experience.

Cecelia fell in love. Her lover was street-wise and a heroin addict. Cecelia, a nurse, went out on the street to make enough money to buy a house and move her lover in with her. So, then Cecelia had to support both their habits. She kept working as a nurse and a prostitute to keep them both high. Shortly thereafter, she was arrested and could no longer work as a nurse. She felt uneasy about going back to the streets, but needed money fast to pay her court fine and for drugs. So, she found a massage parlor at which to work. But there was never enough money for the drugs and they were always high. She lost her house. She got fired from the parlor. She worked in nursing through a temp agency and saw a few johns which temporarily helped with their money problems. However, she eventually realized her life was hell. So, she finally got out, from under her lover, heroin, and the job. She was lucky. Others tell similar stories. Their stories demonstrate that drugs are a problem that can lead to prostitution and how readily available drugs can be whether the prostitute is on the street or in a massage parlor. Given what other studies and individual sex workers say about the link between drugs and sex work, it would be hasty to assume that this is the reason women go into prostitution.
Third, if women are “forced” into prostitution for financial reasons, aside from the need to purchase drugs, the underlying issue is poverty. There are stories of women who need to support their families and cannot do so with minimum-wage jobs who go into prostitution. But it is the stories of runaways that critics of prostitution focus on to demonstrate the “forced” nature of the business. Karen was a runaway who was taken advantage of by a “nice guy” who turned out to be a pimp who turned her to prostitution. Then a “nice cop” came along to save her, eventually becoming her pimp himself. This turn of events “saved” her from being arrested. Luckily, within a few months, she saved enough money and went home to her parents. Collette ran from New York to San Francisco. She was “lucky” enough not to fall prey to the “nice guys” hanging around the bus station looking for girls just like her. However, Collette’s fortune led her to work in a massage parlor. She was blessed to have ended up working indoors rather than outdoors, and even luckier to have caught the eye of the owner and eventually became the manager of the parlor.

Phyllis Luman Metal did not run away, but was looking for a different kind of life. She ended up in Paris, alone and penniless. She met a musician, also with no money. She ended up supporting them both through prostitution and he became her de facto pimp. Once this became their relationship, she says “from then on I had a regular job.” Although she could be considered victimized, Karen got out of the life she did not want to be in. Neither Collette nor Phyllis looks on her work in prostitution as forced, despite how critics may characterize them.
If women are coerced into prostitution by men (or other women) because of their dire financial need or desperate drug addiction, sex workers say, focus again should not be on the exchange of sex for money as the key problem. Rather, it is those who prey upon the needy and the relationships formed between them that need to be resolved.¹⁷⁹ Those on the right and the left, religious conservatives and feminists alike focus most of their efforts to “save” these women on stopping the act of selling sex, when it is other underlying causes that must be addressed. Abolishing prostitution merely takes away one of the few financial resources women in such circumstances have available to them. This is not to say that patriarchal gender relations are not an underlying cause, but these relations do not make the sale of sex inherently oppressive.

I wholeheartedly agree that some women are in need of saving. A drug addicted woman, living in poverty, who does not see any way out other than selling blowjobs for twenty dollars a pop, would benefit from learning that there are other choices available to her and learning how to make something else happen. But as Veronica Monét attests, that is not the experience of all or even most prostitutes:

Television programs, movies, and news stories that tell only about financially desperate, drug addicted, sexually abused, uneducated, and/or street tough prostitutes are taken as representative of who and what most if not all prostitutes are like. Those representations of prostitutes make me feel invisible, especially if it is a twisted profile of myself I’m looking at. I think about the reality of my and my colleagues’ own work and lives as prostitutes…because those realities are so very different from popular stereotypes.¹⁸⁰
Monét recognizes that media representation of prostitution does not reflect the personal experiences of prostitutes. More specifically, she tells the story of when she was interviewed by *Hard Copy* in 1993. The show edited out all positive statements she made about her work and made it look like she was a “desperate woman forced into prostitution by the recession.” So, media representations are recognized by some prostitute women as inaccurate to their reality.

Moreover, being characterized as a “victim” is seen as harmful in itself by sex workers. Larry Grant recognizes the need to help men and women who have been forced into prostitution by the problems outlined above. However, he adamantly argues that “What they don’t need…is to be labeled victim….By branding struggling people ‘victims,’ we make them even more helpless.” Carole Leigh, aka Scarlot Harlot, agrees. She created the character of Scarlot Harlot as a way to humorously expose false conceptions of who sex workers are and share her experiences. She says, “…I strive to divorce myself from the stereotype of the Sorry Slut, that image insinuates itself into my life like a commercial for my oppression.”

Much like Scarlot Harlot, Judy Hefland refused to see herself as an exploited woman. She was inspired by the woman she lived with who was a nude model. Hefland’s lover was self-assured in the way she expressed herself sexually with men in a way Hefland admired. When she went to work herself, she admits to having conflicting feelings. However, she refused to be a victim throughout the experience and never felt the need to be saved.

As a matter of fact, Nell argues that attempting to “save” her made her feel as if she had no voice because the feminists trying to save her did not accurately represent her
experiences. The Feminists for Free Expression (FFE) go against this mainstream feminist perspective of attempting to save women from oppression in prostitution or in sexual imagery. This includes consumption of sexual expression and the creation and production of it. They argue against attempts of the “government to curtail rights in the name of ‘protecting’ women.”184 In a letter against censorship legislation, the FFE said:

Women do not require ‘protection’ from explicit sexual materials. It is no goal of feminism to restrict individual choices or stamp out sexual imagery…there is no agreement or feminist code as to what images are distasteful or even sexist. It is the right and responsibility of each woman to read, view or produce the sexual material she chooses without the intervention of the state ‘for her own good.’185

As this statement from the FFE and the experiences of the Leigh, Nell, and Grant highlight, the real issue is the question of choice versus coercion.

Mainstream feminists would say that patriarchal structures prevent choice; that all prostitution is forced.186 Therefore, any woman who says she has chosen this lifestyle is suffering from false consciousness. However, sex workers’ experiences, and that of the FFE, contradict this position. Therefore, dominant conservative and feminist moves to “save” these women actually act to further oppress their experiences by denying them. While focusing on victimization is not a particularly useful approach to addressing problems in prostitution, identifying the reasons women go into prostitution does direct our attention to issues that could be addressed in order to better the lives of prostitutes.
Scholarship about prostitution by non-sex workers, from Hollywood movies to right-wing legislation to mainstream feminist scholarship, often makes no distinction between coercion and choice. Rather, it assumes that prostitution is a profession no one would choose if they had a choice. From this perspective, anyone who goes into this line of work must have been forced, whether they know it or not.\(^{187}\) An attempt to distinguish between coerced prostitution and making the choice to go into the profession came from the “…Platform for Action that emerged out of the United Nations’ Beijing Women’s Conference in October 1995 (that) clearly differentiated between forced and voluntary prostitution, condemning the forced variety.”\(^ {188}\) The division between that which is done willingly and unwillingly would allow for deeper analysis of factors that affect sex workers’ lives and whether such factors are related to the job itself or how one came to the work. However, the fact that divergent perspectives of those who \textit{choose} sex work exist is little known. For example, Jill Nagle, former sex worker and editor of the collection, \textit{Whores and Other Feminists}, notes that her race and economic privilege allowed her to choose sex work, whereas women who are neither white nor economically stable may not have the same choices she did.\(^ {189}\) Knowing that she chose this work would allow us to examine the roles race and ethnicity played in allowing her to make this choice. Yet, these same factors might prevent someone else from making the same choice. What is important is \textit{not} assuming that both Nagle and someone of a different race and/or economic status have the same life experiences.
There are women who choose to do sex work. Despite working in a supportive environment for nine years for Women Against Rape, former nude model and topless dancer Judy Helfand feared her co-workers’ condemnation if she told them what she once did:

It makes me angry when feminists lump all sex industry workers into a pile of poor, exploited, brainwashed victims without minds of their own. I was a young woman who needed to earn a living and chose to pursue the highest paying, least demanding jobs I knew of. I was successful. I felt good about myself. Today I have different values and a clearer understanding of my position as a woman in the world, but this doesn’t invalidate my past experience. What I can do today is examine those unexpressed, unacknowledged feelings from the past, the feelings which co-existed with my previously discussed feelings of power, independence, sexiness, and ease. This is the hardest part, the home of those barriers of silence, guilt, and isolation.  

Rather than try to sort out such difficult-to-reconcile feelings, such as power, guilt, independence, silence, sexiness, and isolation, Helfand felt her co-workers would lump her with the other taken-advantage-of women sucked into the life. Despite conflicting feelings between how she feels today and how she felt when she was working in the sex industry, Helfand gives credence to both her experiences then and her feelings about that work now.

Porn star Nina Hartley says that she made the right choice for herself when she went into sex work and if she had to do it all over again she would make the same
decision. Part of the reason she has such confidence about the choice she made is that she gave it careful consideration first. She consulted her two life partners and contemplated a range of questions from whether or not she could reconcile the sex industry with feminism to how she could defend her personal desires as an exhibitionist/voyeur in her work, from whether it was wrong to arouse male lust in such an environment to whether or not she and her family could deal with their loss of privacy. Such careful deliberation of so many factors that might affect her life along with consultation with her closest family members led Hartley to make a conscious choice about her life path.

Examples such as Hartley and Nagle represent a range of reasons women choose to go into sex work, and that choice is possible. As with many occupations, sex workers themselves identify economic motives as the most important reason for going into the business. Critics argue that the economic status of women forces them into choices they would not otherwise make. Many sex workers recognize economic necessity while at the same time see the necessity of this type of work and the economic opportunities it provides that they can find in few other places.

*Sex, Money, and Power*

Identifying economics as the number one motive for going into sex work does not make women’s different perspectives on money clear. Judy Edelstein knew she would be giving handjobs when she went to work at the massage parlor, but was not willing to do other acts men offered her money for once she was working, at least not at first. But, as she says, “Pretty soon I wised up. I figured I wasn’t working here for my health. So the next time a guy tried to feel me up, I let him. That way he left me a nice tip and asked for
Gina Gold agrees that the point of working in the sex industry is to make money. Others’ reasons are related to the ideological relationship between women and making money. Cecelia Wardlaw says that in non-sex work jobs getting a pat on the rear or having to go out with the boss was expected, but that she was not paid for this work. So, she “began turning tricks, not so much to make money, but to avoid giving away sex.” Her choice was to get paid for sex.

Getting paid for sex is one of the most lucrative jobs available, especially for women. Striptease dancer Vicky Funari explains,

A long period of unemployment and an empty bank account got me into that mirrored room. From among the temporary options visible to me – waitressing, office work, and nude dancing – I chose the job with the most comfortable uniform and the best learning opportunities. I put my body where the wages were, and my consciousness immediately began changing shape without my permission.

While Funari’s experiences led her to her current anti-pornography stand, she makes it clear that during the work her feelings were both positive and negative, much like any other job.

As a matter of fact, to abolish sex work would take away one of the most financially lucrative options available to women. Liz Highleyman, aka Mistress Veronika Frost, argues that “Everyone should have the opportunity to leave the sex industry if they choose, but antiprostitution crusaders should not assume that women – either in the industrialized or in the developing world – would necessarily be better off doing low-
wage domestic, factory, office, or agricultural labor than they are doing sex work.”

Strippers can make upwards of $75,000 in Texas, which is more than most strip club managers. Working at a massage parlor, Denise Turner was able to live off 3-4 customers a week. After leaving the job, she still returned to work during summer vacations in order to finance seasonal travel. Despite all the money that can be made in sex work, with legal bills, partying, and shopping, the lifestyle can lead to working just to keep up with the bills. Yet, given the reality in which we live, the sex industry provides economic opportunity not available to women in many other places.

Ideologically speaking, the desire to make one’s own money is not a quality that has traditionally been attributed to women. Even feminist theory does not have a way to reconcile women, sex, and money. “It tends to remain in the arena of ‘nice girls.’ And nice girls don’t pursue things like money or sex unless they have humanitarian or nurturing motives (e.g., supporting a child with money or loving a partner with sex).” For this reason, women’s desire to make money, especially from a marginalized profession such as prostitution, is dismissed by the right and left alike as women being victimized by the economic system or the mask that hides their oppression. Blake Aarens argues that as long as we live in a world where a male corporate CEO can exert his power without consequence and women cannot even assert the right to make money without controversy women will remain oppressed. But there is a fear of power and femininity in the same body as it challenges traditional gender roles. Sex can be an area in which women hold power over men. Therefore sex workers embody this challenge, especially if you add their financial power to the equation.
In his study comparing male-female and male-male prostitution, Julian Marlowe highlights the flaw in anti-prostitution arguments. He says that “the objection relates not to the actual transaction,” as male prostitutes are not subject to the same types of arguments against their involvement in the profession, “but rather to preconstructed sex roles that attempt to stigmatize women for being anything other than the traditional passive partner.” If women pose a challenge to these traditions, arguments unrelated to the exchange of sex for money are often used to justify marginalization. Veronica Monét argues that prostitution actually allows us to see how women are “expected to interact with sex and money in our society” and that “once (she) lost the approval and acceptance of the good girl and felt the punishment and rejection of the bad girl (her) view of reality changed drastically.” She realized that part of being a “good girl” meant not desiring wealth and being “bad” alleviated that constraint.

From this perspective, women either need to conform and accept the system or need to be “saved” from it. However, “Critics fail to consider that a healthy desire for wealth, not psychological deficiencies, may attract women to the industry. Pathologizing women for earning money in one of the only fields in which women earn more than men is sexism, not psychological insight,” Stacy Reed contends. Reed’s perspective would attribute a desire for money to women that non-sex workers rarely acknowledge. This does not mean women do not possess this desire though. As Peggy Morgan puts it, “The fact is, there’s a livable wage to be made in the sex business, and we decide when, where and with whom we’ll do what. Money talks, bullshit walks, and we don’t have to put up with anything we don’t want to.” Perhaps, then, one important reason women and
money are kept separate is that giving money to women would also give them power, which would, in turn, upset the current balance of power in society.

Sex work brings sex, money, and women together and threatens to shift power relationships between women and men. Typically, men as a group have physical, economic, and political power over women, women control something that most heterosexual men desperately desire. Some girls and women learn early in life to use this power for their own gain, and sex work is an extension of this practice. Sex work relies upon, some might even say exploits, the sexual neediness of men ….Men spend large sums of money, face shame and guilt, and risk family and societal censure to satisfy their sexual desires, especially those that are considered unusual or illicit.”

Putting men in such a compromising position, threatening perceptions of them, and redirecting power and money to women makes sex an “arena in which women have considerable power over men.” Interestingly, Vicky Funari uses the set up at The Lusty Lady, a San Francisco strip club, as a metaphor for this shifted balance of power. She claims that the theater is one of the most socially integrated environments she has ever been in, “Except for one little detail: women are on the paid side of the glass, men on the paying side. It’s the strongest visual metaphor I’ve encountered for the feminist argument that sexism crosses all boundaries and encompasses all races, all political, cultural, and economic systems.”

As a result of making their own money, many sex workers recognize an evolution in the way they think about themselves. Nell claims that making her own money has
helped her to know her own worth and appreciate the skills she has developed. She also says, “I don’t sell myself short for anybody….I know what I can do with my body – it’s not for free and it’s not for pay. So it has been good for me to get that sense of possession, of worth about my body, being able to use it for something, knowing what I can do with it.” Others report feeling the eroticism in power itself. A widespread claim by sex workers is that being able to earn the amounts they do allows them to be freed from the heterosexual economy in which we live.

Sex work, much like the idea of a woman working anywhere outside the home at one time, “violates society’s antiquated ideas about sex being somehow degrading to a woman’s body (devaluing her) and the ridiculous notion that a woman is the property of first her father and later her husband.” Women working in many other professions have become acceptable. But, the ideas that women degrade themselves in sex outside marriage and a woman moving from her father’s home to her husband’s have not been eradicated. Carol Leigh recognizes that she “…was raised to trade sexuality for survival, or some social advantage.” However, she also claims that this “state of prostitution” in which we live cannot be recognized because doing so would either acknowledge that all women are whores and/or break down the carefully built wall separating the good girls from the bad girls. Eva Pendleton claims that sex work is refreshingly honest about what is being bought and sold making it more equal than the unacknowledged heterosexual economy in which we live. In magazine articles about prostitutes that have appeared in magazines such as Sassy and Glamour that Pendleton examined, sex workers claim that it is the choice to exchange sex for money that removes them from the
heterosexual economy as they are less likely to “put out” for free or for drinks and dinner as non-sex workers do on a regular basis.\textsuperscript{218}

Phyllis Luman Metal provides a unique perspective on sex work as a better way of life than the heterosexual economy. In a dialogue, Metal shares the perspective of a fifty-five year old prostitute. The sex worker claims that she did not feel guilty over her profession, but described it as “a hell of a lot better than marriage. And I tried that five times….I found it very liberating to be a prostitute, and the men must have found it liberating too, for they were much better lovers than my husbands.”\textsuperscript{219} For this reason she wonders why it is wrong to get paid for having sex, especially since when she first charged for sex she felt more self respect and self worth than she ever did when she was married. In marriage, she had husbands who expected her to do the shit work at home, expected her to serve their desires, broke her ribs, took all her money, neglected her children, came home drunk every night, and gave her a sexually transmitted disease. She says that she never had a trick do anything like what her husbands did. Plus, she got paid and did not have to do the crap work at home.\textsuperscript{220} She got out of the system through sex work and was able to liberate herself.

Unfortunately, claiming a need and desire for money and recognition of actual benefits from sex work are likely to provoke either of two possible responses. The “false consciousness” response: women just do not know they are oppressed in this system; or, the “need for restraint” response: women are not supposed to desire wealth (or sex), so what this woman is doing is wrong and should be stopped. The pressure to hide the desire for money makes Blake Aarens feel conflicted. She is an artist who has a “sugar
daddy” who acts as her patron. She enjoys that his patronage allows her to pursue the arts she enjoys. Yet, she says that it is difficult to tell people outside the business, especially feminist friends, that this is where her livelihood comes from due to how they would judge her.221

Going into the business for the money does not always mean getting what you really want though. Aarens and five other sex workers debated the value of money. On one side, some said that women are fooling themselves into thinking that money equals happiness when they are not really happy physically or spiritually. While others said that even having a sore body from so much sex can make you feel good, because you know you are making money and doing a good job. In the end, the question that remained for them was: How is your pussy getting you things different from your brain getting you things?222 The question suggests that other factors, in addition to the desire for money, contribute to sex work stigma. Athletes have skills in a particular area in which they can make tremendous amounts of money using their bodies, yet do not suffer the same type of marginalization. Seeing sex as intrinsically bad or paying money for sex as inherently oppressive is what allows women to be scorned for being sex workers. Perhaps altering this attitude is what would allow us a more accurate view of how sex work really affects the women who do it.223

An altered view of sex is one important factor that may give more credence to sex workers’ point of view. Perhaps it would help us to reconceive of the economic situation in which women live as well. Scarlot Harlot’s solution does address the economic system with some suggestions for improvement. She believes:
1. Prostitution is too rampant. Most of us are forced by economic need to share this deep intimacy. About half the prostitutes I know are mothers who support their families. My solution…pay mothers decent salaries for childraising. This will eliminate about half the prostitutes. The remaining prostitutes will make more money. Everyone will be happy.

2. In general, all the boring, dangerous and unpopular jobs will pay more than the interesting, popular jobs. That will improve most people’s lives.”

So, it would seem that sex workers recognize the constraints the economic system in the United States puts upon them that make other jobs available to them undesirable. Meanwhile they can enjoy the benefits of the money sex work provides, regardless of how others interpret their desire for wealth and ability to achieve economic success.

Much of what I have written so far should signal ambivalence as key to the perspectives of sex workers’ life and work experiences. It would be easy to trace discourse surrounding prostitution, conclude that this talk discursively constructs a punishment/redemption binary, and then attempt to refute such a binary with the perspectives of individual sex workers. However, this trajectory is what happened with the sex wars in the 1980s and again as pro-sex perspectives began to emerge as sex radicalism in the mid-1990s. As performance artist Annie Sprinkle explains:

Over the past twenty-five years I’ve done virtually every aspect of sex work except lap dancing. When I started, there were very few of us that were open about our jobs. The legal repercussions were too great and the stigma too heavy. Slowly but surely (inspired by Margo St. James and Xaviera Hollander), one by
one, we began to speak out about how we weren’t all exploited victims, how we weren’t all on the side of the patriarchy, and how some of us felt empowered by sex work, grew through it, and sometimes actually enjoyed the sex. We accentuated the positive (in my case, ad nauseam) because the many forces against us (police, religious fanatics, FBI, IRS, jealous wives, politicians, etc.) continuously exclaimed the negatives to keep us down.225

While she would continue to encourage women to share their positive experiences, she also argues that sex workers themselves must be able to discuss both positives and negatives of their work. The danger, of course, is that what they reveal as negative will be taken as proof of the anti-sex brigade’s argument about the oppression of sex workers. So, it is important to Sprinkle that both the positive and negative in the experience of sex workers be examined.226 This is especially true since so many of the women who have written about their experiences have both positive and negative things to say.

Despite many benefits that money can bring, for some women, in the end, the money is not enough to justify the work. As already mentioned, some women get caught in a cycle of working just to afford a particular lifestyle. This life of money, parties, legal bills, shopping, etc., can make it difficult to get out of the business once one gets used to it.227 Not everyone gets caught in that cycle though. After working three years, Stacy Reed claims that she got bored with stripping. What was a thrilling job became just another job. Her body hurt, she wasn’t taking time to find her real passion – writing. At that point, her only motivation for dancing was money and her motivation for the work plummeted.228 For others, the money can distract from the fact that sex work might not be
for them. According to Denise Turner, “There were some people who worked at the
(massage) parlor who would just do it for the money, but it was really intimidating for
them, and they shouldn’t have been there. But it wasn’t intimidating for me once I did it a
couple of times.” Not all jobs are right for all people. Perhaps learning about what
types of people do well in sex work and what types do not would be helpful for others in
making decisions about whether to go into the business or not. Priscilla Alexander is
often quoted as saying that it is both the right to do sex work and the right not to do sex
work that is important. For Veronica Monét, that is exactly what it came down to, for she
felt that “making money was a rush and choosing not to make money was even more
powerful. It has all come down to choice for me.”

Ambivalent Experiences in Sex Work

The economic status of women in society is only one issue where dominant
discourse about prostitution oversimplifies a diverse range of experiences. Women
working in the sex industry cite a number of positive and negative experiences with
which they deal on a daily basis. Negative experiences include a range of issues from
social stigma and isolation from friends and family to difficulty negotiating professional
and personal relationships, from dealing with competitors for work and difficult clients
to burnout. Positive experiences involve everything from building solidarity and
support networks among women and learning new skills to enhanced self-esteem and
confidence, from having a place to explore sexual creativity and expression to having a
flexible work schedule that allows time for other pursuits. A few recurrent themes
emerged in my examination of the words written by sex workers. I will discuss the
ambivalence sex workers feel in dealing with work they both enjoy and sometimes find disgusting, the skills these women develop in order to provide a service to others, how issues of self-esteem, body image, and self-confidence are affected by sex work, how setting limits and knowing yourself can impact the experience of this type of work, and how women experience both autonomy and independence, as well as restrictions and controls that shape their desires for transgression, creativity, and variety. Although I discuss these themes separately, this is purely for the sake of convenience. Many of these experiences are shared by a range of sex workers and the issues they deal with everyday certainly interact with one another.

Although many women concur that they went into sex work for the money, the sex itself plays a role too. Many of the same women who say they went into the work for the money mention that they chose to go into sex work so that they would be paid good money to do what they enjoy anyway.235 Some go so far as to say that it is only on the job now that they “get off.”236 Carol Leigh claims that her experiences were the opposite of what she thought they would be. Sex at work was both interesting and annoying, while sex in her personal life became very exciting.237 For others the down side of enjoying sex at work is that it can make personal relationships difficult and/or make sex outside of work seem mundane or boring.238 As a matter of fact, Emma Marcus notes that there is ambivalence in the work itself. She describes being unsure of how to deal with a particular encounter with a massage parlor client during which she felt emotionally moved by him and disgusted at the same time.239 This type of conflicted feeling is echoed in the words of Gina Gold who explains that she has
had a lot of fun doing it, I’ve got a lot of strength doing it, but it’s also okay to say that it started from an unhealthy place….I’m saying that (sex workers are) the strongest people in the world and it’s okay to say that I sat on this man’s dick and he grossed me out and I feel like shit now. It’s okay to say that. The shit was nasty!\textsuperscript{240}

Gold not only finds the work enjoyable and disgusting at the same time, she also points to the difficulty noted by performance artist Annie Sprinkle that sex workers have acknowledging both the positive and negative experiences they have had. So, although the sex can draw women into the work, it can be both enjoyable and difficult at the same time.

Some women claim that they went into sex work because it is easy work for the amount of money one can make.\textsuperscript{241} However, others make it clear that it is not that easy. Sex work requires learning particular skills that are not readily taught to women. As porn star Nina Hartley explains, “Most women don’t have that many partners or opportunities to learn skillful sex. Many women are plagued by self-doubt, confusion, and insecurity about their worth as sex partners, emotions mined by Madison Avenue for gross profits.”\textsuperscript{242} Sex work provides opportunities for women to learn from one another and from the numerous partners with whom they interact. Women must also worry about maintenance of one’s internal health and external look – working out, tanning, doing make-up, and wearing the right clothes.\textsuperscript{243} Women also note that it is not only sex that customers pay for. So, women must be good conversationalists, listeners, and know how to be compassionate for clients.\textsuperscript{244}
Sex workers must take the time to learn many skills, but learning skills such as these have benefits as well. Learning these skills is worth it for many who point to the services they are able to provide to those who may not be able to get what they offer anywhere else.\(^{245}\) Stacy Reed notes that although most men who come into men’s clubs are “strikingly normal,” there are lonely, awkward men who find release from being able to watch women dance. More importantly, she says that “impotent, disabled, and conventionally unattractive men are sexually stigmatized and frequently rejected as partners. One of my old regulars used a wheelchair. Until prejudices subside, he believes such clubs will be his only legal source of sexual interaction.”\(^{246}\) Sex workers provide opportunities to teach men what women want in bed, to engage in and fulfill fantasies they may not be able to pursue elsewhere, provide sexual satisfaction to men who cannot get it from their wives or who have sexual or other disabilities that prevent them from having “normal” sex lives, making sex work therapeutic as well as educational.\(^{247}\) Liz Highleyman, aka Mistress Veronika Frost explains that “A considerable number of clients wrestle with feelings of guilt, self-hatred and shame about their ‘perverse’ sexual desires….\(^{(P)ermission\text{ and safety help them to shed layers of shame and guilt, permitting clients to both enjoy their predilection and regard them with a more relaxed clarity.}^{248}}\) So, helping them to fulfill their fantasies shows these men that they may not be as strange as they think.

Learning new skills and providing services to their male customers can lead to an increased understanding of male sexuality.\(^{249}\) Nina Hartley notes an increased understanding of her own sexuality, that of other women with whom she works, and of
male sexuality. She says that the fear of male sexuality promoted in the press and in anti-pornography work, is decreased by her personal experiences with men she works with and audiences she meets.250 “Customers, too, can positively influence dancers’ perceptions of sexuality and raise awareness and sensitivity to issues of male sexuality,”251 as average looking guys come in and have shown capacity for unlimited sexual variation. The perceptions of these men by the dancers can be positive and negative.

Other benefits of sex work extend beyond customers to the sex workers themselves. Sex workers report an increased ease with their bodies, boosts in self-esteem, and an increased understanding of themselves and others. Many women are contemptuous of their own sexuality given the virgin/whore binary in which we are constrained. Creating her own woman-centered adult film company made Candida Royalle realize how needed it was for women, both performers and the audience, to be able to express their sexuality, and how creating her own erotic films could fulfill those needs.252 Jade Irie claims that she can be herself in the stripping environment. Ironically, she dresses and acts very “butch” at work, which would seemingly not be what men want. Although she admits that she does not make as much money as some women who fulfill the blonde/big boob fantasy of many men, she still makes good money and serves a particular clientele.253 It is just this acceptance of difference that Vicky Funari says she learned at work.254 For lesbian sex workers, which are numerous,255 being able to be naked with other women makes them at ease with themselves and others. Many of these women also realize how different types of bodies are attractive to different men. This
makes working with women at a strip club somewhat like consciousness-raising groups of the 1970s for some. Yet this type of understanding of diversity is built into these women’s work environment. Vicky Funari had always been uncomfortable with her body hair. Working at the San Francisco strip club The Lusty Lady made her realize that there are some men who desire to see the type of body hair she has. Stacy Reed realized that the parts of her body that she used to be critical of, her “A” cup breasts, large ass, and milky white skin, garnered her compliments and customers.

These types of realizations have helped sex workers to challenge dominant notions of what it means to be a woman, become more comfortable with their own bodies, and increase their self-esteem. As a matter of fact, the comfort with their bodies some women develop allows them to challenge societal expectations about who and what they should be. As Tawnya Dudash explains:

…being naked for hours each day causes many dancers to question and reject the dominant ideology regarding female standards of beauty. This may seem contradictory since we are being paid to represent this very ideology, but after working at the theater dancers begin to realize that while we do not all conform to the feminine ‘ideal,’ we are all beautiful nevertheless….we discover how difference – from one another and from standard conceptions of beauty – is valuable….By representing the ‘feminine ideal’ at work we begin to see how literally constructed gender is, which allows us to begin deconstructing it.

Better understanding of themselves and frequent interactions with men have led many workers in the sex industry to increased understanding of societal expectations of women,
relationships between men and women, their own sexual nature, and that of men. 260

What sex workers do with this knowledge is then up to them.

Veronica Monét, while working as a prostitute, wanted to see just what it was like to be a customer. So, she went to a Nevada brothel, the Mustang Ranch, along with a male partner (as women alone were not then allowed to be customers at the Ranch) and paid for sex. She says,

I sought a prostitute precisely because I didn’t want to risk emotional involvement – and it was erotic, fun, exciting, and fulfilling. She was the one in charge of the hour we spent together. And that was great – to relax and turn everything over to a professional. It’s delightful to pay for what you want and then let someone else orchestrate it for you.261

As professionals, sex workers have to take the time and effort to learn the skills they share with their customers. For their efforts they are able to fulfill fantasies and provide services. Nina Hartley hopes that what she is able to teach and share with the people who watch her films will be shared with their partners as well,262 thus extending the effects of her work beyond her personal encounters.

Despite reports of increased comfort with one’s own body and improved self-esteem, sex work can also exacerbate insecurities. If women have insecurities about themselves and their bodies, dancing can aggravate these problems. According to Tawnya Dudash, the fact that the management at the Lusty Lady where she worked keeps an eye on women’s weight does not necessarily promote comfort and confidence, even though the management is checking on both over- and under-weight dancers.263
Oversight by the management is only one level on which sex workers are judged. Women are in competition with one another in most work environments. Having other women chosen over her, Liz Highleyman says can make her feel less attractive and rejected. This competition can also interfere with the possibility of solidarity among women workers, and even guilt for being complicit in the “deception of other women,” and for exploiting “our bisexuality or lesbianism for the sexual pleasure of men.” What Judy Helfand discovered was that she felt like she was just feeding into what men wanted. Her feelings of independence were tied to money and her feelings of self-esteem were inseparable from men finding her sexually attractive. She concluded, “What I never saw was that in basing my self-worth on men’s desire I was far from developing a true sense of worth based on self love. I see this false sense of power as one way internalized oppression keeps us down.”

Body image, self-esteem, sexuality, and solidarity among women are issues that can be affected both positively and negatively by sex work. The issue of race is too. Madeleine Lawson explains:

(M)y experiences in the sex industry have been, for the most part, lonely and unpleasant. Being a Black woman, I have to deal with a lot of bullshit in society. Being in the industry just intensifies that because it is all the more racist and sexist. At a certain point I was so angry and frustrated that I started to question my physical and mental well-being in such an environment….I felt like the maid….I felt so angry because it confirmed my feelings that, in the sex industry,
just like in the vanilla world, you have to try twice as hard to get anything, and you’re still not given any recognition.\textsuperscript{266}

Her treatment as a Black woman by customers, other women workers, and the police, making her feel like an uninvited guest at the party, are echoed by a number of other sex workers.\textsuperscript{267} However, despite these feelings, Madeleine Lawson still wants to be a part of the sex industry. She says, “I want to let people know that I am an intelligent and beautiful Black woman who refuses to be at the bottom of the sexual totem pole anymore….I want to be a Black woman who educates and stimulates others to explore Black female sexuality.”\textsuperscript{268}

Perhaps whether women have positive and/or negative experiences is influenced by other factors, such as where a women’s head is when she is working and how comfortable she is with what she is doing in the first place. Carole Queen explains the difference between women who do or do not have self-esteem problems when working in the sex industry:

Just one factor stands out to distinguish those who live well, with no loss of self-esteem, from those who may find sex work a difficult or even damaging career choice. Most of the former have sufficient sex information and are sex-positive. Most, too, are staunchly feminist, even though some of them refuse to embrace the term, associating it with women who do not understand their circumstances and who do not support their right to work and to control their own bodies. Most of the latter have internalized negative attitudes about sex, especially divergent sexual behavior, and certainly about sex work itself.\textsuperscript{269}
Having information is the one factor Queen identifies as key to positive or negative experiences in sex work. However, Tawnya Dudash’s comments suggest that knowledge is only one step in having a positive experience. She says that needing to know what your own limits are and being able to communicate those limits to customers is also important.

A fellow stripper at the Lusty Lady, Rosetta, supports Dudash’s contention. She says, “(T)he way I deal with most of the men [is that] I’m definitely the one in power and taking control of the situation….For the most part, it’s a pretty powerful experience.”

Both women make it clear to customers what they are willing and not willing to do. Dudash says that knowing her limits and being able to make them clear to customers has carried over into the way she and other women she works with relate to men outside of the theater as well.

While being able to set and articulate limits can make women feel powerful, Tawnya Dudash says, “Neglecting to define limits can result in a dancer feeling coerced and invaded, although the glass barrier provides a physical safety net (at the Lusty Lady). Often dancers must learn through trial and error what we are comfortable with, and how to say ‘no’ to what we do not want.”

Lola, a stripper at the Lusty Lady describes the process she went through:

I have stopped doing things that were nonconsensual….When I first started doing [the booth], I felt completely out of control and I was breaking all kinds of limits that I set for myself long ago in terms of what I do and don’t do sexually….Not because the money was more important but because I think I hadn’t set up any rules for myself….I think I’ve found ways to deal with it so that I feel less
powerless in the booth. In fact, I feel pretty powerful in the booth now. I’m very capable of dealing with the guys who harass me, very capable of dealing with the men in the hallway…and much more willing to tell a customer to fuck off….I feel like I stick to my guns and I really do feel in control.”

Lola did do things she was not comfortable with, but realized how uncomfortable these acts made her. She was able to redefine her limits and in so doing was able to regain control.

Although experimentation may help workers to realize what their limits are, the experimentation process might lead some women to feel violated in the meantime. Judy Edelstein tells the story of being offered enough money, fifteen dollars, to do a blowjob at the massage parlor. It was not something she wanted to do, or ever did before, but decided the money was right to give it a try. The man was patient and gave her instructions as to how to do it better as they went along. She thought about what a great teacher he was and how this was not as bad as she thought it would be. That is, until he was near orgasm. His reactions, moaning, pressing his hips against her, made her want to gag and stop immediately. She did not want him to touch her and just wanted to get him off so that he would leave. Although he was thrilled, he made it clear that he knew she was a lesbian, but that it did not matter to him. He then said to her, “Just so long as you do what feels good to you, that’s the main thing….It’s always a mistake to do anything you don’t want to do…because you’re prostituting yourself if you do that.” She said that his comment left a bad taste in her mouth because it made her feel like a whore because she did not want to be with him and did not want him to touch her. Edelstein
was testing her own limits and trying to figure out where to draw those lines for herself, but still ended up doing what she did not want to do. Unlike for Lola, this process did not make her feel powerful.

Despite such negative experiences, other sex workers indicate that working in the sex industry, especially in stripping and/or prostitution, can teach women how to stand up for themselves.\textsuperscript{276} Being able to hone your negotiation skills can benefit everyone, in bed and out. In her work as a professional dominant, Mistress Veronika Frost has learned, “A crucial part of overcoming ingrained and dangerous sexual role playing – the kind that leads to rape – is for men to learn the necessity of consent and for women to learn that they have the ability to either withhold or give their consent.”\textsuperscript{277} Mistress Frost hopes that her abilities at work will help men to learn these lessons and apply them in their sexual encounters with women in their everyday lives. Carol Leigh says that a fellow sex worker told her that prostitution was a “crash course in assertiveness training.”\textsuperscript{278} This advice helped Leigh in her work and once to resist a boyfriend who did not treat her right and tried to become her pimp. Stacy Reed concludes that if not for her work she would not feel as in control of her sexuality.\textsuperscript{279}

These feelings of control are certainly in tension with restrictions placed on sexual women. However, many sex workers contend that they find the sex industry a place where they have found autonomy, independence, and a place in which they can actively express their creativity, and even explicitly transgress such restrictions placed upon them. Although I will expand on these themes more in later chapters, it is useful to note that what women are taught to believe about themselves and sex, that they are virgins or
whores, and that they will be marginalized if they are the latter, can be addressed in sex work in useful ways. Lesbian sex workers are one group that have found their work to be particularly liberating. For example, documentary filmmaker Hima B.’s *Straight for the Money: Interviews With Queer Sex Workers*, includes “interviews with queer-, lesbian-, and bisexual-identified sex workers, including prostitutes, peepshow girls, strippers, and dominatrices.” Her film highlights that “The most common sentiments expressed by these women are that they have *chosen* sex work and that their work experiences enhance their lesbian sexuality by allowing them another outlet for sexual expression.”

Interviewing Denise Turner, Lyndall MacCowan questions the acceptance of lesbian sex workers by feminists and the lesbian community. Turner indicates that despite rejection from some persons in feminist and lesbian communities, there are actually numerous lesbian sex workers. She explains that “the reason why you have so many lesbians in this business is because of…us being on the outside and already having an identity that’s outside of social norms….you know you’re rebelling against hypocrisy….the double standard, that men are allowed to be sexual, but women aren’t.” Eva Pendleton echoes this thought. She says that she came into the sex industry to explore her sexuality and that performing femininity for her customers helped her to find that it was part of her lesbian identity/ies.

Feelings of sexual freedom, creativity, and expression include lesbian, bisexual, and straight sex workers. Tawnya Dudash and Liz Highleyman both note their abilities to experiment as positive in sex work. They both also say that they found benefits in the exercise of the work and in sexual expression and creativity. Marcy Sheiner and Blake
Aarens enjoy their roles as sex writers (and readers). Sheiner indicates, “Writing and reading pornography has been, for me, fun, exciting, creative, illuminating, empowering, and lucrative. And I feel no qualms or contradiction when I say that I am both a feminist and a pornographer.” Aarens feels that she gets to express all the parts of herself in her writing while getting to write nasty stories and quote Shakespeare. Veronica Monét eloquently sums up all that she and friends gets from their work:

Recently, Cosi Fabian commented to me that the nice girl often feels shame and guilt and a compulsion toward incessant people pleasing. On the other hand, the bad girl is empowered to have desires and satisfy herself. Strength and freedom – there it is!...I will not channel all my desire for sex into love, romance and ‘meaningful relationships.’ I reserve the right to fuck. I reserve the right to pursue physical pleasure just because it feels good. And I refuse to eschew money and all that it can buy so I can earn merit badges for doing without and leading a life of self-sacrifice. I claim the right to want, to procure, and to be satisfied….I am interested in finding a workable marriage between the human traits that have been divided into categories called masculine and feminine. I want to embody characteristics and behaviors from both camps. Blame it on my bisexuality if you must, but I feel most like me when I am being assertive and receptive, sexual and romantic, material and spiritual, angry and forgiving, generous and selfish.”

This desire to bring many parts of one’s identity/ies together is echoed by a number of sex workers.
The common thread throughout the experiences of women who found working in the sex industry positive is that they all chose this work. These same women and other women who claim to have gone into the work out of economic necessity have both positive and negative experiences. Few of these women, even those with negative experiences, claim that they need to be saved. As a matter of fact, those I read who have gotten out of the business due to their negative experiences have done so of their own volition. Interestingly, if we changed our attitudes about sexual women and how we evaluate the exchange of sex for money, the need for sex work might disappear entirely. Again, I will not claim that there are no women who need to be saved, only that we need to recognize the perspective of those who do not need saving.

*Threats to Society?*

As noted in Chapter 1, prostitutes are seen as threats to the health of the general population and to traditional notions of what it means to be a woman. Prostitutes are blamed for the spread of disease. In the whore/virgin binary, the whore is closer to the Earth and nature, and therefore unclean, whereas the virgin, with all that culture, society, and civilization teaches her, removes her from nature and cleans her up. So, as long as she remains pure and untouched, except within societally sanctioned relationships with men in marriage, she is not a threat – to our health or our expectations of what “female” is “supposed to be.” Prostitute women themselves do not say much about being perceived as a threat to the medical health of society. Yet studies of sexually transmitted diseases target prostitutes and create perceptions of sex workers as threats to society at large. The behaviors for which the medical establishment and right-wing political and religious
conservatives would punish sex workers, by restricting and stigmatizing their behavior, have little grounding in fact. For this reason, I will briefly discuss what studies of sexually transmitted diseases - HIV/AIDS in particular - claim about sex workers, before moving on to discuss the perceived threat sex workers pose to societal traditions and beliefs.

Since the outbreak of HIV/AIDS in the early 1980s, publically sexually active populations have been targeted as carriers and spreaders of the disease. However, once blood was identified as the primary bodily fluid through which the disease was carried, condom use has been shown to effectively curb the spread of the disease. Rather than allow gay bathhouses in cities such as San Francisco to promote condom use and re-open, their doors have remained closed. Programs that promote or require condom use by prostitutes have been shown to effectively eliminate transmission.\textsuperscript{290} In the Netherlands, where prostitution is legal and condom use is promoted but voluntary, prostitute-to-client and client-to-prostitute transmission of sexually transmitted infections is virtually the same as in the non-prostitute population.\textsuperscript{291} In legal Nevada brothels, where condom use has been mandated since the late 1980s, no cases of HIV/AIDS have been reported.\textsuperscript{292} Sex workers report that using condoms is fairly easy and a regular part of the job.\textsuperscript{293}

What has been found is that drug use is a significant factor in the transmission of HIV/AIDS. Drug use by prostitutes is associated with higher rates of HIV/AIDS transmission and lower prevalence of condom use, which is also associated with higher rates of transmission.\textsuperscript{294} Cases where condom use is low for sex workers in the United States are those addicted to drugs, those working in illegal brothels, massage parlors, and
other locations, including the street, in which the woman is coerced to behave in particular ways – by clients, pimps, managers, and/or madams. Women living in extreme poverty also report that being offered larger sums of money not to use condoms can be an incentive to practice risky behavior.\textsuperscript{295} Illegal sex workers also report that when busted by the police, authorities often confiscate their condoms.\textsuperscript{296} This makes their work more expensive, sometimes prohibitively so, and promotes risky behavior at times.

Given the relatively low threat of disease transmission when safety precautions are taken, the threat of disease, even when not supported, has been enough to justify regulation of sex workers’ behavior by medical and legal authorities. These regulations act to stigmatize and marginalize sex workers. The perceived threat to the medical health of society is not the only issue with which sex workers must contend, however. Women in the sex industry, merely by being in this line of work, compete with dominant conceptions of what a woman is “supposed” to be. Such definitions have, over time, been used to justify other social controls of sexual women. To learn that prostitutes are not so different from “typical” women is a challenge to definitions of the typical “woman” and to what it means to be a sex worker. As already noted, sex workers challenge traditional notions of what the relationship between women and money is expected to be and embrace the experience being sexual allows them. In addition to these “threats” to society, who these women are and how they conceive of what is supposed to be oppressive also characterize their experiences.

Sex workers recognize that sex is not merely a moral issue in society, but a political tool used to maintain the social order. The virgin/whore binary is used to
separate those who are normal (virgin) from those who are not (whore). Characterization as abnormal, dirty, immoral, or impure provides justification for controls to be placed upon sexual women in order to maintain the social order.\textsuperscript{297} This social order assumes that in a land-owning economy, men must know who their rightful heirs are and maintain control over all that they own. Therefore, women must remain monogamous in order for men to maintain ownership over land and family.\textsuperscript{298} These restrictions do not merely make women feel bad about being openly sexual. Veronica Monét argues that “women’s sexual independence has been curtailed, even to the point of killing and/or blaming rape victims for ‘allowing’ themselves to be ‘damaged’ by the rapist.”\textsuperscript{299} These types of restrictions amount to “compulsory virtue” for any woman who does not want to be marginalized as abnormal. Every move a woman makes, what she can and cannot do, is influenced by this expectation of virtue.\textsuperscript{300} Women’s sexuality would pose a threat to the family, religion, systems of ownership, and the entire social order.

Breaking down the virgin/whore binary would be one step toward redefining the social order, which some would see as a threat and others would see as a positive transformation of society. For this reason, throughout history, prostitutes have been marked as such by the clothes they wear, the places they are allowed to work, and how they are treated. \textit{Us} magazine includes a weekly feature with pictures of celebrities doing everyday things they call “Just Like Us.” This feature is intended to make readers feel that celebrities are just like “regular” people. How do you think society would feel if they knew that sex workers were just like us?
Porn star Nina Hartley is a college graduate who chose to go into sex work to explore her sexuality, get dates, and arouse male lust. Madeleine Lawson claims that she goes by many names that are chosen to reflect her multiple alter egos in her various work capacities – escort, phone sex girl, pro dom, swing hostess, as well as a college senior and bank teller. In general, she claims to be “an educator, liberator, and advocator of sex.”

Jade Irie works as a stripper and has a sugar daddy to support her life as an artist. Filmmaker Hima B. worked as a stripper for four years to put herself through graduate school. She continued her work in order to save up money for life expenses. The few films she has made were funded with her job as a stripper. Many of the women who work at the Lusty Lady are students and/or artists. “They are very intelligent and creative, refuting the stereotype of strippers as brainless sex bunnies.” Gina Gold was a stripper for five years after working in phone sex. She then wrote a novel (Island of Misfit Toys) about her experiences as a stripper and those of other strippers. College students, dancers, single mothers, nude models, paralegals, strippers, artists, prostitutes, educators, and pro doms are all sex workers. Most of these women who have written about and been published on the subject admit that they are a privileged group of sex workers. However, what seems to separate “us/them” are attitudes about what type of work is acceptable for women and what is not.

There are limits to who does/does not work in sex work. Vicky Funari says that despite the diversity of women who work at the Lusty Lady, including a large number of lesbians, there are no older or obese women there. However, Liz Highleyman says that older women are valued as much or more than younger women in the professional
dominance game. Stacy Reed says that it is a myth that all strippers fit a model-beauty mold. Reed claims that although “strippers must be relatively attractive, most look real.” Although there is racial diversity in sex work, there is also disparity in who works where. In higher class (read: more expensive) locations, Black, Asian, and/or Hispanic women are features, meaning that there are a few representatives of each race, but that overall racial and ethnic minorities are largely underrepresented. However, in street prostitution, for example, there are more Black and Hispanic women. There are also fewer college graduates working on the street. Rather than interpreting these insights as supporting stereotypes, though, it is important to recognize the similarities between those classified as normal, non-sex workers, and sex workers.

(II) Legal Status of Prostitution Fosters Restrictions, Abuse, and Stigma

Prostitution is largely illegal in the United States. In most Nevada counties brothel prostitution is legal, but street prostitution or working out of one’s home is illegal. Stripping is legal in most of the country, but subject to a variety of restrictions, such as who can touch whom, what body parts must be covered/can be exposed, and what types of beverages can be served at strip clubs. Pornography involves people having sex for money, but its status as “art” or “entertainment” seems to imply enough of a distinction from prostitution that it is not illegal. Larry Grant explains, “Seeing the continuity of the sex industry from topless dancers to street walkers, from call girls to adult magazine models, and from massage parlor workers to actors in pornographic movies, is a key to understanding the sex industry as a whole.” The same can be said for the shared experiences of individual sex workers when it comes to dealing with the legal status of
the work and the consequences of being on the edge of (il)legality. For example, Scarlot Harlot aka Carol Leigh says that as an “ivory tower prostitute,” who is able to do most of her business via telephone and in her own home, she does not face a daily risk of arrest.311 However, she does face the same stigma that the illegal status of sex work carries. Nell’s work both as a street prostitute and as an indoor (brothel or massage parlor, for example) prostitute demonstrates that she faces stigma and the same threat of arrest in both places, though more on the street than off.312 What is common across the experiences of individual sex workers in all areas of the industry is the stigma the job carries, which leads to a number of negative consequences, that are often attributed to the work itself. The working conditions of sex workers are also affected by the (il)legal status of the work. Management, the medical industry, and legal institutions all take advantage of the sometimes undefinable status of the work and the stigma faced by workers. Such exploitation also leads to a number of negative outcomes for sex workers.

Many of the women’s experiences I have shared so far have included both disadvantages and advantages in sex work. The benefits, from monetary gain to sexual exploration, are all the more notable given that they were gained in the face of the societal stigmas attached to the work. In her book Talk Dirty to Me, Sally Tisdale explains that this stigma is one of the only negative aspects of her work.313 Although Liz Highleyman agrees that all forms of sex work carry stigma, her experiences in professional dominance have led her to conclude that S/M is even more highly stigmatized as it involves women, sex, and power. She says that even women who do not believe sex work has negatively affected them “can’t help but be aware of the negative
stigma that surrounds it and many are unwilling to face censure and condemnation from family friends, and society at large.” Candida Royalle would concur. She explains feeling comfortable starring in adult films, but also experiencing embarrassment and confusion. She clarifies her ambivalence:

I realized I was allowing society’s judgment of what I had done as a woman to influence my feelings. I had to step back from societal opinion, including feminist opinion, and decide for myself what I thought. I decided there was nothing wrong with the concept of sexual entertainment, but most of the actual films reflected this sexually shame-based attitude toward women. I saw that there was nothing wrong with what I had done, or with the notion of pornography inherently, but rather the underlying societal attitudes toward sex that were revealed in pornography. The answer for Candida was to take the reins and create films that included more healthy perspectives of women and sex. However, focusing on women and sex continues to be marred by social stigma because it is difficult to reconcile such a different view of women with societal constructions of what women are “supposed” to be.

The stigma attached to sex work can make women feel ashamed of themselves, isolated from others, and engage in behaviors that are self-destructive. Working as a nude model and topless dancer before going to work for Women Against Rape, Judy Helfand “was never ashamed of myself while working – I felt proud, cocky and powerful. But today I feel ashamed and afraid to bring it up…We do not talk about our experience of prostitution – selling our sexual selves or bodies to make it in the world” even to a
group of women out to change the world. It was only being able to write about her experiences, positive and negative, that has allowed her to overcome her feelings of isolation. Being fearful of the judgment, even from feminists, is not an anomaly in the experiences of sex workers. Carole Queen says that becoming an outlaw within the feminist and lesbian feminist movements by exploring S/M and sharing her experiences publicly led her to learn “how fearful of discovery over a sexual ‘kink’ even someone who was sexually well-adjusted – and already living counter to social norms – could be.”

Feelings of isolation and shame can lead some women to self-destructive behaviors such as drug use. Contrary to the women who go into prostitution to support drug habits, it is the shame attached to the work (not necessarily the work itself) that leads many to use drugs to get through the job, or through uncomfortable conversations with others about the work. Stigma, social controls, and abuse by management and legal institutions all contribute to feelings of shame. For some, being in an altered state is the only way they can deal with such pressures.

Self-destructive feelings and behaviors are one effect of social stigma. Another is the negative treatment by others. Peggy Morgan says that she feels free when she is stripping and that she could not experience real freedom without being herself. Even so, she still does not have the luxury of using her real name at her job as the stigma stripping carries could hurt her in the future getting other jobs and housing. She also worries how the social stigma could affect her future role as a mother if her children were to learn what she once did. Sharon Kaiser explains that as she watched a talk show including a
prostitute sat on a panel, the conversation went from why the woman was a prostitute and her responses to the audience picking on the prostitute. One audience member said “something about a whore only being able to think between her legs.” Seeing this made Kaiser feel this helpless, surging rage. I wanted to cry. It never seems to matter how long I’ve lived with the stigma of being a prostitute or being a lesbian, or being something someone didn’t think I should be. I can’t seem to get used to being treated as though I am less than human. I don’t think I ever will. It’s always a shock to me.”

Standing outside acceptable roles for women and being proud of one’s work are not ready options for sex workers. Others report more immediate material consequences of such marginalization. Rosie Summers says that being honest about what she does often leads to responses of silence. But silence is better than the reaction she got from one boyfriend. He was more concerned about how his penis matched up with those she had seen in her work. She says that “It didn’t, of course, ever occur to him to sympathize with me or to comfort me because I had once been someone whose life was considered so worthless that men often tried to kill me.” The threat of violence follows women not only in sex work, but can be a result of the stigma as well. Madeleine Lawson wishes more women could be “out” and proud of being sex workers even in the face of being ostracized, but that she cannot. She explains, “If I told my grandfather that I was a proud whore, he would beat the shit out of me.” Fighting this stigma is part of the everyday experience of sex workers and
can be exhausting. They have the choice to remain silent and deal with all the good and bad of their work on their own or they can fight. Fighting involves defending themselves and their work on a daily basis, as well as risking jail and loss of the economic benefits of the work as well.326

Beyond the effects to individual sex workers, this stigma is said to affect perceptions of women outside of sex work as well, from how sexual women are represented in the media327 to standards to which sexual women are held. “Whore stigma” comes from the sexual availability and number of partners with whom prostitute women have sex, and, from a sex-positive point of view, the fact that they do this work “on their own terms.”328 This fact acts as a challenge to the stigma while, unfortunately, feeding into the basis for the stigma - at the same time affecting not only sex workers, but any sexual woman. Teri Goodson, a prostitute who faced this stigma when she tried to join the National Organization for Women (NOW), explains the root of the problem and its widespread effects:

Women in this culture receive subtle messages from childhood onward to use their sexuality as a bargaining chip in exchange for economic security and protection from a man under the guise of ‘love’ and family formation, but outright prostitution, while much more straightforward, is considered disreputable. This helps maintain the double standard that denies women the type of proactive freedom, pleasure, and agency accorded to men.329

Criminalizing sexual activities that challenge women’s place in the heterosexual economy, such as prostitution, where some women find such freedom and agency, just
works to limit acceptable sexual behaviors for all women and keep all women within acceptable sexual roles.\textsuperscript{330} Some prostitute women argue that the only way to end such feelings, treatment, and constraints on sexual women in general is through ending the stigma attached to sex work.\textsuperscript{331}

Much of the stigma attached to sex work is perpetuated by its (il)legal status. Given its (il)legal status, it is no surprise that women are arrested for prostitution. However, it is the experience of many female sex workers that they are disproportionately targeted for harassment and arrest by the police, especially in comparison with their customers.\textsuperscript{332} Risks for arrest and harassment are common for women working in both indoor and outdoor settings.\textsuperscript{333} The frequent interactions between the police and sex workers and the (il)legal status of sex work leads to restricted and unsafe working conditions enabled by legal institutions as well as by management and clients.\textsuperscript{334} Sex workers explain that there is an ever-present fear of being arrested, that they are always on the lookout for cops Even when they are not “hooking” they have to be on the lookout for cops harassing them. They were susceptible because the police know they are prostitutes. Sex workers are also harassed for crimes such as loitering (which has happened to groups of women talking on the street) or pandering (which has happened to women for giving each other advice).\textsuperscript{335}

Sex workers describe a multiplicity of ways in which they are harassed by the police. Gloria Lockett describes nights that police discriminated based on looks and race when it came to who they were going to harass and/or arrest. She says that women who were not arrested because they were ugly or Black or Latina were still subject to police
abuse. Some were burned on the engine of the car. She described being fondled by a drunk police officer and another officer took her to a dark alley and demanded a blow job. She even told about an officer attempting to handcuff her to a bed so that he could continually rape her.\textsuperscript{336}

Norma Jean Almovodar can attest to this type of police abuse from the perspective of the police and the perspective of the sex worker as she has been both. She worked as a traffic officer for the Los Angeles Police Department for 10 years before getting burned out. During her tenure, she refused to sleep with senior male officers and, she claims, was therefore unlikely to get promoted. At the time, she was committed to not becoming a whore. During her time at the LAPD, she kept a journal that she hoped eventually to turn into a book to expose abuses by the department. After getting burnt out at the department, however, she decided to go into prostitution to get people’s attention and promote responsibility where there currently was none. She wanted to expose the hypocrisy in police abuse of prostitutes within a larger system of unchecked police corruption. Prostitutes were treated in an outrageously degrading manner by the very agents of the law who were supposed to protect them, but the cops’ abuse of public trust, property, and human life caused far more harm than commercial sex ever could.\textsuperscript{337}

In one of her stories, Almodovar tells of cops joking during roll call about using the “whore car” to round up prostitutes:

Often, the women were rounded up like cattle and forced to entertain the officers by running a barefoot race on the street. The women who finished last were then
arrested and dragged to the police station, booked, fined, and permitted to return to the street early enough to make the money to pay the fine. The women became so immune to this abuse that they, too, began to think of this violation of their rights as a game – they laughed with the officers when they were tagged for the night.  

She tells another story about a pregnant fifteen year-old that the police arrested every night for a week and left shackled to a bench to urinate on herself. The rationale for this behavior: the police were trying to “teach her that she was in a degrading profession and that the police believed they were actually doing this for her own good. Weren’t they, after all ‘rescuing’ her…”? Almovodar was indignant about her experiences as a cop and then as a sex worker. As a cop, she had to stand by and watch the abuse (or participate in it). As a sex worker, she had to take the abuse. She says that sex work was not what the media or the cops had taught her it was. Rather, the abuse surrounding the work was what took its toll.

Most police harassment goes unnoticed for a number of reasons. First, not all police harassment takes place while women are under arrest. So, for it to be noticed the women must report it. Second, women do not report it because they have learned they have little to no power in the face of legal institutions. Ironically, when sex workers are arrested, plead not guilty, and go to court, many report being found not guilty. Gloria Lockett explains that she has been arrested 30-40 times, but has not served any time as she pleads not guilty and sometimes even goes to trial. She has not been found guilty once. She says that most women plead guilty under pressure. Third, the social stigma
and legal status of prostitutes does not support their plight. Carol Queen argues that many prostitutes are victimized by their clients and/or by police while society looks the other way because it’s just whores being harassed, not good women. A telling example of this attitude is when police officers often claim that prostitutes cannot be raped given the type of work they do. This means that sex workers have no protection from being raped by customers and/or police officers. Rosie Summers says that in her experience cops used to set hookers up to get arrested and that when prostitutes died or were murdered, she saw police officers laugh, “reflecting society’s feelings that hookers’ deaths – and lives – are unimportant.”

Abuse by the police is motivated by and certainly perpetuates the societal stigmas attached to sex work. But, the (il)legal status of prostitution and the lack of protection provided by the police also allows for abuse of sex workers by management and clients and gives tacit consent to poor work environments as well. Stress, emotional and physical, is usually attributed to the work itself and the necessity of separating private life from public action. However, sex workers explain that though these stresses are part of the job; it is often not any different than any other job. Additionally, sex workers explain that abuse by police, management, and clients along with being treated like pariahs, increases the stigma surrounding their work. It is this stigma along with the very real threats to their physical and emotional health from police, especially, that truly take a toll on their emotional and physical well-being.

The situations women describe in their work environments vary. Women working indoors, in massage parlors, explain that they are not allowed to go outside when
working. The management at such places is afraid that if women go outside during their shifts they will do drugs, which is a very real danger, do business that is not controlled by the management, and/or face abuse by boyfriends or clients. At the same time, there is often pressure for indoor and outdoor sex workers to do drugs and/or alcohol with clients. Although there may be just as much risk for strippers to face the same dangers as massage parlor workers, strippers do not describe the same restrictions on their behaviors. Strippers do share other abuses also encountered by massage parlor workers. That is, they experience abuse by management in the form of sexual harassment, for which there is little to no redress, and from one another. Rosie Summers says that she began to think of “motherfucker” as her nickname because everyone from the management to the customers and other sex workers all referred to her by this name. Candida Royalle describes, while working in porn, having to kiss her boss goodnight every night. Others say that no woman gets her job, whether in a massage parlor, on the street, or in porn, without having to have sex with some man. Strippers tell stories of having their clothes peed on by other strippers and of the “dirty hustle,” that is, women stealing customers from one another.

Not all work environments involve harassment though. Stacy Reed describes strip clubs in Texas as beholden to the strippers. These sex workers have the ultimate authority over who they dance for and are given considerable compensation for doing so. Reed says that club owners and managers realize that they would have no business if they did not treat the strippers well. There is one strip club in particular whose name came up time and again in my reading of the experiences of sex workers: the Lusty Lady. This
strip club in San Francisco employs a number of lesbian workers, is woman-run, and is set up differently than most strip clubs. At the Lusty Lady, women perform on a stage behind a glass wall. Customers pay for their time to sit in a booth on the opposite side of the glass and, therefore, cannot touch the women. The women can move about the stage dancing in front of various customers at any given time. If a customer is being rude, making faces, calling nasty names, etc., the stripper can move to another booth. As the women do not work for tips, but for an hourly wage, they are not in competition with one another, for the most part. So, a number of the issues facing sex workers in other work environments have been addressed at this strip club. However, Vicki Funari says that the publicity for the club and the reality are not necessarily in sync. The publicity says that the club is “woman-run and offers a ‘safe, supportive, clean environment for women to express themselves erotically.’”\(^{352}\) Funari notes though that “one of the first things the manager told me was: ‘This is not a feminist enterprise. We’re here to provide a service for our customers.’“\(^{353}\)

Despite this seeming conflict between management goals and worker interests, the Lusty Lady does seem more oriented toward protection of its workers than other clubs. For example, when Siobhan Brooks was working there, she experienced racism. She brought this issue to light by filing a complaint. The management, grudgingly, held meetings to address the issue; dancers were able to voice their opinions on the matter; and, Brooks’ complaint was resolved to her satisfaction.\(^{354}\) This kind of picture did not seem to be the case at most other strip clubs and massage parlors discussed in the
literature I have read. The Lusty Lady has also joined Service Employees International Union, Local 790, becoming only the second strip club in the country to unionize.\textsuperscript{355} Harassment and abuse by the police, customers, management, and other workers is par for the course for sex workers. But far from being inherent in the work itself, these conditions are both grounded in and perpetuated by the social stigma attached to the women who do sex work. Little is done to address the difficulties experienced by these women because society buys into and promotes the same stigma used to justify these behaviors. Consequently, the women feel they have no redress, and, as marginalized workers, few people are privy to the experiences in the first place. Sex workers argue that the (il)legal status of their work makes such treatment inevitable and redress nearly impossible.

\textit{It’s Just a Job}

Despite such difficulties, many sex workers characterize prostitution as just another job. Some liken working at a peepshow to social work or even McDonalds, as all three provide service for the customer.\textsuperscript{356} Others say that sex work is just like any other job for women, only more honest about the role sex plays in the work. Vicky Funari argues that when she waitressed she was sexually harassed by bosses and customers. When she worked in an office she could not get away from a flirtatious male co-worker who could not (or would not) understand why she preferred her female lover to him. She asks, “What is the difference between jobs within work systems that hypocritically deny the importance of sex to their smooth operation as opposed to those that exploit it as their very reason for operating?”\textsuperscript{357}
Some even go so far as to argue that the institution of marriage is this same type of opaque sex work, where women are expected to live within the heterosexual economy that expects them to do unpaid work in the home to support their husbands’ paid work outside the home. There is a thin line between being a whore and getting paid for sex according to Nell. She tells the story of a friend who sleeps around a lot, considers himself a whore, in this way, but does not turn tricks, i.e., does not get paid. He says he cannot cross that line. Nell claims that her friend’s distinction reflects that of many people. To sleep around is not as big a deal as to require payment for sleeping around. For her it is different: “I had considered myself a whore from the time I had become sexually active…. (I)t was like, well, I’m gonna make money at it, and, sure, try to get paid for it.” Many sex workers claim that they know the value of their work because they are able to make their own money with their own skills.

From this perspective working in the sex industry is just another job for women, but one in which the role of sex and money is explicit, and may be a better fit for some. As Larry Grant explains,

For many people, having sex for money is a less stressful way to make a living than waiting tables, digging ditches, pushing papers, or any of the ‘respectable’ career paths. Some people find comfort in the sexuality or physicality of the work…. (S)ome find expression for their creativity, an opportunity to live out sexual fantasies, and a mode of showing and feeling physical love outside the bounds of conventional relationships. There is nothing inherently degrading about
sex for money. Many other jobs are harder, more humiliating, and less rewarding.³⁶⁰

So, sex work can be an outlet for people who do not “fit” into other less enjoyable jobs. Unlike other jobs the transparency of the relationship between sex and money can be an added benefit despite the considerable drawbacks already discussed.

Admitting the potential problems with and revealing the potential benefits from prostitution depends on being able to conceptualize it as legitimate work. Influenced by her liberal feminist upbringing (which also influenced her third wave feminist development) and Robin Lakoff’s *Language and Women’s Place*, Carol Leigh realized that “linguistic revisions could be used as an activist tool by feminists.”³⁶¹ So, motivated by her desire to reconcile her lived experience with her feminism, she “invented sex work. Not the activity, of course. The term. (She did so to)…create an atmosphere of tolerance within and outside the women’s movement for women working in the sex industry.”³⁶² She felt that a term was needed that described what women did without the negative connotations contained in the word “prostitute.” She explains,

> “Prostitute” does not refer to the business of selling sexual services – it simply means ‘to offer publicly.’ The euphemism veils our ‘shameful’ activity. Some prostitutes don’t use the term to describe themselves, as they want to separate it from the negative connotations (e.g., to compromise one’s self). In political contexts, I refer to myself as a prostitute to imbue it with some pride, although we rarely used that work referring to ourselves, preferring the term ‘working girls.’

We needed a new term.³⁶³
So she suggested changing the title of a workshop from the “Sex Use Industry” workshop to the “Sex Work Industry” workshop. She felt that this term referred to the “work” done by women and that it might be inclusive of women who work in trades, i.e., prostitutes, strippers, porn actresses. This rhetorical turn “acknowledges the work we do rather than defines us by our status….’Sex work’ has no shame, and neither do I.” 364

Defining prostitution as sex work attempts to focus on what workers do rather than defining who they are. From their perspective, what they do is provide a necessary service to the community. Although there are some who view sex as sacred and object to its commodification, conceptualizing it as “sex work” is one step toward focusing on the exchange of money for services which is inherent to a market economy.365 As Liz Highleyman explains, “Sex workers do not sell their bodies – they still have them when the commercial transaction is over. Rather, they sell their time and skills, and perhaps rent the temporary use of parts of their bodies, as do most other workers.” 366 Carol Queen argues that it is non-sex workers, often feminists, who claim that sex workers are selling themselves or their bodies. However, she goes on to explain that sex workers do not sell their bodies any more than any other worker under capitalism.367 Professional athletes use their bodies and skills to make money, but are not said to be selling themselves. Everyday people sell their blood or plasma and are not said to be selling their bodies. Sex workers make the same argument – they are selling their services, which happen to involve their bodies.

The difference between professional athletes and sex workers, then, is that undressed physical labor is valued differently than work done with one’s clothes on. So,
sex workers must conceptualize the body differently than those who would condemn use of sex to make money. Peggy Morgan explains that sex workers are necessarily more comfortable with their bodies and sexuality.

We don’t have ‘private parts,’ dismembered from the rest; they are parts of the whole. Having a customer fondle a breast, for instance, may not be pleasant, especially if he’s rough, but it doesn’t feel like being violated. It’s part of a job, and really no different than if he touched an elbow. It’s not sexual, it’s work. Using our whole bodies to earn a living makes it clear how much sexual feelings really come from our minds: a lover may touch the same way a customer does, but produce an entirely different feeling.368

While Morgan does not recognize the sexual aspects of the work that others have commented on,369 she does point to a bodily awareness of sex workers that many others note as well.370

Given the limited work options for women in our society, especially work that pays a living wage, this form of labor is necessary for some women. Body labor has always been a last resort for those who lack the resources to develop mind labor. As men have been able to rely on physical labor, so too have women been able to rely on bodily labor. This does not mean that other options should not be made available for women, only that to take away one of the few job options that allow economic success for women is to further ghettoize women’s work.

However, being successful at the use of bodily labor requires more than just having a body. It also involves development of desirable skills. Nell explains that she has
learned her own value from doing sex work. She says, “When you’re making money for yourself, there’s an immediate value on you, you’re selling yourself, your personality, your charms, your appearance, your ability to persuade, your ability to sell. It takes skill…and a lot of strength. I’ve come to appreciate those qualities in myself.”371 While this implies the opposite of what has been said by others about selling one’s self, it would be shortsighted to see this as Nell’s point. Rather, she highlights the skills a sex worker needs to be able to be successful and feel positively about one’s work. Sex workers must be able to relate well to others, be attractive to them, and be able to negotiate good prices for agreed upon services.372 Additionally, sex workers discuss other skills they have learned in their work, such as how to do a massage373 or how to fulfill customers’ fantasies,374 how to be an empathetic listener or a good storyteller.375

Others do not emphasize the skills they have developed but the services they provide for people who might not be able to get them anywhere else. Massage parlor worker Emma Marcus describes a customer who comes in for her services because he does not feel comfortable dating since his wife died. Hers are the only sexual relations he has right now.376 Others tell the story of men whose wives will not provide particular sexual services, the most common of which is the blowjob. So, men come to sex workers to get what they cannot get at home.377 This reveals how the good girl/bad girl binary works in everyday life. Wives can be sexual, but only within particular boundaries. Outside those boundaries is where prostitutes earn their keep. To satisfy their sexual appetites, some men visit both. Unless/until our society can resolve this binary, the
services of sex workers will continue to be in demand, giving them the opportunity to provide services for those in need.

Prostitution, then, as conceived by many individual sex workers is just like any other job, but more honest about the role of sexual relations. Therefore, as Leigh argues, we should conceive of it as “work.” As work, the practices in the job can be conceived of as skills of the workers which are developed to provide services for those in need. This job is not done for altruistic purposes though. Rather, this job, like any other, is done for the economic return it provides for women. Given the limited economic opportunities many women face in our society, as currently structured, to take this job away is to take away bodily labor from women with limited opportunities. Additionally, to conceive of this work as a job is a step toward removing stigma and legitimating the work for these women.

Conclusion

Examining the individual perspectives of prostitute women within their community reveals the limitations of the punishment/redemption binary constructed by socio-historical perspectives of prostitution. Individual viewpoints do include women in need of “saving.” However, how they are “saved” is more complicated than many feminists and conservatives would lead people to believe. These individual perspectives of the lived experiences of sex work reveal another problem with cultural conceptions of prostitution. That is, the “threat” prostitutes pose to society might better be conceptualized as a threat to dominant social mores and beliefs about how women are not meant to be sexual, powerful, or act as agents on their own behalves. Finally, the (il)legal
status of the exchange of sex for money is an important factor that often goes
unexamined in historical and cultural studies of the practice. What has been made clear
here is that the liminal place in which the sex work exists is highly relevant for how it is
experienced by the women who do it. Conceiving of prostitution as legitimate work
might be one step toward resolving some of the stigmas currently attached to this (il)legal
practice. When we consider the individual perspectives of sex workers in this chapter, a
much more complicated view of prostitution is uncovered.

Couple what we have learned from historical and cultural narratives of
prostitution in Chapter 1 with the community and individual perspectives of prostitute
women here in Chapter 2 and the picture becomes increasingly muddied. Individual
perspectives within the sex industry reveal that the reform/punishment perspectives of the
media and scholarly discourse too easily contribute to the continuation of a good girl/bad
girl binary when it comes to sexual women. Institutional mechanisms continue to
subordinate sex workers (and queers). Individual stories of sex workers show that women
have both negative and positive experiences of their jobs. While they are more often than
not motivated by financial need, this need does not necessarily mean women’s choices to
go into sex work are therefore coerced. Women report multiple reasons for going into sex
work. Additionally, sex workers indicate having both negative and positive experiences
doing the work itself. Interestingly, the ambivalence of some women’s experiences
demonstrates that individual sex workers encounter both negative and positive feelings
about their work as well. Ambivalence pervades what these individual sex workers have
to say about their experiences in prostitution.
Overall, the individual perspectives reviewed here show that their perspectives are neither wholly negative nor entirely positive. Rather, prostitute women characterize what they do as a job. As work, sex workers find their jobs difficult some days and enjoyable others. Workers in the sex industry indicate that there are both benefits and drawbacks in what they do. Far from the feminist or conservative conceptions of prostitution, individual workers say that it is not the work they find oppressive, but, rather the (il)legal status of their employment that causes the most difficulties in their lives. From police abuse to unsafe working conditions, sex workers indicate that the best thing for them would not be to ban prostitution in order to “save” them, but to legalize and regulate it so that these women would be afforded the same protections of “legitimate” work. As Eva Pendleton concludes,

The concept of sex work as a commodity sold by women and consumed by men is something that bears further feminist analysis. But this analysis is impeded by legal and moral imperatives against sex work that stigmatize and oppress whores, especially if they come from feminists looking to ‘protect’ sex workers rather than assist them in their efforts at self-determination.378

It is only by revealing where the moral and legal status of sex work comes from, how it is discursively constructed, and how it is perpetuated in everyday practices that this type of analysis can begin.

HBO’s *Cathouse* and the Moonlite Bunny Ranch provide not only potential counter-discourses to dominant discursive constructions of prostitution and sexual women, but provide an opportunity for the lived experiences of sex workers to be shown
in the mainstream media. Owner/proprietor Dennis Hof unflinchingly promotes the business of prostitution on the radio, television, internet, and at various public venues. For this reason, it is important to understand the dominant discourses of prostitution countered by Hof and HBO’s perspectives before fully developing the discussion of the elements of their alternative discourses. Williams’ view of the necessity of understanding the totality of culture and Bourdieu’s theory of practice and concept of *habitus* both contribute ways to understand this socio-historical context of prostitution in the United States – *what* we think and *why* we think the ways we do. Taken together with narrative inquiry’s advice to look into the multiple levels on which narratives operate, the totality of culture of prostitution in the United States allows us to look not only at the structural level of knowledge constructed about prostitution (historical and cultural) but also to the lived experiences of prostitute women (community and individual). Before turning to the question of *how* this counter-narrative of prostitution is constructed on television in Chapter 5, I will explore legal prostitution in Nevada and at the Moonlite Bunny Ranch specifically in Chapter 3.
Chapter 3: The Moonlite Bunny Ranch

“What’s it really like to be at the Moonlite Bunny Ranch?” This is the most common question I am asked when describing this research project. Probing questions about the details of daily life and the business practices of the sex workers usually follow. “How much do they charge?” “How do customers choose a girl?” “Is it really like it looks on TV?” Interestingly, many people who ask me these questions do not even know that prostitution is legal in Nevada in the first place! These questions point to a need to define clearly what prostitution is like at a legal brothel in Nevada, and more specifically at the most publicized legal brothel, the Moonlite Bunny Ranch. Sex worker activist Carole Queen explains that failure to define the situation in which sex work takes place perpetuates the stereotype of sex workers as forced into a lifestyle that demeans them. She argues that this perception is not universally true or “helpful for analyzing the situations of those whores whom it describes, unless the question is also asked: What separates those sex workers who experience their lives negatively from those who do not?”379 Sex worker and scholar Jill Nagle concurs. She argues that it is “…high time to stop excluding the perspectives of sex worker feminists.”380 That is, we should consult with those who see positive possibilities in sex work and/or recognize that the structural and feminist perspective of the oppressed woman forced to go into work that reproduces their own objectification also reproduces “the whore stigma common to the larger culture.”381 Such is the perspective of many of the women at the Moonlite Bunny Ranch, whether they call themselves feminists or not.
This is not to say that all the women at the Moonlite Bunny Ranch characterize their experiences in wholly positive terms. Rather, the sex-positive perspective of prostitution points to the need to define parameters of the situation in which sex work takes place rather than automatically buying into dominant discourses of prostitution. It highlights the need to avoid assuming that all prostitution is inherently oppressive and that all women involved in the practice have no choice in what they do. There is no denying that many illegal prostitutes are subject to coercion, violence, and degradation. Often women turn to illegal prostitution due to sociological factors such as poverty, abuse, lack of education, drugs, and other factors over which they feel they have little to no control. However, studies of these problems with prostitution usually ignore whether or not these same factors are relevant to legal brothel prostitution and make sweeping generalizations about all prostitutes. On the rare occasion when legal prostitution is taken into consideration, only some brothels are examined, often within the context of dominant discourses of prostitution. I do not wish to succumb to these same limitations. Therefore, my purpose is to situate the practices of legal prostitution, which in the United States are often ignored, and specifically how sex work at the Moonlite Bunny Ranch compares to other publicly described legal brothels. I addressed this first purpose in Chapter 2. Here, I will focus on the second.

In order to aid in the definition of prostitution at the Moonlite Bunny Ranch, I will draw on the work of Jo Phoenix who suggests that when studying prostitution, it is important to use some guiding questions about the practices involved in the specific type of prostitution. She suggests seven areas to consider when analyzing prostitution:
• Place of work: where does the work take place?

• Mode of client contact: how do clients and workers get into contact with each other?

• Employment status: is the worker full-time, part-time, regular or casual?

• Peripheral activities: are there any other activities commercialized in the prostitution exchange?

• Exchange practices: how are monies from the prostitution exchange collected and distributed? What type of economic relationships does the worker enter into?

• Formal relationships with others: what are the formal relationships that the worker is involved in, apart from with her client?

• Risks and protection: what risks to the worker are involved? What protection is offered to the worker? What strategies and relationships does she enter into to obtain protection and who is she needing protection from?384

Considering each of these areas in the analysis of a particular situation of sex work allows the inclusion and exclusion of relevant issues such as control, coercion, and consent facing workers without being subject to the pitfalls of dominant discourses that begin by assuming oppression and coercion as facts of the life of a prostitute.385

Although it is important to consider these seven areas when addressing a particular prostitution situation, I must also heed the cautions of other sex workers not to draw false distinctions between types of sex work. False distinctions between types of sex work lead to an inability to organize collectively and competition to determine which types of sex work are seen as more or less valuable. In Carol Rambo’s analysis of table
dancer narratives she recognized that often dancers demeaned one another based on what types of practices each engaged. Dancers who did not engage in sex with customers put down those who did, or those who would not do nude dancing would dismiss those who would.\(^{386}\) Liz Highleyman, aka Mistress Veronika Frost, a professional dominatrix, says that in her line of work, dominatrixes often claim they are not sex workers in order to avoid sanctions imposed on illegal sex work, i.e., legal punishments and the stigma of having sex for a living. But Highleyman concludes that this is a false distinction that merely acts to keep sex workers from acknowledging their similarities.\(^{387}\)

I do not intend to create false distinctions. Therefore, I would not exclude anyone who engages in a “range of practices involving the exchange of sex and/or sexually related goods or services for money,”\(^{388}\) from the umbrella terms “sex work,” or the “sex industry.” At the same time, it is necessary to define sex work at the Moonlite Bunny Ranch by the characteristics it shares with other forms of sex work as well as by what makes it unique from other situations in which sex work takes place. The intent is not to devalue other contexts of sex work, but rather to clarify what this situation is like.

When I first began the process of defining sex work at the Moonlite Bunny Ranch, its legal status emerged as the predominant distinguishing feature. However, I found myself continually needing to distinguish it from other brothels in Nevada as well. Given that sex work is legal at these other brothels too, I needed to consider what it was about this brothel that made it distinctive, while also reflecting upon what connected it to other legal, and illegal, sex work. Guided by Clifford Geertz, I considered how I could speak to these issues through ethnographic description. Geertz claims that ethnographic
description has four characteristics. It is 1) interpretive, 2) temporally bound social discourse, 3) fixed in perusable terms, and 4) microscopic. The interpretive nature of this type of research requires that I include both what the women of the Bunny Ranch said and did as I observed and interacted with them during the time I was at the Ranch, as well as my own interpretations. Most simply, this means that I will be using perusable terms that emerged from the research context to explain concepts whose meanings need clarification and/or problematizing. How the women described their daily lives, the words they used to define themselves, and how they share meanings of these experiences played into how I have talked about them throughout this work.

Further, these interpretations include comparisons to what I have learned about other contexts of sex work. The fact that second and third order interpretations are being made by me must be made explicit in order to make the social nature of this ethnographic work clear as well. However, what I chose to focus on, what those interpretations are, and how I have made sense of them are bound temporally to the time I spent at the Ranch and in analyzing my experiences afterward. Additionally, what these women chose to share with me, how they made sense of their experiences, and what our interactions involved are also bound to the time and place in which they occurred. I may be able to draw comparisons based on these interactions and interpretations, but our experiences in November and December 2007 would not be the same now. This does not limit their usefulness in understanding lived experiences at the Moonlite Bunny Ranch. Rather, it limits our ability to generalize to other times and places.
For this reason, the final factor in Geertz’s ethnographic description I have yet to discuss is the most important one for this chapter, that is, focus on the microscopic. I found that attempting to write about the Moonlite Bunny Ranch as representative of prostitution was impossible, as its legal status distinguishes it from many of the experiences of other sex workers included in Chapter 2. Additionally, this Ranch engages in daily practices within a business context that distinguish it from most other brothels in Nevada despite the shared legal status of the business. So, while the Bunny Ranch shares some features common to sex work in general, it also distinguishes itself with the way the business is framed by its owner/proprietor and the women who work there. So, I must cast my interpretations according to the experiences of the people with whom I worked at this Ranch during the time in which I conducted my research influenced by the ways in which they described the context.

Geertz’s perspective of culture involves a context that is thickly described. Understanding the culture of the Moonlite Bunny Ranch and how the people who work there construct and make sense of their situations everyday requires me to focus on microscopic issues of their daily lives highlighting “their normalness without reducing their particularity...render(ing) them accessible: setting them in the frame of their own banalities, (thus) dissolv(ing) their opacity.” Undertaking this project requires me to look at the similarities this Ranch shares with other contexts in which sex work takes place while allowing me to define it in its particularity. To accomplish this task I will share stories from my first few visits to the Moonlite Bunny Ranch. These stories reveal what I learned about the daily practices of the Bunny Ranch. They also include insights
into how the women who work there make sense of it, and how I interpreted the experience. Throughout this storytelling, I also will draw comparisons to what I have learned about other sex work/sex workers and other brothels in order to situate the context of this study of the Moonlite Bunny Ranch and the women who work there.

**Arrival at the Moonlite Bunny Ranch**

Driving out to the Moonlite Bunny Ranch is nothing like arriving at a Vegas strip club or being drawn in to a pre-Guiliani New York skin bar. There are no flashing neon lights and no hawkers trying to draw in customers. Located approximately 30 miles from Reno, and just five miles outside of the state capital of Carson City, less than one mile over the Lyon County line and surrounded by the State flower, sagebrush, auto repair shops, and junkyards, it feels more like taking your car to be serviced than a place one goes to have sexual fantasies fulfilled.

![Figure 1: Signs for Local Businesses amidst the Sagebrush on the Way to the Ranch.](image-url)
The first indications that this is not just another sign painting business arrive with yellow warning signs, just like those you’d see on the side of any highway in America. But look closer and you see that these warning signs have pictures of rabbits copulating on them.

Figure 2: Warning: Yield for the Bunnies Ahead.

There is another sign warning drivers to keep clear of the helipad, though no helicopters in sight. These are followed by a white ranch-style fence at the entrance to the parking lot attached to which is yet another sign advertising “Free Tours - No Sex Required.”

Figure 3: Entry to the Moonlite Bunny Ranch Parking Lot.
Pulling up at 1:30 in the afternoon for my first visit, I was surprised to see more than 20 cars in the parking lot. I did not expect to see so much business so early in the day. The newly renovated façade (completed after the first season of HBO’s *Cathouse*) is painted tan with white trim and pink accents fronted by a white wrought iron gate. At night a large red arrow lights up pointing down to show “You are here.” The setting reminds me of what I know about the history of prostitution in Nevada, though the new face of the Bunny Ranch is a far cry from the mobile homes of days gone by.

*Figure 4: Post-Cathouse* Facade of the Moonlite Bunny Ranch.

* * *

Prostitution in Nevada came with the founding of the 36th state on October 31, 1861. Nevada had hardly any population, but President Lincoln needed another free state to outnumber the slave states to support his action against seceding southern states. The Nevada population was primarily made up of cowboys and miners. With the boom of the Comstock Lode in the 1860s and 1870s, population in the state grew by leaps and bounds. But, men outnumbered women at least 3 to 1.\(^{392}\) Mining companies, wanting to
keep their male workers happy, actually brought in women to work as prostitutes. The frontier mindset about prostitution echoed that in larger society: “good” women were pure and lacked sexual desire, and therefore, these early Nevada male settlers were encouraged to partake of the services of “bad” women. At one time, over 150 brothels operated in and around Virginia City, site of the Comstock Lode.

By 1881, legislators in the state passed the first regulations of prostitution requiring licensure and taxation of brothels that were tolerated and the ability to prohibit houses of ill-repute in counties that chose to do so. These laws amounted to justification for the police and authorities to shut down any brothels they considered a public nuisance at any time and the authority to extort money from brothel owners and prostitutes. Regulations became more formal during World War II after President Franklin Roosevelt passed an executive order for states to suppress all prostitution near military bases. At this point both Reno and Las Vegas, the largest cities in the state to this day, decided to tighten up their regulations. After the war the ability to regulate prostitution was returned to the states. The cities of Reno and Las Vegas chose to use “public nuisance” statutes to justify the continued ban on prostitution. Other counties turned back to their laissez-faire approach to the practice, which also continued the justification of random crackdowns through the 1950s and 1960s. That is, do nothing as long as no one was complaining, but conduct raids when communities expressed concerns. This is why up until the 1970s most brothels operated out of mobile homes and trailers. If owners heard that county authorities were ripe for a crackdown, they could, literally, move their
business to neighboring counties. Most other Nevada brothels still look like doublewide mobile homes.

* * *

The afternoon of my arrival at the Bunny Ranch, I walked up to the locked gate and pushed the buzzer. I learned quickly that this is the typical entry for a Nevada brothel. The gate immediately buzzed and I was able to push it open. I could not see in the glass entry doors from the outside, though the greeter was able to see me. Just inside the glass doors, I stepped onto the immaculate black, marble-tiled floor. I noticed a bathroom on the right of the entry with “He/She” written on the door. Later in my visit I used this bathroom which was spotlessly clean and decorated in the same black marble as the entry way and included a pedestal sink with glass bowl on top. On the left side of the entry, I scanned shelves upon which t-shirts, sweatshirts, and other Bunny Ranch souvenirs were piled. After the black marble tiled area, I stepped into the first of three other sections of the “public” area of the parlor. Each was open to the other, yet separated by partial walls in between. The first two sections were connected by long red velvet couches and chairs backed by a mirrored wall, and small tables on the right. On the left I saw two fireplaces framed on each side by the same red velvet couches which lined the partial wall between the two sections. In the center of the three areas I was not surprised to see the stripper pole, as I remembered it from Cathouse.

At the back of the parlor, in clear view from the front door, I spied the “Bunny Bar,” identified by a pink neon sign hung above it. There were about eight barstools that lined the bar, behind which were a couple of shelves lined with alcohol bottles, with a
mirror behind them. Above the mirror I saw a street-sign-like sign reading “Sturgis 2005.” I surmised that Ranch must get a good biker crowd.

Figure 5: The Bunny Barn.

Figure 6: One Sitting Area in the Moonlite Bunny Ranch Parlor.
On my first visit, Brooke Taylor, star of the second season of *Cathouse* and owner/proprietor, Dennis Hof’s current girlfriend, gave me a tour beyond the parlor area. Brooke was taller than I am at about 5’5”. She was thin and wearing a short, straight platinum blonde bob. When she entered the parlor area she was wearing short-shorts, a half-top Bunny Ranch t-shirt, 6-inch heels (which made me feel even shorter), and a long black sweater which she wrapped around herself to keep warm. She showed me the hallways to the right and left of the bar. To the right, opposite the bar, was a glass case with shelves of sex toys, lubricant, condoms, massage oils, etc., for sale. On the left of this hall, still visible when seated at the bar, were pictures of the “stars” of the Bunny Ranch, including Airforce Amy and the sex class instructor from *Cathouse*, Alexis Fire, on her back with her legs behind her head. Opposite these pictures and the bar was the cashier’s office. I giggled a bit when I saw the frosted glass door that read, “Hooker Booker.” This office appeared in *Cathouse*. So, I knew that I would find the work schedule was written on a white board, the kitchen timers and timecards inside. This is where the girls came for supplies – towels, condoms, wet wipes, etc. - and to book parties. Brooke took me straight down this hallway to the kitchen area. In the center was a long, low table surrounded by red velvet chairs that matched those in the entry. She told me that meals are provided for all workers when they are on-shift and that a microwave was provided for heating leftovers or other food brought in by workers. On this day, one of the drivers had brought in some homemade soup to share.

Turning left from the kitchen, Brooke led me out a back door. The outside courtyard had a common seating area, a hot tub for parties, and a sign that read, “No tops
allowed. Bottoms optional, but discouraged” (as seen on Cathouse), as well as a trampoline. She took me across this courtyard to an “out house” that had three rooms. The first was the “torture” room. The walls of this room were painted black, but there was not much else in the room. There was a spanking chair (the black and white horse-like chair seen on Cathouse) and a “horse” which had a flat vibrator on top of it. Brooke showed me how strong it vibrated and allowed me to touch it. I do not know how she rode it in the Cathouse musical special (that aired the following New Year’s Eve) as it seemed to be a hundred times stronger than any cell phone vibrates.

The second room she took me in was the doctor’s room. This room has a doctor’s exam table and doctor’s supplies. I was later told during a new girl’s orientation by Jenna395 that this room is used for their doctor’s exams but that it can also be used for theme parties – playing doctor for a fee. The room also has a tanning bed in it available for use by the girls at a cost of $4 per session. The third, and final, room in this building that Brooke took me to was the water room. It had a bed that can be used for all sorts of water massages, food games, etc. She explained that the entire room was waterproof and that it could be cleaned and hosed down easily. Over the water bed I saw two shower heads on the ceiling and another mounted on the wall. Upon return to the main building, Brooke pointed out that the other small buildings out back are not available for rental, but are provided for “friends of the Bunny Ranch,” i.e., celebrity clients who wish to maintain some level of confidentiality during their visits.

Back at the bar area, Brooke then took me to the left of the bar. Before leaving the bar area to go down the hallways to the left, we passed an ATM machine, which she
explained discreetly shows up as a cash advance from South Lake Tahoe on receipts and bank statements. We also passed a smaller glass cabinet in the wall opposite the bar with more shelves of sex toys, etc., for sale. Across from the ATM and sex toy case, there was a small computer room in which the girls work with internet clients, schedule appointments, or just use in down time. When using the internet, according to Jenna, girls cannot quote prices for parties because it is illegal. They can set up appointments and invite customers to the Ranch though. Jenna did mention that there are ways to “creatively” discuss prices on the internet, such as asking what kind of budget the guy has and telling him that he can get a good party for particular prices he suggests. However, Brooke explained that most girls, like her, use their own laptops in their rooms as there is wireless access throughout the Ranch.

We then proceeded out of the parlor/bar area, when I noticed that there was not one, but two long hallways past the bar to the left, one to the right and one to the left. Each was lined with doors on both sides and pictures of various Bunny Ranch stars and Dennis over the years. Each door opened to a bedroom. I learned that there were a total of 30 rooms, many of which were being used by girls during my visit. Even though the Ranch was not full during the holidays, Brooke explained that many of the girls are from out of town and therefore live at the Ranch full time. The rooms in which they work are the same rooms in which they spend their non-work sleeping and living time. The girls can decorate the rooms however they would like but are encouraged to put multiple sized condoms and various sex toys on their nightstands, according to Jenna. Each of the regular girls’ rooms had name plates on the door (unused rooms had places for
nameplates but remained blank). Some doors had personalized signs or decorations on the outside of the doors as well. Brooke also explained that all the girls used sheets and/or towels on top of their comforters when they party in their rooms and that many girls have pillows they use for parties and different pillows for sleeping.

No one is allowed to enter anyone else’s room without permission. So, Brooke showed me several rooms, with their occupants’ permission, including the two rooms used in the *Cathouse* series. Brooke explained that cameras were mounted in these rooms when they were filming. During which times, a switch was hit upon entry into the rooms to turn on the cameras. The rooms used for *Cathouse* were much larger than the other rooms. The other rooms also varied in size, from barely large enough to fit a queen-sized bed to large enough to fit a king-sized bed, dressers, chairs, with plenty of room to move around. Brooke’s room was at the end of a hallway, which she said was nice for privacy, but difficult when she had to run to the bar area for line-ups. She also showed me the Jacuzzi tub and separate shower in her bathroom, but explained that not all girls had their own bathrooms. Brooke kept a small Yorkshire Terrier named “Bella” that Dennis gave her for her birthday in her room as well. No other girls had pets in their rooms.

*Orientation at the Moonlite Bunny Ranch*

After the tour, Brooke dropped me off back in the parlor to meet with Dennis and his general manager, Madame Suzette. We briefly discussed the parameters of my study before they had to head off to go shopping for Christmas party presents. At this time, “big sister” Jenna was just starting an orientation session for a new girl at the Ranch, Nadia. I asked if I could sit in on the session and was granted permission by Dennis and Jenna.
Jenna sat next to Nadia on a couch on one side of the fireplace, while I sat on the couch on the opposite side of the fireplace. Jenna was tall (about 5’8”) with very dark brown/black hair cut in a bob, curled under. She wore a fluffy robe over knee-high black 4-inch heel boots and a v-neck printed tight shirt which highlighted her large breasts and ample cleavage. She carried her cell phone in her robe pocket. Nadia was petite (5’), dark-skinned and spoke with an accent. I am not sure what her ethnic origin was. She wore a black short-shorts jumpsuit that had two narrow straps that came from her waist up around her neck. Under each small breast was a crystal barrette-like clip, and a thin string wrapped around her torso to hold the straps in place. She wore black stilettos with a strap around her ankles that had rhinestones that matched her top. I could hear what they were saying but could not see the pages of the 3-inch binder filled with orientation materials as Jenna went page-by-page through the book explaining the ins and outs of working at the Bunny Ranch. Although the details vary, most Nevada brothels have some sort of orientation of new girls. Interestingly, this practice is against the law in other contexts as it is considered pandering.396

The orientation usually begins with instructions about how to check a man for a diseased/healthy penis. However, Jenna skipped over this part of the lesson because she said that Nadia already knew this from having worked at the Wild Horse (another Ranch just outside Reno). So, Jenna began by talking to Nadia about the Bunny Ranch dress code. She told her that all girls are expected to dress and act like ladies in the common area. This meant not wearing jeans, cut-off shorts or sweats when she was on-shift, on the floor. Baby doll nighties, thigh-highs, stilettos, bras, etc., were all approved apparel. Girls
were expected to look sexy, but not sleazy. Hair and make-up should be done like the girl would if she were going on a date.

Upon arrival of a customer, at most ranches, working girls do a line-up. That is, all women working at the time, line up and introduce themselves to the customer, after which the customer chooses which woman he likes. When on-shift, girls at the Bunny Ranch were expected to come to every line-up. If not chosen in a line-up, Jenna recommended staying out on the floor until it was clear that an agreement had been reached between the customer and the girl that was chosen. The reason for this, according to Jenna, was because you never know when the customer might change his mind. Bob Herbert, Ohio journalist and critic of prostitution, claims that it is requirements such as these demonstrate the coercive nature of brothel prostitution. He claims that sometimes women are awakened to attend line-ups. What Herbert fails to note, however, is that during a worker’s twelve hour shift, she can take naps, watch television, and eat her meals, which certainly distinguishes this type of work from much non-sex work. The trade-off is that she must also wake up to do her job during her shift.

After a girl is chosen, Jenna explained that the procedure was first to take the customer on a tour of the Ranch that concluded in the girl’s room. At that point the girl should keep the door open a crack while negotiating a party and price. Once a price has been negotiated, the girl is expected to bring the customer’s credit card to the cashier in the office, or if he/she is a cash customer, the girl should bring the customer and the cash to the cashier. The cashier will run the card and bring the receipt for the customer’s signature back to the room with the girl. When the cashier leaves the room, she will shut
the door and the party can begin. No money is handed to the worker herself. This is explained, in part, as a courtesy. I learned later from Kandi, that it has always been seen as tacky to hand a prostitute money as it exposes the business part of the transaction. Even in media depictions customers usually leave the money on the nightstand! Primarily, however, this procedure is followed so the cashier can keep track of the amount of the transaction to make sure that the house is getting its cut - fifty percent at the Bunny Ranch.

At the conclusion of the party, Jenna continued, the cashier will call the room through the intercom and inform the girl and customer that it is time to “re-party.” The customer will then re-negotiate with the girl or the party will end. It is during the negotiation, while the door is still open, that the girl can find out what the customer wants, decide if this is something she is willing to do, and determine whether the customer is willing to pay her price. If they cannot come to an agreement, due to the price the girl expects or if she does not do the type of party he wants, she will bring him back out to the common area and introduce him to other girls. If girls who are not chosen in the line-up go right back to their rooms, there will be no girls to whom he can be introduced. This is why Jenna recommended staying in the common room until the money was paid to the cashier. Returning to your room could mean lost business.

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It is important to note that sex workers’ relationships with customers and the cashiers are only two of the important formal relationships within the Ranch. During my visits, I learned that the women have formal relationships with the rest of the staff at the

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Ranch, which includes men and women of all ages who work in the kitchen, cashier’s office, bar, laundry, drivers, and greeters. These relationships are very important for, as like many businesses, the support staff keeps things running. Most of the interactions I witnessed at the Bunny Ranch were quite positive. However, there was also a clearly demarcated hierarchy from Hof to Suzette to the cashiers and sex workers, followed by support staff members. Staff members were expected to defer to the sex workers and provide services for them so that they could get their jobs done without the worries of many everyday concerns. One example was when a sex worker’s laptop crashed. Staff members called the computer repair place for her, delivered the broken laptop, paid for the service, and returned the laptop to her. The flipside to this relationship was that the sex worker paid for the deliveries of the laptop and for the service to it. Kitten says that she is treated like a “spoiled brat” when she is at the Ranch.

Aside from these formal relationships, sex workers in Nevada have an interesting informal relationship with the local community. By “local,” I mean people who consider themselves residents of Nevada. Some of the women who work in prostitution are from Nevada, but there is no clear majority of locals over out-of-staters. While this relationship is not the central focus of this study, it is important to note that even as a legal business practice, sex workers in Nevada are still stigmatized by much of the community, often even by those who support their right to work in the industry. This stigma affects the ways brothels do business, from Hof’s decision to advertise, to other brothels’ decisions not to advertise. It also plays a role in how the women of the Bunny Ranch discuss their work.
Working as an Independent Contractor

Whether chosen in the line-up, introduced to a customer by another girl, or fortunate enough to meet a customer in the parlor, once chosen, the sex worker has the right as an independent contractor to negotiate her own prices and to choose which type of parties she will do. This is legally and therefore technically true at all Nevada brothels. However, unlike at other brothels, at the Bunny Ranch women are not forced by house rules to violate their status as independent contractors. At the Bunny Ranch, sex workers can choose or refuse any party depending on what she will or will not do. Jenna further explained that unlike some Ranches, couples and woman-only parties were allowed at the Bunny Ranch. She said that some Ranches do not allow female customers of any kind. Jenna said that she had never done couples parties before working here, but that now couple parties are her favorites to do. She explained that they are really fun, but did not explain what she found fun about them. However, she also said that she did not like to do girl parties. She said that she is “Gay for pay.” Nadia said that she had never done couple parties.

Jenna also told Nadia that there is no minimum price for which a girl must ask, unlike at many other ranches. Jenna did advise Nadia to consider her own overhead when negotiating a price. Girls at the Bunny Ranch must pay $20 a day for room and board for each day she is scheduled to be on-shift. As many women are from out of state, they also must pay room and board. Even so, I learned later from Kandi that if a girl books $1200 during the week or $1500 on a weekend, she does not have to pay this fee. But, if a girl is scheduled and does not show up or is sick, she still will be charged for room/board
because the room is reserved for her. All girls are expected to work if they are scheduled to be on-shift. If they are not there, just like any job, they will have to talk to the boss (Suzette) about why they are not, and Suzette will deal with them accordingly. If a girl is ill, she must tell Suzette as soon as possible, or if she needs time off, she needs to give Suzette as much notice as possible.

It was clear throughout my visits that Suzette is the woman in charge of daily activity. Her big Texas-style dyed blonde hair would make her fit right in with the working girls if it was not for the rest of her look. Like the other non-sex workers at the Ranch, she was always fully dressed. She is also older and heavier than most of the girls, appears to be in her fifties, and wears outfits that tend toward something my mother would have worn when she worked at a bank while I was growing up. Suzette would fit in better as a county office administrative assistant than as a brothel madam. The authority she held with the girls, staff, and with me, also echoed the power of the stereotypical “woman behind the man.” She lords over the daily scheduling, hiring, and settles conflicts amongst the girls. She is the woman through whom the girls and staff must go before getting to Dennis. He is a hands-on business man, but leaves the micro-managing to Suzette. She is his right-hand woman and she knows it. Everyone else knows it too. The girls are told that Dennis is the Daddy and Suzette is the Mommy. The girls often refer to each of them in this way in casual conversation. In this case, Mommy handles the day-to-day inside the Ranch just like a homemaker would. So, although the women work as independent contractors, they are subject to the authority of “Mommy” and “Daddy.”
Although independent contractor status is positive in some ways, there are problems with the practice as well. First, brothels do not have to pay medical insurance or benefits to their employees. Second, all costs, including room and board, travel to and from Nevada, medical tests, personal cleaning services, storage, use of tanning beds, and more, all come out of the women’s pay. The girls also have to buy their own supplies (including condoms, lubricant, cleaning supplies, toys, videos, etc.), which they can buy outside of the Ranch, but that the Ranch provides at discounted prices. Girls must have large, medium, and small condoms, cleaning wipes, lubricant, a sex toy (or several), some porn videos, and paper towels available in her room. Jenna explained that sometimes during a tour with a potential customer, she will point out a particular sex toy she would like to try out or a massage oil she likes and have the customer buy it for their party. She said that this was a good way to cut costs and add spice to parties. So, although owners do not have some types of authority, they do have economic controls over parts of the women’s lives. The benefits of independent contractor status are meant to outweigh the disadvantages. However, despite this status, not all brothels follow the rules.

Contrary to the opinions of some critics, women at the Moonlite Bunny Ranch are not subject to coercion any more than any other employee at any other job is. They are expected to be at work on time and to perform particular tasks, such as working scheduled shifts and attending line-ups, when stipulated. As a matter of fact, they have more freedom than some employees as they can choose their customers and what they will and will not do with them. However, during these shifts women eat meals, watch television in their rooms, socialize with one another, take naps, update the message
boards online, chat with clients, and even, for more industrious of the workers, solicit business on the phone or internet. Sometimes they are also asked to do interviews with the media, or even with researchers like myself.402

Overhead and Negotiating Prices

After sharing all this information with Nadia during the initial orientation, Jenna brought Nadia to the office to pick up her supplies. Nadia did not own any toys, so she picked out a small vibrator. She also told the cashier, Mary,403 that she would have to charge her supplies. Mary knew this and put them all on her account, to be paid for after she began working. Other charges girls sometimes pay are for a driver to go pick things up for them at the store or food (if they don’t want what is provided in the kitchen) when they are on-shift. Unlike at most other ranches, girls can come and go as they please when they are not on-shift, but drivers can go for them then as well. The girls pay the drivers a set price of $7 per trip, plus they add a tip. The maids on site will do the girls’ laundry for a cost of $5 per load. This cost does not include towels, sheets, etc., as those are done by the maids at no additional cost to the girls. The girls also pay $4 per session for tanning. Girls do not have to pay to take advantage of the personal trainer who is in the gym three days a week, nor do they have to pay to use the private gym. So, Jenna recommended to Nadia to take no less than $100 for a party as this would be the bare minimum to cover her overhead costs. And, she explained that this would be for a short party. The example she gave was a 10 minute “handjob party” for $100. Otherwise, she explained, they would be doing it for free, and they are “worth more than that.”404
As the orientation continued, Jenna explained the negotiation process as well. She recommended aiming high on price so that Nadia would have some room to work with the customer on the price. Jenna said that sometimes she would ask for a particular price and the customers would immediately say yes, at which point she would be really excited to get that price (although she did not mention what this price was). She also told Nadia that she should ask some of the girls if she could sit in on their negotiations so that she could see how some girls handle it. Jenna said that when she is chosen from the line-up, she will first ask if that customer has been there before. If he has, she will not take him on a tour, but take him directly to her room. She recommended putting on some porn during the negotiations. However, later when she was giving us a tour and we were in her room, she also explained that she would often ask the man if he would like to watch some porn or listen to some music.

All the rooms have TVs and DVD players in them. There is satellite television throughout the Ranch. While I was there a satellite radio station was on in the common area the whole time. Jenna said that her customers often like just to have music on. After setting the mood, during negotiations she would then sit with them on the side of the bed nearest the door. Jenna (and the woman who shares her room) have a small white board, like the kind college students post on their dorm room doors, hanging near their door with a message written on it that says, “Don’t forget to tip the Bunny.” Jenna said that while she is negotiating, that is what the customer sees. She showed us where she would sit while she negotiated and explained to Nadia that she would want to consider what comforter and blankets, etc., she would want on her bed. Jenna said that she could go to
the linen closet and see if there was something there she liked better than what was in her room at the moment or she could buy something like a WalMart bed-in-a-bag for about $80. She did make it clear that having a soft blanket or silky sheet on the bed that she could touch while negotiating was advantageous. She explained that customers are all about the senses. So, while she negotiates, she showed us how she would pet her blanket and how the customers would often mime her movements. She also said that sometimes a man would ask if she had children. She would tell them yes if she thought it would help up her price. She said that some men have a “mommy” or “maternal” thing and it would get them to pay more. She told Nadia that she could decide to tell them yes or no depending on how she felt about it and if she thought it would increase her price. However, she also recommended not giving out too much personal information.

Although Jenna did not quote any of her own prices, she did mention that $1000 and $2000 are prices she has asked for when negotiating particular parties. She also gave specific instructions regarding taxi and limo customers. She said that when a customer is a taxi or limo customer, the greeter would give a signal to the girls in the line up. If it was a taxi or limo customer, Jenna told Nadia that she should automatically ask the customer for twenty percent more in the negotiations. Although Jenna did not explain why this was the case, I learned from a limo driver friend that the working girls do this because taxi and limo drivers are given twenty percent for bringing in customers. Casino concierge services also participate in providing tourists with this information. None of these practices are legal, but they are tolerated. Nadia asked if they should tell the customers that it will be twenty percent more and Jenna told her that they should absolutely NOT
tell the customers that they are being charged twenty percent more or why. Jenna also said that she would sometimes tell a customer during negotiations that she would lower her price a bit if they were going to tip her. She said that she found that customers pay more overall if they think they are getting a “break” on the price, even though half of tips go to the house as well.

The services provided by locals, such as taxi drivers and concierges, are neither advertised nor highly regulated. Locals have always known about the ranches, which makes advertising less important. Many take advantage of brothel services and share their knowledge with others. But, up until recently, most solicitation was done informally. During the winter of 2007, Nevada statutes changed to legalize brothel advertising. Prior to the change in this law, most brothels kept their businesses fairly hush-hush, relying on word of mouth to garner business. Due to the county-by-county ability to legalize prostitution (or make it illegal) most brothels prefer to keep their business under wraps so as not to upset the voters in each county. Keeping their business on the down low allows other brothels to keep their daily practices quiet as well. This is how many other brothels are able to violate the laws protecting the independent contractor status of sex workers, for example, by requiring women to take any customer, provide any service, and/or setting minimum prices.

*Enter the Pimp Master General – Dennis Hof*

The Moonlite Bunny Ranch is an exception to this rule of thumb. Dennis Hof is a self-professed “businessman.” A boisterous man in his fifties whose balding head is rarely seen as he is usually wearing a baseball cap. At the Christmas party he had a
special rhinestone encrusted Bunny Ranch hat with his affectionate title on the back—Pimp Master General. Dennis handles all business deals for the Ranch, from product purchases to media campaigns. As a businessman, Hof values and employs business practices such as marketing. Since advertising was illegal, Hof took to doing interviews on national radio shows such as *The Howard Stern Show*, on television talk shows such as *The Tyra Banks Show*, and working with HBO on *Cathouse*. Hof says that if he does his business “by the book” then there should be no reason to upset voters. Rather, his goal is to legitimize the business in order to further his business possibilities. So, his promotional efforts are not limited to soliciting customers.

Aside from advertising per se, Hof has made it his mission to promote the Bunny Ranch for customers and to recruit workers. He does so by attending adult entertainment conventions and awards, such as the Adult Video News, visiting strip clubs across the country, and through his connections with other big names in the sex industry, such as 70s porn star Ron Jeremy and *Hustler* publisher Larry Flynt. Hof hands out business cards and encourages potential new recruits to contact Madame Suzette, the general manager, to arrange interviews. In addition to in-person recruiting of workers and invitations to potential clients, Hof also takes advantage of multi-media outlets. As already mentioned, the Bunny Ranch has its own website that allows customers to browse workers and chat live with them. Interest in the Bunny Ranch by radio, television, and multi-media outlets began with an article in *The New Yorker* discussing Hof’s business career that cemented his deal with HBO that ultimately yielded five specials and a two-season series of *Cathouse*. Of the women I interviewed, over half contacted the Bunny...
Ranch to work there after having seen the show. During my visits to the Bunny Ranch, several phone call inquiries a day were made because potential clients saw the show.

Hof works to keep his business practices above board and expects his girls to do the same. In addition to negotiated prices that are paid directly to the cashier, all tips given to girls are turned in to the office. At the end of each day (Monday -Thursday), the girls get paid in cash (Friday –Sunday parties are paid on Monday.). The Ranch accepts cash, credit cards, and checks. But girls are not paid from checks until the customer’s check clears the bank. Nadia mentioned that accepting checks is risky and Jenna agreed. Women working at all Nevada ranches are paid in cash. It is therefore their responsibility to report all earnings and pay taxes. This can work well for both the women and the house. For the women, they have access to their money on a daily basis, which protects their income from being held from them. For the house, when the women are paid in cash, the women are more likely to spend it more quickly. Although Hof advises the women to consult accountants and to save their money, he also knows that if they spend their money, they will be more likely to work more, which benefits him as well. In this way, the pay system has its benefits and drawbacks. Fifty percent gross goes to the house and fifty percent, less costs, goes to the girl. Girls are allowed to accept gifts from customers, but if the gifts are more than $75 then the girls must pay half the cost of the gift to the house. Jenna explained that girls, including herself, receive flowers all the time, and sometimes clothes or jewelry. If a girl gets a $3000 tennis bracelet, she can keep the bracelet but has to pay the house $1500. She told Nadia that if she wasn’t sure about the cost of a gift that she should ask the cashier.
What is different about the economic relationship between the sex workers and the management at the Bunny Ranch, as opposed to most other prostitution situations, is the economic incentives Hof offers his employees. On Thursdays of every week (the day many girls arrive), the tea party, or company meeting, is held. During my second visit to the Ranch, I was invited to attend that week’s tea party. Madam Suzette, the general manager, gave two raffle tickets to every girl that wore a hat to the party. Knowing about this rule from Cathouse, I wore a hat and was given raffle tickets as well. At the end of the meeting, the raffle was held for prizes like Bunny Ranch clothing, lotions, manicure kits, and other beauty products. I did not win that day, but might have been uncomfortable if I had. I did not want to take a prize away from one of the working girls. At each meeting, the top earners for each day and for the week are announced. At the end of meeting, all top earners for the week are taken to the “top booker store” – a warehouse with products ranging from luggage to jewelry, from CD players to TVs – where they get to pick out top booker prizes. There are also prizes for top bookers for each month. This week there were nine girls that got to go to the top booker store. I was not only invited along for the ride, but the affectionately dubbed “Handy Ho” (the maintenance woman) who drove us to the store was asked to make sure I got to pick out a free t-shirt too.

In addition to these weekly and monthly incentives, as already mentioned, Hof offers free room and board to women who earn over $1200 during the week, or $1400 on weekends. These are amounts the women usually earn with one to two parties (accounting for approximately 30 minutes to 2 hours of their time). During slower months, such as between Thanksgiving and Christmas, Dennis and Suzette offer other
incentives. This holiday season they gave out mall gift certificates for “top” activities like the best gossip or the most helpful big sister. He also held a large Christmas party at which all the employees were given gift certificates for food, clothing, and other high end gifts. Hof made sure I was given these same gifts at the Christmas party to which I was invited. Hof is a businessman. As such, he wants to keep the women happy and economically motivated while at the same time capitalizing financially from this arrangement, and making the most of the marketing opportunities available to him.

A question often asked that is related to the economic relationship the women enter into is whether or not the workers have to have sex with Hof to get a job or keep it. The answer is that many of them do have sex with him, but that it is not required. No, he does not pay them directly when they do sleep with him. But the complicated part of this relationship is that they do receive other benefits such as outdates with him (traveling to the Playboy Mansion was one such activity described), meals, etc. All the women I spoke with complimented Hof’s professionalism when it came to the business side of things. Professionalism and sex with the boss? This is definitely a factor that is unique to the sex industry, and perhaps to the Bunny Ranch as well. Yet it is also a relationship that is virtually impossible to regulate.

Sex Work – Not just Sex for Money

Interestingly, at the Bunny Ranch, women are hired for a number of specialized services beyond those that are sexual. Jo Phoenix uses massage parlor prostitution as an example of a situation in which there are other activities, namely the massage, that are commercialized in the prostitution exchange. The same is true at the Moonlite Bunny
Ranch, other Nevada brothels, and illegal prostitution. More specifically, however, what is commercialized is more than sex. Many women I interviewed explained that often men do not want sex when they come in. *Cathouse* showed customers coming in for talking, affection, cuddling, massages, trampling (being walked on by women wearing stilettos), and even playing chess. Sex worker Max is shown as primarily a good conversationalist, intellectual, and someone with whom men enjoy having a naked game of chess. So, in effect, prostitution in this case is different the exchange of sex for money. As promoted by *Cathouse*, the women I interviewed, and multiple published sources, what is commercialized are the public services provided by the Ranch. Some might argue that sex for money is not a public service, but the virgins who come to the Ranch to learn how to have sex from professionals or the man who comes to learn how to become comfortable with his own body would definitely disagree.411

It is also important to note two more peripheral activities at the Bunny Ranch. The first is the Ranch itself as representative of legal prostitution. In the case of Nevada brothels, Nevada tourism, which is associated with the economic solvency of the entire state, is a major commercialized exchange. The main motivation Hof has for his above board business practices is that he believes prostitution should be legalized nationwide. Therefore, he wants to create a model for how prostitution can be a safe, economically empowering environment for himself and the women who work there. Hof explains, “if you are against legalized prostitution and what the Bunny Ranch stands for, then you are for the exploitation of women…In an illegal environment, these women are exploited
terribly by ruthless pimps and police officers.” For this reason he can be said to be commercializing a particular model for the sex industry.

The more simple, but no less important, peripheral activity the Bunny Ranch promotes is its products, which serve to promote its vision as well. They have DVDs, t-shirts, hats, hot sauce, water bottles, and more. These products act as advertising for the Ranch, but also allow customers to take home a souvenir of their visit. Shirts that read, “There’s no business like ho business,” or “A hole in one guaranteed” are intended to titillate and play with the image of prostitution. In other words, Hof is working hard at branding his business.

Along with these material promotions, the women sometimes act to commercialize themselves as “brands” as well. Many of the women at the Bunny Ranch today are in porn videos or are featured striptease dancers. Some began at the Ranch and worked their way into other parts of the sex industry; for others it is the other way around. Either way, the women are able to promote themselves as Bunny Ranch girls or “stars” of Cathouse. This type of cross-promotion within the sex industry is very effective.

*The Rules – Keeping Things Running Smoothly and Safely*

While Jenna was talking about the economic incentives of the business and the need to declare gifts from customers, Jenna’s cell phone rang and she answered it to speak briefly with her daughter. Phone calls to and from the girls are not restricted at the Bunny Ranch, as they were at the Mustang Ranch described in Alexa Albert’s book, *Brothel*, and may still be at some other places. Later in the orientation Jenna explained
that children are not allowed at the Ranch, for “obvious reasons…it’s not an appropriate place for children.” She also explained that visits from boyfriends and/or husbands should be limited, but that they are not prohibited like they are at some brothels. Although partner visits are allowed, Jenna said that they should only be when a girl is off-shift. Additionally, if these visits are in a girl’s room, the visitor, or working girl, must book the room at a rate of $80/hour.

Jenna explained the rules of soliciting business at the Bunny Ranch, such as girls not being allowed to participate in a “dirty hustle”. She asked Nadia if she knew what that was. Nadia gave an example of going up to a girl when she was with a customer by using me as an example. She said that if she were talking to me and Jenna was to come up, then that would be a dirty hustle. Jenna agreed that that was a good example and also explained other examples such as winking or making eye contact with a customer while he/she was with another girl at the bar. Nadia added, or touching them. No one mentioned behavior in the line-up, though in *Cathouse* girls were shown participating in (and being called out for) dirty hustling in line-ups. While the dirty hustle is frowned upon, Jenna also mentioned that sometimes customers will try to make eye contact with other girls while talking to her and that this was often when a customer was trying to set up a two-girl party. Jenna told Nadia this so that she could see the difference between a dirty hustle by a girl and solicitation by customers.

She further explained some of the other “rules” of living in the house. Some rules are practical and keep things running smoothly and safely at the Ranch. For one, the Ranch is on a septic system, so nothing but toilet tissue can be put in the toilets. If any
girl puts anything other than toilet paper, and the toilets clog, and it has to be fixed, it
costs a fortune, can close down the Ranch, and if a girl is caught, she can be fined or
terminated. If a girl is caught not turning in tips she can be terminated. Girls are also not
allowed to have any sort of fire in their rooms – no candles, no burning sage, etc. They
can smoke in their rooms though. If they are caught with any other sort of fire in their
rooms, they can be fined $1000 or terminated. They may decorate their rooms tastefully
but cannot hang things except by using push pins, as nails and tape cause damage to the
walls that is difficult to repair with so much turnover.

Other rules are also intended to keep the girls and the business safe, but focus on
larger societal issues. On the tour with Jenna, I learned that the Bunny Ranch is a drug
free house. Jenna mentioned that many of the girls who work there are in recovery and
being around drugs is not helpful to them. She also said that having a drug free house
keeps it safer. If a girl is caught doing drugs on the premises or dealing, even prescription
drugs, she will be terminated. Although these are the rules, there were indicators during
my visit that some girls smoked pot, but not on the premises. They would go for a drive
to do it.413 Also, when some of the girls appeared on a special 20/20 with Diane
Sawyer,414 they filmed themselves on Ecstasy. So, the official line is that it is a drug-free
house, but I think it would be fair to say that drug use is tolerated as long as it is kept
under wraps and does not disrupt business. It should be noted, however, that neither
Dennis Hof nor Madame Suzette drink.

Another rule that protects the business is that all parties must be booked through
the cashier on the premises. In Nevada, illegal prostitution includes any prostitution that
does not occur at a brothel, or that has not been arranged at a brothel. For example, illegal street workers may solicit business on the street, but actually conduct business at a hotel or home. Brothel prostitutes may solicit in brothels, but carry out sexual relations outside the brothel, at a hotel, for example. So, while a majority of their work may be on the premises of the brothel, some women have described “out-dates” where the client picks them up at the brothel, pays at the brothel, but then they go to a hotel or other locations for their actual “date.” In an interview, another working girl, Kitten, told me that these out dates are her favorite, especially when she is taken to Lake Tahoe. Women are warned that they may conduct business this way legally, but that they should not go over to the California side of Lake Tahoe, for example, as this would then become illegal.

The fact that business takes place inside the brothel, and not on the street, for example, affords women in Nevada protections that some illegal prostitutes do not enjoy. Although streetwalkers are the most visible types of sex workers, they only account for one in 5 sex workers, according to Ron Weitzer, professor of sociology at George Washington University. “Most prostitutes…work at massage parlors, brothels, escort agencies or, increasingly, on their own.”415 Weitzer would never claim that this type of work is free from violence, but that the risks are much lower indoors in legal brothels. 416 Melissa Farley counters this claim by arguing that only the customer’s safety is increased with indoor prostitution, but not that of the workers.417 However, there is a good chance there will be more benefits with legalization than if prostitution remained illegal, and some of these advantages stem from the location of the practice.
While in her room during the orientation tour, Jenna pointed out a panic button on the bottom of the intercom in the room. She said that the button should NEVER be pushed unless there was an emergency. She explained that there was no violence in the house (she even pointed out that only trained girls use the bondage room as people could get hurt if they did it improperly. She said that she does not do bondage parties but that if Nadia was interested in them, trained girls could teach her). If the panic button were to be pushed, which had only happened once in the time Jenna worked there, everyone who was on-shift and not in a party would immediately go to the room. There is not a “security” team per se, but Jenna says that it is unnecessary at the Bunny Ranch because of the safe environment and the response by everyone if a button were to be pushed. The reality is that most ranches are not large enough to need buzzers. She said that if a customer got rough and the button was pushed, he would have “fifty sets of stilettos” in his face. Nadia asked if people could hear through the walls in case a girl couldn’t get to the panic button. Jenna said that yes people can hear through the walls but that she shouldn’t worry as it had only happened once. Two women I interviewed indicated that they had disrespectful clients (who called them rude names in their rooms at the start of parties). Both women explained that they had no need to call for help, but escorted each client to the front door to leave without incident and with the full support of the management.  

Another measure undertaken at most Nevada brothels to limit violence is keeping women on lockdown. This means that they are required to work three weeks on and one week off. The time they are “on” they are required to live at the brothel 24/7. This
practice is claimed to be for the protection of the women as the brothel is able to monitor the comings and goings of customers. This then allows the brothel to protect the women from overzealous customers and/or jealous boyfriends/husbands. However, it has also been theorized as keeping the women in and limiting their freedom. The Bunny Ranch does not practice these lockdown rules. Women are allowed to come and go as they please. All of the women are required to work 12-hour shifts during which they are encouraged to stay on the premises. A runner is employed to do errands, such as pick up take-out food, or go shopping for the women while they are on-shift, at a cost to the worker. But, if a woman has to leave or wants to leave for any reason, she is not subject to firing.

* * *

Some protections, who they protect and who they afford protection from, have already been mentioned, such as independent contractor status and in-room buzzers. Other regulations include those to protect the health of sex workers and customers. All sex workers in the state must be licensed. This involves an initial health and criminal background check with state authorities, as well as weekly gonorrhea and Chlamydia tests and monthly syphilis and HIV tests. Women must visit the doctor on the same day each week and are not allowed even to be on the brothel floor working if they have not had their weekly doctor’s visit. The cashiers at the Bunny Ranch pull each woman’s licensure card every day/every shift to check whether or not she has been to the doctor that week and will inform her that she cannot work if she has not been to the doctor that day. Additionally, all sex acts that involve exchange of bodily fluids must be done with
protections (condoms and/or dental dams). These medical tests and practices are designed to protect both the workers and the customers. However, the costs of these tests come out of the women’s pockets because of their status as independent contractors. At their orientation, new workers are taught how to check men for sexually transmitted diseases as well. Since 1986, there have been no reported cases of HIV at Nevada brothels.420

Another part of the rationale for limitations and regulations, such as lockdown and medical testing, is that they allow owners and the state a level of control over their workers. As Abigail Solomon-Godeau argues in *The Legs of the Countess*, within a legalistic framework “the crucial issues were surveillance, control, and confinement.”421 So, lockdown rules allow owners control and surveillance of the workers, and the prostitutes’ confinement works both to contain the sexuality of the workers in a specified environment as well as to keep their sexuality from threatening that of “normal” women, i.e., pure and non-sexual, outside brothels in the public. Keeping the women inside allows physical control of their bodies and protection from community judgments. Counties that have voted to legalize prostitution can vote to prohibit it just as easily. Most brothel owners, therefore, keep their business quiet; they keep prostitutes out of the local community, and hence, do not get disturbed by moral outrage.422 Interestingly, most Nevada brothels do not even allow female customers, hence, further delineating the good/bad girls.

* * *

Hof and the Bunny Ranch are the exception. He claims that he runs his business above board so that he cannot be criticized for mistreating the women who work for him.
He follows the rules. Many other brothel owners keep quiet, do what they want, and avoid criticism, but the workers do not enjoy the same protections. As owners are primarily motivated by profits, if the women cannot leave for a particular period of time, it is reasoned that she will be more productive. Yet, Hof attempts to promote productivity through economic incentives. Also, as mentioned above, the Bunny Ranch does not limit female customers or require the workers to stay on the premises when they are not working. Even so, the Ranch does have built-in aid for the women so that they do not have to leave while working, such as runners doing their errands and lingerie salespersons who come to the Ranch to do business. These rules do operate to prevent the presence of pimps, drug dealers, and other criminal elements at the same time.

The fact is, while on-shift, most of the girls do not leave the premises purely because it is easier to stay. While on-shift, line-ups can happen at any time, requiring the women to be dressed and ready to meet potential customers. While Brooke wore a long sweater wrap and Jenna wore her robe, both could be dressed for line-up simply by shedding their cover-ups and slipping on their shoes. But, to go out, especially during the cold, snowy winter, would require putting on several layers of clothing, making sure the cashiers and/or Suzette knew they were going out, and potentially missing out on customers while away. So, motivated by profits and the ease by which they can have someone else go out for them, most girls take comfort in the fact that they can stay on the premises while on- or off-shift.
Conclusion

Exploring the answers to Phoenix’s guiding questions allows us to see how prostitution at the Moonlite Bunny Ranch compares to other brothels in Nevada as well as to scholarly, popular, and media discourses of prostitution. The purpose of her process of defining prostitution is to avoid making the mistaken assumptions of structuralist accounts while still allowing for contradictory factors to be taken into account. In this chapter, I have included discussion that touches on each of Phoenix’s questions. Here I will summarize some answers that my first few visits to the Bunny Ranch provided to these questions in order to explicate further the context of prostitution at this brothel.

Where this work takes place is the key factor in defining the context of prostitution at the Moonlite Bunny Ranch. What the place of work is depends on what part of the work I am describing. Payment for services can only happen on the premises of the Ranch itself. This distinguishes it from illegal prostitution in that payment can occur anywhere. The fact that payment on the premises is legally sanctioned, and payment which is not made on the premises is not, makes Nevada brothel prostitution legal. However, the services for which payment is made, whether it is sex or sexually related activity, can occur on the brothel premises or outside of the Ranch, as long as it is still located in Nevada. Other parts of the business including marketing and promotions, takes place in the media (and therefore in our homes as well), at adult conventions, and other locations involved in the sex industry, such as strip clubs. Dennis Hof, Madam Suzette, and Moonlite Bunny Ranch Bunnies go on national television and radio programs, visit strip clubs, and even take advantage of occasional visits to the Playboy
Mansion to promote the Ranch. Hof also uses visits to strip clubs and adult industry conventions and awards to recruit new workers as well. His was the first legal brothel to advertise porn stars as regular workers.

These promotional and recruitment trips and other advertising also distinguish the Moonlite Bunny Ranch from being just any old Nevada brothel and can be considered, in Phoenix’s terms, *peripheral activities*, that is, activities (beyond sex) that are commercialized. In this case, Hof is trying to commercialize the Bunny Ranch brand in an attempt to commodify it and promote it as a model for legal prostitution that challenges dominant perceptions of what prostitution is. Therefore, the place in which this business takes place is influenced by the peripheral activities engaged in by the owner, which, in turn, affects how that business is carried out. In this case, it means that Hof is able to promote his business because he is doing it above board and following the laws to which it is subject. Moreover, this relationship is cyclical because he is following the rules of the business in order to be able to promote it.

The place in which the work takes place also greatly influences the *status of the women who work* there. Their independent contractor status is respected at the Moonlite Bunny Ranch, which means that they can set their own prices, choose the customers they service, and can come and go as they please (as long as they show up for their shifts and conduct business as they would be expected to in any other job). This also means that the sex workers can determine whether they are part-time, full-time, regular, or casual workers. All types work at the Bunny Ranch. One’s *employment status* is determined by what each person agrees upon with the management of the Ranch. The same is not true at
other brothels or in, say, massage parlors, where the women’s schedules are determined by management, as are what they charge and what they will/will not do with whom. Additionally, women in other prostitution contexts also have their movements restricted. Such restrictions are motivated by the desire for worker productivity, and, some say, their protection. The Bunny Ranch attempts to promote the same productivity through economic incentives, while promoting worker and customer safety through restricting illegal activity that might threaten them, such as the use of drugs.

The rules regarding client contact and exchange practices are very strictly limited by the location of the work as well. While clients can contact bunnies via their website, prices cannot be negotiated across state lines. Instead, clients must come to the physical location of the Bunny Ranch to negotiate payments for sexual services. Clients can only set up appointments and chat with the Bunnies on the phone or over the internet. They can only set actual prices and pay for services at the Ranch. Payment can be made through cash, check, or credit cards and is done through the cashier at the Ranch. The only monies that usually go directly to the working girls are tips. Fifty percent of all transactions, including tips and gifts over $75, goes to the house, and fifty percent less costs goes to the women. Women must also pay the house for room and board if they do not book enough to receive these for free.

This relationship between the women and the house is just one of the formal relationships into which she enters when working at the Moonlite Bunny Ranch. Each woman works closely with the general manager, Madam Suzette to negotiate her schedule, and must tell her if she will not be working when she said she would. Suzette
and the owner/proprietor Dennis Hof determine who is hired, fired, and make sure that everyone is doing business above board and following the rules of the house.

Other formal relationships include those with their doctors, with whom they must meet once a week for medical testing and once a month for further testing. The sex workers must pay for these appointments. Sex workers also enter into formal relationships, for which they pay, with state and legal authorities. Sex workers must apply and pay to get a license to work in the state of Nevada. Additionally, they enter into relationships with tax authorities, much as any worker does, when they file their taxes. Because they are independent contractors paid in cash, it is their responsibility to declare all income and pay appropriate taxes.

These relationships with the doctors, legal authorities, and management, as well as the place of business, all influence the risks and protections for the sex worker, customer, and business itself. Regular medical testing with doctors is said to protect the women and their customers from sexually transmitted diseases, as is use of condoms and other protections during sex that involves transmission of fluids. These doctors’ exams are a prerequisite for licensure by state and legal authorities. Licensure is said to regulate medical testing and allows authorities to keep track of who owes them taxes. Management, Hof specifically, provides informal help with finances by advising sex workers to consult his accountant and to save their money. However, like in other prostitution contexts, sex workers are paid in cash which both cuts against the ability to save effectively and protects them from management unfairly withholding their money. In exchange for agreeing to be in this formal relationship with management, they provide
a clean, safe, legal, healthy environment in which to conduct their business. If sex workers face threats by customers or legal authorities, the management, and other workers, can step in to protect them.

What goes unsaid is that these protections are also meant to extend to wider society. Required medical testing and registration of workers means that if any sex worker contracts a sexually transmitted disease, she can no longer work legally in the business and the government has her diseased status registered. Only legalizing brothel prostitution limits where women can exchange sex for money. This regulation poses little threat to societal expectations about the relationships between sex, money, and power for women. Women in the Moonlite Bunny Ranch make a lot of money exchanging sex for compensation. In this environment these women can be sexual without much threat from outside forces. Consequently, little challenge to the good girl/bad girl dichotomy outside the Ranch is posed. Sex workers at the Moonlite Bunny Ranch are willing to give up fifty percent of their take because of the protections provided by the legal status of the practice and the safe environment of the Ranch. Meanwhile, this Ranch promotes itself in such a way that their economic success is possible.

This exploration of prostitution at the Bunny Ranch shows that it is not as simple as exchanging sex for money as being necessarily oppressive to women. Rather, prostitution at the Bunny Ranch is a job that involves both positive and negative factors. What is clear is that it also is not as simple as characterizing the women of the Moonlite Bunny Ranch as those in need of saving or punishment as dominant cultural discourses of prostitution would have it.
The daily, weekly, and monthly living of the women of the Moonlite Bunny Ranch involve logistics, from scheduling shifts to going to the doctor on the right day every week; negotiating their environment, from getting to and from work to deciding how to spend their shift; rules, from not doing drugs on the premises to being ready for line-ups; and still having to deal with societal attitudes and pressures about what they do, not to mention the actual interactions with customers. This constellation of activities is what really stood out while I was at the Bunny Ranch. That is, the daily routines of the business and social interactions among the women and the staff were more prevalent than interactions with customers. During my first few visits, the first of which lasted about six hours, the second of which was another eight hours, there was an average of one line-up per hour. Dennis Hof says on *Cathouse* that if they have one customer an hour, the Ranch is doing well business-wise.\(^4^{25}\) Although I am sure that there are more line-ups per hour on a Saturday night than a Thursday afternoon, it is still clear that other aspects of the business take up more of the working girls’ and the staff’s time than actual interactions with customers.

This is the message Dennis Hof wants to get across about business at the Moonlite Bunny Ranch; that is, it is a business *and not* an oppressive system that abuses women. This is the focus of *Cathouse*. This is the message that came across to me while observing and conducting interviews at the Bunny Ranch. As I have explored in this chapter, business at this brothel also is not quite as uncomplicated as Hof would hope to show it. However, in comparison to the business of sex in many other contexts, in my
judgment, it is the best run system of prostitution, as measured by how the women are treated and how business is conducted, I know of in the United States.
Chapter 4 - *Being a Rhetorical Critic and a Qualitative Researcher: Investigative Practices*

I returned to Reno, Nevada, in 2002 after living abroad for four years. There was much excitement at my parents' house as Nevada was about to get national exposure for something other than Las Vegas. Many people in the northern Nevada area were excited for the debut of *Cathouse* on HBO as it meant our area was getting some attention. Others may not have been very happy about why we were on TV. Even so, those of us from the area do not often get to see the inside of our own legal brothels, so this was our chance. We watched the one-hour premier of this HBO special along with millions of other pay-cable viewers. I was not surprised at the scantily-clad women or sexual explicitness of the show. What did throw me for a loop was how much money the women were making and how clean and comfortable the inside of the Moonlite Bunny Ranch appeared.

Three and half years later, another special, *Cathouse 2: Back in the Saddle*, and the first 13-episode season of *Cathouse*, the series, had aired. As I continued to watch the show, I began to wonder if what was shown on *Cathouse* could really be what life was like at the Moonlite Bunny Ranch. I had taken many Women’s Studies courses as an undergraduate and had completed a Master’s certificate in Women’s Studies. From my studies I learned that prostitution was part of the patriarchal structures that oppress women and that these prostitutes would never participate in these kinds of activities if they had not been forced to do so. What I had learned about prostitution in those classes did not reflect what I was seeing on television. I wondered if the show was staged and
edited in such a way as to downplay negative aspects of prostitution that I had learned about, or if what I had learned about prostitution did not reflect what it could be like in a legal setting.

I was an undergraduate from 1988-1992 and a Master’s student from 2003-2005. Yet, the Women’s Studies courses I took during both periods of time were strikingly similar. The main difference was that the readings I did for my Master’s degree included more post-colonial feminist perspectives. However, at both times how women’s sexuality was theorized remained the same. In liberal and socialist feminisms, women’s sexuality/ies were erased. In radical feminism, only lesbian sexuality was recognized as legitimate and then only egalitarian, caring, feminine-based sexuality was acceptable. Despite the introduction through the 1980s and 90s of multi-cultural and standpoint theories and the move to post-structural and post-modern frameworks, what I learned about sexual women did not change. I always felt I needed to rationalize how I could be a feminist, heterosexual, and sexual woman. As a heterosexual, sexual woman, there did not seem to be a place for me in feminism.

So, according to feminist theory, prostitutes are oppressed by the heterosexual patriarchy and I am suffering from false consciousness for thinking I could ever be happy with a man. This was enough to make me consider abandoning feminism. Instead, I decided to examine what it was about Cathouse that made it stand out from other media depictions of prostitution. I realized that if what was on that show was really how life was at the Moonlite Bunny Ranch, then what feminist theories said about prostitutes could not be true. So, in addition to examining the show, I realized that I should also go to the
Ranch to see how it compared to what was shown on television. At worst, I could confirm that the show did provide a distorted view of what prostitution was really like and confirm the way feminist theory characterizes prostitution. At best, I could determine how the practices at the Moonlite Bunny Ranch as depicted on Cathouse countered what feminist theories said about prostitution.

I am happy to report that choosing to do this project did a lot more than give me perspective on what I had learned about prostitution from my Women’s Studies classes, or even help me to compare Cathouse with the lived experiences at the Moonlite Bunny Ranch. This project helped me find a whole set of feminist literature that is “sex-positive.” This scholarship celebrates sexual women of all shapes, sizes, and predilections, from heterosexual, married women to lesbian leather enthusiasts, from bisexual women in multi-partner relationships to married lesbians. I found a place in feminism for the heterosexual, sexual woman I am and for the sex workers of the Moonlite Bunny Ranch.

That place was not, however, in my college Women’s Studies courses nor in media depictions of prostitution. Ironically, media depictions were strikingly similar to what I learned about prostitution in these academic courses. Both textual projects constructed this dichotomy between women who needed to be saved because they have been coerced into prostitution or those who are put in jail or killed because of persistently breaking the law, and, I would add, transgressing expectations of what women are supposed to be. However, this twofold predicament is not what I learned from my analysis of Cathouse or from my observations and interviews at the Moonlite Bunny
Ranch. What follows is an explanation of how I went about examining *Cathouse*, the rationale and process for how I went about my study, specific details of the investigative practices I used – including participant observation and in-depth interviews – and detailed discussion of the processes I used to analyze and render these discourses.

*Rhetorical Criticism*

As the initial focus for this study was the performance of identity/ies, I first watched the pilot, first, and second seasons of *Cathouse* paying particular attention to how each of the women spoke about herself, her work, clients, etc., and, ultimately, performed her identity/ies. However, it quickly became clear that this was not how the show operated. Rather, the show focused on constructing a narrative of the business of the Moonlite Bunny Ranch. The women’s activities, interactions, and direct-to-camera comments, together with how they were put together on this reality television show, all worked to construct this business narrative. Therefore, the focus of the rhetorical analysis became not the individual women but how the form (reality television *docuporn*) and content of the series as communicated through the medium of television interacted to construct a particular narrative of prostitution as a legitimate American business.

I began this process with a close reading of the pilot episode of the series. I transcribed everything said word-for-word, noted the scene and topic breaks indicated by the use of titlecards, and took note of the camera angles and hypermediated content, such as when text appeared at the bottom of the screen to indicate that a “hidden camera” was filming the sequence. I then watched the subsequent thirteen half-hour episodes of the first season and the five varying-length episodes of the second season and other
specials that have aired so far. I noted significant changes in form and topics covered in each episode.

The notes from the one-hour pilot episode revealed that the show was structured loosely around themed sequences. Each sequence began with a titlecard and theme music to set the mood. Although the titlecards revealed the nature of the “party,” i.e., sex with a customer, that was about to be filmed, such as “The Virgin” or “The Anniversary,” each segment included only the negotiation session between the sex worker(s) and the customer(s), not the actual party. This was one way in which the pilot episode differed from subsequent episodes. Additionally, each party negotiation was shown between segments that showed and explained topics and practices surrounding the inner workings of the business, such as, how girls are chosen by customers, how the women are paid for their work, and how the doctor comes to the Ranch for weekly testing of the workers.

I chose to begin my analysis by examining *Cathouse* because I suspected there was something about it that made it stand out from other media portrayals of prostitution. I needed both to find out what the show communicated about prostitution and what other media portrayals of prostitution communicated. My close textual analysis suggested that a story was constructed of prostitution as a job rather than as a deviant social practice. At the same time, I identified the redemption/punishment dichotomy as typical of media depictions of prostitution. This research and the close textual analysis made me realize there was great disparity between the representations of prostitution on *Cathouse* from that in dominant media depictions. Additionally, my close textual analysis helped me realize that the show was structured around themed short stories involving interactions
between sex workers and their customers accompanied by narration between these stories. Put together, these juxtaposed narratives constructed an overarching story about the Moonlite Bunny Ranch. Witnessing such narrative strategies directed me to use methods of narrative criticism to guide my analysis.

According to Sonja Foss, narrative criticism is an appropriate method to use for an artifact that has at least one unified subject, a minimum of two events that are organized in time order, and that involve causal or contributing relationships among these events.\textsuperscript{428} Cathouse involves all of these elements. The show is unified around the subject of legal brothel prostitution in Nevada, involves multiple short events - in the form of interactions between customers and the working girls shown from beginning to reflections after the events. We are also shown overarching events of daily life at the Moonlite Bunny Ranch. Both of these types of events are related to the overall operation of the business.

After determining that narrative criticism was an appropriate way to investigate the show, I went about identifying the elements of the Cathouse narrative. Foss suggests that settings, characters, narrators, events, temporal and causal relations, audiences, and themes are all elements of narrative. Conducting a narrative criticism involves identifying these elements in an artifact and then determining what, if any, relationships exist between these elements, and determining which are most important to the construction of the overall story being told. Not all elements must play significant roles in the story. Rather, part of narrative criticism involves determining which are most important. Two ways to determine the importance of the elements of narrative are to note the frequency
and/or intensity of the elements.\textsuperscript{429} If an event or theme, for example, is repeated frequently throughout the artifact, it is important due to the intensity or significance of the appearance. So, if a character appears only once, then he or she may still be important if their appearance is noticeably “intense.”

The \textit{Cathouse} narrative is outlined specifically in my introduction. Basically, it involves the legal brothel, the Moonlite Bunny Ranch, as the setting, which is situated within the broader setting of prostitution in the United States. The importance of this broader setting to the specific setting became apparent with my document-based research conducted at the same time I was completing this criticism. The Moonlite Bunny Ranch is one of over 30 legal brothels in Nevada, which is the only state in the United States where prostitution is legal. So, the fact that dominant discourses including media representations of prostitution remain locked in a reform/punishment dichotomy makes the legal setting and its characterization stand out. The roles of the characters and narrators are intertwined in constructing the narrative of the show. The working girls and management are shown conducting daily business in all the events of the stories. These persons are the focus of both the short stories and the overall narrated story in-between these interactions. The minor characters are the customers and the support staff at the Ranch. The customers are part of the short stories of the “parties” with the working girls. The time and relational aspects of the story are not as significant to the overall story as the characters, narrators, settings, audience, and themes. I identified the themes based on the interactions between characters in the events of the story and the way the narrators defined the overall story.
I did not identify a specific audience or audiences of this story. However, the fact that this show was produced by HBO and shown on pay-cable television suggests how it was trying to appeal to its audience. That is, through focusing on the sexual nature of the business and highlighting the spectacle of the scantily-clad sex workers there were obvious strategies from soft-core porn utilized. These aspects of the story are discussed more specifically in the introduction and in Chapter 5. To summarize, when brought together these elements of the narrative led me to define it as a story of a “typical American business” in which the prostitutes are defined as “sex workers.” In this story, the sex workers are kept safe by the management and the legal protections Nevada has in place. These women provide a service for which they are handsomely rewarded monetarily, and are encouraged to be their sexual selves and have fun at work.

After having identified the elements of the story and defined the overarching narrative constructed in Cathouse, I continued my research of the broader setting in which this narrative is situated. The disparity between what historical, cultural, community, and individual narratives of prostitution in the United States and the narrative constructed on Cathouse directed me to explore several of the questions Foss suggests to explain a rhetorical artifact. Questions I considered throughout this work included: How would I evaluate the desirability or undesirability of the story constructed? What ethical standards does the narrative suggest? How readily can the narrative be refuted? Is the narrative coherent? Does the narrative demonstrate fidelity? How accurately is reality represented? Additionally, I considered how it was that the artifact constructed the story. That is, how the form (reality television docuporn), content (the
elements of the story), and medium (pay-cable television) interacted to construct the narrative of the “typical American business.”

So for each sequence, delineated by titlecards, I noted not only the content of the story being told but also the common uses of the camera, how set dressings were changed to create mood, as well as how each party theme operated as one part of the demonstration of the overall argument being made in each sequence. Other strategies such as direct-to-camera comments and “everyday” action sequences (in which cameras appeared to be filming all the action \textit{in situ}) also served to construct the basis for what was being said or done. I also drew on theories of television to make sense of the narrative constructed on the show and how audiences interacted with it. Bringing all these elements together allowed me to better examine the narrative of the show in Chapter 5.

The question of how accurately reality was represented became extremely important to the remainder of the project. So far, I had compared the narrative constructed on \textit{Cathouse} with dominant discourses of prostitution. However, this comparison demonstrated that there was a big difference between how dominant discourses characterized prostitution and the story of the Moonlite Bunny Ranch on \textit{Cathouse}. So, was the representation on \textit{Cathouse} real? To answer this question, I could not focus merely on criticism of the text alone. Rather, I would need to investigate the lived experiences of the women at the Ranch to see if they provided a service, were protected, economically empowered, etc.
Before moving on to discuss the ethnographic methods I employed to compare *Cathouse’s* representation with the lived experiences of the women at the Moonlite Bunny Ranch, there is an important issue to clarify. I chose to use only the pilot episode of *Cathouse* for my narrative criticism. This one-hour pilot episode aired in 2002. Subsequent to this episode, HBO aired three more specials, and two subsequent seasons of the series. A total of four specials and fifteen half-hour episodes aired between 2002 and 2008. Even so, I chose to focus only on the pilot episode both because of elements it has in common with the other episodes of the show and because of the characteristics that distinguish it from the others. Elements the pilot has in common with other episodes include focus on information and entertaining aspects of the business. Whereas the pilot balances how much information and entertainment are shown, subsequent episodes focus more on entertainment than on information. The pilot also distinguishes itself in that it shows only negotiations and post-party interviews with customers, whereas other episodes show actual parties with customers.

Additionally, the pilot made use of a hidden camera to film negotiations with customers. Customers were not told they were being filmed until after negotiations were completed. They were then asked for their consent to use these segments in the show. During the ending credits, the reactions of some customers to having been secretly filmed were shown. While some of those shown were not pleased initially when they found out, they still agreed to be on the show. Filming dates for subsequent episodes were posted on the Moonlite Bunny Ranch website. So, some customers in episodes after the pilot chose to be at the Ranch while HBO was filming in hopes to be on television and some
customers and working girls were invited to be on the show. Any negative reactions that resulted in segments not being used on the show could not, by necessity, be shown. A disclaimer at the end of all episodes indicated that some customers were paid for their participation in the show.

I chose to use only the pilot episode primarily because its focus on sex worker/customer negotiations highlighted the business aspect of life at the Moonlite Bunny Ranch which countered dominant representations of prostitution. Moreover, it did not differ significantly enough to necessitate using all the episodes of the show to make the claims I made in this dissertation. After completing my rhetorical criticism of the show, I went into the field to observe life at the Bunny Ranch and interviewed women who work there. I conducted participant observations and in-depth interviews during 5-weeks of visits during the winter of 2007.

Research Questions

Some important research questions were developed from my analysis of *Cathouse* and guided the ethnographic inquiry and subsequent analysis of data:

1. What are the characteristics of identity/ies of legal sex workers working at a legal brothel in Nevada?
2. How do commercial sex workers at a legal brothel communicate, or perform, their identity/ies?
3. What is the narrative constructed on *Cathouse*? What does this narrative tell us about the experiences of legal sex workers at the Moonlite Bunny Ranch?
4. How does the *Cathouse* narrative compare to the lived experiences of legal sex
workers at the Moonlite Bunny Ranch?

5. How do the Cathouse narrative and the lived experiences of sex workers at the Moonlite Bunny Ranch compare to historical, cultural, community and individual narratives of prostitution?

To explore answers to these questions, I used the following methods of data collection and analysis.

Ethnographic Inquiry

It was important to me to finish at least an initial version of the rhetorical analysis before doing any fieldwork. Doing so would enable me to draw conclusions about the show without the influence of being at the Moonlite Bunny Ranch, surrounded by the business itself, and while attempting to focus on the women’s lives and interactions. Even so, I returned to the rhetorical analysis while analyzing the field data in order to be able to draw comparisons between the mediated representations and my discoveries on location about how these sex workers perform identity/ies.

Because of my underlying assumptions about identity and narrative discussed in the introduction, the concept of identity could not be examined on television or in lived experiences without considering of how it is performed in relation to others. In discussing different approaches to the study of identity based on multiple epistemological understandings of the concept, James E. Côte suggests narrative and life-history interviews as one way to develop “accounts of people’s identity formation and maintenance issues, which, by their nature, require a sensitivity to the emergent expressions of the various senses of identity that can only be captured using qualitative
methods.” Employing methods based on narrative theories of identity was useful for examining the in-person talk of the sex workers about themselves. One-on-one in-depth interviews and participant observation furthered my understanding of how these women perform their identity/ies in the context of their work situation.

My ethnographic study at the Moonlite Bunny Ranch consisted of participant observation, during which I took fieldnotes and conducted in-depth interviews. Ethnographic methods enabled me to “capture the qualities of identities as they emerge through on-going interactional processes in day-to-day naturalistic settings.” Since I view identity and narrative as processes of social interaction, interpretive practices of participant observation were crucial. Jaber F. Gubrium and James A. Holstein define these interpretive practices as a “constellation of procedures, conditions, and resources through which reality is apprehended, understood, organized, and conveyed in everyday life” that direct attention both to the what and how of social reality.

Based on scholarship in phenomenology and in line with theories of narrative inquiry, these interpretive practices direct focus to ordinary language and interaction as meaning making events. Additionally, the context in which these social interactions take place is also crucial to our understanding of them. As Gubrium and Holstein continue, Objects and events have equivocal or indeterminate meanings without a discernible context. It is through contextualization that practical meaning is derived…(Additionally,) the circumstances that provide meaningful contexts are themselves self-generating. Each reference to, or account for, an
action…establishes a context…for evaluating the self-same and related…actions of others. 434

I was investigating both what the characteristics of these sex workers identity/ies are and how they perform these identity/ies. At the same time, I also was examining what the narratives of Cathouse and the Moonlite Bunny Ranch are and how they were constructed. My interpretive work involved continually assessing these discourses in relation to each other.

Interviews themselves comprise a social context negotiated between participants and the researcher. However they are conducted within a larger social context as well. Accordingly, it is necessary to situate what is said in interviews within its enveloping social context in order to be able to flesh out meanings. 435 In order to increase my understanding of this enveloping context, I spent five weeks visiting the Moonlite Bunny Ranch. I spent most this time in the parlor area of the Ranch, which is the main public area of the Ranch. As I described in Chapter 3, the parlor includes three main areas and is connected to several others. The first is the marble foyer which has an attached marble bathroom and is where souvenirs are sold. The souvenirs are in glass cabinets and the girls, cashiers, greeters, and other staff members all assist customers when they want to buy products. The second area is made up of two identical sections, each with a fireplace, red velvet couches, small cocktail tables with mirrored walls and a stripper pole. The third area is the bar. The working girls hold line-ups here for customers, customers meet working girls, many people hang out during work, and even some business meetings are held in the parlor. The cashier’s office and Dennis/Suzette’s offices are just off the parlor
as well. Being situated in this area allowed me to observe women interacting with one another, customers, staff, and the management. I was able both to observe their conversations and interact with them.

The limitations of being in this area were that I did not observe parties in the girls’ rooms. This curtailed my ability to speak about sex worker/customer relations. Since the parlor area was very public, it may have influenced what and how people talked. I believe this is one reason that doing one-on-one interviews contributed to a more complete picture of life at the Ranch. Even so, I was able to take copious fieldnotes and observe and participate in daily activities when I was there. I visited the Ranch a total of 16 days over the course of five weeks. My shortest visit was 30 minutes, my longest 8 hours. I feel comfortable with the conclusions I have drawn based on the amount of time and interaction I had at the Ranch. However, I had intended on spending more time there but ran into issues with access that changed my plans and shaped the remainder of the project.

*How Access Shaped My Research*

I began calling the Moonlite Bunny Ranch in November 2006 to see if I could visit in December of that year to discuss with owner/proprietor Dennis Hof the possibility of doing research on-site. However, I was unable to get him on the phone prior to being in the Reno/Carson City area in December of that year. My difficulties getting him on the phone led me to contact two sociologists working at the University of Nevada, Las Vegas. Barbara Brents and Kate Hausbeck have done much work with Nevada brothels. A friend of my family knew of their work through a graduate student who was working
with them. My friend introduced me to their graduate student who introduced me to Barb and Kate. I stopped in Las Vegas to meet with them prior to a visit to Northern Nevada.

Barb and Kate gave me some good advice to help me prepare to meet Hof. They confirmed my suspicion that I should dress “appropriately” to meet with Dennis. That is, I thought I should dress up Nevada-style (jeans with nice shirt and fancy shoes) but also be sure to highlight my femininity. They also supported my idea that I should emphasize my local connection to Nevada (my parents are long-time residents of the area and I went to elementary and high school in the area). Having met Hof, they told me that he is indeed interested in helping those from the area. They also told me that if I were to be able to get him on the phone that he would say yes to my request. The trouble, they noted, would be getting him on the phone.436

Once I arrived in Reno to visit my family for the holidays, I called the Ranch several more times. Each time the person I spoke to, whether it was a cashier, greeter, or Madam Suzette, told me that they would take a message or that I should call back. So as not to be annoying to the staff at the Ranch, I called just once a week for the five weeks I was in the area. I received no calls back. Prior to leaving the area, I decided that I would drive out to the Ranch and attempt to speak with Hof, or at least set up a meeting with him. When I arrived, I spoke with the “Hooker Booker” (cashier) who told me that Hof and Madam Suzette were out to lunch. I left my business card with a note about why I stopped by and both my own phone numbers and my parents’ numbers. I received no response.
For the next several months, I continued to attempt to get Dennis Hof on the phone. Every few weeks I would take a week during which I could call three or four times. I received the same lack of response every time. Finally, nine months later, on the doorstep of having to file my IRB application, I decided to try a different tactic. I e-mailed Hof at the Bunny Ranch address explaining the project and asking if I could speak with him about it. I had not done this before because it was a general e-mail address and I did not expect Hof to see my message. However, within a few hours, I had a response from Hof. He gave me his cell phone number and indicated that I should call him. I called immediately and got his voicemail. I left a message explaining who I was, that he had sent me his number, and why I was calling. Within two hours, he called back. I explained the project, agreed with him that television depictions are judgmental, and chatted with him about when I would want to visit. After nine months of waiting, it took 3 minutes for him to agree to have me visit.

Once I was granted access to enter and conduct this study at the Moonlite Bunny Ranch, additional issues with access altered what I had initially intended to do. I had hoped that my observations and interviews would involve my being present at the Bunny Ranch 5-6 days a week. Since the Ranch is open 24-hours a day, I hoped to alternate working during the day and night shifts, i.e., working day shifts one week and night shifts another week. This way I had hoped to be able to observe and interact with different groups of women, given that they work twelve-hour shifts, and to spend a significant amount of time on-site. Additionally, I hoped to be able to set up interviews with as many of the women who were working at the time as possible.
However, prior to arrival at the Ranch, I had merely arranged “full access” with Dennis Hof. What this meant in terms of the number days I could visit, the lengths of each visit, and the exact length of time during which I could visit were vague. When I tried to arrange specific details with Hof, he would nod and say, “Uh-huh, yeah, O.K.” On my first visit, I explained to Hof and Madam Suzette the length of time I wished to visit, the number of days, and how much time I would like to stay. Again, they were non-committal. So, I asked when I could come next. They invited me to the tea party/staff meeting the next day.

For my second visit, I went to the tea party. I went for the meeting and stayed another couple of hours. I was invited to visit the “top booker store” with the top bookers for the week and was given permission to observe a new girl’s orientation. After the orientation I ended up in a conversation with Vivian West, who had just arrived that day. This conversation filled the time I was waiting for Hof to return to the parlor so that I could ask when I could visit next. Ultimately, I was able to schedule a visit on the following Saturday through Suzette even though she told me that Dennis wanted to handle “this whole thing.” In all, I spent approximately five hours at the Ranch during that visit. I felt it was a terrific second visit except the way it ultimately ended. When Suzette told me that Dennis had agreed to my request for a Saturday visit, she said that I could come on Saturday but “only for a few hours.”

So, I arrived that Saturday evening at 6:30pm. I decided that would be a good time to visit so that I could see what it was like at the Ranch on a Saturday evening. But, if I was only going to be there for a couple of hours, I would leave before business was
too busy. I wanted to make sure not to get in the workers’ way. Upon arrival, I found a
group of working girls dressed for work playing Taboo with Madam Suzette in the parlor.
As I entered, Bunny Love said, “Oh, it’s just our friend from Ohio University.”\textsuperscript{437} I felt
like I had been moving in the right direction – the girls were getting used to my presence!
This excitement was immediately dashed, however, when Madam Suzette said, “I
thought you were coming earlier.”\textsuperscript{438} To which I stuttered to respond, a response Suzette
did not wait for, as she turned back to the game. The next 15 minutes were uncomfortable
while they finished their game. I just sat there, afraid even to take my notebook out.
However, when the game was over several of the girls came over and started chatting
with me. Within a few minutes I had four interviews set up for the next couple of days.
Feeling better about my presence, I decided that I should try to smooth things over with
Suzette.

I hesitantly approached her partially closed office door and knocked. She opened
the door without getting up. I apologized for not clarifying the time of my visit (for we
did not set a time). She immediately responded, “I just don’t want you to overstay your
welcome.” I replied, “I don’t either. That is why I am talking to you about it right
now.”\textsuperscript{439} I then explained that I had set up interviews with some of the girls for the next
couple of days for which I wanted her permission to return. She agreed to my coming “as
long as it’s only for a couple of hours.”\textsuperscript{440} After leaving that night I called a friend to
share my concerns. I called my advisor and spoke with him the next day. Both my friend
and advisor confirmed my fears: that my access was in jeopardy. However, they were
more positive about where I should go from here. Both advised me to try to clarify
expectations with the management at the Ranch. We all agreed that the interviews I had scheduled were encouraging nonetheless.

When I arrived to do these interviews on the following Sunday and Monday, I found that Suzette did not work these days. Dennis was also out of town much of the time I was there. Because from this period forward I did not have much opportunity to ask for more time from him, I still requested time to visit and do observations only through Suzette. However, I tried whenever possible to set up interviews on days that Suzette was not working (Sunday-Tuesday) so that I would be able to do my interviews and observations without feeling that I was overstaying my welcome. Luckily, this strategy led to Suzette being more friendly with me and more welcoming when I did visit when she was there. I am unsure whether this was because she saw me on-site less, because of the good word of mouth about my visits, or some combination thereof. What I do know is that my presence on days she was not working led to my developing positive relationships with the cashiers and staff. They were there most of the time and very helpful. They introduced me to some of the working girls and helped me arrange more interviews, while my relationship with Madam Suzette resulted in me feeling the need to limit the amount of time I was ultimately able to be at the Ranch.

**Interviews**

These limitations affected the amount of observation time I had and the number of interviews I was able to conduct. My in-depth interviews consisted of one-on-one conversations between myself and the participants that would focus on their lives at work and outside of work (see Interview Protocol in Appendix). There are approximately 500
women licensed to work at the Bunny Ranch ranging in age from 18 to 50. However, during the time I was at the Ranch a total of thirty women worked. Of those thirty, I was able to set up interviews with 13 women. Of those thirteen, I was only able to interview 9 persons due to our scheduling constraints.

I had not intended to conduct any interviews on-site in order to protect the women’s confidentiality and to protect the validity of the study. However, seven of the women were both living and working at the Ranch. The other two lived with family members, in front of whom they would not have felt comfortable speaking – one because her family is her teenage daughter, and the other because her family does not know where she works. So, all but one of these women invited me to their rooms to do the interviews. For those that live at the Ranch these are the rooms where they live and work. The one exception was a woman who has participated in a number of media interviews, and she chose the kitchen area as the location for the interview, which is open to anyone at the Ranch. All participants were given the opportunity to choose the location of the interview when informed consent was given verbally and in writing (See Appendix). They were also given the opportunity not to respond to any questions they did not feel comfortable answering and the option to end the interview at any time. During one interview, a participant refused to answer a question about her work at another brothel by saying that she did not want to talk about it. Other than this choice, there were no other incidents of note.

After the women signed the informed consent form and before I began recording the interview, I asked each woman for her real name and contact information. I also
asked each woman if they would like to suggest a pseudonym that I could use to refer to them when I wrote this dissertation. All but one of them indicated that I should use her work name. Almost none were concerned about who might recognize them as none of their work names is the same as their real name. All of these women indicated to me that they used pseudonyms to protect their privacy as stalkers are not unheard of in their business. The one woman who asked me to choose another name to refer to her uses her real name for work. She has worked as a stripper and has posed for various magazines. In these capacities, she used her real name. So, she continues to use her real name in order to drum up more business. To protect her privacy, she explained that her house and bills are in her married name even though she is now divorced. So, I made up a random name for her. I also made up randomly assigned names for working girls and staff that I did not interview (and therefore did not obtain informed consent from) so as to protect their privacy.

In-depth interviewing was chosen as one of my investigative practices in order to acquire insight into how the sex workers “perform” in the context of one-on-one interviews, and to allow me to solicit direct information from these women in their own voice. These interactions helped me to understand how these women lived and made sense of their work. Kathryn Anderson and Dana C. Jack argue that interviewing women requires special attention to issues that may emerge through the way in which women communicate. Their research focused on discovering “how individual women define and evaluate their experience in their own terms.”

Jack’s research shows how the interactive process in interviewing can be particularly effective when working with these
women. This is especially true where conflict and contradiction may be present in the way in which women negotiate societal, cultural, class, racial, and personal expectations and standards.

Although we would disagree about the way life stories are constructed, Marie-Françoise Chanfrault-Duchet further describes the advantages of life story approaches to oral histories of women. She believes the approach “highlights the complexity, the ambiguities, and even the contradictions of the relations between the subject and the world, the past, and the social and ideological image of woman – i.e., how women live, internalize, and more or less consciously interpret their status.” Given the complexities of negotiating their work and home lives, and the unique situation in which they perform this work, I believe the life history-based in-depth interviews provided the opportunity to explore the multiple ambiguities, complexities, and potential contradictions the women at the Moonlite Bunny Ranch live with everyday.

My interview protocol was developed with the concepts of identity, work, and narrative in mind, as well as considering the perspectives of Kate Hausbeck and Barb Brents. In the conversation I had with Barb and Kate in December 2006, they made it clear that in their work with sex workers, the prostitutes were often suspicious of researchers who were primarily interested in their lives outside of work. Barb and Kate said that sex workers in Nevada were leery of researchers who wanted to prove hypotheses about the abusive, violent upbringings of sex workers or of the destitute nature of the lives of sex workers. While this might describe the lives of some sex workers, this project does not begin from these types of assumptions. Rather, this project
wanted to explore the multiple, at times contradictory, identity/ies performed by the sex workers in their work context and then move to their “not-work” lives in order to understand how they negotiate the multiple dimensions of their identity/ies. By dividing the questions in the interview protocol by “work” and “not work” parts of these women’s lives, and by beginning with their work lives, I hoped to be able to build trust with them (by letting them know that I do want to know about all parts of their lives). I also hoped to explore the multiple experiences that contributed to how they perform identity/ies at the ethnographic moment at which we meet. The interview protocol served as a guide to get at these issues and follow-up questions were asked when needed to clarify or expand on issues brought up during our interviews.

The number of women I interviewed represents nearly a third of the women who were working at Ranch at the time. I was also able to interview women representing a range of ages (19-47) who had worked at the Ranch for varying lengths of time (one month to 6 years). The interviews ranged from 40 minutes to an hour and a half. All of the interviews were audio-taped and transcribed word for word. It could be said that taping our conversation might have affected what and how the women spoke about themselves. However, compared with my fieldnotes made before and after each interview and our other interactions during my visits, I feel confident that the parts of these women’s interviews I examined in this study usefully reflected meanings from their perspectives. I ultimately transcribed 113 single-spaced pages.

I explain most of the practices I used in the analysis of these women’s discourse in the next section. Even so, transcription involved analysis as well because I
recognize the “representational and interpretive nature of transcription.” That is, I, as the researcher, play a role in what is inscribed during transcription. The transcripts became traces of a performance I participated in. However, the recordings do not include the feelings the moments held for me or the participants. Some of this emotion may have come through in the transcription when I noted pauses, laughter, or multiple explanations of the same points. However, the process of typing it all up was not just a matter of copying the words I heard, but of interpreting pauses, noting emphases, and even particular words, especially when the sound quality of the recording was not perfect. In general, I used commas to note short pauses and ellipses for longer pauses. When interpreting the transcripts I had a cue to the pace and timing of the conversation, but not all long and short pauses are the same length, nor do these pauses carry the same meanings.

I faced all the challenges noted in transcription by Blake D. Poland, including: needing to make judgment calls about when sentences began and ended given the run-on nature of verbal communication; noting when these women were quoting others and when they were communicating their own thoughts; needing to make sure that I included all that was said when I went forward and backward on a recording to make sure that I wrote down all that was said; and the need to make sure that the words I transcribed were the words that were said. For example, when reading back over the transcripts, I noted times when I typed “their” when the respondents were saying “they’re.” While these may seem small mistakes and can easily be rectified, it points to the idea that I may have
transcribed the wrong words at times.\textsuperscript{443} I made every attempt in good faith to prevent such inaccuracy.

After having transcribed these interviews and completed initial interpretations of this work, I had hoped to re-visit the women at the Ranch to share transcripts and my perspective with them. Although I sent transcripts to 7 of the nine women I interviewed via e-mail,\textsuperscript{444} I received no responses back from them. Admittedly, I did not send the transcripts to them in as timely a fashion as I should have. I sent them over six months after our interviews. In the e-mail, I requested that each person read the transcript and inform me if there were anything she would have concerns with, or would like to add or change. I also requested responses regarding other issues, such as feedback about recent media appearances, from a few of the women; however, I received no responses.

I had also hoped to visit the Ranch a second time to share my analysis with the women I interviewed to check my fidelity in representing their perspectives. Issues of representation have been addressed by a number of scholars from a number of different disciplines.\textsuperscript{445} Judith Stacey argues that the researcher-participant relationship in ethnography is inherently power-laden, where the researcher has power over the participant. She, therefore, concludes that there can never be a feminist ethnography, as the researcher’s power over the final product always precludes an equal relationship.\textsuperscript{446} However, other scholars both recognize the role of power in ethnography and address these problems with strategies that address issues of representation.\textsuperscript{447} As Claudia Salazar notes, “The demand that the Other expose itself (vulnerability) and the desire to know (power/knowledge) that guides the ethnographic project inevitably create a hierarchical
field of forces that opens up different discursive positions for its participants to take up.448

Sharing my writing and conclusions with the participants in order to allow them to critique, comment, and edit them is one way I had hoped to address disparity between our discursive positions and to attempt to account for the relational nature of communication in the analysis.449 However, when I called the Ranch to request another round of visits, I ran into the same access problems I faced initially. Despite having built positive relationships with the cashiers, who answered the phones each time I called, my relationship with Dennis Hof did not result in a response from him. Rather than spending another six months attempting to visit the Ranch again, I decided to complete this project, as is, and to pursue additional visits to share my interpretations with these women at a later time. I realize that what I have written here may be subject to criticism by them. However, I have followed the guidance of scholars regarding issues of representation in order to represent these women from their point of view as best as possible given this limitation.

Working with the participants in the analysis stage of the project would have been an attempt to address some of these issues as they would have been able to contribute their voices to the co-construction of the final project. However, since I have not been able to work with them again, so far, another issue that impacted both my interpretation of the narrative of Cathouse and that of the lived experiences shared with me by the women at the Moonlite Bunny Ranch is the concept of “truth.” As Paul C. Rosenblatt notes, “Every person I have ever interviewed seemed to believe in truth and try hard to
deal with the truth.” In other words, they believe that what they are saying conveys the truth as they see it. I did not want to fall victim to the same criticism that has been charged against feminist analyses of prostitution, that is, that they do not recognize the experiences of individual women working in the business. Rather, I wanted to do my best to speak to these women’s experiences working at the Moonlite Bunny Ranch from their perspective, to represent their truths.

My investigative practices of participant observation and in-depth interviews were both chosen because they are designed so that the researcher “carefully listens ‘so as to hear the meaning’ of what is being conveyed.” This perspective demands that I make “cultural inferences” in order to understand what is meant in the context in which it is said, from the perspective of those speaking. Carol B. Warren advises researchers to make these “cultural inferences from three sources: what people say, the ways they act, and the artifacts they use.” Additionally, I had to recognize, and own, that interviewing especially, but also participant observation, is a co-constructed process, in which both I, as the researcher, and the participants influence meanings that are made.

I made use of my prior research about prostitution and Cathouse, fieldnotes from my observations, and the transcripts and notes from my interviews with these participants in order to honor the perspectives of these women. Since I did not have the opportunity to check back in with the participants in my study, I tried to employ practices both to make my own subjectivity explicit and to honor their perspectives. As noted by Katherine R. Allen and Alexis Walker, I tried to attend to three steps to balance my subjectivity with their perspectives:
(a) being open to and taking note of initial impressions by using the senses to guide what one notices, (b) observing and recording key events and incidents including one’s own reactions to events and feeling, and (c) moving beyond initial reactions to an “open sensitivity to what those in the setting experience and react to as significant.”

These strategies were intended to acknowledge myself in the research although not to privilege my point of view. Instead, I wanted to use my reactions “as a way to appreciate the insider’s view.”

Analytic Processes

In Chapter 5, I argue that the narrative constructed in Cathouse is one that packages legal prostitution at the Moonlite Bunny Ranch as a “typical American business” in which the prostitutes are “sex workers.” When I went into the field, I was attempting to see how the lived experiences of the women at the Bunny Ranch compared to what was depicted on television. So, my observations and interviews were shaped by my focus on the concept of “work” and by the process of narrative construction. For this reason, when I began to analyze the stories these women told about their work and non-work lives, I thought I was going to be focused on how they performed their individual identities at work. I thought I would gain insight into how they defined their work and how they negotiated their work/non-work identities. I did gain insight into particular areas in which these women communicated their individual identities as I conducted the interviews and performed observations, and when I examined the interview transcripts for recurring thematic categories. However, I also discovered something more interesting:
these women situated their own perspectives within and in opposition to dominant discourses of prostitution and the narrative constructed of the Moonlite Bunny Ranch.

Analysis of Observations and Interviews

Analysis of the discourses collected began while I was still visiting the Ranch and interacting with these women. I took note of things I thought I was learning along the way and paid particular attention to what these women said and did that refuted, supported, or qualified my developing interpretation. I was sure to note what I thought I was learning in the form of questions in my fieldnotes. I also made additional notes while I was transcribing interviews. Finally, I returned to consider my initial thoughts when I later reviewed my fieldnotes and transcripts to identify themes and categories for analysis. As Paul C. Rosenblatt explains it,

The process of analysis during the interview seems to me to blur the boundary between two texts – the “text” that is the verbal and non-verbal performance of the interview and the “text” that is the transcription of the interview. The interviewer’s on-the-fly analysis of the former text cocreates that text…and intrudes into the interview transcription text.

For me, this meant having to recognize how my assumptions shaped the interview protocol and the perspectives of those I interviewed. As Carol A. B. Warren notes, “The interviewer, like the respondent, participates in the interview from historically grounded biographical as well as disciplinary perspectives.” As such, “the interview, like the ethnography, is about self as well as other.” This is the reason that I included the story of how I came to this project and the knowledge that shaped the approaches I chose to
use at the beginning of this chapter. I recognize that what we both, researcher and participants, brought to the table shaped what is written here.

Based on strategies from grounded theory, I began my analysis of the interview transcripts with the intent of having the discourse point me toward what it was saying, rather than attempting to impose meaning upon their words. However, this stance involved a process of abduction, going back and forth from their discourse to my assumptions and what I knew about their world from other sources. This process was necessary primarily because I knew that what I had learned about the Moonlite Bunny Ranch from *Cathouse* and my rhetorical analysis shaped my interview protocol and therefore shaped the nature of what they talked to me about.

Even so, what Strauss and Corbin suggest is that the qualitative analysis of data is “the interplay between researchers and data” that is both “science and art.” For this reason, as a researcher, I must maintain a degree of rigor by grounding the analysis in the data. As such, my qualitative coding procedures should:

1. Build rather than test theory.
2. Provide researchers with analytic tools for handling masses of raw data.
3. Help analysts to consider alternative meanings of phenomena.
4. Be systematic and creative simultaneously.
5. Identify, develop, and relate the concepts that are the building blocks of theory.

Through this abductive process, I was able to build my interpretations upon their discourse, deal with consistent and contradictory information across the interviews,
consider alternative meanings, and be systematic and creative in identifying themes and
creating categories.

The content of these women’s stories provides only one layer of analysis. As I examined stories and narrative fragments told at different times in different interactions with different people, it was important to consider recurrent patterns, similar narrative structures, repeated metaphors, and/or other common narrative features that happen through the various narrative performances. This redundancy was important as narrators often borrow mythic forms, metaphors, recurrent motifs, and ideological references from larger narrative structures, such as social and cultural narratives. Attention to content as well as structural elements of the narratives helped me to understand the roles personal, social, and cultural narratives played in the stories these women told about themselves and their work.461

Starting from these women’s discourses, recognizing my assumptions, and drawing upon what others have said about the topic of prostitution helped me realize that their stories were imbricated within and influenced by dominant discourses of prostitution, as discussed in Chapters 1, 2, and 6, as well as by the organizational narrative of the Moonlite Bunny Ranch discussed in the introduction and Chapter 7. Thus, when it came time to analyze what they said and did at the Ranch, I compared and contrasted what I had identified in the Cathouse narrative with the ways these women characterized their work.

A qualitative interview “unfolds reflexively as each participant looks at the world through the other’s eyes, incorporating both self and other into the process of
interpretation.” At times, the “other” in this case was me as the outsider, the researcher. However, often, the “other” became those outside of prostitution in general. Identifying themes, within their discourse, then, involved recognition of what fell within dominant discourses of prostitution and the organizational narrative of the Moonlite Bunny Ranch as represented on Cathouse. It also required recognizing discourses that qualified and/or resisted these enveloping discursive constructions.

The stories these women told included both direct and indirect cues indicating that dominant discourses and/or that of the Moonlite Bunny Ranch were involved in their personal narratives. Direct cues include examples such as when participants referred to “what people think” about them. Another type of direct cue was when women invoked what Dennis Hof had told them or what they had seen on Cathouse as a way to explain their experiences. Indirect cues included times that the women asked rhetorical questions they thought others might ask about them and answering these questions. Such as when Summer asked rhetorically, “How can these women do that?” Another type of indirect cue was when the women explained what they were not. One example would be when Kandi explained that she was not on drugs, did not come from a broken home, and had not been abused when I asked her how she started in sex work. These were recurrent elements in the narratives of the transcripts that suggested to me what their own narratives included and how they were involved with dominant discourses and the organizational narrative of the Moonlite Bunny Ranch.

I identified a number of important thematic categories in the interview transcripts. These categories included both discourse that referenced the influences of
dominant discursive constructions of prostitution and those that were involved with that of Dennis Hof and Moonlite Bunny Ranch. However, themes were also identified that fell outside of these discourses. These themes included topics such as the importance of characterizing what they do as work, specific examples of the elements of their jobs that should be considered work, how they characterized their relationships with the management and the other girls at the Ranch, and the importance of their relationships outside the Ranch. These themes became the basis for my analysis in Chapters 6 and 7. I should note, however, that not all of the themes I identified in their discourses made it into this final work. It is not that the other themes were not important, only that I had to make choices about those most relevant to the focus of this project – work. I will also note that none of the themes that were not used here contradicted the analysis here either. When I found “exceptions” to the categories or themes, I included them and explained how they problematized a theme or added nuance to my understandings.

I used a data reduction technique to help with the process of identifying and organizing themes. I numbered each interview 1-9. I included page numbers on each page of the transcripts. In identifying themes and creating thematic categories, I made notes in the margins of the first three transcripts. I then returned to these notes to look for themes that recurred and/or quotes that stood out because they did not fit within a particular theme or category. For example, a theme that emerged from the interviews that confirmed the Cathouse narrative was that what these women do is “a real job.” So, under the heading “work,” I recorded the number of each interview that included this theme followed by the page numbers on which the theme appeared. Under this theme,
notations such as 1/5, 3/4, 8/10, were included. This way, when it came time to consolidate my understanding and write about a particular theme, I would be able to go to where that theme had been identified in a particular interview, read what the participant had to say about it, and consult my notes about her story in the context of the interview.

Discussion – Writing as Analysis

Summarizing themes, noting exceptions in the discourse, and interpreting these women’s perspectives were all part of the process of analysis, but so too was the writing. Before discussing my writing process and its results, I would first like to discuss one particular practice I used that involved much consideration and choice. Making use of direct quotes from my fieldnotes and transcripts of the interviews was part of the writing process that involved choices on my part as a rhetorical critic and qualitative field researcher. No doubt, these choices shaped the discourse and will have some effect on how others interpret what these women shared with me. Given my knowledge that the way that I edited quotations for use in the final chapters shaped them, I took precautions to try to be true to my respondents’ utterances and the ways they said them. For example, where possible and significant, I used direct quotations from my participants and checked my interpretations against what they said at that time, at other times, and what appeared in the fieldnotes I took about our interactions.

However, I also needed to “clean up” the transcripts to prevent the respondents from appearing less articulate then they were given the differences between spoken discourse and the way it appears when copied in writing onto a page. Choices I made included omitting multiple uses of “like,” “um,” and “you know.” These were the most
frequently repeated “verbal fillers” that I chose to omit when I used direct quotes. Additionally, I cut words, sentences, and whole sections of talk in order to be able to use quotes that spoke directly to the theme or topic I was addressing. These changes make it appear that some respondents spoke directly and at length about particular topics. While they did speak at length about these topics, it was also true in some cases that a woman might have spoken about a topic, then spoke about another issue before coming back to the initial topic. So, ultimately, the way I edited quotes such as this influenced how they appear to have been spoken. At the same time, I tried to remain true to what these women said, even when I chose to edit the way they spoke about them. I did not, however, add to quotes unless specifically indicated, such as when a pronoun referent was needed to show who was being talked about.

I must also note that how these women spoke about particular topics was relevant to my analysis in many cases. When this was true, such as when they invoked dominant discourses or the narrative of the Moonlite Bunny Ranch, I worked hard to make sure that both what they said and how they said it were accurately reflected in the choice of quotes I incorporated and attempted to edit as little as possible. Potential transcription and interpretations problems were also addressed with the use of my fieldnotes, which I took during observations, which occurred before and after interviews.

There was one interview and interview transcript that was troublesome. The recording of this particular interview was virtually untranscribable in parts due to the sound quality. The difficulties with the sound quality included both it being too quiet at times and my not being able to understand the ways she spoke at times. It was difficult
for me to tell, even in person, whether this woman had an accent and she did not speak about her ethnic origin. However, the way she spoke was difficult to interpret on the recording. Listening to what I could of the recording, using what I remembered of our conversation, and consulting my fieldnotes helped me to summarize parts of the interview that I could not transcribe. However, I also did not use any direct quotes from her unless I was able to hear what she said.

The nature of my analysis and the choices I faced with transcription and use of direct quotations from these sex workers point to a larger issue with which I had to contend during the entire research process, from design to writing. That is, the crisis of representation. Norman K. Denzin explains that what appears on the surface to be one crisis is in fact three: the intertwined crises of representation, legitimation, and praxis. The representational crisis asserts that if we only know a thing through its representation, then ethnographers no longer directly capture lived experience. Experience is created in the social text. The legitimization crisis questions how we bring authority to our texts. It involves serious rethinking of such terms as validity, reliability, and generalizability. This crisis, in turn, shapes the third, which asks, “How is it possible to effect change in the world, if society is only and always a text?”

I will address how I dealt with the first two crises during my writing process. I will address the third crisis identified by Denzin in the concluding chapter.

I have already noted that the reason I went to the Moonlite Bunny Ranch in the first place was to go beyond televisual representation of the women who work there to
examine and compare their lived experiences with that representation. This choice was based on both wanting to confirm and/or deny their representation on *Cathouse* and the desire to give voice to their perspectives as legal sex workers. I wanted to write about their perspectives because they are not often given voice in mainstream academic or popular literature or media. But, just writing about them would not necessarily address the crisis of representation. This is the reason I chose to do participant observation and in-depth interviews and to use an interpretivist perspective in developing my interpretations.

As H.L. Goodall contends,

> For the interpretivist, the world has no “given” – not an external thing to be reported accurately, but rather something “constructed” out of interactions with it….Culture was not something “out there” in the field to be discovered, uncovered, and then written about. Instead, culture was what happened at the moment the writing was performed.”

Using these investigative practices allowed me to be a part of their performance of their self/ves. Additionally, I did not use a static “text,” but instead, our interactions as the basis for analysis. I also recognized my role in the process as analyst and writer. I am owning up to my role in the process of meaning construction, which also contributes to my ability to be able to demonstrate how they make meaning of their world, from their perspectives.

As to the legitimization crisis: my purpose here was not to identify a model of legal prostitution and generalize that all prostitution is like this, or even that it should be. Rather, in line with Clifford Geertz, my essential task involved making “thick description
possible, not to generalize across cases but to generalize within them. Based on my observations and fieldnotes, Chapter 3 more clearly defines how I defined the Moonlite Bunny Ranch as this case. Additionally, rather than trying to measure this study by “hard science” standards, I have instead used standards of rhetorical criticism and qualitative field research to assess the quality of my interpretations. The most important way for me to check my interpretations will be sharing what I have written with the women I worked with on this project. Until that can happen, however, I have invoked standards from narrative criticism, qualitative interviewing, and participant observation as discussed earlier in this chapter.

I cannot conclude before discussing what I believe this project as a piece of writing ultimately became. I could argue that it meets the standards of ethnographic writing as outlined by James Clifford:

Ethnographic writing is determined in at least six ways: (1) contextually (it draws from and creates meaningful social milieux); (2) rhetorically (it uses and is used by expressive conventions); (3) institutionally (one writes within, and against, specific traditions, disciplines, audiences); (4) generically (an ethnography is usually distinguishable from a novel or travel account); (5) politically (the authority to represent cultural realities is unequally shared and at times contested); (6) historically (all the above conventions and constraints are changing). These determinations govern the inscription of coherent ethnographies.

Chapters 1-3 provide context and definition of this particular case. Throughout this work I have used expressive conventions of rhetoric to construct an argument about the lived
experiences at the Moonlite Bunny Ranch and their representation. The constant refrain throughout each of the chapters herein is that the discourse of the Moonlite Bunny Ranch and the women who work there stand in relation, both resisting and reifying, to structural perspectives of prostitution. Given its theoretical grounding this work falls within the genre. Politically, I have both revealed my biases and attempted to demonstrate my authority in representing discourses of these women. Finally, historically, I have granted that this work is bound to the ethnographic moment of the research and yet can still teach us a great deal about the lived and represented experiences of sex workers at this legal brothel.

Even so, I feel uncomfortable leaving this work defined as ethnography. I believe what I have done here involves both ethnography and text construction. Ironically, the crisis of representation would contend that making everything a “text” takes meaning away from lived experiences. However, I believe that by bringing multiple discourses to this analysis, I have actually constructed a “text” that, defined broadly, speaks meaningfully to the relationship between representation and lived experiences of sex workers at the Moonlite Bunny Ranch. It has only been through the writing process that the character of this piece became apparent to me.

Theories of ethnographic writing argue that ethnography is only partial, fictional, and incomplete. As Clifford sums up, to call ethnographies fictions nowadays “suggests the partiality of cultural and historical truths, the ways they are systematic and exclusive. Ethnographic writings can properly be called fictions in the sense of ‘something made or fashioned.’” Rhetorical theorist Michael Calvin McGee would
take this argument a step further and argue that any given text, not just ethnography, is unfinished and therefore must be recognized as merely a fragment in an on-going conversation. As such, “texts” can only be considered “complete” when taken within context and when interpreted by the consumers of the discourse. Because the entire context of a given text fragment can never be known, we must recognize the incompleteness of the text while at the same time give credit to the interpreter of the fragment for being able to construct a meaningful text, whether he/she is a "professional" or "everyday" critic.

It was therefore my job as the rhetorical, i.e., “professional,” critic to construct a “text(s) suitable for criticism.” As suggested by McGee, and noted in Chapter 1, constructing this text involved identifying “discourse and its sources, between an apparently finished discourse and culture, and between an apparently finished discourse and its influence.” Based on these guidelines, the fragments I used to construct this text included Cathouse, literature constructing and analyzing dominant discourses of prostitution, my fieldnotes, published writings from prostitutes working in other contexts, articles about the Bunny Ranch, and the transcripts of my interviews with the women of the Moonlite Bunny Ranch. I could not evaluate the representation of these women on Cathouse without going into the field to talk to them and observe their lived interactions.

So, I became not only a rhetorical critic, but also a qualitative field researcher, in order to be able to bring these discourses together. The writing process was where I was able to bring my interpretations of this constructed “text” together with my reflections on the lived experiences of the women I had the opportunity to interact with.
What is written in these chapters was a part of constructing the text I analyzed as well as an interpretation of what I learned from that text. As with anthropological writings, as characterized by Geertz, this “final” text is itself a group of “interpretations, and second and third order ones to boot.” So, this “text” is not merely words and representation, but also involves the lived experiences of the women involved and my role and experiences as the researcher. I believe taking advice from the fields of ethnography and rhetoric and applying it to these multiple discourses in my writing process I have been able address issues of representation and legitimization and to learn more about one site where legalized prostitution is practiced.
Chapter 5 - *Cathouse: Prostitution as a Typical American Business*

HBO’s *Cathouse*\(^{472}\) asserts, “It’s not just sex, it’s a profession.” As prostitution is largely illegal in the United States, it is not surprising that dominant discourses\(^{473}\) do not recognize, let alone celebrate, the possible benefits of sex work. Nevada is the only state in the union in which prostitution is legal. *Cathouse* invites viewers to see the inner workings of a legal Nevada brothel, the Moonlite Bunny Ranch, from the perspective of the owner, general manager, sex workers, and their customers. The series began with a one-hour documentary-style special, which prompted HBO to order a second one-hour special, *Cathouse 2: Back in the Saddle*,\(^{474}\) and two subsequent seasons of the series. A total of fifteen half-hour episodes aired between 2004 and 2007. Finally, a musical special aired at midnight in the middle of a marathon of another popular HBO series, *Entourage*, on New Year’s Eve 2007, and another “best of” special aired recently. While other media portrayals that take place in Nevada, such as the original *Crime Scene Investigation (CSI)* and the TV movie *The Ranch*,\(^{475}\) remain locked in reform/punishment discourses that are seemingly acceptable to American audiences, this reality television program flies in the face of dominant representations.

The landscape of American television has been transformed in the last decade and a half by the explosion of reality television programming (RTV). Producers love this form as it is cheap to make, requires limited production time and is attractive to advertisers and audiences alike.\(^{476}\) By February 2003, just three months after *Cathouse* premiered on HBO in December 2002, the network that airs the most reality programming, Fox, devoted “41 percent of its ‘sweeps’ offerings to reality shows.”\(^{477}\)
Cathouse drew in 1.5 million viewers for its first season finale despite having received no promotion by HBO.\textsuperscript{478} American Idol has become Fox’s flagship show as it was number one in the Nielson ratings every week it aired during the 2007-2008 season. American Idol is just one of over 40 versions of the original U.K.’s Pop Idol that has been spread around the world. Bertelsmann is the parent company of FreemantleMedia, the company responsible for Idol and other reality shows, such as America’s Got Talent. This company nearly doubled its U.S. revenues between 2005 and 2007, from $177 million to $310 million in 2007, during the time its reality programming slate and ratings increased. American Idol averaged 27 million viewers per show and reported 32 million viewers for its May 2008 finale, up 3 percent from 2007. Public voting for the finale topped 90 million call-in votes.\textsuperscript{479} The Screenwriter’s Guild writers’ strike during the second half of the 2007-2008 television season left gaps in networks’ schedules, which were filled by unscripted reality programming. This trend upped the number of reality shows during the second half of the season and the order for fall programming as well.\textsuperscript{480} The fall 2008 television schedule included over 60 reality TV shows airing on all major networks and virtually taking over some cable networks such as Bravo, E!, and VH1. Reality TV has even garnered its own cable network, TruTV, which plays reruns of shows from other networks and even has some of its own syndicated fare.\textsuperscript{481} Cathouse was developed and aired in the midst of this RTV boom that shows no signs of decline.

RTV started with a simple premise: isolate a group of people, watch and see what happens. The first reality television show was the PBS program, An American Family, which ran during the 1973 season.\textsuperscript{482} HBO has had documentary programming on its
schedule since 1982. As a matter of fact, its documentary series, *America Undercover*, included episodes about prostitution. But what has become the current RTV phenomenon has been traced to the 1992 MTV premiere of *The Real World*. What was initiated as a way to appeal to young viewers was just the first of an ever increasing number of shows that focused on seemingly ordinary people in “real” situations being filmed so the audience could watch their “spontaneous” everyday interactions. *The Real World* asks viewers to watch and see what happens “when seven strangers stop being polite and start being real.”\(^{483}\) Coupled with the popularity of *The Real World*, the 1995 live television airing of the O.J. Simpson trial signaled to the networks that viewers were hungry for reality programming.\(^{484}\) *Survivor* did not air until five years later in 2000. It begins from the same premise as *The Real World* - isolate a group of strangers together, film them 24/7, and let viewers watch. However, it differs in several ways. It takes place in (mostly) tropical locales, involves weekly competitions for luxuries as well as contestants voting each other off at tribal councils until the last person to “Outwit, Outplay, Outlast” the others wins $1,000,000. *Survivor* is said to be the show that popularized the RTV genre.\(^{485}\)

Since *Survivor*, the number of different types of reality television shows has multiplied. There are the more traditional RTV shows such as documentaries and newsmagazines, and now, there are also docu-soaps, game-docs, various competition-based series, makeover/lifestyle shows, dating and talent shows, as well as reality sitcoms.\(^{486}\) Today, most RTV shows do not fit into a singular model or form. Given the number of different combinations that could be called “hybrid” such as the dating-
competition (ala The Bachelor or The Bachlorette) or the soap-competition show (such as Big Brother), it is important to identify the type of show being examined rather than just grouping and analyzing all RTV as if it is the same. What all of these shows have in common, though, is the appeal of watching Others participate in activities, mundane and/or exotic, from the safety and security of one’s own home.

HBO’s Cathouse is a reality television special that makes use of the strengths of television as a medium and RTV as a form to construct a counter-narrative of prostitution. All communication technologies contain inherent biases that privilege some senses over others.487 Television and its visual bias is one such technology that both shapes and is constructed by society and the institutional structures that regulate, profit from, and can be destabilized by it.488 The visual bias of television is an ideal medium for a “sexy” subject matter, such as prostitution. The construction of the Cathouse narrative is uniquely influenced by the visual bias of television and its form as reality TV “docuporn.” It is a program that takes place in a real setting that contains information and entertainment, in which the entertainment relies upon pornographic strategies to titillate audiences.489 As RTV docuporn, Cathouse constructs a narrative of prostitution as the typical American business and casts the prostitute as sex worker. In this way, the show both challenges and reifies traditional prostitution discourses through its construction of a counter-narrative of sex work.

Most studies of RTV recognize that what is represented as “reality” is really constructed.490 So, most studies focus on representation and how such representations are constructed. Studies of reality television have ranged from how men and women,
masculinity and femininity, are portrayed, to how homosexuality and heterosexuality are characterized. Some studies look at whether participants are exhibitionists or unwilling, unwitting victims of humiliation, while others focus on the role surveillance plays in the appeal of the genre to participants and audiences alike. Still other research discusses RTV as infomercials for products such as particular kinds of make-up on makeover shows to the lifestyles makeover shows promote. No matter the subject, the constructed nature of RTV has led to the development of specific concepts to aid in the study of what is represented as reality on television. I will draw upon some of these concepts later in this chapter.

Despite the admission that RTV is constructed, what most of these studies have in common is a lack of examination of the actual people in reality TV shows. Scholars have made claims based on the characteristics of television and RTV, as edited, constructed, visual narratives, which are rational and well-reasoned, yet not supported with evidence from the actual people represented. This chapter will focus on the constructed nature of an RTV narrative, with particular emphasis on what the narrative is and how it is constructed. Later chapters will delve into the lived experiences of the people who are featured on the show and those working at the brothel represented. Coupling these two parts of this study will allow me to examine not only the narrative constructed in *Cathouse*, but also contribute to a deeper understanding of how the RTV form impacts what audiences see and what role, if any, the lived experiences of the participants of such shows play in what the audience sees.
So, how do the inherent qualities of the television medium and the structure of the reality TV docuporn affect what we see on screen about legalized prostitution and sex workers? What can we learn about legalized prostitution from a reality television show? What meanings does *Cathouse* construct of legalized prostitution and sex workers? The exploration of these questions has led me to contend that the reality television show *Cathouse*, as RTV docuporn, acts to challenge and reify dominant representations of prostitution through its construction of a counter-narrative of legalized sex work at the Moonlite Bunny Ranch. The Ranch is constructed as a “typical American business.” The prostitutes are portrayed as oversexed, yet, empowered business women, i.e., “sex workers.” To support this contention, I will first discuss the theoretical basis for my argument, exploring the important characteristics of the medium (television), form (RTV docuporn), and content that come together to construct this narrative. I will also provide the theoretical basis for my argument that this narrative can both reify and challenge dominant discourse. Secondly, I will explore how this constructed counter-narrative of sex work operates to reify and challenge dominant discourses of prostitution using particular examples from *Cathouse*. Finally, I will explore some theoretical and substantive implications.

**Constructing the Cathouse Narrative**

*Cathouse* can best be characterized as RTV docuporn. It has the general characteristics of a reality television program, but it also acts, through highlighting information and entertainment (through sexual titillation), as an hour-long soft-core porn documentary. While the motives of such a program on the History Channel might be
explicitly questioned as self-promoting and biased;\textsuperscript{496} the same technique on HBO, about prostitution, has been embraced rather than dismissed. The popularity of the initial special is what led to subsequent seasons being filmed.\textsuperscript{497} Although I could examine the entire series, I have chosen to focus this analysis on just the initial special. There are differences between the initial special and subsequent episodes, such as the special focusing primarily on negotiations in contrast to the series showing actual “parties” (sex workers giving the customers what they pay for). Moreover, there is a shift in the balance from highlighting information over entertainment (special) to emphasizing entertainment over information (series). However, the narrative constructed in the special does not significantly differ from that continued in the other specials and the series episodes. For this reason, I consider focusing only on the initial special sufficient for exploring the typical characteristics of the narrative. As RTV docuporn, \textit{Cathouse} constructs its counter-narrative in such a way that makes it palatable for mainstream viewers, even in the face of dominant discourses of prostitution. Therefore, it will be important to discuss all the elements involved in the construction of this counter-narrative. In this section, I will outline the important characteristics of the medium (television), form (RTV docuporn), and the method (narrative inquiry) I used for constructing this narrative at the intersection of the medium, form, and content.

\textit{Television and Reality TV}

Marshall McLuhan claimed that the medium is the message.\textsuperscript{498} While I agree that the medium is important, I disagree that it \textit{is} the message. The technological determinism of McLuhan’s work should not prevent us from learning from it though. McLuhan’s
perspective should push us to consider the medium when analyzing the message, and, in this case, the form, especially when the medium and form are equally important to how a message is constructed. Television as a medium is influenced by the space in which it is viewed, restricted by commercial forces of production, and privileges the visual. RTV as a television genre is subject to the constraints of the medium, while emphasizing particular constructs that define it as a form. Although I parse out parts of television and RTV for the purposes of discussion, it is important to note that each overlaps and intersects at multiple levels with the other. Therefore, they are not separable when considering what makes the medium and form what they are. Not all features of television, or even RTV, are examined here. The focus here is on the elements of the medium and form that contributed to how the *Cathouse* narrative was constructed.

Televisions are everywhere – from bars and airport waiting areas to elevators and even at gas pumps. This means that television is accessible to an overwhelming majority of the American population. Yet, despite the ever-increasing locales in which TVs are placed, television is viewed at home more than anywhere else. TV operates primarily within this space that is at once private, yet does not necessarily isolate the viewer from the outside world. Television, unlike film, emphasizes the “glance” more than the “gaze.” That is, its location in our living rooms, our bedrooms, our homes, means that television becomes part of our everyday lives. Watching it does not necessarily command our full attention. We watch TV while eating dinner, doing laundry, and even entertaining guests. Such multi-tasking makes the viewing experience “fragmentary,
dispersed, and varied in nature.”\textsuperscript{500} Yet, television “has woven itself into our social and familial lives,”\textsuperscript{501} in part due to the location in which it is viewed.

As such, our need to integrate the stories and characters we see on television into our everyday lives is essential. According to Lila Abu-Lughod, “…television’s messages are deflected by the way people frame their television experiences and by the way powerful everyday realities inflect and offset those messages.”\textsuperscript{502} So, while the actual space where television is situated is important to analyses of television, the other spaces that intrude into the room are important as well – “domestic spaces; national spaces; broadcasting and narrowcasting spaces; biographical times; daily times; scheduled, spontaneous but also socio-geological times.”\textsuperscript{503} Situating this narrative in relation to discourses which draw on historical, cultural, social, and individual narratives is one way to account for the roles these multiple spaces play in our living rooms watching TV.

Televisions and television services are one of the most inexpensive forms of commercial entertainment in the United States. As such, the medium is affordable, and therefore accessible, to most of the population. This means that “ordinary” people are television consumers and that television is, therefore, subject to interpretation by the “masses.”\textsuperscript{504} These audiences do not absorb the messages to which they are exposed as if through osmosis. Nor do members of these audiences need advanced knowledge and training to interpret messages. Rather, as John Fiske describes the process, “viewers have considerable control, not only over its meanings, but over the role that it plays in their lives.”\textsuperscript{505} This implies that viewers can, and will, make any meanings they like with what
they see on television without limits. Celeste Condit argues that such polysemic interpretations might be better characterized as “polyvalent.” That is, when audience members share understandings of the denotations of a text but disagree about the valuation of those denotations to such a degree that they produce notably different interpretations. In this case, it is not a multiplicity or instability of textual meanings but rather difference in audience evaluations of shared denotations that best accounts for the two viewers’ discrepant interpretations.\textsuperscript{506}

Understanding such limits on audience interpretation is especially important given the shows are produced in one place, be it Hollywood, New York, or rural Nevada, and consumed in localities that reach far beyond these locales. For this reason, “television is most interesting because of the way it provides material which is then inserted into, interpreted with, and mixed up with local but themselves socially differentiated knowledges, discourses, and meaning systems.”\textsuperscript{507} In other words, audiences can take what they see on television and integrate it within what they know about particular topics. Abu-Lughod claims that Egyptian women, like her friend, informant, and research participant, Zaynab, “read(s) television in terms of (her) political perspectives” and worries “about television’s social impact…for the immorality it normalizes.”\textsuperscript{508} Despite Zaynab’s objections to American soap opera mores, Abu-Lughod still recognizes the value of television for bringing up important issues, such as work, marriage, and economics. Such exposure allows village women like Zaynab to use what they see on TV
to either justify their own experience or to challenge what they do not see as right. If packaged correctly, TV shows can do both.

Television has always been intended to provide both information and entertainment. Packaging of both is highly crucial for television for it is not primarily an artistic medium but a commercial one.\textsuperscript{509} As Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin indicate in their book \textit{Remediation: Understanding New Media}, “(E)very medium is a network of economic, social and cultural as well as technical elements, and the network of relations that constitute American television is most clearly visible in the commercial.”\textsuperscript{510} For this reason, the need to make money, not art, is foremost in the minds of television producers. With so many new media and cross-media interactions today, TV has an ever increasing need to commodify itself and to save time and money if it wants to maximize profits.\textsuperscript{511} RTV is the perfect form for achieving the commercial interests of television producers. As Bolter and Grusin conclude, the force of television is “lost unless the viewer connects with the product itself and feels an urge to buy….the commercial insists on the reality of television – not just its power as a medium, but its place in our physical and social world.”\textsuperscript{512}

RTV saves time and money while capitalizing on features of television such as the visual bias, immediacy, and authenticity within its form. Harold Innis argues that all media contain inherent biases, such as radio penetrating the ear and television drawing the eye.\textsuperscript{513} As such TV makes use of visual drama to draw in viewers,\textsuperscript{514} hence maximizing the ability to generate profits. Visuality is only one way to draw in viewers though. Producers must also work to create a feeling of immediacy for viewers. That is,
television offers a quality of “presentness, of ‘here and now.’” Regardless of economic and social forces that intervene, and sometimes because of them, the audience is meant to see TV as a direct channel between themselves and the television event. Theoretically, television producers motivated by the bottom-line should be more responsive to audience needs and desires because giving viewers what they want or need is what gets them to tune-in.

Being able to accommodate visual multiplicity - to create visual drama – is one way television as a medium can create greater immediacy to further the connection between the audience, the medium, and, in this case, the form of RTV. Bolter and Grusin explain that reality television also uses techniques from documentary filmmaking, such as editing raw footage and imposing a narrative to make sense of it all, using a subjective camera, and borrowing on the audience’s knowledge of “live” TV to create this sense of immediacy and authenticity. But while they argue that such techniques in RTV favor transparency of the medium, I would argue that their concept of the “double logic of remediation,” which involves both transparency and hypermediacy, defines the combined roles of television and RTV in constructing authenticity in the Cathouse narrative.

Both TV generally and RTV specifically attempt to create an authentic experience for the audience. RTV does so through strategies such as seemingly showing activities as they happened, editing and packaging shows within traditional narratives, and using subject matter that is easy for audiences to relate to. These strategies, taken together, are used to create an “authentic” experience of watching “reality.” Mike Darnell, executive vice-president of alternative programming for Fox “informed Entertainment
Weekly that the formula for every successful reality show is an easily understandable premise steeped in some social belief that provokes an audience reaction of ‘Oh, my god!...What’s wrong with you?’”\textsuperscript{520} Despite being drawn in by the desire to watch and criticize, viewers still hope they will see what something is “really” like. The audience is persuaded by the medium and form to believe that they are watching something that is connected to the “real” world and to their experiences.\textsuperscript{521} Although there is no mystery that editing and production can alter “reality,” making the actual experience come across is still the goal of RTV.\textsuperscript{522} Because television viewing takes place in the private realm of our living rooms and bedrooms, the ease with which viewers can integrate its content and form into their own lives is important for the reception of a program.

Creating an authentic experience can be explained with the “double logic of remediation.” According to Bolter and Grusin, the double logic of remediation is an attempt to fulfill the “contradictory imperatives of immediacy and hypermediacy” through a medium’s efforts to “erase its media in the very act of multiplying them.”\textsuperscript{523} Use of these seemingly contradictory strategies of erasing and multiplying media can actually act together to give a feeling of “authenticity.” Viewers know that situations on RTV are constructed. Viewers know that the presence of cameras affects how the real, ordinary people act,\textsuperscript{524} that many of these “real” people, while not professional actors, do put on an act, and that these shows are edited to create particular points of view. Producers, wanting to sell their product (the show), conform to the expectations of the audience, while at the same time focus primarily on the most exciting visual aspects of the interactions to maintain audience interest. RTV programs assume audiences have
such knowledge of production techniques when they employ other strategies, such as title
sequences, cutting of different point-of-view (POV) shots during conversation, use of a
host to mediate and facilitate activities, just to name a few, to highlight the medium itself.
They also attempt to hide the obvious signs of the medium when they employ strategies,
such as, not showing the cameras filming and maintaining the fourth wall (e.g., the
participants do not look at the camera during interactions with other participants). Using
these strategies together, i.e., the double logic of remediation, can make the audience feel
as if what it is watching is “real.” Of course, the audience knows it is not real and the
producers know that the audience knows it is not real. So, this shared knowledge is why
the goal is “authenticity” rather than reality.

*Docuporn*

The RTV boom over the last 15 years has led to different RTV formats and has
pushed the shows to become glitzier as well. Using sex to sell is one way to spice up the
visual drama. As HBO’s president of documentary and family programming, Sheila
Nevins, indicates, “If I’m doing hookers in the South Bronx, it’s going to get good
ratings. If I’m doing a sports team in Germany in the 1930s that was eliminated from the
Olympics, I won’t get a great rating.” Americans spend nearly $4 billion dollars
annually on video pornography alone. This is more than the annual revenue generated by
the NFL, NBA, or MLB. If you add in porn on television, movies, websites, pay-per-
view, phone sex, sex toys, and even magazines, the amount jumps to $10-14 billion
annually in the United States alone, making it a bigger business than the all these
professional sports organizations combined! The business of television shapes the content
in RTV as much as it does in other forms. So, it should be no surprise that RTV has turned to forms of pornography to bring in the audience.

There are many different kinds of pornography, however. Definitions of pornography range from the previously discussed Andrea Dworkin and Catharine MacKinnon assumptions that it equates to violence against women\textsuperscript{526} to pornography scholar Joseph Slade’s definition based on use: “representations designed to arouse and give sexual pleasure to those who read, see, hear, or handle them.”\textsuperscript{527} A common, if increasingly antiquated, definition of pornography comes out of the Supreme Court designation of obscenity as sexually explicit material designed to titillate having no artistic merit.\textsuperscript{528} Interestingly, the etymology of the word traces back to the Greek word \textit{pornographos}, or a reference to a female slave sold for prostitution, which was later used in current form as a description of prostitutes.\textsuperscript{529}

Karen Boyle argues that traditional research, especially that of the feminist persuasion, focuses on the “effect” of pornography on men and women. This focus comes from the assumption that men use pornography for particular purposes and that women, even those who are not involved in porn, are affected by the ways in which men “use” the form. She argues that such research is problematic for five reasons: (1) key terms are poorly defined and mask ideological assumptions that color the research; (2) all sexually explicit materials are lumped together, no matter the content, as if they are all the same; (3) studies ignore individual consumers’ understanding of and use of different types of pornography; (4) specifically “how” and “why” porn is used are not explored when attempting to figure out possible immediate and long-term impacts of it on consumers;
and, (5) most of this research assumes women as objects of pornography and men as consumers. This, Boyle argues, marginalizes experiences of women involved in porn and women who consume it, as well as assuming a passive/active relationship between women and men, respectively. Due to all these problems, Boyle contends that we need to begin by “examining how specific pornographic texts are made and used by producers and consumers in particular ways.” In these studies we should: (1) be careful to define clearly terms so that we reveal rather than mask the underlying assumptions we bring to the study of porn; (2) consider what impacts the multi-media formats presenting the pornography have; (3) consider what types of porn could be potentially harmful (or not) to others; and, (4) focus on what the experiences of those involved in the production of porn are, and (5) what those of consumers are. I will not be examining the experiences of consumers though it would be a good route for future studies. Even so, I will attend carefully to my definitions of terms, clarify my assumptions, scrutinize the medium, and focus on the experiences of those involved in the production of Cathouse.

I do not contend that Cathouse is pornography. Rather, the show uses pornographic strategies to draw in viewers. Much pornographic material on television tends to focus on women. To package such sexualized content, the television medium requires privileging of the sensational coupled with normative judgments of the women involved. As Jane Arthurs explains, “(s)ensationalism is the product of fascination with stories of sexual transgression in which the moral righteousness of exposing wrongdoing is entwined with the often unacknowledged pleasure of vicarious participation.” So, while she sees positive possibilities for challenging dominant representations of sex work
through feminist critique in alternative forms such as documentary and auteur films, she is cautious in her optimism. She warns that forms that succumb to profit motive and rely heavily upon spectacle to draw in viewers, i.e., “docuporn,” have “spurious appeal to feminist legitimacy” as they are “undermined by the restricting codes of its limited erotic vocabulary and its institutionalized relations of consumption that are characteristic of this type of sex industry documentary.”\(^5^3^2\) Arthurs’ criticism of docuporn may apply to Cathouse. So, it is with caution that I proceed. However, I believe the show’s function as a unique counter-narrative of prostitution in mainstream media deserves more than dismissal as eroticized consumption. It is important to examine how its narrative elements and form as RTV docuporn together function to challenge and reify dominant representations of prostitution.

The particular sub-genre to which I have assigned Cathouse, then, is RTV docuporn. That is, it takes place in the actual work setting, the brothel, of the sex workers, and it films the women in seemingly unscripted interactions with each other, customers, and their bosses. Even so, the show is constructed to tell the story of the Moonlite Bunny Ranch as a typical American business with the sex workers as the protagonists of the story. The business of sex coincides nicely with the business of television in that they both focus on the sensational, the visual drama. Television provides the medium through which this “real” sex can be the content of the show and the means of drawing in viewers. These, then, are the elements of Cathouse that will aid in the analysis of the show’s narrative.
The space in which we watch TV, the business of television, and the visual bias of TV and RTV do not explain how we integrate what we see into our lives. It is important to note though that many of the theorists referenced in the preceding section make reference to the narrative construction of television programs as a key feature of television generally and RTV specifically. RTV producers edit and package raw material (the seemingly unscripted events and interactions) to construct traditional narrative formats, and these narratives use familiar subject matter to which the audience will easily be able to relate.

In the case of RTV, the shows are brought into our private realm in order to show us Others’ seemingly private lives. As *Cathouse* deals with subject matter and people that most audiences rarely, if ever, have contact with in their everyday lives outside media depictions of them, how they are portrayed influences how we relate to them. People have the need to integrate such discursive constructions within our lives and understandings of the world. Therefore, portrayals of Others must relate to what we know in our own lives if we are to integrate what we see in some way, as Tania Modleski explains in her examination of how women integrate the stories from soap operas in their lives. If what we see on TV does not easily coincide with our traditional understandings of social life, then we may experience difficulty accepting it as Lila Abu-Lughod found her study of Egyptian serials. She said that even when issues relevant to the villagers were shown on TV, if they were not packaged in ways that related to the lived experiences of the viewers, the ideas were “unassimilable because of fundamental
differences of perspective related to social location.” So, well-constructed and easily recognized narratives help us to integrate these televised people and their lives into ours.

Narrative is used in most television programs as a way to package the information and entertainment of television in order to make the integration of what audiences’ see easier. According to David Carr, narrative “characterizes the structure of everyday life.” He goes on to explain that our everyday experiences consist of sequences that have beginnings, middles, and ends. We live these sequences and are also able to separate them from the “bigger picture” of our overall lives. Such separation allows us to articulate “relations of suspension-resolution, departure-return, means-end, problem-solution, etc.” This “protentional-retentional” character of narrative means that we draw not only on what has occurred in the past, what is occurring in the present, and the potential for the future, but also on narratives with which we are familiar from historical, cultural, social, and personal levels where such stories occur. These stories are told from a particular narrator’s point of view, include characters and storylines, and are used as a way to make meaning of our lives, as lived and as we use them to reflect upon our lives. These narratives shape our everyday lives.

What is unique about the narratives in RTV is that they are constructed from raw footage of seemingly unscripted interactions. Often shows will integrate footage filmed during “natural” interactions with direct-to-camera comments, and, sometimes, voiceovers. Making these stories appear as if they emerged out of what actually happened is a way that RTV masks the hand of the producers in constructing the stories. The audience is meant to accept the edited version as what happened regardless of what was
left out in the editing. Despite the editing, producers are said to try to present what happened realistically. To do this, producers focus on protagonists, create antagonists, and write storylines, through editing, that include rising action, conflict, climax, and even denouement. People in the industry recognize that “those who created a narrative structure around reality television made it take off.” This can be explained by the audiences’ need to structure events within the stories we are told. If these events are told within stories with which we can relate, we are more easily able to integrate them in our lives. Ironically, however, the multiple sources of the stories we use to constitute our realities are not always consistent. As constitutive of our histories, cultures, social, and personal lives, stories can act as “the makers and enforcers of what is expected, but…also, paradoxically, compiles, even slyly treasures, transgressions.” Some argue that the conflicts and personalities are what draw in viewers. Pozner remarks, “Viewers may be drawn to reality TV by a sort of cinematic schadenfreude, but they continue to tune in because these shows frame their narratives in ways that both reflect and reinforce deeply ingrained societal biases about women, men, love, beauty, class, and race.”

The narrative constructed in *Cathouse* is inherently tied to its form (RTV docuporn) and the medium on which it is shown (TV). Unlike dominant media depictions, the narrative constructed in *Cathouse* tells the story of empowered sex workers kept safe by the legal protections Nevada provides for their business. In this story the prostitute is the protagonist. The protection of the women does not act to “save” them; rather, it leads to safety for the customer and allows the women to provide a necessary service to the community. The prostitute’s story revolves around her
interactions with the other prostitutes, her boss, and her customers. There is no comparison between the virtuous and the evil, no good girl/bad girl binaries constructed amongst the women. The sex worker is a businesswoman; the tale is one of how she is successful and provides a service for the community.

Of course, this tale is not ultimately altruistic. What is shown to empower the women is the freedom of choice they enact, in their choice of career and the daily choices they make at work, and the money they make providing this service. For this reason, Cathouse takes on the form of reality TV (RTV) docuporn. That is, the show films “ordinary” people in their “natural” environment going about their daily lives, which in this case is the eroticized world of prostitution, as the show also acts to commodify prostitution as a legitimate business. The reform/punishment binary that dominates most media, television in particular, and depictions of prostitution in general (see Chapter 1) are outwardly challenged by this narrative. At the same time, particular strategies in the narrative telling of Cathouse reify dominant discursive constructions about prostitution. Packaging such challenges along with reifying constructions is what makes the challenges easier for audiences to integrate into their understandings of prostitution.

Cathouse: A Counter-Narrative of Prostitution

Having explained the relevant characteristics of television as a medium and RTV docuporn as a form, I will now examine the content of Cathouse to show how the medium, form, and content interact to construct a counter-narrative of prostitution. I will focus on three aspects of the show to demonstrate how this narrative both challenges and reifies dominant discourses of prostitution. The way Cathouse negotiates the balance
between information and entertainment (infotainment), how the body is represented, and
the ways in which “authenticity” is constructed will be explored in this section. These
three moments of interaction in the show were identified through a close textual analysis
of the first Cathouse special. The focus of this chapter was driven by these moments of
interaction which, when taken together, demonstrate how a narrative can be constructed
through traditional elements of this form, i.e., characters, plot, conflict, etc. Moreover,
these moments are packaged in such a way that can make these stories more easily
integrated into our traditional understandings of prostitution and effectively challenge
dominant discourses as well. Before discussing the important moments of interaction in
the show, it is first important to explain how the show is structured.

The Cathouse special is organized around the negotiations for seven different
“parties.” In between the parties, subjects such as how the business works, from line-ups
to timecards, who the customers and sex workers are, the social side of working at the
Moonlite Bunny Ranch, and the benefits and responsibilities of working at the Ranch are
covered through a series of segments. Each of these segments is composed of a montage
of direct-to-camera interviews and scenes depicting the workers, customers, and bosses
“in action,” often shown with accompanying voiceover. Although the documentary and
pornography aspects are inseparable in the structure of RTV docuporn, it is important to
highlight moments that attempt to foreground one or the other as this packaging “sells”
the show as both information and entertainment, as opposed to being purely
pornographic, in the traditional sense of the form.
Cathouse as Infotainment

Neither documentary nor pornographic strategies of RTV docuporn can be separated from one another in Cathouse. There are times, however, when either information or entertainment is privileged over the other, during which particular aspects of the typical American business narrative can be demonstrated. When information is foregrounded, Cathouse comes across as a documentary about the inner-business of the Moonlite Bunny Ranch. The montage sequences of direct-to-camera interviews and everyday action are instances when information is privileged. In one such sequence, the general manager, Madame Suzette, talks directly to the camera in parts and in voiceover in other parts, all the while the screen oscillates between showing her direct-to-camera shots and showing interactions displaying what she describes.

This sequence begins with a working girl dropping off a timecard at the office and picking up a towel from Madame Suzette. Madame Suzette’s voiceover begins, “it’s a 50/50 percentage split,” and the camera shot shifts to show Suzette talking on the phone, “$19 a day room and board. Sky’s the limit on what you can make.” The camera cuts to a shot of the multi-line phone next to a credit card machine printing off a receipt as Suzette continues to explain the business to a potential new worker, “You don’t do anything you don’t wanna.” The camera then focuses on Suzette ripping off the credit card receipt, pen in hand, which also holds a pile of cash. Cut back to Suzette, “Bye, bye,” and she hangs up phone. Suzette turns to someone off-camera and explains, “That’s about my thirty-first call today.” Cut back to the window with the working girl writing on a timecard as Suzette’s voiceover begins again, “The girl’s name and room number are
on the timecard which she signs when they put the money on. And they put it under the timer.” The camera shows a card being put under a timer and the timer being set as she continues, “When the timer goes off we always laugh and say ‘the cookies are done’ because it’s a timer like an oven. And then we go on the intercom and say that it’s time to renegotiate another party.” Next, the camera shows Suzette in close-up as a timer goes off. Another woman working in the office closes the sequence. She pushes the intercom button and says, “Yvette, time to re-party, honey.”

This sequence continues by showing the scheduling board as Suzette goes on to talk about how she treats the women before shifting from business- to family-mode when she says, “Dennis is the Dad; I’m the Mom. They know I have that look. They don’t wanna disappoint me. I’m their mother and they are nice, nice girls.” But it is the proprietor, Dennis Hof, who concludes the segment. He is shown walking up to the front door, entering, and kissing his girlfriend, porn star and working girl Sunset Thomas, as his voiceover begins, “I’m not a pimp. I’m a businessman. I’m friends with these ladies. We’re business partners.” The shot cuts to a direct-to-camera interview with Dennis sitting in front of the bar, “We are the most legitimate business in America because we know we’re gonna be scrutinized. So we do everything right.”

This segment packages the Bunny Ranch as a typical American business. Hof is the boss; the goal of the work is to make money, for the boss and for the girls. During the course of the workday, the women meet customers, book parties, and negotiate business deals. These segments demonstrate who the key players in the story are: Dennis as boss, Madame Suzette as “right-hand” woman. The mundane nature of a business that is
usually thought of as exciting, dirty, and dangerous, demonstrates how it relates to “regular” jobs. Although we do not usually see scantily-clad women in our work environments, characterizing prostitution as work, not deviance, and showing the women doing the mundane - timecards, money, bookings – attempts to communicate “just another day at the office.” Even Suzette’s characterization of herself as the mother and Dennis as the father uses synecdochal referents to connect their roles to traditional expectations of mother and father to treat their children right. The message is that this is a business that takes care of its workers.

Although information is foregrounded in the preceding example, the action within it, i.e., showing rather than just telling, serves to keep the audience interested. This belies the need of television to entertain.\textsuperscript{549} So, from the business to the fun of it - directly following the business section described above, the camera cuts to Dennis sitting at the bar with Felicia and two other working girls as he says, “The only thing I’m missin’ in life is the ability to have 10 orgasms a day like you girls.” One of the blonde women with him then explains that the women all have sex toys in their bedrooms for use during slow times. The scene continues with Dennis’s voiceover, “My relationship with the girls is many things. I’m a friend, I’m a good friend to a lot of these girls. I like them. I’m a lover to some of them. I’m a father to some of ‘em. I’m there to help them with whatever they need….Best job in the world. (Doorbell rings) We got customers.”\textsuperscript{550} During Dennis’ voiceover one of the women straddles his leg and begins to rub herself against him. She continues to hump his leg, orgasms, and then goes to join the line-up for the customer who just rang the bell, that is, after thanking Dennis for making her climax. This

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sequence foregrounds an entertaining aspect of the business, portrays the women as hypersexual, and depicts Dennis as more than a business partner – as a friend, lover, father.

Portraying legal prostitution makes the job of the producers easy, as the business itself is spectacular for audiences to see. The Moonlite Bunny Ranch as a business is typical in that there are rules to follow, timecards to fill-out, deals to be negotiated, all under the watchful eyes of the boss and manager. This is a business whose goal is to make money by having fun and taking care of the customer. How this brothel is portrayed as a typical business certainly challenges the ways in which prostitution is usually depicted as it focuses on work not stigmatized behavior. At the same time, the women of *Cathouse* are represented as hypersexual. This aspect of the show feeds into dominant conceptions of how prostitutes are expected to act. Yet, it is this exciting and entertaining aspect of the type of business talked about that is perfect for television and makes the show RTV docuporn. Packaging information as entertainment and entertainment as information, as demonstrated above is one way this helps shape the narrative of the show in a way that makes it easy for the audience to accept.551

*Representation of the Body*

Information and entertainment are commodified on television.552 The selling of which, in turn, commodifies television – makes television about the selling of information and entertainment rather than, say, the creation of entertainment for the sake of art or aesthetics. Sex is a literal commodity in the form of prostitution. The Moonlite Bunny Ranch grossed $1.5 million dollars in April 2002 alone from selling sex.553
*Cathouse* commodifies prostitution, while at the same time television commodifies
*Cathouse*, branding legal prostitution in Nevada. While most of this is not revolutionary
thinking, the idea that the show packages and sells *a particular vision of prostitution* is
important. This process of co/modification between television and the show is the site
in which the narrative of the show is constructed. Bolter and Grusin characterize the
infomercial as

particularly insistent on connecting the product to the world. It combines various
techniques from television and film documentary with the traditional commercial,
and, by its length and frank acknowledgment of its intention to sell, it further
insists on the inseparability of the message and the product."554

So, too, does *Cathouse* insist on the message and the product. This packaging of
prostitution in this RTV docuporn narrative allows dominant representations of
prostitution to be challenged, constructing a vision of prostitution as *work* and the
prostitutes as *sex workers*.

The way the body is represented in *Cathouse* makes it easier to accept this
transgressive view of prostitution into our living rooms. Interestingly, without the
comparison to the “pure” protagonist as in good girl/bad girl media portrayals of
prostitutes, as characterized by Lisa McLaughlin, exposure and use of the body
becomes normalized, rather than merely sensationalized. In dominant representations,
there is always a good girl and a bad girl. The “pure” protagonist can be a cop, wife,
mother, sister, and is usually shown in “acceptable” heterosexual relationships. As long
as she is fulfilling her customary role, the good girl will be used in contrast to the bad girl

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– the prostitute. The prostitute can be either the victim of a predatory (usually) male who acts under coercion or an out-of-control sexual woman. Whichever approach, this character represents the threat to norms and mores and therefore, either needs to be saved or punished. The contrast serves to justify the good girl/bad girl dichotomy as much as it is acts as rationale for the outcome faced by the prostitute, that is, being saved or punished.

One filmic strategy used to emphasize the sexuality of women is to invite the “gaze” - displaying the female body as a sexual object to create an erotic spectacle for the (male) viewer, according to Laura Mulvey. Because audiences are being allowed into the taboo world of prostitution, the visual bias involved in focusing on the spectacular still works to draw the gaze. The focus on the body as commodity encourages the voyeuristic gaze of the viewer and the exhibitionism of participants, who are in the business of exhibitionism in the first place. So what does this double exhibit mean for the typical characterization of sexualized women as objects? Cathouse works to both reify the spectacle of the body in the discourse of prostitution and challenges the positionality of the sex worker from object to subject with a focus on the “body in relation,” the benefits received by sex workers from use of their bodies, and transforming the “gaze” into a “glance.”

The move from object to subject is aided by the portrayal of the workers as empowered business women rather than deviant, diseased, evil-doers or seduced innocents in need of rescue. This shift occurs throughout the show, except during the “line-up.” When the women hear a customer ring the outside bell, they come to the
lobby/bar area of the Ranch dressed for business. There is a female greeter (non-sex worker) who meets every customer at the door, explains the process to the customer, and introduces each of the women standing side-by-side in line to him/her. When the line-ups are shown in *Cathouse*, the camera begins a tracking shot showing the women from the legs up. In one line-up, the camera goes horizontally from left to right down the line showing only the women’s feet in high “hooker”-heels and bare legs before returning from right to left to show their scantily clad torsos and heads. This strategy allows the audience to “read” the body. During the line-up the customer’s gaze is mirrored by the camera and encourages the audience’s gaze as well. Inviting the gaze feeds into the need of television to create a visual spectacle. However, this is one of the very few times during the special that the women are portrayed as objects.

During the negotiations, which make up over half of the one-hour special, the camera shots move from focusing on the sex worker to focusing on the customer to focusing on both. Through the entire negotiation, the prostitute is in control. She uses her body and her communication and audience analysis skills to drive up the price for her services. These interactions are about commodifying sex. However, the customer and the sex worker are always shown in relation, with the sex worker in control. After being chosen in the line-up, the sex worker controls the action. She guides the customer to her room. She tells him what she will and/or will not do. She encourages the customers to feel comfortable in an environment in which they might feel uneasy. The sex worker uses both verbal and bodily negotiation skills to up prices. During one negotiation, Sunset Thomas takes off various pieces of clothing, puts them back on, touches different parts of
her own body, and of the customer’s body at various times in order to negotiate more
time and therefore more money. She is the agent of action.

Use of the body is not limited to negotiations and actual sex at the Bunny Ranch.
There is a whole lotta naked there at all times. That is, the women are always scantily
clad. They do each others’ hair; they argue about business and competition; they discuss
their days off; they put in credit cards and pick up their pay – all while wearing lingerie
(if that) and showing most of their body. The focus on the body belongs not only to the
spectacular, visual drama, but to the mundane as well. The body is almost always shown
in relation to others, the women are almost always in charge, and coupled with the
mundane, the spectacle encourages us not to “gaze” at the women, but to integrate her
bodily activities within our world with a “glance” instead. The constant focus on the
body, as well as the focus on interaction during the negotiations creates the possibility for
the change in positionality of the sex worker from object to subject. Add to this the
concentration on the business narrative, and these images of the body become normal,
acceptable, a part of that business. This shift from object to subject furthers our ability to
accept a counter-perspective of prostitution as the narrative is constructed, as use of the
body is not shown as dirty and threatening, but part of the business.

At the same time that the sex workers are portrayed as empowered and using their
bodies as part of their business becomes normalized (which challenges dominant
prostitution narratives), they are also depicted as hypersexual (which reifies these same
narratives). The previous example of Dennis Hof at the bar with the “off-duty” sex
workers demonstrates this point. Although the women are at work, they do not appear to
be working. They talk about using sex toys during slow times, and one woman uses Hof’s leg to get off. The women are often shown during montage segments as partying – drinking alcohol, dancing, socializing and being sexual with one another. To celebrate their best April ever, during which they made $1.5 million, they had a party. At the party, they all drank champagne and there was a sheet cake. After toasting their success, Felicia opened her robe and planted her breasts in the cake. Dennis, Sunset, and other sex workers then proceeded to take turns licking the frosting off her chest. This scene provides an example of how the women are shown, even when seemingly not working, as hypersexual.

Yet, the women are still in charge. There are few customers shown in these scenes. Those that are shown are in the background. The women appear to be partying with Hof during work hours, which shows just how much fun working at the Ranch is. Additionally, the women do not appear coerced, oppressed, needy, or desperate. Rather, they are happy, having fun working and playing, and getting paid well for both. The fact that the scene above takes place during a party makes the action appear part of their everyday lives. So, the women are shown as hypersexual beings, which reifies dominant stereotypes of prostitutes as threats to society that need to be controlled. However, these women’s sexuality is shown in this case to lead to empowerment through freedom to be sexual and the monetary success it provides.

It is important to note, however, that the prostitutes’ sexuality remains in the controlled, isolated environment of the Ranch. The focus of their work is, of course, sexual. However, even when the prostitutes are not working, their sexuality is still
prominent in their social interactions with one another, as the party example demonstrates. The women are never shown outside the confines of the Ranch. Even when not with customers, the sex workers are shown scantily clad, talking about sex, or making out and masturbating with each other. As such, they appear single-minded – focused on sex. At the same time, the medium of television keeps the audience safe from the unbridled sexuality of the prostitutes. Their “deviance” is allowed because they are exhibited for the audience’s gaze. However, the normalization of their sexuality also serves to problematize the gaze, and the medium of television further problematizes the concept of the gaze, encouraging the glance. So, the women are kept confined to the Ranch, which keeps the audience and public safe from their unbridled sexuality. Yet, the audience is still inviting this transgressive view of prostitution into its home where the glance can act to normalize this perspective of sex work. The reification and normalization of the body, portrayal of prostitutes as successful, empowered, business women, all shown in the isolated environment of the Ranch (and in our televisions) invites the audience to enjoy and learn from this discourse rather than having to confront the potential challenges to dominant discourses. It all makes it easier to integrate this view of prostitution and sex workers into our everyday lives.

The focus on the body as commodity encourages the voyeuristic gaze of the viewer and the exhibitionism of participants. Packaging information as entertainment and entertainment as information is one way this helps shape the narrative of the show in a way that makes it easy for the audience to accept. The United States is a capitalist society, so what could be more normal in our everyday lives than a man owning a
successful business? Add the women to the mix and you have women enjoying and being successful at business as well. The RTV docuporn format turns the gaze to a glance, and the narrative of business makes the fact that their business is sex easier to swallow, so to speak.

**Authenticity**

An additional aid to the normalization of this version of prostitution is the way in which the narrative constructs an “authentic” portrayal of prostitution and sex workers. *Cathouse* uses strategies of erasure and hypermediacy and is therefore an example of how the double logic of remediation serves to enhance the feeling of authenticity. As Bolter and Grusin describe the process, it multiplies the signs of mediation and in this way tries to reproduce the rich sensorium of human experience….In every manifestation, hypermediacy makes us aware of the medium or media and (in sometimes subtle and sometimes obvious ways) reminds us of our desire for immediacy.  

Where hypermediacy makes us aware of the medium of television and, in this case, the genre of RTV, erasure attempts to hide these same signs that what we are watching is not real. Two examples of how hypermediacy and transparency serve to enhance the audience’s feeling of authenticity occur during the party negotiations.

At the Bunny Ranch, in-the-bedroom interaction between sex worker and customer(s) is called a “party.” As the Moonlite Bunny Ranch Menu suggests, this could be anything from “Straight Sex” to “Half and Half” (half oral sex, half intercourse), from a “Lingerie Show” to “More than You Can Handle” (anything and everything you
want to do in a given amount of time) – whatever the prostitute and customer negotiate.

*Cathouse* shows the negotiation section of seven parties. All of these parties begin with a title sequence. Two different color schemes are used for these sequences – one pinks and one blues. However, in each a lighter color background, with a neon frame serves to focus attention on the white text that titles each party, while music sets the mood for the type of party named. For example, the “Two Brothers” party (in which Sunset Thomas entertains two brothers together) title sequence is shown with a blue background, with brighter blue neon around the frame of the screen, like the flashing neon lights of an older movie theatre. The white text is highlighted by a background flame-watermark and the letters “T” and “B” of the text have watermark flames flowing off the back of them. All the while, *Pulp Fiction*-style biker music plays. In contrast, Airforce Amy’s “Anniversary Couple” party, in which she entertains a couple for their fifteenth anniversary, title sequence uses a maroon background with pink neon framing. White is still the color of the text, but the watermark used merely highlights the text, which it repeats. A flourish, also in white is used to underline the text. As we see this title, formal orchestral music plays. Each of these title sequences highlights the medium of television and serves to set the mood for the parties that follow.

After the title sequence, each party begins in a bedroom. The first camera shot of each party shows a bedroom in which the interaction takes place and the people involved. In the foreground of the shot are four right-angle corner squares which serve to frame the shot beyond the frame the television screen provides. In addition to the secondary framing, the bottom right corner of this frame contains a small red light next to the words
“hidden camera.” After a short time, the text and red light are eliminated from the shot, but the foregrounded framing remains throughout the interaction. While the title sequences highlight the mediated nature of the show, the foregrounded framing of the parties, while highlighting media, serve to authenticate the interactions. The producers create a seemingly natural interaction of ordinary people in the moment.

The use of the same bedrooms, presumably, is due to the difficulty of installing and positioning hidden cameras. HBO installed these hidden cameras in two of the bedrooms and these rooms were “dressed” for the various occasions. Another consequence of the use of hidden cameras, and probably of a limited budget, is that the same camera angles are used in all of the parties. Despite the same angles, the shots in the special often serve to highlight the positionality of the participants in a given interaction. The key difference between this strategy and the foregrounded framing of the hidden camera is that this one is made transparent while the framing is hypermediated. Yet both serve to authenticate the interaction for acceptance into audience accepted narratives of prostitution.

These interactions occur in bedrooms that could be, for the most part, “any-bedroom USA.” Each bedroom used appears different. Careful viewing shows that some of the same bedrooms are used for different parties, but have been decorated slightly differently. Each bedroom setting serves to highlight the tone of the interaction. A pink and tan color scheme with ruffled bedspread and curtains for “The First Time” party, but black-and-white geometric-style bedspread for the party with “Two Brothers.” Additionally, different camera angles highlight the positionality of the participants at any
given time. For example, “The First Time” party takes place in a baby blue-walled room with white doors and dark wood furniture. When Felicia and her customer enter the room, the camera angle shoots from the top left of the bed angled downward to show the end of the bed and a dresser with a mirror, like you might see in any room at home. The bedspread is baby blue with pastel patterns. On the far side of the bed, the shot shows both Felicia (dressed in orange, patterned, sheer robe) and a young-looking boy (who appears to be a teenager with short dark hair, wearing a red polo shirt and khaki pants) as she tells him to have a seat.

The second camera angle shoots the room from the bottom right side of the bed looking diagonally toward a window covered with white blinds and framed with green pastel curtains showing a dark wood headboard, a mirror above the bed, sex toys on the nightstand, and in bottom right of screen, paper towels and a hand towel are hanging on the wall above a square basin. This second angle focuses on the boy sitting on the bed. This angle shows only a partial profile of Felicia. This shot directs our attention to the boy – his nervousness and the experience of the first time – and the business of sex – the toys and practical materials needed. The first angle, on the other hand, centers the interaction. Both angles further demonstrate the shifted positionality of the players putting the sex worker the power position as active agent and the customer as submissive as discussed in the previous section.

The hypermediacy of the title sequences and the hidden camera icon work together with the transparency of the multiple camera angles to create an authentic viewing experience. This authentic encounter, along with the narrative created, serves to
further normalize this version of prostitution. The use of the multiple camera angles also operates to shift the focus from the sex worker to the interaction and the customer allowing the prostitute to become the subject of these interactions. These strategies serve to emphasize the immediacy of the interactions; making the audience feel as if they are seeing interactions as they happened and, therefore, as they are. That is, we witness a prostitution that differs from that typically depicted, but that is still acceptable given that it is authentically represented. As *Cathouse* challenges a view of prostitution as so far removed from everyone else’s everyday work, so too does it continue to reify the hypersexuality inherent to the business itself.

**Conclusion**

I have claimed that the medium, form, and content of Cathouse construct a counter-narrative of prostitution which represents the Moonlite Bunny Ranch as a *typical American business* in which the prostitutes are shown as *sex workers* who are empowered by the choice and monetary benefits of the business. To support this contention, I discussed the relevant characteristics of the medium of television, the form of RTV docuporn, and how this narrative was constructed in *Cathouse*. Additionally, I examined how the narrative constructed relies upon how it is packaged on television as RTV docuporn and how particular elements of the show both challenge and reify dominant media narratives of prostitution. While I feel that this work significantly contributes to public discourses of prostitution by carefully scrutinizing how this narrative differs from typical television depictions of prostitution, I would also argue that it provides the basis for even more important insights to come.
This rhetorical criticism was inspired by my first viewing of *Cathouse* in 2002. Despite having lived in Nevada for many years, I had never seen the inside of a brothel, so I watched for the same reason many others did: I wanted to see what it was “really” like. Since that time, there have been a number of other representations of prostitution and of sexual women on television which seemingly challenge the traditional redemption/punishment model. E! Entertainment Network’s *The Girls Next Door* follows the lives of “Playboy” entrepreneur Hugh Hefner and his three live-in girlfriends. This show unapologetically shows the girls partying, usually scantily clad to emphasize their tans and breast implants, and, most importantly, living in a multi-partner romantic/sexual relationship with one another and Hefner.\(^5\) Showtime got in on the act when it aired the British import *Secret Diary of a Call Girl*, which follows the life and work of the main character, high class call girl, Belle de Jour.\(^4\) In response to the success of *Cathouse*, Showtime’s take on prostitution, and the recent controversy involving seemingly squeaky clean New York governor Eliot Spitzer’s involvement with call girls, HBO is currently developing the series *Diary of Manhattan Call Girl*. In addition to this pay-cable fare, popular shows on major networks also are beginning to push the boundaries of acceptable prostitute representation with characters such as Lady Heather on *CSI*. The most popular main character on that show, Gil Grissom, has a positive, flirtatious, and respectful relationship with Lady Heather. CNBC aired a report on how the business of high class prostitution is thriving, even in these hard economic times, on November 11, 2008.

However, shows such as these on newsmagazine shows often edit to show the downside of prostitution, much like Diane Sawyer’s insider report on *20/20* in March
2008. Sawyer interviewed heroin prostitutes living on the street and focused on drug use at the Moonlite Bunny Ranch as a form of survival. Her report is in stark contrast to both *Cathouse* and my own experience visiting the Bunny Ranch. The November 10, 2008, episode of *CSI: Miami* portrayed housewives as turning to prostitution out of boredom, much like the original movie, *Belle de Jour*. On *CSI: Miami*, these housewives are ultimately punished for their behavior (murdered or sent to jail). This demonstrates that even in the face of changes in the representation of prostitution, dominant portrayals have not gone by the wayside. As San Francisco’s recent defeat of Proposition K, which would have legalized prostitution, American society may not yet ready to conceptualize prostitution as a legitimate form of work.

Yet, how the medium, form, and content intersect to construct this narrative of prostitution packages the subject in such a way that makes integration of such a different view of prostitution into our lives possible. While considering the environment of a rhetorical text is a common practice by media ecologists, it is not by all rhetorical critics. Not all rhetorical texts necessitate consideration of this environment. Even so, this example demonstrates that there are times when such consideration is necessary. I hope that this work serves as an example of one way in which to account for all the elements needing consideration to gain a more complete view of how a text can be constructed.

Dominant representations of prostitution and sexual women are constructed within the redemption/punishment binary that characterizes not only media representations of sexual women, but pervade our thinking about sexual women in society in general (see Chapter 1). The body of knowledge that has been constructed and
continues to be reinforced presents prostitution as stigmatized work, done by particular types of women (victims/predators) who need to be saved or punished. When taken together, the medium, form, and content of *Cathouse* stands in stark contrast to this view. Yet, rather than viewers rejecting this view as untrue or unreal, the narrative constructed through the interaction of these three elements of the show makes this contrary view of prostitution easier to integrate into viewers’ understandings of prostitution.

Helga Kristin Hallgrimsdottir, Rachel Phillips, and Cecilia Benoit argue that not only do media influence how we perceive race, gender, and class, but when “invisible” or marginalized populations are portrayed on television, this may be the only contact the general public has with them. As prostitutes on television might be the only sex workers many people ever see, how they are portrayed becomes very important to how they are perceived. These authors observe, “Essentially, in the absence of any lived interaction with the sex industry, media texts are key cultural sites at which stigmas of sex work are produced and consumed by the majority of citizens.” Reform/punishment narratives used by most fictional and talk show representations of prostitutes perpetuate stigmas of sex worker as dangerous, deviant, or, alternatively, as victims. Because audiences bring their own experiences to their understanding of media representations, if representations can act to challenge dominant narratives and also be easily integrated into the everyday lives of the audience, *Cathouse* operates as a way to normalize prostitution as *work* and prostitutes as *sex workers*.

A broader approach to how rhetorical criticism is done and a deeper understanding of this counter-narrative of sex work and its potential to challenge
dominant representations of prostitution are the significant contributions of this work. However, this chapter is just a first step to a deeper understanding of the concept of authenticity in reality television. In the chapters that follow, I bring together the discourse in *Cathouse* and that which I witnessed at the actual Moonlite Bunny Ranch as I conducted participant observation and interviews with the sex workers there. Bringing these discourses together will allow me to do what other scholars studying RTV have not yet done. That is, I will further assess the idea that *Cathouse* constructs an “authentic” vision of legal prostitution inside the Moonlite Bunny Ranch.
Chapter 6: “We aren’t bad people. We’re just like you.”

Historical, Cultural, Community, and Individual Narratives of Prostitution at the Moonlite Bunny Ranch

I contend in Chapter 5 that *Cathouse* constructs a narrative of a typical American business in which the prostitutes are sex workers who are empowered by the economic opportunities their business provides and who provide a service to the community. Taken together, this analysis and my research addressing discourses of prostitution in Chapters 1 and 2 suggest that the narrative of *Cathouse* counters dominant mainstream constructions of prostitution. That is, packaging this legal brothel as a conventional business and the prostitutes as workers in that business is contrary to the punishment/redemption binary constructed in historical, cultural, and media representations of prostitution. It is this difference that prompted me initially to wonder if life at the Moonlite Bunny Ranch was really like it appeared on TV or if the editing of this reality television program masked a different reality.

To find out, I spent time at the Moonlite Bunny Ranch observing and conducting interviews. What I learned was that historical, cultural, and community discourses of prostitution, including media representations of prostitution and narratives of sex workers working in other contexts, pervade the everyday lived experiences of the sex workers at the Bunny Ranch and are a part of how they talk about their lived experiences. These commonalities do not mean that the women of the Bunny Ranch necessarily are subject to these discourses, though at times they are. What it means is that the ways they talk about their lived experiences in interviews and everyday interactions involve these discourses. In other words, at any given time, historical, cultural, community, and
individual narratives operate and interact with one another and have an impact on how these women live and make sense of their everyday lives.

I also argue in Chapter 5 that the narrative form of Cathouse makes it easier for audiences, most of whom have little to no direct exposure to prostitution outside what they see in the media, to understand and integrate what is said about sex work in the show into their everyday understandings of it. This argument was based on both the form of Cathouse as reality television docuporn, as well as on theoretical underpinnings of narrative. As noted in Chapter 5, David Carr argued that narrative “characterizes the structure of everyday life.” This narrative structuring occurs because what has happened in our pasts, is happening in the present, and may happen in the future influences both how we live our lives as well as how we make sense of them. In addition to our own personal stories, narrative theorists suggest that historical, cultural, and social or community narratives have also been constructed. These narratives do not merely exist out in society somewhere, but interact with and influence our individual stories. So, when examining how narratives shape our everyday lives, it is important to examine narratives that are constructed on these multiple levels and which interact in everyday communication.

There are both theoretical and substantive contributions in this chapter. Theoretically, narrative inquiry includes discussion of the existence of multiple levels of narrative, including historical, cultural, community, and individual levels. However, there are few studies which demonstrate how each of these levels of narrative interacts with one another in communication. The main focus of this chapter is to give examples of
how structural discourses (historical, cultural, and community, in this case) influence individual narratives. This influence includes occasions when these sex workers respond or resist structural narratives, directly or indirectly, and when they integrate them into their own stories. Questions that arose for me during this study include whether and how women’s stories of empowerment in sex work could be true at the same time as historical and cultural discourses of oppression were also true. Being able to identify moments of interaction among multiple levels of narratives has provided some insight into this question.

Substantively, this work has implications for legal prostitution and the women working in this capacity. Dennis Hof has stated explicitly that he would like to see prostitution legalized nationwide. He claims that legalization is the best way to protect the women who do this work. Admittedly, he would also benefit economically if he were able to expand his business. Currently, the state of Nevada has no state income tax. However, given the current economic crisis, Nevada state legislators are looking for new sources of income. Knowing that Nevadans would ardently oppose a state income tax, brothel owners have proposed taxing prostitution. If this were to happen, given the way that tax laws in the state are written, it would result in legalizing prostitution statewide, not just in counties with less than 400,000 people. This means that Hof has a chance to give Nevada voters a reason to legalize it statewide. Hof claims that he does business above board and therefore the Moonlite Bunny Ranch should provide a model for “doing it right.” Accordingly, it is important not just to focus on the economic benefits such a move might provide, but also to analyze critically what this means for the women who
work in this business. By critically, I mean that we should not rely on kneejerk structural analyses that assume the dominant redemption/punishment binary to tell us what these women’s experiences are. Nor should we mindlessly accept sex-positive responses to these representations. Rather, it is important to examine carefully what this model offers to the women who work in this environment.

On this note the pervasive ambivalence characterizing the sex workers’ talk about their work at the Moonlite Bunny Ranch should be pointed out. Every interview and every day of observation I conducted included these women talking about how great their work is and how hard it can be. They talked of male customers wanting to learn about sex and women, who treated them well. They also spoke about men they did not enjoy servicing because the customers were bad in bed or because the men talked trash to them. When talking about their relationships with the other girls at the Ranch, experiences of friendship, support, and camaraderie were coupled with feelings of competitiveness, tension, and even catfighting. Such ambivalence closely resembled the perspectives of sex workers working in other contexts discussed in Chapter 2. As such, it demonstrates that the redemption/punishment dichotomy in dominant discourses is too limited to rely upon to explain the lived experiences of sex workers in this specific context as well.

I am aware that my interview questions and the assumptions I brought into my observations certainly influenced some of the themes that emerged. For example, in some cases, my questions are the reason these women were talking about their work. But, this was purposeful as the focus of this analysis addressed how the concept of “work” plays into the practices of prostitution. Thus, when my questions occasioned the emergence of
a theme and possibly how these women talked about it, I have tried to balance my influence with careful attention to their experiences. However, there are other themes that emerged in more organic ways. For example, no questions were asked about *Cathouse*, but many women discussed its influence on them and/or their roles in it. Kayla described how great working at this brothel is by saying, “We are the World Famous Bunny Ranch as seen on the *Cathouse.*” Vivian West explained to her neighbor where she works by saying, “I’m a star of HBO’s *Cathouse.*” None of my questions asked these women to compare their experiences with other cultural or media discourses, or with the experiences of sex workers employed in other contexts. But, it became very clear that these discourses were a part of the Bunny Ranch working girls’ experiences.

Noteworthy in this process is how resistance to structural narratives emerged in these women’s talk. I identified *resistance* in their talk when the women either directly pointed out and took issue with what people think of them or explicitly addressed how they believe society sees them. More often, though, the women would talk as if an accusation had been made that they felt the need to respond to. For example, responses to the question, “What is the most difficult part of your work?” varied from specific answers about sore bodies and interpersonal conflicts to extensive diatribes about how it is not as bad as society thinks it is. Though not prompted, many of the women I spoke with felt it was their responsibility to challenge societal perceptions. Some women posed rhetorical questions they thought people outside the business would ask and responded to them. In other cases, these women’s talk would assume the form of a response without a question, such as when Kandi, in response to the question, “How did you get started in sex work?”
indicated that she did not come from a broken home and was not abused as a child. In her answer she assumed that I expected her to say something about having a terrible childhood. This mode of answering suggested that having a terrible childhood was an assumption about sex workers that most people would make and that my analysis in Chapter 1 supported. This interaction between structural and individual narratives has very important implications both for how these women make sense of their lived experiences and for narrative inquiry.

In this chapter, I will explore specific areas in which historical, cultural, and community (in this case, the community refers to prostitutes in general) discourses pervaded the talk of the women I spoke with and observed at the Bunny Ranch. The moments of interaction identified include: 1) when these sex workers felt the responsibility to respond to cultural assumptions about them; 2) how these women resisted cultural assumptions about who they are; and 3) how they negotiated their lives inside and outside the Ranch. At the end, I will discuss some implications of this analysis.

_We Have a Responsibility to Speak Out_

_Cathouse_’s audience brings with it certain historical and cultural knowledge about prostitution. As argued in Chapter 1, the dominant perspectives of prostitution in American society are those of redemption or punishment. That is, prostitutes either need to be saved from themselves or the oppression of others who are making them do this job, or they need to be punished for transgressing societal mores. At nineteen, Summer Verona already has more experience working in the sex industry than I expected. At eighteen she moved to Los Angeles, procured a manager, and started working in porn.
She started working at the Bunny Ranch only one month before I had the opportunity to interview her. I talked to her just after she woke up on a Sunday morning around 10 am. She invited me to her room where we sat on her bed. Her dark brown, long, straight hair suffered some from bedhead and she wore only a white cotton robe. Summer believes that it is her responsibility to deliver the message that the punishment/redemption dichotomy of prostitution does not reflect the reality of all sex workers. The feelings on the matter that she expressed to me in this interview deserve quoting at length:

I think that’s the most difficult part…delivering the message out there that it’s not bad, what we’re doing….Because a lot of women and men sit down at home and watch this show and say, “How can these women do this? How can they put themselves out there?” Well, why don’t you try it? Why don’t you see? It’s a challenge. Period…. Maybe the reason you feel that way is because you haven’t grown up to see this and that….A lot of people knock it down because that’s the way society…You know this is one of the (only) places it’s legal….So, people are never gonna understand it, unless people that work here…and that live around here and they understand, they’ve been around it…But people who never ever thought that prostitution was legal…some people don’t even know it’s legal….And that’s the whole point of getting across the world and getting to travel and getting to experience different things and cultures. So, I think that’s a difficult part as well…trying to deliver a message that we aren’t bad people. We’re just like you. We’re just like anybody else who’s listening to this interview or who will read it, you know? Or watch it. It’s just one of those things….Of
course everybody’s gonna…say something bad about something, but when you
do it, it’s not half as bad….You could always…say something bad about
somebody, “Oh, look at this person, they’re doing prostitution…” Then when you
try to do it yourself, you’re like, “Oh this isn’t as bad as I thought.” Summer recognized that most people have never seen what legal prostitution is like, let
alone know that it is legal anywhere in this country. So, cultural and media discourses are
the primary bases that inform the average person’s knowledge on the subject. Although
Summer suggested that anyone could learn what it is like if they did it themselves, as she
has done, she knows that most people would not go into prostitution just to find out that it
is not as bad as they think. So, instead, she believed it was her (and my) responsibility to
spread the word, to make sure voices like hers were heard.

Despite her strong feelings on the matter, she does find herself falling into the
same negative thought processes when she talks about her work. She said, “It’s one of
those things where you knock it down. When you do it yourself, you’re like, ‘Oh shit, am
I really doing this?’ I was talkin’ shit about it last week. I’ve caught myself doin’ it. So, I
can’t lie.” She said that she has put down what she does or complained about it, but that
she has also caught herself doing it. This goes to show just how pervasive cultural
discourses of prostitution can be when they become part of self-descriptions of the
women who do it. Nevertheless, they may not feel that they are oppressed, need to be
saved, or punished despite the role societal narratives play in their everyday talk. Equally
important, in my opinion, however, is how women like Summer also can resist cultural
discourses without even realizing it. Throughout this chapter there are examples of how
the working girls at the Moonlite Bunny Ranch both reproduce and resist historical, cultural, and community narratives of prostitution in their talk about their lived experiences.

At times, sex workers appear called upon to explicitly and directly resist characterization as victims or predators. Kandi is a tanned, toned, and tall (at about 5’8”) blonde. At 36, she is older than many of the women who work at the Ranch. Having worked at the Ranch for over 6 years Kandi has much more experience than many of those I interviewed and interacted with as well. She described to me a specific example of when she had to confront directly one such cultural assumption when she appeared on *The Tyra Banks Show*. Tyra asked her if she would want her daughter to be a prostitute? Kandi replied, “That’s why I’m doin’ it now. So, my daughter doesn’t have to.”\(^{590}\) Kandi said that Tyra then responded that Kandi was not providing a good role model. But, from Kandi’s perspective, “Tyra…goin’ down the runway in (her) bra and panties, is that a good role model? Sex sells, honey. Either way. It’s sex, you know, to sell. Whether you’re in lingerie, whether…it’s (actual) sex. It’s sexual. Right?\(^{591}\) There appears to be a fine line between when commodification of the body is acceptable and when it is not in American society. Athletes and models are acceptable. Prostitutes and porn stars are not. Sexual labor remains stigmatized, directly or indirectly, in our discursive constructions of the practice. In this case, Kandi characterized her work as economically empowering for her and her daughter in resistance to Tyra’s assumptions.

Vivian West may not have as much experience working at the Bunny Ranch as Kandi, having only worked there a few months, but she has worked in the sex industry
for over eight years. Vivian started out as a feature striptease dancer after having taken a course to learn how to choreograph and perform feature dances. She has since performed in many pornographic films and continues to travel the country doing feature dancing. Vivian is shorter than Kandi (at about 5’3”), but is just as tanned and blonde. She told me a story of a confrontation with a couple of “Bible thumpers” on a recent flight when they characterized her as a predator. One of them offered to help her put her carry-on in the overhead bin. The bag was so heavy that he asked if it was filled with bowling balls. She said, “I didn’t even think about it and I’m decked out full in Bunny Ranch gear and I looked at ‘em and I’m like, ‘No. Porn.’” She was then subjected to a lecture about how she was a liar and an adulterer. She tried to reason with them, explaining that not all people believe that humans are monogamous creatures. She went on to explain that although she had read the Bible, she did not necessarily believe in all its teachings. Rather than agreeing to disagree though, these two men tried to put the Bible in her hands and did not let up the entire flight from Houston to Reno. Vivian said the lesson she learned was to keep her mouth shut and not try to reason with those who promote their beliefs at the expense of others’. This story teaches that dominant cultural discourses, especially those from ardent Christians, not only pervade mainstream society but can be imposed upon people who attempt to live outside them.

The women of the Moonlite Bunny Ranch live and work within this larger society. However, rather than merely succumbing to the way structural discourses characterize them, they felt the need to respond to them and demonstrate how they differ from them. In their talk, they accomplished such responses both directly and indirectly.
Even so, these legal sex workers’ described experiences remain ambivalent. That is, there are elements of their work that are similar to structural discourses as well as those that differ. In the following section, examples of both are included when these women attempted to clarify that they are not who we think they are.

*We Are Not Who You Think We Are*

Several women felt the need to describe themselves as “normal,” as if there were a need to justify themselves or what they do as normal as opposed to how they were typically characterized. Shy Love, a petite woman (about 5’) in her early twenties with coffee colored skin and long, straight dark brown hair, had just started working at the Bunny Ranch when we sat down to talk. As she curled up in her pink and purple satin comforter she explained:

I know how to distinguish between when I’m here and when I’m a prostitute. Outside of here I’m a normal person. And, even…when we go to the club\(^593\)…you wear a Bunny Ranch jacket…a Bunny Ranch hat, they know you. And…the people around here, they don’t even treat you like that, like when you’re outside of here…They treat you just like this regular person off the street who’s either hella cool or hella stupid. And, they kinda, they just make you feel like a normal person. So, it’s really easy out here to do it.\(^594\)

Shy made it clear that who she was in the Bunny Ranch and who she was outside were different, even when she was representing the Ranch. She also said that being in Nevada made it easier to be treated “normally” outside the Ranch.
When I inquired further about what Shy saw as normal she referenced “nine-to-fivers” as normal, but indicated that that is not the kind of normal she could ever be. Even so, she said that outside the Ranch she is a “normal” single mother of four as distinct from someone who would blow all her money on an expensive Mercedes even though she has the money to do so. She also described herself as a “girlie girl” in the Ranch whereas outside she could go without make-up, have messy hair, and wear jeans or sweats. She said that she can go out and enjoy herself outside but that inside she had to keep her mind on work. Interestingly, she described keeping her mind on work as: “(I)n here, I’m like, ‘Alright, gotta put my mind on work. I gotta do this and gotta do that. Gotta have some sex. Gotta have some sex.’ Here, it’s like, ‘Alright! Gotta get laid!’”\(^{595}\) It could be said that the sex aspect of her work is another element that is distinct from the “normality” of life outside of work. On the other hand, peepshow dancer Tawnya Dudash suggests that sex workers venturing out into the forbidden realm of ‘deviant’ female sexuality means it no longer holds as much of a threat for us. The bonds among us as women are strengthened, and we are able to discuss sexual variations in a nonjudgmental format, thereby breaking down notions of ‘normal’ and ‘abnormal’ behavior.\(^{596}\) Shy’s focus on sex as work could be characterized as distinct from the “normality” of her life outside of the Bunny Ranch either because her life outside the Ranch does not involve work or because her work is focused on sex. The casual way she talked about sex as work, though, could also suggest that she is breaking down distinctions between what is considered “normal” and “abnormal” as Dudash indicates.
Another interviewee made efforts to equate herself with “class” in an effort to make sex-related work acceptable to a “normal” population. When Jenny has saved enough money, she hopes to open her own “classy” sex shop, where people can purchase massage oils, sex toys, etc., like the one where she used to work. Making it “classy,” she explained would allow her to do business with “normal” people, whom she described as those outside the sex business. Jenny is the only woman I interviewed who was in her forties. She has worked primarily in strip clubs and has posed for popular men’s magazines, but has worked off and on at the Bunny Ranch for a few years now. Class was very important to her when she described the places she had worked, whether it was a strip club, magazine, or brothel. She described the first place she started in the sex industry,

They (her sisters) found out about a strip club and out of desperation started dancing and found out it was really good money, and when they came back we had a place called the Million Dollar Saloon that just opened up that was really, really nice. Two levels, they put a lot of money into it. Very classy place. So we started working there together.

She made numerous references to the need to be classy and promote class. With the shop she hopes to open, “classiness” is her strategy to appeal to the general public. Yet, she also made it clear that she would need to maintain her status “in the community” of the sex industry in order to be successful in her business. So, “class” is a way for Jenny to negotiate between and be attractive to both “normal” people and those “in the community.”
This distinction between normal people and sex workers is likewise promoted in cultural discourses of prostitution. Cultural discourses suggest that one reason women go into prostitution is because of difficulties in their childhood, presumably, unlike normal people. Kandi was both aware of this assumption and resisted it with her experiences and how she talked about them. Kandi came from a religiously observant Methodist family. It is ironic that she is on HBO now as she was not allowed to have movie channels when she was younger. Although her family went to church every Sunday, she did not feel that her upbringing was particularly repressive. Kandi resisted cultural assumptions when she compared reasons others gave for women going into military service with those given for women going into sex work:

(I)t’s not like I come from a…broken home…You know, there was no abuse. No sexual abuse. No physical…My mom was my Girl Scout leader for thirteen years. So, really, I can’t think of anything, ‘cause usually they say, oh, for you to go into the service you gotta come from a broken home, or somethin’ bad’s gotta happen to you in your life for you to become a stripper, or a working girl. No. I mean I have not had one thing bad in my life that I can look back and say, this is why I’m here.

Kandi said that people assume, in both cases – military service and sex work – women go into the business because something must have gone wrong in their childhoods.

Despite not coming from a broken home herself, Kandi admitted that there were those that got into the business for the wrong reasons. She said, “I remember when I was little girl, and you would hear about a prostitute or a hooker…you know, you’d seen ‘em
on the talk shows, doing it to support their drug habits. I thought that was the most
godawful thing…(D)id I feel that that was icky? Yes, I did.” But now that she has
experience doing the same type of work, she finds these others’ perspectives sad because
she recognizes what they were going through. She knows that sometimes your body can
feel worn out and that “having to be with a man that you have no connection, no
chemistry, no emotional connection (with)…can be an awful feeling.” Yet, she also
described the economic benefits her work has brought to her and her daughter. She
explained how she and her daughter were able to travel together and to donate school
supplies to students back home because of how much money she made. Kandi’s
ambivalence about her experiences echoed that of the individual sex workers’ discourses
considered in Chapter 2. She explained how her work could be hard, yet financially
rewarding. She explained how taking time off was necessary because the work could be
hard on her body and mind. Yet, she resisted being characterized as a prostitute who got
into the business for drugs or because of childhood abuse, and she recognized the value
of her work in providing for her and her daughter.

Cultural discourses also suggest that prostitutes are forced into this work in unsafe
environments. Yet, even though the women of the Moonlite Bunny Ranch recognized this
perception, they told a different story. Kayla, a cultured, polite, and soft-spoken African-
American woman, started working at the Ranch a few months before I met her.
Interestingly, at 27 years old, she said that this was her first real job. She married young
and went from her parents’ house to her husband’s house. After almost five years of
marriage, she divorced and had been living off her settlement before using her looks -
slender 5’6” frame, thick, long, black hair, and delicate facial features – to make her own money from working at the Ranch. She indicated that she “didn’t feel pressured into it and it wasn’t like everyone’s perception of it. I never look at like, ‘Oh, prostitution,’ and I think that if I ever saw it as that…I wouldn’t do it. ‘Cause I think prostitution, like on the street corner, is something that’s worse.” In Nevada, legal prostitution does not take place on street corners but in brothels. Yet, many brothels still practice the “lockdown” system where prostitutes work three weeks on and one week off. During those three weeks, they are not allowed to leave the premises of the brothel and communication with the outside world is limited. Without being prompted to do so, Kandi responded to this characterization:

This is a very, very nice place to work. We’re not locked down. We’re not made to stay. They don’t go through our stuff, unless they really feel that they have to, for drugs, or… weapons, whatever. Has that been a problem? No. I can’t remember one time in the goin’ on six years that Dennis and Suzette have had to come in to any girl’s room for drugs or weapons or anything….We are very well protected every which way.

Contrary to assumptions others make about her working conditions, Kandi explained that she did not feel forced to be at the Ranch and she also felt that she was safe when she was there.

Shy Love explained that she felt that her privacy was protected and that she felt safe as well. She described her room as her “bubble” - it is where she can go and be alone, watch television, and relax, even while on shift. Interestingly, it is the same room
in which she entertains customers. Bunny Love is a 5’5” platinum blonde, who is a
tomboy when she is off-shift wearing snowboarding pants and t-shirts. Yet, along with
Airforce Amy and Brooke Taylor, when Bunny is made-up for work – hooker heels, and
mini-dress, hair up, and make-up perfect – she has become one of the public faces of the
Bunny Ranch appearing in *Cathouse*, in radio interviews, and on many of the posters and
other marketing material issued by the Ranch. She echoed these sentiments and extended
her feelings of safety to everyday practices as well. She said that in the two years she has
been working at the Ranch full-time, she has never felt threatened by the management or
customers. Additionally, the women pass on practices to one another about how to check
customers for sexually transmitted infections and how to use condoms to protect the
women’s health. Showing how they are protected and kept safe is how many sex workers
at the Moonlite Bunny Ranch resist their characterization as victims in need of saving.

Structural discourses also characterize prostitutes as a threat to society. As noted
above, safety was promoted in a number of ways that would challenge this claim.
Additionally, I theorized in Chapter 1 that the primary threat sex workers pose to society
is a threat to traditional conceptions of who women are expected to be. Women who are
not coy and secretive about their sexuality are considered dirty and wrong. 605 Eva
Pendleton notes in her article, “Love for Sale: Queering Heterosexuality,”

…the act of making men pay is, in fact, quite subversive. It reverses the terms
under which men feel entitled to unlimited access to women’s bodies. Sex
workers place very clear limits on that access, refiguring it on our own terms.
Rather than face sexual harassment in the underpaid straight work place, sex
workers give men limited permission to play out their sexual fantasies and

desires. In addition to being a threat to the “normal” sexual relationship between men and women
as Pendleton characterizes it, the women of the Moonlite Bunny Ranch also pose a threat
to the “normal” heterosexual economic relationship between men and women.

Women who voice the desire to make their own money in sexual ways pose a
threat to the heterosexual economy that has been practiced longer than the United States
has been a country. Porn actress, feature dancer, and working girl Vivian West directly
addressed these assumptions in speaking with me. She claimed, “It’s very empowering
for a woman….I do whatever I wanna do…I’ve had a lot of guys come in here and be
like, ‘Teach me stuff.’…We’ll play teacher then. I’ll show ‘em somethin’ new…. They’ll
be like, ‘You’re a porn star, teach me stuff.’ And, I’m like, ‘O.K. I can try that.’
Vivian voiced the idea that providing the service of teaching men was empowering for
her. The idea that they are called upon to provide a service to men and that this service
made them feel as if their work was worthwhile was repeated by almost all of the women
I interviewed at the Ranch.

Both the need to resist dominant visions of prostitutes as oppressed and to create
space where they can speak of their work as empowering was echoed in the work of cop-
turned-prostitute, Norma Jean Almodovar:

In the beginning, I feared that I would hate working as a prostitute, but when I
discovered that I really like “whoring,” I felt an immense sense of relief and
liberation. It was wonderful to enjoy the work that subsidized my writing career! I
planned to tell my friends and family that I was a prostitute because I didn’t want them to hear it on the evening news before I was prepared to begin my public battle with the LAPD. I steeled myself to deal with the loss of their affection and support, but was delighted that instead of rejecting me, they all chose to stand by me.609

In sex work, Almovodar found what the women of the Bunny Ranch talked about. That is, they described enjoyment and liberation. She was also surprised that the reaction of her friends and family did not match what dominant discourses said it would be: rejection. Rather, they were supportive.

Many of the women also indicated that working at the Moonlite Bunny Ranch allowed them a safe place to be themselves where they could use their sexuality to make their own money. Kitten, a very thin, dark-skinned African-American woman with long, black hair, who is in her early twenties, has been working at the Moonlite Bunny Ranch for only a few months. However, she worked at another brothel owned by Dennis Hof, the Bunny Ranch 2, for about a year and half before being offered a job at the Moonlite Bunny Ranch. She observed:

I don’t want to tell you this in the wrong way…I wouldn’t call myself a nympho, which is an addiction. Oh my god, this is gettin’ real deep. But…I love attention….I love to feel like I can take something from a guy with my sex appeal. That’s awesome to me….I mean I’m not the prettiest thing in the world, but to some guys I am like a goddess or somethin’, and that kinda floats my boat….So, I think the sex appeal about it is amazin’. And, bein’ open with
yourself and your sexuality is kinda like great….Guys are really into this, you know? You don’t meet a lot a guys that are into women like that. It’s like, “Oh, she’s O.K.” But these guys are like, “Yeah, yeah.” And, I like that. That’s great.610

Kitten both felt the need to justify her enjoyment of sex and the fact that she enjoyed being able to negotiate a good deal from a customer for the services she provided. This characterization both feeds into cultural discourses of transgression while cutting at the underlying assumptions upon which they are based. Can you imagine a male athlete feeling the need to provide a rationale for his enjoyment of sports and the money he makes from it? Kitten said that the Bunny Ranch is a place where she can be herself, which includes being sexual and making money for it, which does challenge the assumption that women should not desire money, especially when obtained through sexual services.611

The importance of making their own money and maintaining a level of financial independence was a theme that ran throughout many of the interviews. Bunny Love explained that although she started off escorting illegally, she did not tell her family that she was involved in the sex industry until after she started at the Bunny Ranch. She did not want to tell her family that she had been arrested for prostitution or that she was working illegally. However, after she started at the Ranch, she felt she could show them. She related:

“Look at what I’ve done. I can actually do something with this and I’m productive, and I’m not just fuckin’ it all off.” And, that way if they had any
problem, I mean, I could just say…I’m twenty-two and I stopped asking my parents for money when I was seventeen. And, my brother is five years older than me and they still pay his car insurance. And, so, like they really can’t say much. Everybody I went to high school with, they’re all either pregnant or married…I’m neither. So, I think I’m doin’ pretty good.612

Bunny was embarrassed when she got arrested for working illegally. Working legally at the Bunny Ranch, making her own money, and being financially independent from her parents allowed her to feel better about what she was doing. It also gave her the confidence to tell her family. Yet she also recognized that this is not the typical path of marriage and babies. Rather than feeling like this made her wrong in some way, she characterized it as doing well in life.

Kitten said that she has had difficulty dating outside the Ranch not just because of what she does but because of the financial independence her work provides. She described her last relationship:

We would go out and he would try to pay for dinner. I’ll pay for it. It just kinda makes ‘im feel like, ‘Urgh, she doesn’t need me.’ ‘Can you stop doin’ this?’ You know? But that’s like saying stop making money. Sit on my ass and let you take care of me….No. I’m not gonna do that. Not now, at least. Let me get what I want and then we can work on this.613

Kitten made it clear that she was interested in romantic relationships, but that if they were going to happen while she was working, it had to be with a man strong enough to handle what she does. Kitten said that she is working toward a goal. She wants to go back to
school and possibly become a cosmetologist. This goal is what she focuses on while she working. But, she said that her last boyfriend thought her mind was on how much better her customers were in bed than he was. Rather than put up with his insecurities, Kitten said she was done with the relationship. She remained hopeful that she could have romantic relationships with more secure men.

Making their own money and maintaining a level of financial independence flies in the face of being characterized as druggie whores oppressed by prostitution. At the same time, the fact that this money comes from commodifying their sexuality is an idea that still contradicts society’s expectations of what a “good” girl should be. Throughout my interviews and observations with them, the way the women of the Moonlite Bunny Ranch talked about their experiences demonstrated that they were aware of these cultural characterizations. Consciously or not these discourses were a part of how they talked about their experiences.

*You Just Don’t Understand*

The need to separate their home and work lives is a common thread in cultural discourses and those of individual sex workers, both inside and outside the Moonlite Bunny Ranch. Yet, it is not a part of the organizational narrative of the Bunny Ranch itself or that is represented in *Cathouse*. One reason given for the need to separate work and non-work parts of their lives is what they do at work is hard on sex workers’ emotions. At least, that is what cultural discourses say. However, the women of the Bunny Ranch concur more closely with the individual perspectives of sex workers working in other contexts as their perspectives are more ambivalent. That is, they
described their work experiences as both trying and rewarding emotionally. In line with cultural discourses, Kandi said that while she is having sex with a customer she tries to keep things from getting too personal:

…if I feel like it’s getting too emotional, too attached…I gotta start sayin’ what am I gonna do with my fifty percent? I’m gonna buy this Coach purse. I’m gonna pay this bill….While I’m goin’, “Yeah, break it off in me daddy!” (laughs) You have to put your mind somewhere else….You have to go somewhere else with it.616

While she may have to work at keeping things from getting too personal, she also said that one of the most enjoyable parts of her work was getting a customer that was good in bed. She also said she enjoyed giving oral sex more than receiving it, even at work.

Bunny Love said that “some people say it’s tough on…the emotions,” but she found it easier than they might think. She said that despite these assumptions that it was only people who came into the business with baggage and who did not know themselves that have trouble. She said, “(Y)ou just have to…know yourself. You have to make yourself not do anything you’re not comfortable with…”617 This perspective is in line with Carole Queen’s perspective discussed in Chapter 2. That is, the difference between women who have negative experiences in sex work and those who have positive experiences is how much one knows about themselves and sex, and those who do not necessarily see sexual women as “bad” girls.618

Kandi concurred. She said that her life experience, having been in the Navy and having had a child, allowed her to grow and mature. In contrast, she believed girls at
eighteen and nineteen still had a lot of learning to do about themselves. She said that she would not wish this job on anyone, not because of the work itself necessarily, but “because you have to be comfortable with yourself. You have to know mentally that you’re a good person…that you aren’t trash. Or, that you’re not a tramp.” Knowing herself was how Kandi was able to identify and set her own boundaries. Additionally, believing in herself was how Kandi described being able to resist cultural characterization as trash or a tramp.

One major reason for the need to separate their lives inside and outside the Bunny Ranch that is not a part of cultural discourses of prostitution is the lack of understanding of those outside the business. Jenny said that she does not like to tell some people what she does because “it’s gonna concern them. You know? …They’re not going to understand it unless they’re here and they’re not ever gonna come here. That doesn’t mean that they’re bad people or that I’m gonna think any less of them myself. It’s just that I don’t want to go into that.” Avoidance is an easier strategy than confrontation with some people despite the fact that Jenny is straightforward with those she cares to share with. The same is true for Bunny Love. While those persons she has told about where she works have generally been supportive, she would rather avoid the subject with those individuals who have proven themselves to be less than supportive. Bunny explained that the questions a childhood friend and an acquaintance of her mother’s asked

…just seemed closed minded. Like they weren’t even interested…(T)hey had already made up their minds. They didn’t like it, regardless. And, so, I choose not
to talk to them. And they can think what they want, but…I don’t have to answer their questions….I’ll answer the questions of the people that I care about and that I love. But if they can’t appreciate something, they can’t be okay with it, then I don’t care….I don’t really give a shit.621

She just found it easier to avoid the subject with those who would be less than supportive and would assume they know what her work is like.

Keeping quiet in response to knowing that some people would not change their opinions was Vivian West’s choice as well. She knew that her uncle was not her biggest fan to begin with so she decided not to tell him about her pornographic films, Cathouse or the Bunny Ranch. Interestingly though, she is able to joke with the rest of her family. As she explained,

Everybody in the family is kind of in agreement not to tell him because they’re like…It’s just gonna pour gas on a fire and start a pointless fight. He has his opinions, which are fine, and I have my opinions, and so…we just don’t talk about that around him. But the rest of my family’ll joke around about it with me. You know? Call me a whore and laugh and point and stuff and I’ll laugh and be like, “Shut up!”622

Appropriating terms like “whore” and making light of what is normally such a negatively charged term makes talking to much of her family easier even while avoidance remains the best strategy for dealing with her uncle’s negative assumptions about her.

Cultural discourses concur that prostitutes face difficulties in their personal lives because of the need to keep what they do secret from their friends and family.623 As the
few examples given above indicate, some of the women at the Moonlite Bunny Ranch have specific people in their lives from whom they keep their work secret. Contrary to this pervasive cultural belief of secrecy, however, most of the families and friends of the women of the Moonlite Bunny Ranch know what they do. Most of the women interviewed made it clear that they have told a majority of the people in their lives what they do. Kandi used to try to keep her work and home lives separate. She would leave her daughter with her mother and father in her home state while she traveled to Nevada to work for a few weeks at a time. Now that her daughter is older, she has moved with her out to Nevada so that she can spend more time with her and still make the money that work at the Ranch provides. When I interviewed her, I was hesitant to mention her home state. She responded that she did not care if they knew and that I should, “Let ‘em know!” Despite the need to be classy or normal, Jenny also indicated that she was always straightforward with people outside the business about what she does. She said that it is just the way she is.

Vivian West agrees. She said,

Everyone knows what I do because I look at it this way, I’m not doing anything wrong, but if you lie and say, “Oh, I’m a model,” or something like that, people are gonna find out anyways….It’s not as taboo as it used to be and people watch it…So, I think if I lie they’ll think I’m ashamed or I feel like I’m doing something wrong, which I don’t and I’m not. So, I don’t lie ‘cause I figure, well, you’re either gonna like me or not. Might as well not like me for who I am than like me for a lie."
Vivian resists the cultural characterization of the woman ashamed to be a prostitute and, in her case, porn actress. She resists being called a liar by being open and straightforward about her work, which helps her avoid feeling ashamed. She also recognizes that society is changing in its perceptions of pornography and the representation of sex work. The reaction she got from her neighbors when they found out supports her theory. When they learned that she worked in porn and was on *Cathouse*, they openly admitted to watching the show and invited her over for coffee.

Being straightforward has allowed women like Jenny to face head-on reactions from others about what they do. Even so, most of the sex workers I interviewed reported few negative responses. Kandi said that she had not heard anything negative from people back home. The way she explained it though was almost as if she expected negative responses, but did not get them. Jenny said that most people who know her have found that working at the Moonlite Bunny Ranch had acted as a stabilizing influence on her life. She has had family conflicts over the years that have affected how she feels about herself and her work. Coupled with her divorce, separation from her business partner and the pain in her body from years of working in strip clubs led Jenny to drinking a lot of beer in order to get through the day. However, since beginning work at the Ranch she said that she has stopped drinking. She also felt more positive about the possibilities her future holds now that she is getting older. She hoped to be able to stop dancing entirely and quit the Ranch so that she can open her own sex shop. But, she also understood that she must keep up her relationships with those in the sex industry if she can hope to make her business a success.
At the same time, two women I interviewed made it clear that no one in their families knows where they work. Kayla told me that a few of her friends and the guy she was sort of seeing know she is working at the Bunny Ranch. But, when asked how she decided who to tell about her work, she said it was on a “need to know basis.” As she sees her mother about twice a year and her father no longer lives in her home state, she does not feel the need to tell them. However, given that she was beginning to do some of the media promotions for the Ranch, she realized that her family might find out about her work before she told them. She did not necessarily think their reactions to her news would be negative. Even so, she clarified,

It’s not that I don’t want them to know. But I don’t wanna have to have the same conversation I’m having with you to explain it all to them because they wouldn’t see it the way it is. They’d see it the way everyone else sees it. It’s the way I saw it before I came….You kinda have to have the experience to know.626 Assuming that her family would have the same negative perceptions of prostitution that are promoted widely in our culture and that she also believed before coming to work at the Ranch, discouraged Kayla from telling them about her work.

Nadia, the new girl I met on her first day and shared orientation with, was pretty sure her family’s reaction would be negative if they actually knew what she was doing. After she got arrested while working at a strip club in San Francisco, her brother disowned her. Now she said that her family included just her, her mother and stepfather. She said, “They know what I do. I don’t know if they know that I do it now.” As she explained further, it was clear that they knew she got arrested for working at the strip
club in San Francisco. She believed they think she works at a strip club now, but they do not know she works at the Bunny Ranch. She said it was awkward because she does not want to lie to them, but she also does not want to hurt them. She understood that telling them what she does would not be like telling them that she was in college studying to be a doctor. So, for now, she lets them believe what they want to believe and does not bring up the issue herself—don’t ask, don’t tell.

Nadia and Kayla’s practices resemble the way structural discourses characterize sex workers. That is, they intentionally keep what they do from their families. While Kayla does not expect negative reactions, she has still avoided telling them, so far. Nadia, on the other hand, does expect negative reactions given the way her brother reacted to her previous arrest. However, most of the women working at the Moonlite Bunny Ranch with whom I interacted during my visits had told their friends and families. These women reported that they had experienced few negative reactions and that their families and friends actually were supportive. The importance of these relationships in their lives will be explored further in Chapter 7. Overall, though, what these women’s stories suggested to me is that there is more to the relationship between their work and non-work lives than the need to separate the two.

Implications

All the women working at the Moonlite Bunny Ranch described being influenced in some way by historical, cultural, and community narratives of prostitution. Accordingly, they felt it was their responsibility (and now mine) to speak out and share their perspectives. This need comes from feeling as if what people think about prostitutes
as oppressed persons in need of saving or in need of punishment does not reflect their perspective as workers in the business. In contrast, these legal sex workers think we need to show that they are not who we think they are. They characterize themselves as normal, not from broken homes, and not forced to do this work. Additionally, they feel safe at work and promote the safety of others working in the business as well. Historical and cultural narratives also typify prostitutes as “bad” girls who transgress societal mores. These women do transgress norms, but are proud of it. They admit to being sexual, desiring financial independence, and enjoying making money from their customers. They say that working at the Moonlite Bunny Ranch gives them an environment in which to accomplish these goals. So rather than needing to be punished for their transgressions, they own them.

At the same time, the women I spoke with at the Moonlite Bunny Ranch do make the effort to keep their work and non-work lives separate just like dominant discourses portray. They admit that it can be hard to negotiate emotionally who they are at work with who they are outside of work. However, this difficulty is not necessarily because of the nature of the work itself. Rather, as these women characterized it, this negotiation has more to do with the lack of understanding of those persons outside the business. Despite this fact, most of the women had told their friends and families what they do with few negative responses. The importance of these relationships will be explored further in the next chapter.

There are both theoretical and substantive implications of this analysis. First, for narrative inquiry, I posed the question: Can individuals be empowered despite operating
within oppressive material and narrative structures? I conceded in Chapters 1 and 2 that there are women who are oppressed in sex work and that there are oppressive structures, such as patriarchy, at work that are imbricated in these women’s lives. In other words, there is some truth to historical and cultural narratives of prostitution. However, what also has been demonstrated in Chapters 2, 3, 5, and here in Chapter 6 is that these are not the only experiences women working in the sex industry have. Their individual perspectives both include structural discourses and resist them in order to make space for their experiences of empowerment as well.

Carol Rambo Ronai and Carolyn Ellis “paint a picture of empowerment in a disempowering context” in their article examining the narrative resistance strategies of table dancers. They argue that patriarchal oppression is responsible for the low-class status attributed to stripping as a profession. Even so,

table dancers come out ahead in the end: Gender becomes a resource with which to beat men at their own game. Dancers emerge as freewheeling entrepreneurs who carve out their own autonomous niche in an otherwise oppressive context, using expressive deviance and microstrategies of resistance to exploit men for money, goods, and services, even as they entice their male targets to believe that the men actually are in control. Ronai and Ellis focused on women’s negotiation strategies and their communication about one another to demonstrate how the dancers carved out space within oppressive structures to speak of empowerment. They showed times when these women seemed to resist cultural assumptions about them and even directed attention to times when these
dancers subjugated one another’s experiences in an attempt to resist cultural characterization as “wrong” or “dirty.” This is one of the only examples I found of scholarship that used actual talk to show how resistance to cultural characterizations occurs.

I have taken my work further. In Chapters 1 and 2, I identified the major elements of the historical, cultural and community narratives of prostitution. This work established the basis for the focus of this (and the next) chapter to identify moments of interplay between and among the historical, cultural, and community narratives with those of these individual sex workers.

By identifying moments of interaction among multiple levels of narratives in these women’s talk I have been able to demonstrate how their talk about themselves is both shaped by these stories and how they resist them. As Larry Grant suggests, “It is true that in some ways sex workers are ground under the heel of the patriarchy. They live lives outside the protection of the law and the safety of socially acceptable modes of sexual behavior. Yet, though individuals may suffer greatly, many find freedom and fulfillment through sex work.”629

My observations lend support to approaches to narrative inquiry that theorize narratives as constructed and operating on multiple levels. Moreover, my research also extends such theoretical perspectives by demonstrating that historical, cultural, community, and individual discourses do not exist in isolation from one another. Rather, these multiple levels of narrative can interact with one another at any given time in the actual talk of people in their everyday lives. As lived and as sense-making tools, these
multiple narratives influence how people talk about, think about, and hence go about being themselves. This means that the women of the Bunny Ranch are both subject to structural discourses of prostitution and create space for their contrary experiences through their individual narratives of resistance. Approaching narrative inquiry with the knowledge that these multiple levels of narrative can interact at any given time provides additional insight into how we understand what people think about themselves and why it is that they believe what they do.

Ultimately, this contention also lends support to the idea that we should not unquestioningly accept the perspectives promoted in structural discourses. In other words, given this analysis, we can no longer accept in blanket fashion that prostitutes are oppressed by their work even if we do accept that certain aspects of structural discourses of punishment and redemption are true. It is no longer legitimate to say that these individuals are deluded or suffering from false consciousness when they claim they are empowered. Rather, we must accept the problematic positionality that they can be both oppressed in a heterosexual, patriarchal economy, while at the same time empowered by the work they do.

This brings me to the second implication of this work: what does this research mean for prostitutes? Almost all women working in prostitution in the United States are working illegally. For this reason, the experiences of women working legally in Nevada are not often researched or included in general analyses of sex work. Additionally, the Moonlite Bunny Ranch is a unique case among legal brothels in Nevada since it advertises and the owner Dennis Hof follows the rules and laws set by the state in order
to provide a model for how legal prostitution should work, as explained in Chapter 3. The women working in this environment report feelings of safety and security, the ability to provide a service to the community, and the capability to achieve and maintain economic independence from their work. Additionally, they claim that they are not forced into this work and that they do not feel oppressed. They admit to difficulties in their work, but couple these with the benefits they receive as well.

So, has Dennis Hof created a model for how prostitution should be practiced? My simple yet qualified answer is yes. Criticisms of prostitution focus on how it oppresses women through hierarchical gender relationships, coercion, and violence. Yet, these are hardly a part of the women’s experiences as they communicated them or as I observed them at the Moonlite Bunny Ranch. This observation leaves the structural argument claiming that the practice of prostitution itself promotes the subjugation of women. However, as I have shown through focusing on the interactions of multiple levels of narratives, blindly accepting such structural arguments ignores the actual experiences of women doing the work. This realization does not mean that the model provided by Dennis Hof and the Moonlite Bunny Ranch is not without its problems. In the next chapter, I will examine the organizational narrative of the Moonlite Bunny Ranch and its interaction with the individual narratives of the sex workers employed there. Thus, Chapter 7 will focus both on the benefits of the “typical American business” story of the Ranch and reveal some its limitations as well.

This is a particularly important time to pay heed to this analysis. As noted in the introduction, Nevada’s economic crisis may lead to expanding the areas in which
prostitution is legal. There will be questions about whether this expansion should happen or not and the old arguments explicated in Chapter 1 certainly will be discussed. What I suggest is that the additional question of how to “do it right” if it is going to be done should also be addressed. Furthermore, as sexologist Carole Queen notes, there is a growing amount of sexual entertainment available today. Being able to understand the increasingly acceptable nature of this work for women requires that “our culture take a whole new look at women and sex.”

So, I pose this “scary” question: What would it mean for women (and society) if we were to consider sex work a legitimate employment option? Obviously, it would alter the economy as women would be able to make as much (or more than) men in this work. It would also likely alter power relations, as the relationship between women, money, and power would necessarily evolve further. Additionally, how we conceive of women and sex would have to change. Porn star Nina Hartley wonders, “You could go to school for any other skill, but not sexual skill. It made no sense. Stripping and adult films provided a safe place to practice lots of sex with lots of different people in lots of different situations. I gained competence and confidence, two things I had always wanted.” If we were able to think outside of the good girl/bad girl binary, perhaps we could conceive of a world where sexual women could be “dirty” but would not be stigmatized for their behavior. We might also be able to reconceive bodily labor that involves sex.

This question of sex work as a legitimate employment option for women also points to another overlooked feature of the research on sex work in general. As noted by Jill Nagle,
Since all our desire and actions still grow up under white supremacist capitalist heteropatriarchy, we need to problematize not only choices to participate in the sex industry, but also choices not to. Whores, too, are something that women are not only supposed to not be, but also, not be mistaken for. This division translates into a mandate to not only be virtuous, but also to appear virtuous, to again demonstrate our affiliation with the privileged half of the good girl/bad girl binary. 

Questioning why women do not go into sex work would put the entire heterosexual economy and good girl/bad girl binary under the microscope. Future research might therefore take the revolutionary stance of examining why women choose not to participate in sex work.
Chapter 7: “No, this is a real job, man.” Influences of the *Cathouse* Narrative and Dennis Hof

As with Chapter 6, this final analysis chapter comes back to the contention posed in Chapter 5, that is, that *Cathouse* constructs a narrative of the Moonlite Bunny Ranch as a typical American business in which the sex workers provide a service through which they are economically empowered. Chapter 6 focused on the interaction of historical, cultural, and community discourses with the individual stories of the sex workers at the Ranch. In contrast, this chapter focuses primarily on the interactions between the organizational narrative of the Moonlite Bunny Ranch and the discourse of the individual women who work there. In Chapter 6, the “community narrative” to which I referred was that of prostitutes working in other contexts, including illegal workers as discussed in Chapter 2 and legal prostitutes in other Nevada brothels. Here, the community narrative is the organizational discourse of the Moonlite Bunny Ranch as constructed on *Cathouse* and echoed by owner Dennis Hof, general manager Madam Suzette, and the women who work at the Ranch.

Structural discourses would have us believe that the women working at the Moonlite Bunny Ranch have been forced to do this work, are not safe in their work environment, and pose a threat to the safety of society. Yet, as *Cathouse* and the individual stories of the sex workers at this legal brothel suggest, this picture is too simple. The lived experiences of these women are both imbricated by structural discourses and resist them at the same time. How these sex workers speak to cultural
discourses, however, has not been pulled from thin air. Rather, the organizational narrative of the Moonlite Bunny Ranch aids in their characterization of their work.

In this chapter, I will focus on specific elements of the organizational narrative of the Moonlite Bunny Ranch that these sex workers draw upon to make sense of their lived experiences. I identified these elements in both *Cathouse* discourse and in the everyday talk of Dennis Hof, Madame Suzette, and the Bunny Ranch staff. I identified instances of the sex workers’ talk reflecting this organizational narrative when the women either directly indicated that they were influenced by any or all of the above discourses, or when the content of their responses suggested the connection. In cases where the connections were implied, I have explained why I concluded that there was indeed a connection.

Recognizing moments when the organizational narrative of the Moonlite Bunny Ranch noticeably patterned the individual narratives of these working girls also highlighted the parts of their stories that were not part of Bunny Ranch story. Specifically, I heard accounts describing the importance of these women’s relationships with their families to their work. Because stories of these relationships are not a significant part of dominant discourses or what is represented on *Cathouse*, but were important in these women’s talk about their work, I considered it crucial to include these narratives in my discussion of their lived experiences.

My discussion here is important for both theoretical and substantive reasons. First, evidence in this chapter supports the contention that *Cathouse* is an “authentic” reflection of the reality of life at the Moonlite Bunny Ranch. Most analyses of reality television as discussed in Chapter 5 merely theorize how representation in this form
relates to reality. In contrast, this study provides observed evidence that the portrayal in *Cathouse*, while edited to be more exciting that the routines of everyday experience, does provide an “authentic” representation of life at the Ranch. That is, watching the show gives viewers a chance to experience what it is like to be there. Given that this show counters dominant discourses of prostitution, audiences may come to question their understandings about prostitution if they watch this show or visit the Bunny Ranch.

Additionally, this chapter identifies yet another moment when multiple narratives interact at given times and together influence the ways these women live and make sense of their lives. It should be noted that I separate my discussion in Chapter 6 of how the stories of these individual sex workers interact with historical, cultural, and community discourses from the present discussion. However, I do NOT do this because they are separate moments in these women’s talk. Rather, this division is useful in pointing out that both structural discourses and the organizational narrative of the Moonlite Bunny Ranch interact with the individual stories of the sex workers who work at this brothel. There are recurrent moments when multiple discourses, such as those identified in Chapters 1, 2, 3, and 6 interact. The contribution of this chapter is to demonstrate instances when the organizational narrative of the Moonlite Bunny Ranch specifically influences how the women who work there make sense of what they do.

Finally, I have suggested throughout this work that what we know about prostitution is shaped by what we have learned from historical, cultural, and social narratives. Problematizing the simple punishment/redemption binary of structural discourses contributes to a more complete understanding of how these women live their
lives. Recognizing the narratives that influence how they live and make sense of their lives - both when they integrate these narratives and when these discourses are challenged - creates space for us to notice when individual perspectives stand outside these discursive constructions. In the end, I hope that these sex workers have the opportunity to be heard and that we have the tools needed to hear them. In this case, this means hearing them define what they do as “work” and clarifying what is important in their work and non-work lives.

Accordingly, this chapter identifies particular areas of these women’s discourse that have been influenced by the *Cathouse*/Hof/Moonlite Bunny Ranch\(^\text{637}\) narrative to demonstrate how their work influences their identity/ies. Before giving specific examples of the interactions between the Bunny Ranch narrative and the individual narratives these women shared, it is first important to explain the theoretical underpinnings that connect work and identity. Then I will discuss how *Cathouse* is an “authentic” representation of the lived experiences of the sex workers at the Moonlite Bunny Ranch. Next, I will show how these women’s relationships, first, with Hof, Madame Suzette, and others at the Ranch, and, then, with persons outside of the Ranch, influence their individual narratives. Finally, I will discuss some implications of this research.

*What We Do is Who We Are*

The major assumption framing this chapter is that these women’s work and how they talk about it influences who they are. So, before moving forward, it is important to explicate the connection between the two. Dan O'Hair contends,
One of the most consistent and predictable conversational turns in early acquaintanceship is the inquiry focusing on our jobs or careers. *What do you do?* or *What is your line of work?* crop up early in relational talk, serving as relationship building devices and points of departure for further conversation. For most of us, work is a primary focus of our lives and occupies a substantial portion of what we talk about. It constitutes a large part of our identity.\textsuperscript{638} Since work plays such an important role in our lives, we should understand how we make sense of our work and the role it plays in the construction of our identity/ies.

As noted in the introduction, I understand identity not as a static concept or an external structure imposed upon us. Rather, it is multi-dimensional, involves change, and is constructed through communication.\textsuperscript{639} Eura Jung and Michael L. Hecht further clarify identity from a social perspective when they argue

that social relations and roles are internalized by individuals as identities through communication. Individuals’ identities, in turn, are acted out as social behavior through communication. Identity not only defines an individual but also reflects social roles and relations through communication. Moreover, social behavior is a function of identity through communication.\textsuperscript{640}

From this perspective, focusing only on the individual would give a distorted, if not totally false, view of identity. Rather, we must see individuals as part of the communities in which they interact, work, and in which the process of their identity/ies construction can be examined.
Throughout this research, the way in which I comprehend this process is through examining the stories told by the women of the Moonlite Bunny Ranch, whether they were offered on television, in one-on-one interviews, or observed during their interactions with me and others. The stories they told gave insight into their identity/ies and that of the Moonlite Bunny Ranch as an organization. The stories they told involved the work they do. How they evaluated that work incorporated the “typical American business” narrative constructed by Dennis Hof and the discourse of the Moonlite Bunny Ranch. As such, what we think about work, jobs, and businesses in the United States in general, and prostitution as a job in particular, is relevant to how these women construct their “work identity/ies.”

Patrice M. Buzzanell and Steven R. Goldzwig’s article on linear and non-linear work models is based on the foundation that a corporate/capitalist framework dominates the way we in the United States view the purpose of organizations and also contributes to how we evaluate “work.” Robin Clair concurs. She argues that the "dominant work-related ideology in practice in the United States is that of capitalism." This external model, originally conceptualized by Adam Smith in *Wealth of Nations*, provides the foundation upon which we base evaluations of what we do as well. According to Clair, Smith argues that jobs are less valued when they are

(1) enjoyable, (2) easy or nonskilled, (3) temporary or unstable, (4) have low probability of success, (5) require little trust, (6) are not conducted in their natural time (e.g., a soldier in war time versus a soldier in peace time), (7) underutilize
the worker in terms of duration and intensity, and (8) are not the primary means of support.643

From Clair’s perspective, then, “a real job” must not be enjoyable, easy, temporary, etc. Joyce K. Fletcher additionally suggests that when considering what “work” is, we must also take into consideration (1) where the job takes place, and (2) who does the work.644

Despite the fluid nature of identity, people still have the need for a sense of stable identity, that is, people attempt to bring their identity/ies into one coherent whole.645 Identification with a community is one way people can bring coherence to their identity/ies. For this reason, people make meaning of their jobs not only in terms of external evaluative criteria such as those suggested by Clair, Smith, and Fletcher, but also in relation to the important people in their lives: self, family, and others.646 What all of these elements have in common is that they are a part of how we speak about our work, and more importantly for this analysis, how the women of the Moonlite Bunny Ranch talked about their work and non-work lives. Therefore, how they talked about “work” affected how they determined the value of their jobs and, in turn, their identity/ies.

Cathouse as “Authentic” Representation of Life at the Moonlite Bunny Ranch

As discussed in Chapter 5, the goal of reality television is to create an “authentic” experience for viewers, to make them feel as if what they are watching is what it is really like, in this case, to be at the Moonlite Bunny Ranch.647 What better way to compare what is represented on television with the lived experiences of the women portrayed than to actually go there and see what it is like? Having spent time at the Ranch, I found that the working girls articulated a distinction between broader cultural discourses of
prostitution and their lived experiences at the Bunny Ranch, as discussed in Chapter 6. They also made specific references to how their experiences compared to what is shown on Cathouse.

On the advice of a friend, Kayla watched just two episodes of the show before she came out to work. After seeing it she said to herself, “Oh my god, this looks so staged.” But when she arrived at the Ranch she was surprised to find, “(I)t’s pretty like it was on there. I just thought that it was like everyone else…I just saw prostitution. People selling their bodies for any amount of money.” Kitten’s perspective was similar. She said that when she saw Cathouse, she thought “it was just too good to believe…I was just like, wait a minute…. (T)his has to be illegal.” Having to get her sheriff’s card upon arrival did not help to allay her fears. But, when she got settled into the Ranch, she says that she felt good about working at this place. She concluded, “I’m telling you, I’m down with it. It makes me feel more comfortable. You know? It does.”

One of the major reasons these women were doubtful that what was shown on Cathouse reflected what life was really like at the Moonlite Bunny Ranch was that their perceptions of prostitution, prior to working in it, came from cultural and media narratives of the practice. They saw it as a practice in which women stood on street corners and were forced to do things they did not want to do by pimps who abused them. In contrast to this perspective, what the working girls at the Ranch found was that it was a business, that it was “a real job.”
Working at the Moonlite Bunny Ranch is the primary means of support for most of the women I interviewed. Given this criterion, working at the Ranch should be considered “a real job.” However, prostitution is usually stigmatized as a social practice or societal “problem” instead. Given the evaluation criteria applied to “a real job” identified by Clair, this should not be a surprise. But there are a number of characteristics identified by the women of the Bunny Ranch that support defining prostitution as sex work. As with most jobs, there are daily practices, rules, and mundane routines, many of which were discussed in Chapter 3. From scheduling to travel plans and from doctors’ visits to overhead costs, the women at the Moonlite Bunny Ranch actually focus more during their twelve hour shifts on logistics than they do entertaining customers.

Although the working girls must work twelve hour shifts when they are on, they all choose when they will work and when they will take time off. They all negotiate their schedules with Madam Suzette, the general manager. How each of them determines her schedule differs though. In Cathouse, shots of Madame Suzette working in the office included views of the white board on which the girls’ schedules are written and instances when girls came by the office to discuss when they wanted to work and what days they wanted off. In interviews I learned some of the more specific details about planning their schedules. Jenny scheduled work at the Ranch based on what was going on in her personal life and how much she needed the money, while Kitten split her months into two weeks on/two weeks off. She admitted that she did not always stick to her schedule though because she enjoyed spending time with her friends and family while she was at
home. So sometimes she would stay home longer. She enjoyed her time at home because she did not have to work at all while there. Kandi worked full time and had a set Monday through Friday, 8am to 8pm schedule so that she could see her daughter off to school in the morning and spend evenings with her. But she also said that she must take time off every few months to rest her mind and body. Each of these women’s schedules is negotiated with Madam Suzette, just as it is shown on *Cathouse*.

In addition to scheduling when they will work, every woman I spoke with at the Bunny Ranch discussed how she had to coordinate her travel to and from Nevada, given that most of them do not live in the state. Vivian tries to work at the Bunny Ranch one week a month, spends another week or two working other jobs in the sex industry, and the rest of the month at home with her mother and son. She said the time she spends at home is terrific because work does not interfere with her time with her family. Kitten travels out to Nevada when she needs the money and goes home to enjoy spending it. Other women like Bunny Love and Kandi have moved to the area to work at the Ranch full time. Their travel plans are for their vacations, which they take every couple of months. All of this coordination is done through Madam Suzette and the cashiers, just as it is shown on *Cathouse*. One episode showed Madam Suzette on the phone with Kitten, for example, trying to find out just when she planned on coming back to work and when the driver should be prepared to pick her up at the airport. It also showed Suzette’s frustration as Kitten does not always show up at the airport when she says she will be there.\(^{652}\)
Despite the amount of time each woman works, they do not work the “typical” 8 to 5 schedule with only one annual two-week vacation. This practice makes it easier to dismiss their jobs as temporary or unstable. Additionally, these women travel to and from their jobs for set periods of time and travel out of state periodically. Sometimes they are going home between periods of work, while others they are vacationing. This makes their work appear that it does not take place in “real” time. These perceptions make it easier to devalue what they do, according to corporate/capitalist criteria of what “a real job” is.

Following the rules is another element of day to day life at the Ranch. One of the most important rules the staff at the Bunny Ranch explained on *Cathouse* was that the women must be medically tested for disease on a regular basis. As Hof explained, “There’s doctors for the girls, at their disposal….One is the doctor that they call the ‘coochie’ doctor. And he comes in and checks the girls for sexually transmitted diseases. Nevada has had seventeen years of mandatory testing and virtually no sexually transmitted diseases.” On one of my first visits, I watched as the girls lined-up to have their Thursday doctor’s visit in the doctor’s room on the premises.

I also met Kitten on one of my first visits. However, I should not have met Kitten as she was not supposed to be out in the parlor until the next day. When asked why, she explained that she had not been “cleared” yet, i.e., she had not seen the doctor yet that week. In her defense, she was just getting a drink at the bar when I met her and not actually working. I learned in my visits that the women must see the doctor once every seven days, on the same day each week, or they are not cleared to work until they see the doctor again. I was shown the doctor’s room, and one of the cashiers demonstrated how
she organizes the women’s work cards and keeps track of which days are their doctor’s
days. Each of these examples demonstrates the safety aspect of the business that is
promoted on Cathouse, as when Felicia explained,

The stereotype is that we’re all…on crack, and we’re all…spreading around
AIDS, and being unsafe, and dirty, and…it’s just sooo the opposite. We’re
checked and tested once a month for HIV and AIDS, tested once a week for
STDs. We practice 110% safe sex here, and that’s one of my selling points with
the guys in my negotiation.

The cashiers check every day to make sure everyone is following these rules and keeping
themselves and others safe.

Another rule is that the working girls are expected to turn in all tips. There are
men who give the girls tips and tell them not to turn them in. However, according to one
of the cashiers, most of the girls turn-in their tips as it is not worth the risk of being fired
to keep the whole tip when they get to keep half of it without fear of repercussions.656

Although the issue of tips was not directly addressed in Cathouse, monetary transactions
were shown regularly to demonstrate the tremendous amount of money the Ranch and the
girls made.657 Deanna pointed out on the show that she makes over $200,000 a year, an
amount repeated by Kandi in my interview with her. Porn stars, who often work shorter
amounts of time and by appointment only, can make a lot more. This is the case for
Sunset Thomas, who explained on Cathouse that she works in porn less now because she
can make $45,000 per week at the Ranch.
In this case, the Ranch must trust that the girls will follow the rules. Although there are ways for the management to find out if tips have not been turned in - such as when multiple girls party with the same man and only one turns in her tip - for the most part this rule relies on the threat of termination for enforcement. However, other rules require the intervention of the management, such as keeping track of doctor’s visits, which demonstrates that there is not a high level of trust in their work environment. As Madam Suzette explained in *Cathouse*, she watches the surveillance cameras in the office so that she always knows where the customers and the girls are, so that she can “make sure that everybody is doing their job.”658 This lack of trust may be yet another reason what they do is not highly valued.659

The working girls are all concerned about how much they bring in each day and week. Working as independent contractors, the girls have to worry about paying for their travel back and forth to Nevada, their room and board (if they do not meet certain minimums), supplies – from condoms and wet wipes to massage oils and sex toys – and doctors’ visits, testing, and licensure. Most of the women mentioned all of these factors at some point in our interviews and/or during observations. Although these daily, weekly, and monthly routines are a part of the work at the Bunny Ranch, and are shown on *Cathouse*, they are not the kind of information that is the focus of most analyses of prostitution. Although prostitutes working in other contexts do have some kind of routines, they probably differ in some ways from those at the Bunny Ranch. But, those at the Bunny Ranch demonstrate how it operates as a business and as these women’s jobs. Yet, when the corporate/capitalist criteria is applied, because this business falls outside of
typical definitions of what a business is supposed to be, we can still devalue what these women do. However, this is not how the women themselves characterize their work.

*It’s a Real Job*

Although their daily routines suggest this is a job, assumptions about prostitution construct it as a deviant social practice which no one would actually choose to do.660 *Cathouse* stands in contrast to this characterization in that it argues that prostitution is a job. One example is when Dennis Hof explains what he calls the girls, “I don’t like prostitute. I don’t know where that word came from. I don’t like it. And…whore is totally unacceptable. And slut, you’re libel….We’re gonna call the police on ya. K? So, working girl. That’s what I think the girls should be called. They’re working girls.”661 In addition to his words pointing out that these women are workers, his point is also demonstrated with the accompanying visual. The girls are shown negotiating deals and having sex with customers. They also facilitate the collection of payment with the cashiers in the office, attend company meetings (in the form of the Thursday tea parties), and fulfill their obligations to be tested, pick up supplies, and other daily routines that do not involve sex.

This representation on *Cathouse* stands in contrast to cultural characterizations of prostitution. For this reason, many of these working girls felt the need to justify what they do as work. Kandi explains, “I don’t really consider myself any different than any human working because it’s a job. Does anybody else put a roof over my head or food on my table? You know…to criticize what I do? No. I’m not out on the streets. I’m not a homewrecker.”662 Despite seeing what she does as a real job, she still felt the need to
distinguish herself from street workers and clarify that she was not a homewrecker. She went on to explain that she did not want to kill herself to make good money, but that being a working girl was a relatively easy way to make good money and provide for herself and her daughter in a way that most jobs would not allow. Perhaps, as Clair suggests, characterizing the job as “easy” devalues it as legitimate work.663

Kitten made it clear that if anyone wanted to criticize her for what she does, she “doesn’t give a fuck.”664 She explained that she did care whether or not her mother supported her choice (she does), but, “Anybody else? I don’t care…. (T)hey can go pay my bills. So, I don’t care what they say.”665 She works hard for her money, pays her own bills, and as long as no one else is going to step up and take care of her, she will do what pays the best. She did not say that anyone did criticize her or that she actually wanted to be taken care of, but because of her knowledge of the criticisms sex workers face, she still felt the need to respond to such assumptions.

Summer Verona also pointed out how hard she works for her money and explained that the issue came up for her when friends or family members wanted to borrow money. She said, “I work hard for this money. Believe it or not. You think it’s easy money ‘cause I make it in 30 minutes, what you make in two weeks, but I’m not gonna give it to you. I work hard for it, and it’s not being selfish.”666 She recognized that she may have made more money in less time than others, but she said that it was not her fault if these people who asked her for money had crappy jobs or did not manage their money. She was the one who had to do the work, pay her doctors’ bills, had to have a needle stuck in her arm once a week for medical testing, and not them. So, she spoke to
their assumptions by resisting them. She explained that she does work hard and chooses not to lend them money.

What most of these comments appear to respond to is the idea that prostitution is not “a real job.” In this case, dismissal as not real work seems couched in the idea that what they do is easy. However, these women explain, in line with what Dennis Hof says in *Cathouse* and at meetings I attended, that what they do is hard work. They also add to their argument that the compensation they receive pays their bills. If we rely on the corporate/capitalist criteria to evaluate their work, these women justify their work as “a real job” based on the fact that it is their primary form of support. Where the discourses of individual sex workers discussed in Chapter 2 and those of individual sex workers at the Moonlite Bunny Ranch concur is in the idea that this is “a real job.” As Vivian West puts it, “I’m a firm believer that this is a real job because there are certain people out there, like my ex…who doesn’t think this is a real job and I was like, oh, that’s great. So, for the last eight years then, since I started stripping I’ve been making monopoly money. That’s amazing!…No, this is a real job, man.” What Vivian suggests with this comment and other stories she told is that what makes it a “real job” is that you are paid for your labor.

To further their characterization of prostitution as a “real job,” the working girls at the Bunny Ranch explained that what they do involves more than just sex. When asked what “work” meant to her, Bunny defended her work against the assumptions of outsiders:
I’m at work right now. And, like most people don’t, I mean they think, like when they hear that we work twelve hour days, they’re like “Oh my god! How do you do that?” And they think we’re like havin’ sex all day, with five hundred people, and it’s really not like that…. (M)y twelve hour day consists of waking up, getting ready, watching TV, doing line-ups, doing bills, answering e-mails, goin’ on the message board, posting comments… givin’ a live chat, and… pretty much just bein’ here. And, people come in, even if they don’t come in to party, they come in. They’ve seen me on radio shows. They’ve seen me on TV shows. They want me to sign somethin’ or take a picture or show ‘em around. So, I mean, it’s kinda like tour guide, and, like bein’ on-call pretty much, but, you get to lay in bed.669 She described a typical day that involved much more than sex with customers. Just like on Cathouse, when they show women chatting with one another, playing games with each other and with customers, and giving tours. Dennis Hof even promotes interactions with customers as fun when he defines them. He said on Cathouse, “I don’t wanna say ‘sex act’ or ‘fuck’ or ‘suck.’ It’s ‘party.’ That’s what we do. We party with these… We’re havin’ a party.” The difference between what is shown on the series and that which Bunny described is that Cathouse is action-packed,670 whereas being at the Ranch demonstrates that there is a lot more “down-time” and drumming up business in their daily routines. Even so, all that is on the series does occur on a regular basis.

The action-packed fun shown in Cathouse is also noted by Kitten. Unlike most jobs, Kitten notes that hers also includes more than just sex and is fun.
To me, seriously, havin’ a good time and making money having sex. Or, not even sex. Some people think it’s all about sex. We get guys who just want a massage. You get guys that…just want to spend some time with you alone and talk. You get guys who just wanna get in the hot tub….And it’s all work. So, I would say sex with fun….Partyin’, and not necessarily meanin’ partyin’ meanin’ sex. Just partyin’ is work for me.

Unlike dominant discourses which discuss the horrific working conditions that prostitutes are forced to endure, Kitten focused on the fun she has entertaining customers and making money doing it. Porn star and former girlfriend of Dennis Hof, Sunset Thomas, said on Cathouse, “Still every time I drive up here I still get excited….I’ve been comin’ here for, what, three and half years now? I still love it.” On the same episode, Felicia said, “I can’t lie. I would do this until I was sixty if I could. I really would. It’s just that fun. Even if it’s just a weekend a month.” Yet, when a job is enjoyable, it is devalued as work. So, describing not only the fun but also the elements of the job that do not involve sex and enjoyment is important for these women and for Cathouse to note in order to be able to show that this is a business. Yet, even though Cathouse includes both, it tends to focus more on the excitement of the job. This emphasis is probably due to the visual bias of television. It does not, however, deny that what is shown on the series reflects what happens at the Ranch.

Despite general agreement that what they do is “a real job,” one of my interviewees strategically distanced herself from the concept of work when asked what it meant to her. Kayla explained, “I don’t consider this like work. I consider this more like a
lifestyle and this is just, to me it’s just like another vacation that I take and then I just go back home.” Prior to starting at the Bunny Ranch, Kayla was married, divorced, and then was living off her settlement. She said that she had never really worked. Between her divorce and her first visit to the Ranch, she was dating a professional athlete long-distance. As a matter of fact, she met Dennis while with her “friend” at a strip club. When Dennis suggested she come out to work, she consulted this friend:

(H)e put it to me like, “If you decide to do that, it’s kinda like coming to see me and dating me, but on a smaller scale. You know?” He gives me so much money when I go out to see him. He doesn’t say, “Oh, I’m gonna give you so much to come.” But just the fact that I do go to see him in (his home town), he gives me money. He says it’ll be kinda like that.675

For Kayla, then, being paid to have sex with men at the Bunny Ranch was not that different than dating this man long-distance as both involved being paid to spend time with men.

A flight attendant girlfriend of Kayla’s also advised her that working at the Ranch would be a good idea. Having seen Cathouse, her friend saw the Ranch as glamorous. Kayla said, “She just thought this would fit in good with my everyday…lifestyle ‘cause I like to travel anyway…. So, she thinks it’s perfect.”676 Kayla was hesitant at first because of how she perceived prostitution. However, when Dennis offered to pay for her trip out to see if she wanted to work and her friends advised her that it would not be that different than the way she lived her life currently, she decided to take the leap. Kayla would not agree that what she is doing is a job. But, she would agree that she makes money for
spending time with men. She would just characterize what she does as part of her lifestyle.

Dennis sold “work” as a “paid vacation” to Kayla and she talks about it not as a job but as a lifestyle. The issue, then, involves what “prostitution” is. Or more specifically, the issue concerns what society and the women at the Moonlite Bunny Ranch perceive prostitution is. Kayla explained that when she met Dennis Hof and he asked her if she would be interested in working at the Ranch, she was extremely hesitant because it was “prostitution.” But the way that Hof described it to her, it sounded like a paid vacation. He offered to fly her out to the Ranch for a visit, during which she could work or not, depending on how she felt about it. But, as she explains, “I didn’t feel pressured into it and it wasn’t like, everyone’s perception of it. I never look at like, ‘Oh, prostitution,’ and I think that if I ever saw it as that that I wouldn’t do it. ‘Cause I think prostitution, like on the street corner, is something that’s worse.” So, she went into the initial trip with an open mind and figured that if she saw anything negative she would not do it. But, she says that within two days of her visit she felt comfortable enough to work. So, Kayla is paid for what she does at the Ranch. But she would claim it is not “work,” but a lifestyle instead.

Characterizing what they do as “a real job” involves couching their work as what supports them financially. For most of the women I interviewed, this is their primary means of support. Cathouse further emphasized how much money the Ranch and the working girls bring in. Many of the working girls do feature dancing, stripping, and some even work in pornography as well as at the Ranch. However, none of these women work
“straight” (non-sex industry) jobs. So, working in the sex industry is “a real job” to them. However, other factors, such as the ease of their work, the temporary nature of it, the idea that it takes place outside of “real time,” and the fact that they have fun doing it, work against those persons outside of their work seeing it as “a real job.” So, the working girls feel the need to further justify their work as not “just sex.”

*It’s Not Just Sex*

Without prompting, Summer Verona explained that the part she likes about this job most is the connections she has forged with customers:

I really like it. I get to meet people…I’m a people person. I love people…all kinds of ‘em. Love to meet ‘em, get to know people. The psychological part of it, it’s just great. You learn so much about people and yourself. So, that’s…the beauty of it….Why do people come in, you know? Did they have a fight with their wife or girlfriend? …Are they just away and want to experience something? Or…are they lonely, and they just want somebody for that night…. (Y)ou do touch these people, believe it or not…. Whether they’re lonely or not, they’ll always remember…. (T)hat’s one of the things that…just amazes me about the whole job.  

While cultural discourses would have us believe that sex workers are used and abused by customers, Summer countered this belief. She said that she enjoyed the variety of connections she has made and how she was able to have an effect on others’ lives in her work. Enjoyment of one’s work is one of the factors Clair argues makes one’s work less of “a real job.”
Most of the sex workers concurred with Bunny and Kitten that what they do involved more than just sex for money. Many went so far as to defend their work as a public service. *Cathouse* showed that these working girls help virgins gain sexual experience. Sunset Thomas and Felicia argued that learning from a professional was the best place for these men to learn how to do things right. The customers agreed. One of the virgins serviced on the show said that after his party with porn star Sunset Thomas, he had “a lot more confidence because before I didn’t really wanna talk to anybody… Afterwards it was like I was alive.” After his experience he said he was a different person and even felt comfortable going to clubs and asking women to dance. *Cathouse* also showed a widower come in so that he could be intimate with a woman for the first time since his wife died. He did not have sex with Deanna, but had her hold him. He said that this experience may help him to come to a place where he could be intimate with a woman again and gave him comfort at the same time.

The comments of my interviewees reflected these same sentiments. Bunny explained that some men came in for help with sexual problems:

There’s some guys that come in for therapeutic reasons…because they really need help …(T)hey need emotional attention….I have a guy who…flies in from way…across country…because he has anxiety about getting his dick hard. He can’t. When it comes down to it and he’s got a girl, he flakes out and he can’t get his dick hard and he can’t perform, and that’s a real problem for him, ‘cause he can’t carry on any relationship…. (I)t’s just something that he’s been dealing with since he was young and, so…that’s what I work with him on….We get his dick
hard on cue, and...he needs that. He pays good money for it. And, some
guys...they’re virgins. They wanna learn what to do. They wanna learn how to
touch a girl. What to do. What not to do. Bunny recognized that her job involved helping men with their sexual dysfunctions and
teaching inexperienced men about how to be with women. Felicia concurred on
Cathouse. After helping a virgin get over his anxiety during sex, she said, “Look at me,
I’m a sex therapist.”

Even those who do not have sexual dysfunctions can still take advantage of the
services provided by these sex workers as shown on Cathouse and reflected in these
women’s talk about their jobs. Cathouse also showed the Bunny Ranch as a place where
men could come to have fantasies fulfilled. Basic services, such as blowjobs, are
something Airforce Amy says many men cannot ask their wives for, “She (the wife) does
enough around the house, I’m not gonna ask….Really, guys tell me that.” Kandi told
me that fulfilling men’s fantasies is part of her job. She said that she works out, tans, and
keeps her hair blonde because she has found that a majority of men who come in are
partial to blondes, which means she does better business when she gives them what they
want. Additionally, she contended that

Guys come here to have a fantasy that they can’t fulfill at home, that they might
feel, that their wives might not do. It’s what they come here to get: what they
can’t get at home…. (A) lot of good men that come in...they may want a blowjob.
They might wanna have oral or give oral, but they might also feel like they cannot
ask their wife that ‘cause it’s the mother of their children. You know? ‘Cause
what if the mother feels like, you know, his wife feels like that’s just degrading….Personally, I like givin’ better than receiving (laughs). That’s my pleasure. 683

Kandi recognized that part of the service she can provide in her job is fulfilling fantasies that men do not feel they can have serviced at home. Interestingly, this assumption, that wives do not give blowjobs and that prostitutes do, merely reifies the good girl/bad girl dichotomy promoted in structural narratives of prostitution.

Other fantasies that the women at the Ranch are shown to fulfill on Cathouse are having sex with a porn star and having multi-partner/same-sex relations. The “Two Brothers” party shows two brothers party with Sunset Thomas. Although she proposes an “anything goes” party for $2000, they said that they could only afford $500. For their money, they had a masturbation party with her. Both made comments about how they could not believe they were getting to watch Sunset Thomas perform for them live. In the “Anniversary Party,” a husband and wife partied separately with different girls. The husband got the opportunity to have sex with a woman other than his wife. The wife got the opportunity to have sex with a woman for the first time. The wife described it as a “once in a lifetime opportunity.”684 This implied that visiting sex workers or even having sex with other people was not part of their typical lives, but that this was their fantasies being fulfilled as an anniversary present to one another.

Rather than being judgmental about the sexual proclivities of the people who visited the Ranch, both on Cathouse and in my interactions with the women who work there, these sex workers characterized what they provided for these people as a service.
The way Airforce Amy put it on Cathouse was: “This is my business….It’s service after the sale, during the sale. It’s a business. I’m a business woman.” The way Kandi saw it in our interview was similar to how she viewed her military service. She concluded, “I was servin’ my country then. I’m servin’ my country now.”685

This is not to say that the women of the Moonlite Bunny Ranch do not focus on the sex part of their work. As previously noted, Kitten makes it clear that part of her work is sex. Cathouse focuses on these women as “oversexualized,” as when Sunset Thomas claimed, “I’m addicted to sex. I’m not into drugs…not into any (of) that. But I’m addicted to sex. I love to come. I mean, I’ll stay in bed all day long if you let me.” Of course, promoting themselves in the media as extra-sexual is also a way to promote their business. Their point, though, is that their work is not just sex. In adding this service element, the women of the Bunny Ranch may still be allowing that their work is enjoyable, but they also are trying to make it clear that they do what others may not do, i.e., men’s wives. While this reifies the good girl/bad girl binary, it is a rhetorical move that also attempts to highlight the value of their work.

However, this move also brings to light who is doing this work and where it takes place, that is “bad girls” in the isolated environment of a legal brothel. As discussed at length in Chapters 1 and 2, characterizing prostitutes as whores and distancing them from the “good girls” of society stigmatizes their behavior, thus devaluing what they do as work. Additionally, the space in which this work takes place is unique. First, it takes place in a legal brothel, which only exist in some counties of one state in this country. This adds to the characterization of this work as “abnormal” and therefore not real work.
Although Kayla calls what she does a lifestyle, most of the other women characterized what they do as work. Support for this description, at the most basic level, involves being paid for what they do. I would argue that the everyday practices and logistics involved in their jobs also demonstrates how what they do is work. Finally, the women themselves describe what they do as work because of the necessary services that it provides for their customers. Unlike structural narratives that would have us believe that prostitution is, at best, a societal problem, or, at worst, a deviant practice that oppresses women, the experience of women of the Moonlite Bunny Ranch shows that they see what they do as “a real job.”

Relationships are Part of Who We Are

After watching the Cathouse specials and series, I expected that the working girls at the Moonlite Bunny Ranch would talk about their relationships with Dennis Hof, Madam Suzette, and one another. I was not wrong. Despite the fact that I asked no questions that specifically referenced any of these relationships, all of the women I spoke with discussed the influence Dennis and Suzette have had on them. Many also discussed the character of their relationships with the management. Additionally, all of the women discussed their relationships with the other girls in the house. Interestingly, I asked all of these women what the most enjoyable part of their work was and what the most difficult part of their work was. Interacting with the other women in the house was the answer to both questions.

Given what I saw on Cathouse, what I did not expect was how important other relationships in these women’s lives would be. Before I asked these women about who in
their life outside of the Ranch knew about them working at the Ranch, they had already
debegan talking about their friends and families. Once I broached the subject, the
importance of these relationships in their lives became even clearer. Given that these
women are human beings, the importance of their relationships should come as no
surprise. However, scholarly literature about prostitution rarely discusses the
relationships these women have with their families and friends outside of their being
judged for working in prostitution or having to hide what they do for fear of being
stigmatized.686 The ways these women discussed their relationships outside of the Ranch
problematicized anything I had read or seen previously about prostitution in the United
States.

I constructed my interview protocol to see how these women talked about their
work at the Moonlite Bunny Ranch. I also thought that by asking general questions about
their work and non-work, i.e., life outside the Ranch, lives I would get a good picture of
how they balanced life inside and outside the Ranch. While some of what they had to say
indicated that they tried to separate their work/non-work lives, which is in line with what
structural discourses of prostitution say they would do,687 much of what they said
demonstrated the interrelation of their work and non-work lives. The way they talked
about their work and non-work lives highlighted the importance of relationships to their
work.

Based on theoretical assumptions of feminist post-structuralism, the sociology of
work, and feminist standpoint theory, Joyce K. Fletcher contends that our language use,
the public/private sphere binary, and the social construction of gender in organizations
work to “disappear” relational practices as legitimate parts of work and limit women’s options as to the types of behaviors in which they are allowed to engage. Shadowing six female engineers for one day each and conducting debriefing interviews and roundtable discussions provided the basis for identifying categories, themes, and sensemaking frameworks including: preserving, mutual empowering, achieving, and creating team. Despite their engagement in these activities, these female engineers were not given credit for the relational “work” in which they engaged. Fletcher suggests that relational work which goes on in organizations is not recognized as “work” because it is not explicitly related to the job tasks assigned.688

When applied to the context of the Moonlite Bunny Ranch and sex work, I would suggest, as already discussed, that relational work is part of what these women do with their customers. Additionally, their relational work with one another and the importance of their relationships with those outside of the Ranch to their work are essential to how they characterize what they do. Yet, both their relational work and their relationships are not necessarily considered “work.” Despite being ignored or used to devalue parts of what women do as work, the relational work accomplished by the women at the Moonlite Bunny Ranch is crucial to their lived experiences of and at work. In this section, I will discuss the influences and character of these women’s relationships with the management at the Moonlite Bunny Ranch, specifically, their relationships with Dennis Hof and Madam Suzette. Then I will examine what these sex workers had to say about one another. In each of these cases, the relationships between that which was represented on Cathouse and their lived experiences will be discussed. Finally, I will delve into that

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which was not portrayed on *Cathouse*, but that remains important to these women’s lived experiences, that is, the importance of their relationships with friends and family outside the Ranch upon their work lives.

*Relationships with Dennis and Suzette*

It is true that legal brothel prostitutes in Nevada are subject to the same type of abuses by management as prostitutes working in illegal settings, as discussed in Chapter 1. However, the women I interviewed at the Moonlite Bunny Ranch indicated that this was not the case at this brothel. Nadia discussed how she was fired from another Nevada brothel in the area by an owner and madam that she had not really even met. When she had a conflict with another member of the staff, the management believed the other woman and not her. This was not necessarily because of what she had or had not done, but because the management knew the other woman better than her. Nadia indicated that the same type of treatment would never happen at the Bunny Ranch because Dennis and Suzette are business people who take the time to get to know the women who work for them. She explained:

…how I got fired, like they could have at least let me come in to talk about it.

You know what I mean? But no…they treat you shitty at other ranches and they didn’t want me there…. (T)hey don’t talk to you like business people talk to you.

You know like how Dennis talks, and Madame Suzette talks. They’re not like that. They’re like, I don’t know. Not nice.

Nadia characterized her experience at this other legal brothel as unsupportive and negative, while her initial experiences at the Bunny Ranch were more positive.
This juxtaposition of the managements of these two legal brothels was also situated within cultural discourses of sex work when Nadia described what Dennis was and was not like and how she admired Suzette:

I know that Dennis is a businessman. He’s not gonna be like, “Listen – you’re my bitch.” He’s not gonna be like that. And like he’s just like real business…Like Suzette, even though she’s not a working girl or anything, but she knows a lot about it and she’s been around it a long time. So, I really…look up to her….I like her around.691

She implied that there are other sex work contexts in which management might treat her like their slave, but that was not the case at the Bunny Ranch. Further, she suggested that although usually it is other working girls from whom she might get advice that Suzette’s experience makes her a positive presence to have around.

Dennis agrees. He explained, “I’m not a pimp. I’m a businessman. I’m friends with these ladies. We’re business partners.” Hof made it clear throughout my visits to the Ranch that he understands the role these women play in the success of his business. At one of the tea parties I attended, Dennis pointed out that many of the girls working during the holidays had complained that it was a slow time for business. He disagreed. He explained that the top earners were making as much as they did at any other time of year. He said that several big parties had been booked by girls working the phones and message board. He said that those not doing good business were probably drinking too much and having too much fun, at the expense of doing the grunt work of drumming up business. Dennis works hard to define his relationship with these women as one couched
in business terms. This furthered his claim that he does this business right. He state the rationale for his above board practices, “We are the most legitimate business in America because we know we’re gonna be scrutinized. So we do everything right.”

Yet, Hof never denied that his business is sex. As he put it on Cathouse, “When you’re around that sexual environment, the energy that comes of it, it’s a great energy. It’s like the highly motivated commission-sales team. That’s what these girls are.” This means that his relationship with these women as their boss and as their lover, friend, father, as he explained on the show, is much more complicated than one of a “normal” boss. In an office environment, having female workers sit on the boss’s lap would be sexual harassment. In this situation, it is daily activity. Many of the girls do have sex with Hof. Many of the girls who do have sex with him do receive benefits such as taking marketing trips to the Playboy Mansion or appearing on The Howard Stern Show. But, women who do not have sex with him receive the same types of benefits. The difference here from a more typical office setting is that the sex part of the relationship is above board.692 The difference here from an illegal setting or life at other brothels is that these women made it clear that they did not feel forced by the management to do anything. I think this lack of coercion is due to Hof’s framing of life at the Ranch as a business rather than as “prostitution.”

Part of that business attitude is protecting the women from abuses, or even the threat of abuses, that prostitutes in other contexts can face from customers. Kandi described a time when a customer, who was a single dad, challenged her need as a single mom to “whore.” Rather than dignify his accusation with a response, Kandi showed him
to the door of her room and then the door of the Ranch. She said that she very politely told him, “You need to leave now.” Kitten described a similar situation. She was with a customer who had already paid six hundred dollars for a half an hour with her. Before they got to her room he was telling her how sweet she was. However, when they actually started having sex he started calling her a “slut,” a “bitch,” and a “whore.” She responded by telling him, “Hold on! You’re gettin’ a little too…Hey! You didn’t pay me for that. That’s not what you paid me for.” She said that she was shocked by the way he was treating her as this was not status quo at the Moonlite Bunny Ranch. She said, “(T)hat was like the worst thing I’ve ever experienced here. Ever, ever, in my life. I felt so low. I felt so dirty. I felt so, urgh, I just wanted to kick him so hard. I was just like, I can’t believe this.” She also said that she told him immediately to stop, that they were not going to continue if he did not calm down and treat her with respect. Working in this context, Kitten knew that she should not be treated this way and that she could stop the transaction. Both of these workers made it clear that they had the full support of the management in ejecting these customers.

This caring attitude translates into Dennis promoting himself as “Daddy” and Suzette, the general manager and Madam, as “Mommy.” Deanna called Dennis her “Daddy” on Cathouse which provoked a confused response from a potential customer. The customer asked, “He’s not your real daddy?” She then explained that he was not her Dad, but that he takes care of her like a father. Suzette explained on Cathouse, “I treat the girls like I wanna be treated. In fact, I treat the girls how my father’s treated and groomed me almost all my life.” She went on, “Dennis is the Dad; I’m the Mom. They know I
have that look. They don’t wanna disappoint me. I’m their mother and they are nice, nice girls.”

The women working at the Ranch referred to Dennis and Suzette as Daddy and Mommy when I talked to them as well. As Shy Love explained:

All the staff is like hella nice to everybody….I could never understand…when I first started, I didn’t get the whole “Mommy,” “Daddy” thing, and now I do. You know? I understand that. That is our Mom and Dad. We are sisters….It’s like one big family and, and…that’s how they treat you. Like, I’m the baby. They treat me like I’m the baby. You know? It’s like, you have family. You’re safe. It’s like, you’re just, it’s your home.”

Treating the girls like family means that they feel that they can rely on the management to help them with things they need while working. While Vivian was telling me about going to the Adult Video News Awards this year, she said, as an aside, “So I’m gonna talk to Mommy today… ’cause like I wanna go to AVN with Dennis.” Kayla explained, “Madam is really like a Mommy to us. If we have any issues or anything outside of the house, like financial or something other, some type of thing we need to deal with, they are very happy to help you.” The working girls referred to both Dennis and Suzette as Daddy and Mommy, especially when referencing the help they provided for them at the Ranch.

This caring attitude translated into action in daily life at the Ranch as well. To promote this attitude of caring, at the end of the first business meeting, the “tea party,” Suzette had the girls go around the room and share a quote that meant something special
to them or something they were happy or thankful for. The girls shared quotes and thoughts about community, family, money, and fun. Many examples were shared with me, without my eliciting them, of times when Dennis would help everyone, working girls and staff alike. For example, two girls told me stories of having to return home for family emergencies. Each told me that Dennis paid for their trips. One explained that she was expected to pay him back out of her salary, while the other said that she did not have to pay him back. It is true that not all the girls are treated alike. However, their treatment seems based on their earning power, not on their specific relationship with Dennis. Critics may point to these examples as ways that these women are oppressed. However, I suggest that if this is oppression, the source of it is capitalism not necessarily prostitution.

Dennis also freely offered advice to the girls at the Ranch about how to achieve their goals through their work. Hof said in *Cathouse*, “If they focus, and they work hard, you do the right things with the money, after two or three years, they never have to work again.” This sentiment was echoed by a number of the girls I interviewed. Kayla summed up their perspective:

(W)hen I say two years turn around, it’s pretty much what Dennis said, that that’s a good thing. Two years, when I first talked to him, he was like, you can do whatever you need to do in two years time. If you’re coming to make money, if you focus, two years is all you need to make enough to get to the next step in life.
There were some women who said that they planned on working as long as their looks held out, but there were others who specifically referenced Hof’s two year advice. Hof was not characterized as someone who was trying to keep these women working for him. Rather, he was like a father giving advice to his daughters about how to reach their financial goals.

The Bunny Ranch discourse, on television and at the Ranch, constructs Dennis as “Daddy” and Suzette as “Mommy.” This is to promote their roles as caretakers of the women who work at the Ranch. Yet, their roles of Mommy and Daddy are still situated within this business discourse. Coupling the two creates an image of a business that cares about its employees. The management at the Bunny Ranch seems, in representation and reality, to help the girls make money, take care of their money, and reach their financial goals. As with the individual perspectives of sex workers discussed in Chapter 2, these women highlighted economic success that would help them with their future goals as the main reason they chose to do sex work at the Bunny Ranch. Yet, many of them explained that the reason they worked at this Ranch was both that they could make good money here and that it was a comfortable, supportive environment in which to do it.

*Relationships with Other Girls*

The relationships between the working girls were best characterized by them as like the broader cultural image of a sorority, and all the positives and negatives this image implies. As represented on *Cathouse*, the girls work together to entertain customers, as when Brooke brought another worker in to do a two-girl party. Additionally, most of the women live at the Ranch while they are working. So, their social community is made up
of the women they work with, staff, and management. Felicia claimed that she works “in a really wonderful environment with good people. I’ve made some of the best friends I’ve had in my 30 years of life, here.” These woman collaborated in their work and recognized the friendship they’ve built. Additionally, these women learn from one another. In more than one episode of *Cathouse*, Alexis Fire and other sex workers are shown teaching classes to one another about particular sexual skills. In one episode, Alexis showed the girls sexual positions that are creative for the men and more pleasurable for the women.

However, the sorority metaphor that is so fitting is not all positive. Living and working with so many women in one place can lead to conflicts as well. These women are pitted, intentionally or not, against one another in competition for men’s attention, and their money. This competition can lead to conflicts. For example, there is an episode of *Cathouse* in which Danielle and Airforce Amy nearly come to blows. In straight to camera interviews each woman explained her point of view. Amy was used to being the top earner. Danielle became the top earner. So, for the first time since Amy started working at the Ranch, Dennis had promotional matches made of both Amy and Danielle, whereas he used to only have matches with Amy on them. So, while talking in a small group, the tension between Amy and Danielle came to a head. Ultimately, Amy left the Ranch.701

These positive and negative experiences reflect the feelings the women at the Ranch communicated to me in person as well. Like she had seen on the show, Kayla
found a community of women working to fulfill their goals in life. Kayla explained that she saw it

just like a dormitory…just like a sorority, and our owner takes very good care of us. Madam is really like a mommy to us. If we have any issues or anything outside of the house, like financial or something other, some type of thing we need to deal with, they are very happy to help you.…(Y)ou know they have a tax man and they try to do everything for you to get your life where…you want it to be. They don’t want to keep you here.702

She went on to explain that it was the friendliness of the women and the tea parties that gave the house such a collegial atmosphere. She also elevated the Bunny Ranch above experiences at other brothels when she explained, “(W)e have other houses too….I think we consider ourselves…one of the best houses around. We are the World Famous Bunny Ranch as seen on the Cathouse. So, I think that…with that we’re like a sorority ‘cause we’re like we’re the top-notch sorority.”703

This sorority-like experience involves friendships and learning from one another. When asked what the most enjoyable part of her work was, Kayla said, “(T)he most enjoyable part of my work is probably meeting the new people, the girlfriends that I’ve met here. I’ve come across some genuine people and I think that I met one of my best friends here. So…I guess the downtime with the girls. I like it a lot.”704 Vivian echoed these sentiments when she explained, “It’s totally been worth comin’ out here. I’ve made really good friends out here and, and the money’s good and it’s a fun job too.”705 As part
of their friendships, the women explained that they are able to learn from one another as well. Jenny notes,

Here it’s important to kind of be friends with the girls ‘cause it’s kind of like still being in college, having not been in college and experienced living in a dorm or anything, it’s been really good for me to learn…to be able to have friendships and relationships with the people that I work with as opposed to bein’ segregated and, you know, you can’t talk to them… (I)t’s been real nice in a lot of ways. It’s taught me a lot.\textsuperscript{706}

Jenny went on to explain that she has not been able to be friends with many women in her life but that she is learning how to be friends in her work at the Ranch.

Other women explained that working with women who have more experience than they do allows them to see where they could go from where they are now. When asked how long she thought she might work at the Ranch, Summer Verona explained what she has learned from Airforce Amy,

Well…if in 10 years I still have a nice body, or decent, I’ll still stay….When I still feel good and up to it, I can still do it, mentally and physically, probably, yeah. I’d be in it and do it. I’ve seen girls do this for years. You know? Airforce Amy, she’s been in it for a while…she’s done great. A great woman. She knows so much. Very nice and she’s got the world at her feet, and we all know that. So, there’s proof that you can stay, make a career out of this, and make great things happen. She’s a great lady. She’s done a lot of nice things for people and people will know it. You know, that’s the good thing about her.\textsuperscript{707}
Summer sees Amy as a model for women who want to make sex work a career, as she claimed she wanted to when we met.

Vivian is already eight years into her career, but still felt that she could learn from the women around her. She said that their model made her realize that she could work as long as she wanted to. As she put it,

I don’t see a point in quitting. There are some women in this…who are twenty years my senior here. And, I have a lot of respect for those women because I’m like, “Man…” As long as I look good and I’m making money, there’s no point to quit….I think that I have a lot that I could learn from those women too. That they’re a lot more experienced than I am. So, I’ve become really good friends with some of the girls out here.708

The positive influence Vivian noted of working with women who were older than she is and all that she could learn from them is just one example of the positive influence many of the girls noted about living and working in this community of women.

However, the sorority model to which these women compared the Ranch is not all positive. Summer said, “We all get along….But there are some times…when you put a room of thirty girls, guess what happens? You know, one has their period, and it just, you know, it stirs things up.”709 Kitten does not think it is menstruation that is the problem. She notes that the competition between the women is the most difficult part of the work. She said, “Everybody’s beautiful here, you know, but it’s all about what the guy likes. But…yeah, competition is difficult.”710 Nadia echoed this sentiment. She shared an example of a time when she was late for the line-up. She stood at the end of the line and
when she was introduced, she raised her hand, waved, and said, “Hi.” She said that the man then picked her and the other women gave her dirty looks. She was then talking to the customer at the bar when an older sex worker approached them. Nadia said,

She was like, “Hi, I’m Kami Kreme. I can wave too!” Really? I don’t know. I probably shouldn’t open my mouth. I already, I don’t even act like that. We should have… have grown-ups here. And in front of a customer? You ain’t gotta be a smartass. And then, you have, and then when we’re negotiating…”

Nadia recognized that she should not talk about this woman, but also that this woman should not have interrupted her interaction with a customer. This example involves what was referred to on Cathouse and in person as the “dirty hustle.” Kami thought Nadia was dirty hustling when she waved in the line-up, so her response was to participate in dirty hustling herself – that is, trying to outdo another worker for the attention (and money) of a customer.

This type of conflict among the women has led to a number of responses. Nadia chooses not to hang out in the parlor after her shifts, as many women do, unless Dennis is around. She said she enjoys his company, but that she has not found many friends among the other sex workers. Jenny said, “Once I started working here I realized that sex was not an issue at all….It’s other things: it’s the politics.” The way she deals with it is to try not to participate in it. She does not avoid it. Rather, she tries to get along with everyone and learn more about getting along with others. Bunny Love and Shy Love both agree that if a girl has a “shitty” attitude she should not stay at the Ranch. Shy said that the best advice was, “Don’t try to be this when you’re really not. Just be yourself.”
Many of these women called the Ranch a sorority-like environment. Subsequently, they all recognized that in this type of environment personalities can clash, cattiness can emerge, but that it can also be a positive environment for support and friendship.

*Relationships with Family*

Structural discourses characterize the relationships sex workers have with their families as difficult, even antagonistic. These narratives would have us believe that the stigma of sex work forces women who work in it to hide what they do from their families because if they know what a sex worker does, they further stigmatize her, disown her, or even subject her to violence. Of the nine women I interviewed, there were two women who kept what they do from their families. As noted in Chapter 6, Kayla had not told her family because she does not see them very often and is not sure how they would react. So, rather than trying to explain a situation that she does not think they would understand, so far, she has kept it to herself. Nadia, on the other hand, has not told her family because when her brother found out that she had been arrested for prostitution before, he disowned her. Fearing the same treatment by the rest of her family, she does not intend on telling them she works at the Moonlite Bunny Ranch.

What I learned from the other women I interviewed was eye-opening because it was not a part of historical, cultural, community discourses of prostitution, including media representation, or *Cathouse*. That is, most of these women’s families know what they do and are supportive of them. Most of these women did admit that their reason for telling their families was that they did not want them to find out some other way. So, the working girls chose to tell people on a “need-to-know” basis, i.e., if they were going to
find out some other way, the women told them. Even so, the people who know what they
do play key roles in these women’s lives, from helping them make the decision to work at
the Ranch to getting them started in the business, and from listening to them talk about
their work to being their support system outside the business.

I had never heard of anyone who said they wanted to work in the sex industry
when they grew up, probably because this is not a story in dominant discourse. So,
Vivian West’s story surprised me:

I got in trouble when I was ten, ‘cause at my elementary school, we’re only
allowed to dress up as a storybook character and bring in the storybook and they
asked me what storybook I was gonna bring in and I said, “I’m not going to
because if I did I’d bring in a porno ‘cause I’m gonna dress up like the Playboy
Bunny.” And, I got sent to the office and my mom got called in and…my mom
was like, “I think she saw somethin’ on TV.” My mom’s always been really cool
and…supportive of me….So, sure enough, I dressed up like the Playboy Bunny
that year (for Halloween). I like had a fake tuxedo and…fishnets, a little pair of
high heeled shoes. My great grandma wore a size four, which was the same shoe I
wore when I was ten, which is funny ‘cause now I only wear a six, but, she gave
me my first pair of stilettos and little white ruffly shorts and a bunny tail. It was
cute. I got a lot of candy.715

Vivian’s story had me conflicted. On the one hand, I was shocked that her mother would
allow her, at ten, to dress up like a Playboy Bunny. On the other hand, I saw that Vivian
realized the value of dressing up cute and sexy at a young age when she got so much
candy. After more thought, I realized the importance of Vivian’s mother and grandmother in her life. Dominant discourses would have us believe that family neglect and abuse leads women into prostitution. However, in this case, it was the support of her family that made her feel comfortable about her sexuality.

Later in her life, Vivian turned to her family again to consult her mother about a potential job. As she explained,

I’ve always been really honest with my mom and my family….They’ve always said…as long as I’m happy and safe, it doesn’t matter what you do in life….I went to my mom and I told her, “Hey…I think I’m gonna go and audition at this club tonight.” I’d just turned eighteen. And she’s like, “That’s cool.” And she actually took me shopping and she bought me…my first couple pair of…thongs and shoes and dresses…and was like, “Here, you’re gonna need these for work.” Her mother did not tell her to go or not to go into this type of work, but helped her get started once she had chosen to do it. Her mother now works full time as nanny to Vivian’s five year old son. In addition to working as a feature (striptease) dancer, porn actress, and at the Bunny Ranch, she, her mother and grandmother also have a clothing line for strippers.

Interestingly, at the end of our interview Vivian told me about when she told her grandmother she was going into the business:

When I told my seventy-four year old grandmother that I was becoming a prostitute and working at the Bunny Ranch, she kinda shrugged her shoulders….She’s full-blooded Italian, and she said, “Well, when our family
came to America we opened brothels and your great-great-aunts were the hookers.

So, you know what? It’s in your blood. Just be safe.717

Vivian wanted to be a Playboy Bunny when she was ten, became a stripper at eighteen, and did not find out until she went to work at the Bunny Ranch that she had had family who had worked in prostitution. This is not to suggest that her choice was pre-determined by biology. Rather, it is to highlight how important the support of the women in her family was in helping Vivian feel positive about the choices she made to go into sex work.

Vivian is not the only woman whose family history influenced her decision to go into sex work and who felt the need to consult her family before starting work at the Bunny Ranch. When asked what the most enjoyable part of her work at the Ranch was, Summer Verona said, “Receiving the paycheck and knowing that it’s real.”718 She went on to explain that her mother works forty hours a week. When she gets her paycheck now, Summer realized that she can make in one hour what her mother makes in two weeks. “And that’s incredible, and she works really hard, and that just made me open up my eyes.”719 Seeing how hard and long her mother worked for her money and learning that she could make more in less time influenced Summer to start in sex work.

Summer also explained that it was her mother she needed to turn to before starting in prostitution. Summer Verona had already done several pornographic movies before she came to the Ranch to work. She ended up at the Ranch at the end of a stint doing movies and was asked by Hof if she wanted to work there. Summer went home to tell her mother and sister what she was going to do before doing it. When she told her mother, she
thought about the fact that “I always used to joke around…that I was going to be a prostitute, or a stripper, but every joke always has some kind of truth behind it.” Despite realizing that she had considered doing this before, she was not sure what her mother’s reaction was going to be. Summer explained,

I told her I was gonna do prostitution and I think that word was too strong for her.

So, she goes, “Oh, please don’t say that.” She just cringed to hear it. But now she’s O.K. with it. We talk everyday…(S)he’ll always ask me, “How’s business? Are you O.K.? How much money did you make? Are…doing fine?” You know….we’ll just discuss about stuff…. We get along. We’ve gotten closer…and I’m glad of that…. (G)rowing up, my Mom and I have always been opposites, never ever did we ever discuss sex…anything like that…and we were just apart from each other…I didn’t trust her. I didn’t feel like…I should run to her and tell her about things…unless something horrible was happening to me. So, doing all this, I got closer to her, it just took me moving out and discovering myself and going out into the world to get closer to my Mom. And, I’m glad, you know? People have gotten closer to me as well…because they wanna support me, wanna be there for me, so it’s good.  

Summer was nervous about telling her mother and was prepared for her mother’s first reaction. However, over time Summer says that being able to be honest with her mother about her work has led to a closer relationships between her and her mother.

Kitten and Kandi described similar experiences. Kitten and her mother had both seen Cathouse and wondered how “real” it was. But seeing the show motivated Kitten to
send her pictures in to apply for a job. After Madam Suzette offered her a job, Kitten talked to her mother about the possibility of working at the Ranch. Based on what she had seen on *Cathouse*, her mother told her, “I think you should try it.” Knowing that her mother supported her made her feel better about her decision, and the fact that she had discussed the possibility with her mother made her mother feel more at ease. As Kitten concluded, “I told her it’s good money. So, she’s all, “If that’s what you do, it’s what you do. So, she’s fine with it.” Of course, Kitten also said that when she paid the down payment on a car for her mother, her mother was overwhelmed with how well she was doing in her work and with her generosity. Her mother and family are the ones with whom she spends her time when she is not working. She has so much fun with them while at home and not working that it is often difficult for her to tear herself away to go back to work. Her work at the Ranch is what allows her not to have to work when she is at home with her family.

Kandi said that telling her devout Methodist parents that she was stripping after she left the Navy was the hardest thing she had ever done. She explained that out of respect for them, because they are the ones who would have to deal with what anyone in their hometown might say about her (and them), she felt she needed to tell them before starting to work at the Moonlite Bunny Ranch. Yet, she was not quite sure what to expect. Their reaction surprised her.

(T)hey said… “Do you think we thought you were dancin’ this whole time?” They said, “We kinda had a feelin’ because you don’t send that kinda money home from dancing.” …(W)hen I sat my parents down, told ‘em about the Bunny
Ranch, they…said, as Christians, who are they to judge? While we are here, God is our only judge. And, that they know I’m a single Mom, and that I don’t do drugs. I don’t smoke….I like to work out….So they know I’m not doing it for habits. That I’m doin’ it to raise my child.\textsuperscript{723}

Kandi’s relationship with her parents was important enough for her to feel the need to tell them about her work. Their understanding of her circumstances and their religious beliefs are what led them to support, not condemn, her. Her relationship with her parents has served as a model for her relationship with her daughter.

Kandi has been honest with her daughter about her work as well. She felt that her honesty created a positive bond with her daughter and could help her in the future. As she put it,

She’s known for a while….\textsuperscript{(S)}he’s known since even when I danced….I don’t lie to her …because I’m a single mom; (we have) a good relationship between us. But, I don’t think she would have a reason to lie to me….\textsuperscript{(S)}he has, neever …thrown it in my face, of what I do. I mean even when we’ve gotten in little spats, she never says, “Well, you do this,” you know? She would never have done that….I think it’s made her, where she’ll see what I know. She’s learned…street smarts. She pretty much knows what’s gettin’ out there. And, I think that with bein’ open with my daughter, I don’t think she’s gonna… when she turns a certain age, sixteen say, and gets her car…I don’t think she’s gonna be the curious…I gotta do this, I gotta try that type of kid. Rebellious. You know? Because I’m
exposin’ it to her and I know that’s awful to say. I mean I don’t expose…she’s never been to the Ranch. And do I bring that home? No.724

What Kandi clarified was that she felt that being open with her daughter created a positive relationship between the two of them, where her daughter likewise could be open with her. Additionally, Kandi believed that being “exposed” to this type of life, her daughter may not feel the need to rebel and find out what this type of life is like. Kandi is doing this work now so that her daughter will not have to do it later. Kandi has the support of her parents and her daughter, which allows her to be able to provide financial and emotional support to them as well.

While many of the women I interviewed spoke about the support of their families, Shy Love got into the business to support her children and to gain independence from the rest of her family. When asked how she got started in sex work, Shy explained, “It was my eighteenth birthday. I’d already had one kid. I was pregnant with my second and me and my parents weren’t exactly on speaking terms or getting along. So, it was like a really rough time in my life.”725 She said that working at a strip club gave her the financial independence she desired. She explained that what she did and what she is doing are to support her and her four children. She was nervous about the day when her children would be old enough for her to tell them what she does, but also said that she would be honest with them. The way she described what she does sounded much like the stereotypical CEO or traveling salesman. She said that she is away from them now so that she will be able to spend more time with them later.
Interestingly, the independence Shy found from her adopted mother and father, led to an unexpected bond with her birth mother. She was never able to tell the parents who raised her, her adopted mother, who passed away, or her adopted father, that she was working at the Bunny Ranch. She felt that they would not be able to handle the news. However,

…my biological mom never raised me so we’re like best friends and I can tell her anything. I can even tell her, like, “Shut the hell up!” (laughs) Or, “Kiss my ass!” Or, “Get the fuck outta my house!” And…she’ll just laugh or we’ll fight, and she’ll get over it later, and it’s like…who cares? You know? So, like my dad is like my heart and soul and it would kill him if he knew what I did.” (Shy 9)

Even so, her dad does know that she travels to work at strip clubs and her biological mother watches her children when she is away. Her brother wants her to set him up with Bunny Love as he has watched her on Cathouse and loves her. So, unlike the supportive relationships that many of the other working girls at the Bunny Ranch described or the non-existent relationships represented in dominant discourses, Shy demonstrates that her relationships with her family are more complicated. She works to support her children, yet misses them while she is away. She does not feel that she can tell her adopted father, but her biological mother provides support for her to do her work by watching her kids and being the person she can talk to about anything.

What these women’s experiences point to is the importance of their relationships with their families to how they live their lives and how they make sense of their work. While one would assume the importance of these types of relationships for most human
beings, dominant discourses of prostitution merely focus on the difficulties women have with relationships outside of their work or how the need to support their children has forced them into this type of work. When asked if there was anything I had not asked her about that she thought I should, Kitten concluded,

I would say no because the family questions are just like the most important to me. You know, outside of the business and knowing what I do outside of here, I wasn’t expectin’ you to ask me, but I’m glad you did. ‘Cause…I want people to know that it’s not just about a working girl. We have real families….And, I am human. I am normal. I do love my family and my family loves me. They know what I do. My mom’s accepted…this for me….So, I really appreciate you askin’ me about that. It kinda puts a smile on my face ‘cause…just gettin’ to sit here and tell you about my family and how much fun I have with them. O.K. I’m gettin’ all emotional now.726

It put a smile on my face as well to know that asking these women about their work and non-work lives was important to them. Asking about how they balanced their work and non-work lives also allowed me to learn what neither dominant discourses nor Cathouse taught me: that relationships with their families are just as important, and complicated, for these sex workers as they are for everyone else.

Implications

There are a number of implications to this analysis. First, for studies of reality television (RTV), this research goes where many other studies suggest this type of scholarship should. That is, I theorized that Cathouse constructed a counter-narrative of
prostitution as a typical American business in which the women are empowered by the economic opportunities it offers and who provide a service to the community. As indicated in Chapter 5, this analysis taken alone points out the somewhat revolutionary nature of the show as a counter discourse of prostitution. But theorizing about what is represented on a reality television show does not necessarily speak to what lived experiences at the Moonlite Bunny Ranch are really like. Being there, interacting with, observing, and interviewing the women who work there, allowed me to do what most studies of RTV do not. These activities allowed me to compare their lived experiences with what is portrayed in *Cathouse*.

The contrast between dominant media representations of prostitution and *Cathouse* made me, and several of the women I interviewed, question the “authenticity” of the series. Dominant media representations portray prostitutes as in need of saving or punishment. *Cathouse* shows sex workers who enjoy their work and who are handsomely rewarded for it. Myra Mendible claims, “The ‘reality’ in these shows stems not from their lack of a script or professional actors (most people know that what they see on these shows is edited, mediated and not truly ‘spontaneous’), but from the ways it reflects the underlying logic of our social order.” Given the contrast between dominant representations and *Cathouse*, it is no wonder we questioned whether what is shown on *Cathouse* truly reflects what life there is like. My comparison of the show with the lived experiences of the sex workers employed there revealed that *Cathouse* is, however, an “authentic” representation of life at the Moonlite Bunny Ranch.
Studies of RTV argue that the constructed nature of the form removes it from “reality;” that is, editing, production influences, and imposing narratives on raw footage of real people interacting slants reality into that which the producers think will garner the most advertising dollars.\textsuperscript{728} Despite their admission and our recognition of the constructed nature of reality television, the goal of RTV is to create a feeling of “authenticity” for the audience. As Mark Andrejevic contends, cast members for these types of shows are selected for their “their ability to ‘be real’ – to reveal their authentic reactions and to just be themselves.”\textsuperscript{729} As I argued in Chapter 5, \textit{Cathouse} creates this “authenticity” by filming the participants’ daily activities which demonstrates how they are “real.” Additionally, the show makes use of the double logic of remediation, i.e., the show both highlights and erases evidence of the medium of television in an attempt to make the show more immediate and authentic to audiences.\textsuperscript{730} For example, in negotiation scenes none of the participants acknowledge the presence of the camera (erasure), but the television screen audiences see has a red light on the bottom with the words “hidden camera” which suggests that the participants do not know they are being filmed (highlighting).

To be sure, \textit{Cathouse} has been influenced by all the same factors as other RTV shows. What is shown on HBO certainly highlights the spectacular nature of the business by showing the women as hypersexual, the business as a 24/7 party, and the women as economically empowered.\textsuperscript{731} However, the show also includes information about how the business works. Otherwise, this “typical American business” narrative would not be so typical. While I concede that life on \textit{Cathouse} includes much more excitement in a half-
hour episode than an average 5-hour visit had for me, everything that happens during an episode I also witnessed at the Ranch: from the mundane – doctor’s visits, reviewing sheriff’s cards, taking payments, and scheduling – to the exciting – women sharing moves on the stripper pole, discussing sexual enjoyment of parties, and walking around scantily clad.

What the discourses in this chapter demonstrate is that the construction of the Moonlite Bunny Ranch as a “typical American business” in which the prostitutes are “sex workers” who provide a service and who are economically rewarded for their work that occurs on Cathouse is also how their lives are lived. E. Michele Ramsey and Gladys Santiago claim in reference to RTV that “mediated representations of anything typically considered ‘abnormal’ must also be made sense of within the discourses of the dominant culture.” As noted in Chapter 5, Cathouse situates the Moonlite Bunny Ranch both within and in opposition to dominant discourses of prostitution. Thus, watching Cathouse gives audiences a glimpse of what working at a legal brothel can be like if it is run like the Moonlite Bunny Ranch. Therefore, it can be said that Cathouse is an “authentic” (n the RTV sense of the word) portrayal of the lived experiences of the women at the Moonlite Bunny Ranch. I assumed, along with many of the women who now work there, that what was on the show was too good to be true. We all thought what dominant discourses taught us: that prostitutes are druggie whores forced to do what their pimps wanted them to. What we found was that this particular business setting more accurately compared to the entrepreneurial opportunities of a small family business than to these representations.
Second, as an “authentic” representation of life at the Ranch, *Cathouse* and the Moonlite Bunny Ranch demonstrate that working at a legal brothel can be considered “a real job.” Characterization as “a real job” is both constructed by the organizational narrative of the Moonlite Bunny Ranch and through the individual narratives of the women who work there. At times it is difficult to determine whether the organizational narrative constructed and promoted by owner/proprietor Dennis Hof influences how the women make sense of their work or if working at the Ranch has determined that they do indeed agree with the organizational narrative.

For example, Hof characterizes the women as a “motivated commission-sales”733 staff whose earning potential Madam Suzette described as “the sky’s the limit.”734 Hof further promotes the business as one in which the women can make as much as they need to meet their goals within two years. Many of the women I spoke with discussed how much money they made in a week or yearly, and all that their earnings provided for them, such as trips and being able to take care of their families. Moreover, several of the women said that in fact they hoped to work at the Ranch for two years to meet their financial goals. Kayla even specifically referenced Dennis as having told her that two years was all she needed to meet her goals.

Although I cannot say if the organizational narrative determines these women’s experiences or if their experiences confirm the organizational narrative, what I do feel comfortable asserting is that there is a dynamic relationship between the organizational narrative and these women’s individual narratives. Interestingly, as noted in Chapter 3, Hof said he does things above board in his business so that he can advertise and he can
advertise because he does things right. The result is better protection of the women’s rights as independent contractors. These practices include: protecting their rights to choose what customers they will and will not work with, choosing what they will and will not do with customers, and allowing them to negotiate their own prices. In the same way, constructing this business narrative and defining prostitution as “sex work” means that Hof runs the brothel as a business and, as a business, what these women do can be considered “work,” rather than a deviant social practice. So, in comparison to typical narratives of prostitution, the interaction of the organizational narrative of the Moonlite Bunny Ranch and the individual narratives of the women who work there create a more positive experience working in prostitution.

Third, how these women experience what they do is as “a real job” is also important. For them, however, “a real job” provides their primary means of support, is enjoyable, takes place during given periods of time that are not necessarily “permanent,” and which provides a service for others. How they characterized their work puts into question the external corporate/capitalist criteria for what “a real job” is. As a way to live and make sense of their lives, these women characterized what they do as valuable, to themselves and others. Yet, their discourse suggests that they are aware that others do not recognize the same value in their work that they do. Being able to frame their work as valuable is very important for how these women view themselves.

Eura Jung and Michael L. Hecht claim that identity/ies are social in nature and that our identity/ies are internalized by us through how we communicate them. They further argue that there are multiple loci or frames of identity which are interdependent:
the personal, the enacted, the relational, and the communal. The personal is the individual self-concept. The enacted is the individual’s performed or expressed identity. Relational identity involves four levels: ascribed relational (an individual’s internalization of how others view him/her), how an individual “identifies him/herself through his/her relationships with others, such as someone’s spouse and someone’s friend,” individual’s multiple identities in relation to each other, and the relationship itself as a unit of identity. The fourth locus is the communal identity, or the identity that is characteristic of a group or collectivity. Jung and Hecht argue that each individual can enact all four frames of identity at any given time in that the frames are interdependent, create a whole identity, and that, when in conflict, identity gaps exist.

What this research demonstrates is how these multiple levels of identity are enacted through communication, specifically through the multiple levels of narrative operating at given times. Examining these women’s individual narratives allowed me to see how their individual perspectives related to the organizational narrative of the Moonlite Bunny Ranch. By borrowing upon the “typical American business” narrative that characterizes what they do as valuable “work,” these women are able to construct and perform their identity/ies not merely as society would have us see them, as “prostitutes” (and all that term connotes), but as “sex workers.” In other words, their “work identity” is one in which they are able to provide for themselves and their families, help others fulfill fantasies and work through dysfunctions, and enjoy what they do to support themselves. The dynamic relationships between these women’s individual
narratives and the organizational narrative of the Bunny Ranch allows these women to live as valuable workers.

This contention not only calls into question the ways structural narratives characterize prostitution, but also problematizes the criteria we use to evaluate what “a real job” is. Robin Clair contends that if a job is fun, easy, temporary, has no criteria to measure success, involves little trust, does not take place in “real” time, or does not seem difficult for the worker, then it is not valued as “a real job.”736 Joyce K. Fletcher further contends that if a job is done by a woman in a location that is not viewed as a “work” environment, then it is not considered “work.”737 The only criteria of “a real job,” then, under which sex work at the Moonlite Bunny Ranch would be valued is that it serves as the primary means of support for almost all the women with whom I spoke. Rather than blindly accept these criteria, though, I concur with Clair and Fletcher’s conclusions that what needs to be called into question is not the work these women do but the criteria of what constitutes “a real job.” Why can’t a job be fun? Why can’t our work be temporary? Who decides the criteria mandating a description of labor as “a real job” or not?
Conclusion – Working at the Moonlite Bunny Ranch

In my introduction I set the stage for my exploration of how the women of the Moonlite Bunny Ranch perform identity/ies through the stories they live and use to reflect upon their lived experiences. From my perspective, performance of identity/ies is not an isolated act of a solitary individual. Rather, identity/ies are socially constructed in relation to others. Others in this case refer not only to other people but also to other discourses, including the narrative of the Moonlite Bunny Ranch. So, I also identified the organizational narrative of the Ranch as a “typical American business,” which provides a basis for comparison throughout my entire dissertation. The importance of discourses to the performances of identity/ies dictated that I examine the larger cultural context of prostitution in the United States. This totality of culture, constructed in Chapters 1 and 2, involved the historical, cultural, community, and individual discourses that provide the enveloping social context that influences what we think about prostitution and how we think about its practices.

In Chapter 1, I traced the evolution of our thinking about prostitution from biblical influences to media constructions and from feminist and conservative perspectives on pornography to conservative and feminist thinking about sexual women. I then moved in Chapter 2 to survey the viewpoints of individual sex workers working in contexts from illegal street workers to legal strippers. Taken together, these discourses reveal what enveloping dominant discourses say about prostitution and why they say it. Additionally, Chapter 2 brought what is often ignored into the picture, that is, the individual perspectives of sex workers. Their points of view demonstrate the limitations
of dominant discourses by showing the ambivalence in their realities. That is, individual perspectives of sex workers are both positive and negative whereas dominant discourses are locked in a punishment/redemption binary.

After establishing the broader context of our thinking about prostitution in the United States, in Chapter 3 I discussed the specific context of the Moonlite Bunny Ranch. I argued that its legal status, location in Nevada, public exposure, and the practices of the management and women at this Ranch make it a unique case among cases. This chapter described in detail what daily life at the Ranch is like. One of the most important points to take away from this chapter is how owner Dennis Hof’s decision to advertise and market the Moonlite Bunny Ranch has overwhelmingly influenced life at the Moonlite Bunny Ranch. This decision has made this Ranch subject to public scrutiny in ways that work in other contexts, including at other legal brothels in Nevada, are not. As such, Hof is careful to protect the rights of the sex workers at the Bunny Ranch as independent contractors. It is this protection that and his promotion of the Ranch as a business that overwhelmingly influence how the business is practiced and the daily lives of the women who work there.

I then took a step back in Chapter 4 and explained the investigative practices I employed throughout this project. Most important to this dissertation was my choice to bring rhetorical criticism and qualitative inquiry together in order to examine the research questions I posed. I realized early on in my research that to understand the lives of the women working at the Moonlite Bunny Ranch I could analyze their representation on television. However, this examination would only add to my understanding of how they
are represented. In order to evaluate that representation and understand how their lived experiences compared to it, I would also have to spend time with the working girls at their place of work. Performing both rhetorical criticism and qualitative study allowed me to compare textual representations of sex workers with my observations and interview accounts of their lived experiences. Moreover, my investigative activities also allowed me to explore how my roles as rhetorical critic and qualitative researcher complemented each other, especially in the writing process.

Chapters 5, 6, and 7 focused on the results of my rhetorical and qualitative research. In Chapter 5 I demonstrated how the media (television), form (reality television docuporn), and content (information and entertainment) of *Cathouse* interacted to construct the narrative of the show as a “typical American business.” Then in Chapter 6 I explored how the discourses of the women who work at the Moonlite Bunny Ranch compared to dominant discourses of prostitution. Interestingly, their stories involved dominant discourses of prostitution. That is, these women’s narratives both invoked and resisted dominant discourse in order to construct what they do as “a real job.” Their characterization of their work contrasted with how dominant conceptions of “work” would try to devalue what they do. Chapter 6 allowed me to explore the relationship between structural discourses and individual perspectives to argue that these women’s own lived experiences both invoked and resisted dominant discourses about them.

In Chapter 7, I argued that the “typical American business” narrative of *Cathouse* is also reflected in the individual narratives of the women who work at the Moonlite Bunny Ranch. Their discourses often draw upon the organizational narrative of the Ranch
constructed on *Cathouse* and in the everyday talk and business practices at the Ranch. However, their stories also involve elements that go beyond what is dictated by the Ranch narrative. Demonstrating the importance of these women’s relationships with their families acts both to resist dominant discourses of prostitution while at the same time allows these women to define themselves as regular people, just like you and me. Taken together, Chapters 6 and 7 demonstrated the pervasiveness of ambivalent perspectives in the lived experiences of these sex workers.

As noted throughout this dissertation, there are plenty of people who say that prostitutes are victimized and oppressed. The abuse they have suffered in childhood has led them into prostitution; their vulnerabilities are preyed upon by men to coerce them into the practice; and they suffer additional abuse working as prostitutes. These are all arguments made in dominant discourses of prostitution discussed in Chapters 1 and 2. I do not deny for one minute that there are women who are coerced into the practice and, at least, taken advantage of, and at worst, abused and/or killed by customers, management, and/or the police. I agree that all of these contentions about sex work are true. It is very easy to believe the redemption/punishment binary of prostitution because of the stigma attached to the work. If I were asked if I were a prostitute or if I wanted to become one, I would automatically be offended. I do not want someone to assume I sell my body for money. A difficult but necessary question to ask though is: why am I offended? Why would I not want to make a lot of money doing something I might enjoy? That is the problem. Within the dominant redemption/punishment dichotomy, women can not, would not, and should not enjoy such a practice as it is oppressive to them.
Where my perspective diverges then is that I do not believe oppression is the only experience women have in prostitution. I began Chapter 1 with a test that Jane Halley proposes. She says that if we start from a place where we assume that women are subordinated then we are operating within something she calls the “Injury Triad” – that is, within prostitution or pornography, females are harmed, females are innocent, and men are immune from harm. If applied to the Moonlite Bunny Ranch, we would have to assume that all of the women who work there have been duped into doing it. We would have to assume that they are harmed by providing services for customers for money. Additionally, we would be forced to place the blame on the male management, i.e., Dennis Hof, and the male customers. The relationships between these women and men would be characterized as purely a man holding power over women. Men would be conceived of as the oppressors and therefore, would have to be considered immune from harm in the practice. So, rather than assume this as a starting place, I, along with Halley, begin from a place where I can find out what the experiences of the working girls are at the Moonlite Bunny Ranch rather than looking for evidence to demonstrate how these women are oppressed.

Admittedly, I was (and am) influenced by what I saw and analyzed in Cathouse. The show packages the Moonlite Bunny Ranch as a business that looks fun, safe, and economically empowering for the women who work there. I was wondering whether or not this narrative was true. At the same time, however, I was (and am) continually influenced by the dominant discourses of prostitution, from what I see on television to what I read in feminist literature. So, I also wondered if what was on Cathouse could be
real given what I had been taught to believe from dominant discourses. My process of negotiating between these discourses, the discovery of the body of sex-positive literature, and reading what individual sex workers had to say made me realize that neither *Cathouse* nor dominant discourses of prostitution tell the whole story.

What dominated both the perspectives of individual sex workers (represented in Chapter 2) and the women at the Moonlite Bunny Ranch (as they shared with me in interviews) was the ambivalence they felt in their work. Some women enjoyed their work, while others felt uncomfortable doing it. Some women felt both enjoyment and discomfort. They shared feelings of being taken advantage of by customers and management at the same time that they reflected upon the freedom they felt working in a job that allowed them to explore their own sexualities. I hope that what I have written in these chapters reflects this ambivalence, as it pervaded the discourses of the women I interviewed and observed as well. I also hope that what I have written acts as a counter-discourse to dominant discourses of prostitution. Where dominant discourses are limited to narratives of redemption/punishment, I hope this dissertation demonstrates that this dichotomy ignores a whole range of experiences that are part of women’s lives working in sex work. This way when we talk about and theorize about prostitution and sex workers, we can begin from a place that examines what their experiences are rather than assuming we know they are negative.

Influences of the Moonlite Bunny Ranch Narrative on Me

Throughout this dissertation I have made reference to the experiences of the working girls of the Moonlite Bunny Ranch. I have also tried to remain faithful to their
experiences by writing about them from their point of view. What I have come to realize through this project is that as a researcher, I was working at the Ranch as well. I became a “working woman,” subject to the hierarchy, daily routines, and influences of working at the Moonlite Bunny Ranch. The hierarchy of the Ranch is very clearly, if informally, delineated. Dennis is at the top of the food chain, followed by Madam Suzette. When Dennis is not on the premises, Suzette is in charge. Then come the cashiers and working girls, followed by the staff, including bartenders, greeters, and the “handy ho” (maintenance woman). Then come the cooks, cleaning women, drivers, and the rest of the maintenance staff. When Dennis is around, everyone is a little more attentive about following rules, such as talking “like a lady,” i.e., no swearing, in the parlor and at least appearing busy. Maintenance staff will not hang out in the parlor as much when he is around. Dennis will often call before he comes in and whoever talks to him, whether it is Suzette, one of the cashiers, a greeter, or bartender, will make sure everyone who is in that day knows he is on his way. Upon his arrival, everyone looks much busier than when he is away.

Dennis’ presence does not merely make everyone more aware of following the rules. Many of the women who work there pay him more attention when he is around as well. When Dennis is hanging out in the parlor or the kitchen, the women who are hanging out there are often hanging out with him, rather than just with one another. Women, like Nadia, only like to spend time in the parlor when Dennis is around. However, the rest of the staff spends less time interacting with one another in the parlor when he is around. The greeters remain in the marble entryway, the bartenders behind the
bar, the cashiers in the office. Although I remained in the parlor when he was around, I was much more aware of when I had my field notes out, more careful about not talking to women who were chatting with customers, and more aware of how I might be perceived by him. I wanted to make sure not to do anything wrong in his eyes so that I would be able to continue to visit and work at the Ranch.

How Dennis and Suzette’s positions and presence affected everyone else was something I noticed in my observations and was part of earlier chapters. How their presence and authority affected me is something that is also important to note. My interviews and observations on days when Dennis and Suzette were not around are what made me aware of the influence they had on me and those around me. Days when they were not there, I hung out in the parlor chatting with whichever cashier was working that day. I built very positive relationships with both of the cashiers. So much so that eventually they started introducing me to girls they thought might make for good interviews. When I would stop by the “Hooker Booker” office, the cashiers would stop whatever they were doing to explain another part of the business to me. This was where I learned about how they check each girl’s sheriff’s card everyday to make sure the girls have their doctor’s visits on the right days.

What is important about this awareness is that I realized that I too was working at the Ranch, despite not being paid for my services. I was influenced by the Bunny Ranch organizational narrative. I believe that it is a business. I respect the authority that Dennis and Suzette had over me. They could have told me to leave at any time. They could have told the working girls not to talk to me, or instructed them what to say to me. I recognize
that I could relate to the cashiers, greeters, bartenders, and maintenance staff, but that 
they all had more authority to be there than I did. They had more rights as employees 
than I did as a researcher.

So, what makes me think that what I learned at the Ranch is not just what Dennis 
and Suzette wanted me to see? Again, it is the relationships I developed and the 
interactions I had with the working girls and staff outside of the presence of Dennis and 
Suzette that makes me feel confident that what I learned is more than a spoonfed 
narrative of the Moonlite Bunny Ranch. The working girls did not present a purely 
positive image of their experiences, nor did what I observe lack negativity. Conversation 
with the working girls and staff did flow more freely outside the presence of Dennis and 
Suzette, but the topics and the ambivalence in these experiences remained virtually the 
same. The biggest difference was the amount of casual conversation that took place in 
their presence and outside of it. I will admit that I may not have gotten to see everything 
that happens at the Ranch. As a matter of fact, I know I did not. I also know that what I 
saw, did, and how I interacted with others at the Ranch were all influenced by Dennis and 
Suzette. However, I think that just as I accounted for the influences of the narrative of the 
Moonlite Bunny Ranch on the lived experiences of the working girls there in Chapter 7, it 
would be fair to say that I had similar reactions as the working girls. Some of my 
experiences reflect what Dennis and Suzette wanted me to see, some of them resist their 
influence and still others fall outside the realm of their influence.

*     *     *
When Dennis granted me access, he gave me one condition, that is, that I must only do my research at the Bunny Ranch, no other brothels. As my intent was to compare *Cathouse* with lived experiences at the Moonlite Bunny Ranch, I had no problem with this condition. At the end of the tea party during my second visit to the Ranch, Dennis and Suzette headed out to hold another tea party at Bunny Ranch 2 (B2), which Dennis also owns. I did not know that Dennis owned another Ranch when I first proposed this project. B2 is not advertised and does not receive the same kind of media attention that the Bunny Ranch does. When I interviewed Kitten, I learned that she had worked at B2 before coming to the Bunny Ranch. She mentioned that it was sort of a promotion to have been invited to work at the Bunny Ranch. However, when I asked her how working at B2 compared to the Bunny Ranch, she said that was one topic she did not want to talk about. This was the only question I asked during all my visits that anyone refused to answer.

I have argued that despite its limitations, the Moonlite Bunny Ranch provides a positive model for how legal prostitution should be. The major reason for this is that Dennis does things “right.” I have also noted that Dennis does things right because he advertises and that he is able to advertise because he does things right. It is the assumption of public scrutiny that keeps Dennis honest, so to speak, and makes him create this environment at the Moonlite Bunny Ranch where the women are protected, feel comfortable, and can be successful in their work. So, why doesn’t Dennis advertise B2? How are things run there? Why wouldn’t Kitten talk to me about her experiences there? *Why* didn’t Dennis want me to do research at any other brothels?
I have made it clear that Dennis’ motivation for doing things right is not altruistic. He is a businessman first and foremost. He gives benefits – from top booker prizes to trips to the Playboy Mansion - to those who bring in business. He recruits featured striptease dancers and porn stars because he knows they will bring in business. He also does a lot for the local community, such as giving a couple whose house burnt down a place to stay and raising money to protect the wild mustangs in the area. I would argue that these actions are also part of his business plan, as having a positive image with the local community helps keep prostitution legal in Nevada.

Most brothel owners keep their business quiet so as not to ruffle the feathers of their local communities. Keeping things quiet means giving these local communities no reason to want to change the status quo and make prostitution illegal. It is rumored that the Nevada Brothel Owners Association is not a big fan of Dennis Hof’s marketing of the Bunny Ranch as it brings too much attention to the practice. I have also argued that keeping things quiet allows these other brothel owners to violate the independent contractor status of the working girls, requiring them to charge minimum prices, to service all customers, and to do whatever acts customers want. Much of the agency independent contractor status is meant to protect is taken away from these women. I do not know what the business practices of B2 are, but does the lack of advertising and marketing allow Hof to participate in these same types of practices as other brothel owners?

I am not accusing Hof of any improper behavior. I merely want to question why he advertises one of his brothels and not another? This question also highlights the
uniqueness of the Moonlite Bunny Ranch model. This question also makes it clear that while Hof is responsible for creating this model, which does serve to protect the independent contractor status of the working girls and helps them to make more money than they would at any other ranch, this is not necessarily the only way he does business. So, while I support the model created at the Moonlite Bunny Ranch and give Hof credit for his role in creating this model, I am also aware of the limitations of the model and the possibility that it is not how he does business in general.

Additional Issues for Future Research

I contend that the picture I have drawn of the Moonlite Bunny Ranch in the chapters of this dissertation reflects the experiences I had while conducting observations and interviews there. However, there are other issues that are important to prostitution and the roles played by the sex workers that I did not fully develop or that fell outside my interactions. This does not mean that these issues are not important. Rather, it reflects their role, or lack thereof, in my experiences. Here I discuss a few of these issues and suggest directions for future research.

Erasing Race, Ignoring Class

I have not yet addressed issues of race and class. I learned from Cathouse, Hof, and my interviews and observations that the women who work at the Moonlite Bunny Ranch are hired so that at any given time the Ranch can offer “31 flavors.” That is, part of the business of sex is offering variety and being able to fulfill customer fantasies. So, there are a variety of women at the Ranch who can provide a wide-range of services, from straight and multiple partner sex to oral and anal sex, and from good conversation
and the ability to provide comfort to bondage and sadomasochistic play. The Ranch makes sure that there are always a variety of women to choose from as well.

There are a number of African American women who work at the Ranch. Although three of my 9 interviewees were African American, 743 African American women do not make up thirty percent of the women who work at the Ranch. Five of my interviewees were white, one was Hispanic-looking, but did not clarify what her ethnic background was. The Ranch works to make sure that at any given time there are women of various races, weights, heights, hair color, etc. Over the course of my visits I met several African American women, a couple of Asian women (one of Japanese decent, another Korean), and a couple of Hispanic-looking women. Cathouse featured a plus-size sex worker and even a little person who worked at the Ranch. However, there were a lot more white women with blonde hair than any other women working at the Ranch. Kandi noted that she makes more money when she is blonde and tan, as guys seem partial to blondes.

The African American women who work at the Ranch represent a variety in themselves. During one of my visits I overheard a conversation between one of the cashiers and one of the African American women I interviewed. This cashier explained that while the customer who just came in wanted a Black woman, this working girl’s coffee color was not Black enough for this customer. On Cathouse, African American sex worker Danielle explains that her chocolate-colored skin is one of her selling points. She was shown on Cathouse as one of the top earners at the Ranch. 744 One of the African American women I met spoke a smattering of foreign languages which may have been a

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selling point for customers, but was also considered a bit crazy by the other women and Bunny Ranch staff.

The variety provided by the presence of a diverse group of women was almost the only mention of race at the Ranch. The only other reference to race was made by one of the African American women I interviewed. Interestingly, what she discussed was the attitudes and behaviors of another Black woman at the Ranch. She said that she is “not a loud mouthed Black woman. I can’t stand that.” She further explained that the only conflict she had at the Ranch thus far was with this other Black woman who was loud mouthed and “ghetto.” However, she further explained that this other woman’s blackness was not what made her “ghetto,” because a white woman or a Hispanic woman could be “ghetto” in her mind. Rather, it was a feature of “tryin’ to pretend like they’re so much harder” than other women that she said distinguished “ghetto.” Apparently, the two of them did not like one another and had words with one another the night before our interview.

Class was not an issue that was raised when the women talked to me about varieties available at the Ranch. However, in addition to race, another one of the African American women I interviewed mentioned that the issue of class influenced the reactions of some of her acquaintances when they found out where she worked. She explained that the only negative reaction she was subject to came from some acquaintances who see her as “‘bourgie,’ or thinking that, you know, that I’m better than them on some level.” But, she said that they felt that way about her even before she worked at the Ranch. Two of the Black women I interviewed mentioned that working at the Moonlite Bunny Ranch
was like working in a high class brothel. They characterized the Ranch as better than other brothels, implying that their work situation put them in a higher class than other sex workers.

Race and class are issues at the Ranch. However, I feel that given the interactions I experienced at the Ranch it is impossible for me to say what these issues really mean. I can speculate that working at the Bunny Ranch puts these women in a privileged class of sex workers. They make more money, are better protected, and feel more comfortable at work than many others working in other contexts. I also feel confident that they recognize this privilege as it was a part of a few of their discourses. I can add that race is definitely an issue at the Ranch. This business actively chooses women to fulfill certain “quotas” so that they can provide for the desires of their customers. Additionally, I can say that there are racial issues among the women at the Ranch. However, I do not feel there was enough evidence in their discourses to support further speculation about the issues of race or class on my part at this time. I do think that further studies that focus on these issues would be warranted.

I will also note that much of the literature I reviewed for Chapter 2 included the perspectives of lesbian sex workers, who service both men and women. Despite the number of parties shown on Cathouse that include female-female sex or multiple partner sex, there was only one mention of lesbian sex in all my interviews and observations. As noted in Chapter 3, Jenna explained to Nadia during her orientation that unlike many other Ranches, the Moonlite Bunny Ranch accepted female customers. Jenna noted that she does do parties with women and that couples parties are now her favorite kind of
party to do. However, she also noted that is only “gay for pay.”

Most of the women I interviewed either explicitly noted or implied that they had boyfriends or ex-husbands. This does not mean that there are no lesbians working at the Ranch, just that I did not interview any of them, nor did I observe any conversations or behavior that reveal its prevalence. However, given the prevalence of the perspectives of lesbian sex workers I ran across in my research for Chapter 2, I would recommend further research in this area.

*The Roles of Men in Sex Work*

Neither male sex workers nor the predominance of male customers of both male and female sex workers have been the subject of many studies of sex work. The assumptions are that women are the prostitutes; men are the customers; women are commodified and victimized by men. These assumptions about women’s roles in prostitution are addressed throughout this dissertation. What I have not included in my discussion is how as customers assumptions about male sexuality contribute to their characterization as oppressors of women. It is true that most customers at the Moonlite Bunny Ranch are men. However, customers were not the focus of this analysis. There has been little written about male customers. Male sexuality has been theorized as predatory, oppressive, and even violent. So, assumptions are made about how male sexuality translates into their role as customers of prostitutes. It is assumed that they use prostitutes to fulfill their sexual needs, that these needs are purely selfish.

Despite the lack of literature on the topic, I would like to suggest that perhaps there is more to this relationship. As noted in Chapter 6, working girls at the Bunny Ranch report that some of their male customers come to the Ranch for help with sexual
dysfunctions, such as not being able to perform on cue and the inability to be close to women after the death of a partner. If these women are helping men cope with sexual dysfunction, is it fair to characterize the relationship between male customer and female sex worker as one of exploitation and oppression?

Additionally, some of these women noted that their customers came to them for services they could not get elsewhere, including losing their virginity and getting blowjobs. The virgins on Cathouse explained that they wanted to learn how to touch and please women from a professional. Airforce Amy said on Cathouse and Kandi said in her interview with me that some of their customers want blowjobs from them because they do not want to ask their wives to perform such a task. In this case, the male customers are paying women at the Ranch to provide services they either cannot or will not ask women outside of the Ranch to perform. On one hand, it could be argued that this makes the women at the Ranch subject to male sexuality. If this is true, then aren’t these men respecting women outside of the Ranch? On the other hand, it could be said that women working at the Ranch are free to be their sexual selves with their male customers, whereas women outside the Ranch would be judged as transgressive if they were to participate in the same acts. So, women outside the Ranch refuse to perform certain sexual acts to maintain their “good girl” status, while women working at the Ranch who are characterized as “bad girls” can provide such services for men. The point is both inside and outside the Ranch male/female sexual relationships are more complicated that oppressor/oppressed. This is definitely a site where more research is warranted.
In addition to the lack of research focused on male customers, there is also a shortage of information available about male sex workers. The two studies I read revealed interesting comparisons between male and female sex workers’ experiences. In their study of Canadian gay-identified sex workers, Todd G. Morrison and Bruce W. Whitehead identified four themes of “stigma resistance” that emerged in how these men combated the negativity they perceived was directed at their profession:

(1) escorting is volitional (i.e., one isn’t forced to work as an escort, rather it is a choice one makes); (2) escorting is a profession (i.e., the client is in control and the escort a service provider); (3) the escort is in control during client/escort interchanges; and (4) escorting is distinct from, and better than, street prostitution.749

Interestingly, I identified variations on all of these themes in the discourses of the women of the Moonlite Bunny Ranch as well. This limited sample suggests that the experiences of male and female sex workers are similar. However, the limited number of studies examining the experiences of male and female sex workers cannot support general conclusions about them. I would suggest studies comparing the experiences of male and female sex workers would add insight into issues facing both.

Julian Marlowe suggests that such comparative research could reveal the limitations in what we believe to be true about women working as sex workers. He argues that the stereotypical hooker is the Julia Roberts in Pretty Woman, i.e., the hooker with a heart of gold waiting to be saved by the right man. In other words, it is the redemption narrative. On the other hand, he contends that “a stereotypical male hooker is regarded as
tough and invulnerable, turning tricks just to be a deviant." So, when men charge money for sex, they are not viewed in the same ways as women. Men choose to be deviants and are tough whereas women are vulnerable and forced into the practice.

However, this argument is based on assumptions that men are sexual and women are not. Marlowe explains further:

“Exploitation” evokes a zero-sum game: one person gains at the expense of the other. However, prostitution – and especially male prostitution – is almost always a commercial transaction in which both parties agree on a price beforehand. The exploitation argument seems to rest on the spurious claim that women find sex inherently unpleasant, and that any woman who engages in it for reasons other than love is having something taken from her, no matter what fee she commands.”

As with the interaction Marlowe describes, a price is negotiated and agreed upon between customers and sex workers at the Ranch before parties begin. When this same type of interaction takes place between two men, the question can be posed, who is taking advantage of whom? Is anyone being exploited? The focus of the argument may shift from that of sexual exploitation to question, if there is exploitation, what is its source? Is it capitalism? Why can’t we ask the same questions when the interaction is between a man and woman.

When an interaction happens between a male customer and a female sex worker, the assumption is that the man is taking advantage of the woman because the woman is acting in a way that women are not supposed to act. As Marlowe explains, “(T)here is
nothing inherently exploitative about two adults engaging in consensual paid sex.”752 Rather,

The juxtaposition of male-female and male-male prostitution helps to highlight a fundamental flaw in the arguments of antiprostitution feminists: the objection relates not to the actual transaction (which is fairly mundane when all is said and done) but rather to preconstructed sex roles that attempt to stigmatize women for being anything other than the traditional passive partner. Rather than advocating a manifestly patriarchal view of female sexuality, perhaps feminist energy would be better spent trying to eradicate the whole good girl/bad girl paradigm altogether.753

So, in effect, the assumption upon which the redemption narrative is based is that there are particular sex roles to which men and women adhere. Women who transgress these sex roles are stigmatized and either labeled victims or punished for their transgression. Future studies that compare male and female prostitution could lend support to Marlowe’s perspective and could give additional insight into why we think the ways we do about female sex workers. These types of studies may also allow us to delve deeper into other structures, such as capitalism, that influence these types of interactions.

Final Thoughts

In Chapter 4 I referenced Norman K. Denzin’s belief that the crisis of representation is actually three interrelated crises. I addressed the first two – the crisis of representation and the crisis of legitimization – in that chapter. Here I would like to conclude by discussing the third part of this triangle: “How is it possible to effect change
in the world, if society is only and always a text?" The assumption upon which Denzin’s question seems to be based is that “texts” do not have material consequences. I believe this is a false assumption.

I have argued throughout this dissertation that we both live our stories and use narrative as a way to make sense of our lived experiences. As such, our stories are not merely “texts” in the sense Denzin implies. Rather our stories are who we are. Therefore, the stories told about prostitutes in dominant discourses, the narratives of individual prostitutes, working at the Moonlite Bunny Ranch or in other contexts, and the organizational narrative of the Bunny Ranch, and the interactions between these multiple levels of narrative, demonstrate parts of who these women are. When these women resist dominant narratives, they are, in effect, attempting to enact change. When we as a society listen to their stories and problematize what dominant discourse say about prostitutes we are also effecting change in the world.

Prior to this study my opinion about legalized prostitution would have fit conveniently into mainstream feminist perspectives. I would have claimed prostitution was oppressive and that we should save these women. I would further have added that if women said they were not oppressed in prostitution that they must be suffering from false consciousness. After this study, I think that prostitution should be legalized and regulated. What these women communicated to me was that there were parts of their work that they did not feel comfortable with, while at the same time there were other parts they thoroughly enjoyed. They seemed to have realistic views about what they were doing. They recognized what society thinks of them. They agreed with parts of this
dominant narrative and resisted other parts. Based on what appeared to be a more realistic view of their world than the punishment/redemption paradigm, I agree with them that legalizing and regulating prostitution is a better way to deal with the negative issues they face than assuming these women are oppressed and deluded if they say otherwise. This is my pragmatic solution based on the idea that prostitution is a practice that has been around for thousands of years and is not likely to go away any time soon. So, we might as well look for the best ways to do it and make sure that the women who participate in the practice are protected and are able to enact choice.

Beyond this pragmatic belief, however, I think that the larger issue that needs to be addressed is our societal attitudes and beliefs about the relationships between women, money, sex, and power. As noted in Chapters 1 and 2, society is uncomfortable with women who want to make money, especially those who transgress traditional gender norms to attain it. So, women who are comfortable with their sexuality and promote sex-positive views make society uncomfortable. Add to this women who charge for sexual services and discomfort levels are increased. Women who have positive attitudes about sex and who admit to being desirous of money are moving from positions of passivity to positions of power in sex work as it is practiced at the Moonlite Bunny Ranch. They are taking charge. There is nothing so scary to society as women taking action and holding power. So, it is no wonder that such perspectives threaten societal gender norms.

Conceptualizing prostitution as sex work, allowing that women are not inherently oppressed in the practice, and demonstrating how the working girls of the Moonlite
Bunny Ranch make sense of their lives from these perspectives offers a way to effect change in the ways we as a society understand and evaluate sex work.

The material consequences of this “text” and the possibilities for affecting how we think about women, sex, money, and power is one substantive implication of this work overall. How I went about constructing this “text” has theoretical and methodological implications as well. As noted in Chapter 4, my writing process brought my roles as a rhetorical critic and qualitative researcher together in unexpected ways. As a matter of fact, it was only by performing both roles at once in the writing process that I was able to draw some of the conclusions I did. However, I originally conceived of this project as two separate stages – the rhetorical criticism and then the qualitative field research. After completing each of these steps, I thought I would then compare the “results” from each to help me answer the research questions I posed. I was aware that what I learned from the rhetorical criticism would influence my assumptions going into my fieldwork. As a result, I made sure to be aware of and reflect upon those assumptions in my discussion of these “results.” Perhaps I should have predicted that my roles as rhetorical critic and qualitative researcher would come together in the writing process.

What I did not expect was how important my rhetorical criticism would become as part of my field research. What I learned from my rhetorical criticism provided the basis for my focus on “work.” As a result, my interview protocol focused on these women’s experiences of their work and how they negotiated their work and non-work lives. Every day that I conducted interviews and performed observations, I was highly aware of how what I was experiencing compared to the suasory Cathouse narrative.
Throughout my fieldnotes I reflected about what I saw and heard that fell within this television narrative and that which did not fit within it. My rhetorical criticism did more than just provide this basis though. What I found in my criticism made me aware of just how important this narrative appeared to be in the lived experiences and spoken descriptions of these women. It could be argued that this perception is a self-fulfilling prophecy on my part. That is, I saw this narrative in action because I was aware of it. However, evidence from my interviews and observations would contradict this assumption.

I asked no questions about *Cathouse*. During informed consent I explained this project as one that focused on these women’s work and non-work lives. So, yes, work issues did shape this project. Yet, in their discourses, the working girls at the Bunny Ranch invoked *Cathouse* and dominant discourses of prostitution as reference points in an unprompted fashion. Further, these women often explained how their views of their work came from advice they received from Dennis Hof. As I argued in Chapter 7, it was his business model that shaped the *Cathouse* narrative and strongly influenced these women’s experiences of their work as well. When I began this process, I was asked why I was doing the rhetorical criticism first. My answer was that I saw something on television about prostitution that seemed different than other representations. So, I felt the need to find out what, if anything, it was about the show that stood out. If nothing was unique about it, my analysis of the show might not be interesting or contribute little to our knowledge of television, prostitution, or communication about the practices. What I discovered through my rhetorical criticism of the televisual representation was a narrative
of a “typical American business” that both reifies and resists dominant discourses of prostitution. Having done this research prior to my arrival at the Ranch helped me not only to design how to do my research, but helped me attend to how these women talked about their work. Without having done the rhetorical criticism and read some of the scholarly literature about prostitution in advance of my field research, I may not have noticed or attended to the roles these discourses played in these women’s narratives.

Ultimately, I think that this project became more than a comparison of a television representation to the lived experiences and practices of those persons in the TV show. I believe that my role as a rhetorical critic led me to construct a particular “text” of the Moonlite Bunny Ranch. I was only able to construct and analyze this “text” because of my knowledge and skills as *both* a rhetorical critic and a qualitative researcher. Additionally, if I had only approached this discourse as a text in a traditional sense, as merely a representation, I might not have realized its material implications. In addition, my understanding and use of narrative inquiry helped me to realize that what these women had to say, on television and in person, reflected both their lived experiences and how they made sense of them. This project pushed me to reconceptualize my investigative roles as complementary. I do wonder how it would have affected the project overall had I entered into it with this understanding from the beginning. In the end, I hope my dissertation will challenge characterization of the investigative practices of rhetorical criticism and qualitative inquiry as discrete activities and recognize how they can be used together to provide valuable insights that using them alone might not. In this case, bringing these practices together allowed me to witness more thoughtfully the dynamic
relationships between the media representation of the working girls of the Moonlite Bunny Ranch and their lived experiences. These interwoven practices also helped me to see who these women are and how they make sense of their lives.
Federal and university regulations require signed consent for participation in research involving human subjects. After reading the statements below, please indicate your consent by signing this form.

Explanation of Study
Cathouse showed a very different picture of sex work than is usually shown on television or in the movies. For this reason, I began wondering about what it is really like to work at a place like the Bunny Ranch. The best way to find out is to conduct interviews with you, the women who actually work here, to find out what your experiences are. For this study, I am interested in finding out what the experience is like for you, in your own words, and as my research focuses on communication, I am also interested in how you talk about yourself. If you agree to participate, we will engage in an in-depth interview about your life inside and outside of work. Interviews may last up to 2-3 hours and will be conducted in a location of your choice. The interview will be recorded and transcribed later. You may choose to answer or not answer any of the questions, or to end the interview at any time. I will also contact you a few weeks after the interview to allow you a chance to review and revise the transcripts for clarity and/or content.

Risks and Discomforts
Your participation in this study is completely voluntary. If you begin to feel uncomfortable at any time, you have the right to stop participating in the interview or to skip questions. As some questions may ask about behavior that is illegal in some jurisdictions, please know that you can skip any questions you might feel uncomfortable answering. This study is completely confidential and you will remain anonymous in any reports that result from this study.

Benefits
As you know, sex work is controversial in the United States. As the general public does not often have the opportunity to speak to sex workers themselves, most of the public's information comes from the media or academic studies. Your participation in this study may help to further understanding of what your experiences working in this industry really are to broader society. Additionally, the interview portion of this study is conversational and therefore should provide you with opportunities for dialogue which can help offer keen insight into your own experiences for you as well.
Confidentiality and Records
This study is completely confidential. You will be referred to by a pseudonym of your choice and thus remain anonymous in any reports that result from this study. Your name and contact information will be collected on a separate sheet and kept separate from the data in a locked place. A code key will be maintained to connect your pseudonym with the data about you which will only be available to the researcher. While names will not be stored with data, there is some risk that the combination of demographic data collected could potentially identify participants. So, please be advised that demographic data will only be used to make general statements but will not be used to identify specific participants. The primary researcher and faculty advisor will be the only people who will have access to the raw data (including demographic data). The master list of participants will be destroyed no later than two years after the interviews have been completed. Recordings of the interviews will be stored in a locked cabinet in the principal investigator's office. Only the primary researcher and faculty advisor will have access to these recordings. Recordings will be destroyed 5 years after data collection.

Compensation
No compensation will be provided for your cooperation.

Contact Information
If you have any questions regarding this study, please contact Jennifer Dunn at (775) 313-2526 or via e-mail at id356805@ohio.edu. You can also contact Ms. Dunn's advisor, Dr. William Rawlins at (740) 593-4828 or via e-mail at rawlins@ohio.edu. If you have any questions regarding your rights as a research participant, please contact Jo Ellen Sherow, Director of Research Compliance, Ohio University, (740)593-0664.

I certify that I have read and understand this consent form and agree to participate as a subject in the research described. I agree that known risks to me have been explained to my satisfaction and I understand that no compensation is available from Ohio University and its employees for any injury resulting from my participation in this research. I certify that I am 18 years of age or older. My participation in this research is given voluntarily. I understand that I may discontinue participation at any time without penalty or loss of any benefits to which I may otherwise be entitled. I certify that I have been given a copy of this consent form to take with me.

Signature _____________________________________________ Date ____________________
Printed Name __________________________________________
Interview Protocol
for
HBO’s Cathouse: The Public Portrayal of the Private Business of Sex

Introduction to the study

Cathouse showed a very different picture of sex work than is usually shown on television or in the movies. For this reason, I began wondering about what it is really like to work at a place like the Bunny Ranch. The best way to find out is to conduct interviews with you, the women who actually work here, to find out what your experiences are. For my study, I am interested in finding out what the experience is like for you, in your own words, and as my research focuses on communication, I am also interested in how you talk about yourself.

Warm-up/Demographic Information

1. Name (this will be asked before recording begins and will only appear on the researcher’s code for matching names with pseudonyms)

2. Do you use your given name at work? If not, what name do you use? Which name would you prefer I call you? (Again, this name will not be recorded but will be in the researcher’s code)

3. How did you choose it?

4. Is there a reason you have chosen to use (ask one or the other) your real name OR use a pseudonym?

5. Pseudonym for study

6. Age


8. Where are you from? Do you still live there? Or, have you moved to Nevada?

Work Life

1. How long have you worked at the Bunny Ranch?

2. How often do you work here? (Year-round? Seasonally? Other times?)

3. Do you work at more than one job?
4. Is this the first place you did sex work? (Where else did you work? For how long?)

5. How did you decide to start working here? What is it like working here? Is it the same or different than working at other places you have worked? What kinds of benefits do you receive working here?

6. In general, what does work mean to you?

7. How did you decide to start doing sex work?

8. What do you find to be the most enjoyable part of your work?

9. What do you find to be the most difficult part of your work?

10. How long do you think you will work here?

**Life Outside of Work**


2. How do you decide whether you should tell someone where you work or not?

3. How do you tell people where you work? What are some of the reactions you have gotten when you have told people outside the business?

4. Could you give me an example? (Who were you trying to decide to tell or not? What did you consider in making your decision? Did you tell them? How did they react?)

5. All people have issues trying to balance work and home life. What it like negotiating your life here and your life outside of the Ranch? Are there any unique issues you feel you have to deal with that you would not in another job? Or, do you find the same issues you would with any other job?

**Conclusion**

1. Are there any questions you think I should ask you?

2. Is there anything else you would like to add?

3. Do you have any questions for me?
Notes

Introduction, 1-40


Unfortunately, I cannot come up with a single term to refer to this multi-dimensional process of identity. As such, I use the term identity/ies and refer to its construction/performance through use of the terms “construction” and “performance” together and separately throughout this paper. All uses are intended to represent this multi-dimensional process as described at the outset.


Ibid, 9.

Ibid, 23.

Jung and Hecht, “Elaborating the Communication Theory of Identity,” 266.

Mokros, “A Constitutive Approach to Identity.”


Jung and Hecht, “Elaborating the Communication Theory of Identity,” 265-266.

Mead, Mind, Self, and Society.

Cooley, Human Nature and the Social Order.


Goffman, The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life.


Lopata, “The Interweave of Public and Private.”

Ibid, 179.

Ibid, 186.


Medved and Kirby, “Family CEOs.”

Kirby, et.al., “An Organizational Communication Challenge.”


Goffman, The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life; Hochschild, The Managed Heart; Oatley, 1993)

Hochschild, The Managed Heart, 119.

Ibid, 153.


399
Alexa Albert, *Brothel: Mustang Ranch and its women* (New York: Random House, 2001). In this section I note that the Mustang Ranch is now defunct. This is true of the Ranch in the form in which Albert did her research. However, a new owner has recently opened a new brothel that they fought, and won, in court to call the Mustang Ranch on the same land on which the old Ranch operated.

Carr, *Time, Narrative, and History.*


For discussion of narrative as a method of rhetorical criticism, see Chapter 4.


Carr, *Time, Narrative, and History.*


Riessman, “Analysis of Personal Narratives.”


Carr, *Time, Narrative, and History.*

Ibid, 93.


Freeman, “Charting the Narrative Unconscious,” 195; emphasis in original.

Freeman, “Charting the Narrative Unconscious,” 204.

Freeman, “Charting the Narrative Unconscious,” 200.

Carr, *Time, Narrative, and History,* 163.

Crites, “Storytime.”


Carr, *Time, Narrative, and History.*

Crites, “Storytime.”


Riessman, “Analysis of Personal Narratives.”

Goffman, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life.*

These elements were taken from Sonja K. Foss, *Rhetorical Criticism Exploration and Practice* (Long Grove, IL: Waveland Press, 2004). She outlines a systematic method of narrative criticism. I chose to use her elements as they incorporated issues identified by the narrative theorists discussed in this chapter, such as spatiality, temporality, etc. Her method could be criticized as too formulaic. For this reason, I do not merely follow the steps in her book. Rather, I use these elements to outline the Cathouse narrative, but explain in detail later how used Foss’ method in conjunction with investigative practices of narrative inquiry (see Chapter 4).

Fieldnotes November 29, 2007. The girls have to pay the runners for each trip, the price I heard was $7 per trip, plus tip. But, the convenience they provide and the fact that the management encourages the girls to use them, makes more girls use the runners than not.


Cathouse.

In subsequent episodes of *Cathouse*, their needs are actually shown to be fulfilled as party segments were filmed. Here, however, we learn that their needs have been fulfilled by what the customers and/or the working girls explain what they got out of it.

I used the term (il)legal in reference to the blurred boundaries between the types of sex work that are legal, illegal, or have elements of both. This term is used extensively in Chapter 2 and is explained in more detail there as well.

“Authenticity” refers to the ability of people on reality television shows to be themselves in front of the camera and how those portrayals relate to the existing social order. This explanation comes from how Mark Andrejevic, “The Kinder, Gentler Gaze of Big Brother,” New Media & Society 4 (2002), 261, and Myra Mendible, “Humiliation, Subjectivity, and Reality TV,” Feminist Media Studies 4 (2004), 335-338, characterize the concept of authenticity on reality television.

The “double logic of remediation” is defined as a strategy in which a television show highlights the medium while at the same time erasing it. Highlighting the medium might involve the use of a hand-held camera or showing on screen that a hidden camera was used. Erasing the medium shows action in-situ as if there were no camera filming. How these strategies combine to create “authenticity” is explained in Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin, *Remediation: Understanding New Media* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press).


Chapter 1, 41-78


89 Ibid, 73.
90 Ibid., 135.
92 Ibid.
93 Ibid.
94 Ibid.
95 Williams, “Base and Superstructure,” 143.
99 Ibid.
101 Ibid., 4.
103 Grosz, *Volatile Bodies*, 3.
104 Ibid.
105 Ibid., 9.
106 Ibid., 10.
109 Grosz, *Volatile Bodies*, 16.
110 Ibid., 17.


115 Hollibaugh and Moraga, “What We’re Rollin’ Around.”


117 Ibid., 27-28.

118 Snitow, Stansell, and Thompson, “Introduction.”

119 Halley, *Split Decisions*.


121 Hausbeck and Brenn, “The Politics of Passing.”


132 Caputi, “Everyday Pornography.”


135 Dworkin and MacKinnon, “Pornography and Civil Rights.”


137 Such as sources used by Dworkin & MacKinnon in “Pornography and Civil Rights.”

138 Boyle, “The Pornography Debates.”

139 Ibid.

140 Ibid., 410.

141 Ibid.


Chapter 2, 79-143

I have included a greater number of lengthy quotes in this section. I chose to do this in order to honor not only what individual sex workers have to say about their experiences, but also to give credence to how they say it.


I used the term (il)legal in reference to the blurred boundaries between the types of sex work that are legal, illegal, or have elements of both. The exchange of sex for money is the most basic definition of prostitution. This act is what is illegal in most of the United States. Street prostitution is the most basic example of this practice and it is strictly illegal. However, women “loitering” in the street have been arrested under the suspicion that they are prostitutes. The legal status of prostitution that occurs at massage parlors and strip clubs, for example, is even more fuzzy. Giving massages for money is legal. Stripping is regulated by legal standards that vary state-by-state, and even county-by-county. At what point massages and stripping become prostitution is often defined by law enforcement in the field, when making busts. The legal/illegal status of prostitution is a crucial factor that impacts how sex work/sex workers feel about their work and how they are treated. Yet, the lack of clear distinctions between that which is legal or illegal is what makes me feel using the term (il)legal more accurately reflects the status of sex work in general in the United States.

170 MacCowan, “Organizing in the Massage Parlor.”
172 Ibid, 212-213.
177 Chateauvert, “Girls, Girls, Girls.”
181 Ibid, 217.
182 Grant, “MAPping Accountability,” 244.
185 Ibid.
189 Ibid.

195 Wardlaw, “Dream Turned Nightmare.”
197 Funari, “Naked, Naughty, Nasty,” 23.
200 MacCowan, “Organizing in the Massage Parlor.”
204 Ibid
205 Highleyman, “Professional Dominance.”
208 Reed, “All Stripped Off,” 183.
210 Highleyman, “Professional Dominance,” 150.
211 Ibid.
212 Funari, “Naked, Naughty, Nasty,” 25.
217 Ibid.
220 Ibid, 120.
221 Aarens, et al., “Showing Up Fully.”
222 Ibid
226 Ibid; See also Aarens, et al., “Showing Up Fully.”

406
Reed, “All Stripped Off.”
MacCowan, “Organizing in the Massage Parlor.”
Hartley, “In the Flesh.”
Highleyman, “Professional Dominance.”
Ibid.
Lash, “Pain, Pleasure, and Poetry.”
Leigh, “Inventing Sex Work,” 228.
Hartley, “In the Flesh,” 61.
Highleyman, “Professional Dominance.”
Reed, “All Stripped Off.”
Hartley, “In the Flesh.”
Reed, “All Stripped Off,” 185.
Female sex workers do sometimes entertain female clients. However, these are not the experiences that are predominant. As a matter of fact, none of the sex workers noted any female clients. The only discussion of non-sex worker sexual experiences were those in reference to targeted audiences of woman-centered erotica and pornography that some of the sex workers were involved in.
Hartley, “In the Flesh.”
Nagle, “Introduction.”
Aarens, et al., “Showing Up Fully.”
Funari, “Naked, Naughty, Nasty;” See also Everts, “Triple threat.”
Dudash, “Peepshow Feminism.”
Funari, “Naked, Naughty, Nasty.”
Reed, “All Stripped Off.”
Dudash, “Peepshow Feminism,” 107.
Funari, “Naked, Naughty, Nasty;” Hartley, “In the Flesh.”


297 Morgan, “Living on the Edge.”


302 Aarens, “Showing Up Fully.”

303 Ibid.

304 Ibid, 252.

305 Ibid, 196-197.

306 Funari, “Naked, Naughty, Nasty.”

307 Highleyman, “Professional Dominance.”

308 Reed, “All Stripped Off,” 181.


310 Grant, “MAPping Accountability,” 244.


312 Alexander, “Interview with Nell;” See also Edelstein, “In the Massage Parlor.”


314 Highleyman, “Professional Dominance,” 151.


317 Ibid.

318 Queen, “Sex Radical Politics,” 126.

319 See previous section on Victims In Need of Saving?

320 Alexander, “Prostitution: Still a Difficult Issue;” Reed, “All Stripped Off.”

321 Morgan, “Living on the Edge.”


323 Ibid.


326 Nagle, “Introduction.”

327 Ibid; See also the section on Media Representation of Sexual Women.

328 Queen, “Sex Radical Politics,” 132.


332 Alexander, “Prostitution Still a Difficult Issue,” 200-201.
336 Lockett, “What Happens When You are Arrested.”
337 Almodovar, “Working It,” 211.
338 Ibid.
339 Ibid, 211-212.
340 Ibid.
341 Lockett, “What Happens When Your are Arrested.”
342 Queen, “Sex Radical Politics.”
343 Carole, “Interview with Debra.”
344 Summers, “Prostitution,” 117.
347 Summers, “Prostitution.”
348 Nagle, “First Ladies of Feminist Porn.”
351 Reed, “All Stripped Off.”
352 Funari, “Naked, Naughty, Nasty,” 33-34.
353 Ibid.
354 Siobhan Brooks, “Dancing Toward Freedom.”
355 Ibid.
356 Funari, “Naked, Naughty, Nasty.”
357 Ibid, 20.
358 Aarens, et al., “Showing Up Fully.”
359 Alexander, “Interview with Nell,” 55.
360 Grant, “MAPping Accountability,” 244.
362 Ibid, 225; parenthetical phrase added.
363 Ibid, 229.
365 Highleyman, “Professional Dominance.”
366 Ibid, 147.
367 Queen, “Sex Radical Politics.”
372 Marcus, “Hong Kong Massage.”
373 Edelstein, “In the Massage Parlor.”
374 Highleyman, “Professional Dominance;” Marcus, “Hong Kong Massage.”
376 Marcus, “Hong Kong Massage.”
377 Metal, “Bohemia Ho…Ho, Ho, Ho.”
Chapter 3, 144-190


381 Ibid; I should also note that when I say “feminist perspectives,” I am referring to the dominant, mainstream feminist perspectives developed in depth in Chapter 1. In particular, read the section on Dualistic Thinking and Sexual Women. This is not to say that there are not other feminist perspectives of sexual women, merely that these are the dominant mainstream feminist voices.


388 Ibid.


390 Ibid.

391 Ibid, 14.


395 “Jenna” is not this woman’s real or working name. All but one of the women I interviewed gave me permission to use their work names. However, I made up names for the women with whom I interacted outside of the interview setting to protect their privacy.


397 Herbert, “Legal Prostitution.”


See Chapters 6 and 7.


Bunny Love in an interview with the author on December 10, 2007, at the Moonlite Bunny Ranch.

As I did not have informed consent from the staff, pseudonyms have been used for them. Dennis and Suzette’s names are real as they appear on television as themselves and are therefore public figures.

As Jenna indicated during a new girl orientation the author observed on November 29, 2007.

Dennis Hof, Bunny Ranch Christmas Party held December 20, 2007, as observed by the author.

Mead, “American Pimp.”

Ibid.

Ibid.

Ibid.

Kandi in an interview with the author on December 17, 2007 at the Moonlite Bunny Ranch.

Phoenix, “Prostitution: Problematising the Definition,” 72.


“Prostitution in the United States,” 20/20, produced and directed by George Paul (Aired on CBS, March 21, 2008).


Weitzer, “Rehashing Tired Claims.”

Farley, “Prostitution Harms Women.”

Kitten in an interview with the author on December 9, 2007, at the Moonlite Bunny Ranch; Shy Love in an interview with the author on December 2, 2007, at the Moonlite Bunny Ranch.

Albert, Brothel; Herbert, “Legal Prostitution.”

Savickas, “Welcome to the Bunny Ranch.”


Hausbeck and Brents, “The Politics of Passing.”

Albert, Brothel; Mead, “American Pimp.”

Phoenix, “Prostitution.”

Cathouse.

Chapter 4, 191-232


Ibid.

Ibid; “Reality” in this case assumes reality as socially constructed. See Introduction for further discussion of narrative and the social construction of reality.

Chapter 5, 233-273


The “dominant discourses” that I am referring to are those discussed in-depth in Chapter 1. These discourses include how we have historically come to think of sexual women and prostitutes, the influence of mainstream feminist theories, and mainstream media depictions of sexual women and prostitutes.

Cathouse 2: Back in the Saddle, directed by Patti Kaplan (December 27, 2003; aired on HBO).


Jones, “TV Too Real to Be Reality.”

The Real World, created by Mary-Ellis Bunim and Jonathan Murray. First aired on MTV in 1992 and continues in 2009.

Ibid.

Jones, “TV Too Real to Be Reality.”

The Real World, created by Mary-Ellis Bunim and Jonathan Murray. First aired on MTV in 1992 and continues in 2009.

Ibid.


497 Hibberd, “HBO hot for ‘Cathouse.’”


503 Ibid.

504 Ibid, 111.

505 John Fiske, Television Culture (New York: Methuen, 1987), 74.


507 Abu-Lughod, “The Fate of Culture,” 123.

508 Ibid, 124.


512 Ibid, 193.

513 Innis, “The Bias of Communication.”


516 Ibid, 188.


518 Ibid.


522 Jones, “TV Too Real.”


524 Deery, “Trading Faces.”

525 Jones, “TV Too Real,” 22.


528 This comes from reference to the Supreme Court decision in Miller v. California, 1973, as well as from tracing definitions from multiple sources at http://dictionary.reference.com/search?q=pornography (accessed November 5, 2008).
531 Ibid., 105.
532 Ibid., 109.
534 Fry, “Television News and Natural Disaster.”
538 Tania Modleski, Loving with a Vengeance: Mass-Produced Fantasies for Women (New York: Methuen, 1982).
539 Abu-Lughod, “The Fate of ‘Culture,’” 117.
540 Carr, “Temporality and Narrative Structure,” 64.
541 Ibid.
543 Bruner, Making Stories; Carr, “Temporality and Narrative Structure.”
545 Bruner, Making Stories.
546 Ibid, 15.
547 Pozner, “The Unreal World,” 50.
548 All quotations in this section are from Cathouse unless otherwise noted.
549 Dahlgren, Television and the Public Sphere.
550 Cathouse.
551 Gillespie, “Narrative Control and Visual Polysemy.”
553 Cathouse.
556 Ibid.
559 Mulvey, “Visual Pleasure.”
Moonlite Bunny Ranch menu.

The Girls Next Door, created by Hugh Hefner and Kevin Burns, first aired October 7, 2005 and is currently in Season 5. Interestingly, one of Hefner’s girlfriends, Kendra, is now engaged to a NFL football player. Hefner has given Kendra his blessing and will be holding the wedding at the Playboy mansion. Additionally, Hefner’s number one girlfriend, Holly, and he have recently called it quits. Rumors are that Holly wanted children and Hefner, in his eighties, did not, according to the website Mahalo: The Girls Next Door, http://www.mahalo.com/The_Girls_Next_Door (accessed November 11, 2008).

Secret Diary of a Call Girl, created by Lucy Prebble, based on a diary by an anonymous sex worker called Belle de Jour, aired on Showtime during the summer of 2008.

Belle de Jour, directed by Luis Buñuel (Robert and Raymond Hakim Production, 1967).


Hallgrimsdottir, Phillips, and Benoit, “Fallen Women and Rescued Girls.”

Ibid, 267.


Chapter 6, 274-309

Summer Verona in an interview with the author (December 2, 2007), 8.


The “dominant mainstream constructions” that I am referring to are those discussed in-depth in Chapter 1. These discourses include how we have historically come to think of sexual women and prostitutes, the influence of mainstream feminist theories, and mainstream media depictions of sexual women and prostitutes.

Historical and cultural narratives refer to the punishment/redemption discourses in scholarly literature and media representations of prostitutes and sexual women, as discussed in Chapter 1. Throughout this chapter I will refer to these narratives primarily as cultural or structural. Community narratives are both those of the collection of individual sex workers in the United States, discussed in Chapter 2, and that of the Moonlite Bunny Ranch specifically – this includes both as it is represented on Cathouse and as it was observed by me during my visits. Throughout this chapter “community” discourses will refer to those of prostitutes working in other contexts, whereas when I am speaking specifically about the Bunny Ranch narrative I will identify it as such.


Carr, “Temporality and Narrative Structure,” 64.

Ibid.


Bruner, Making Stories; Carr, “Temporality and Narrative Structure.”

Carr, “Temporality and Narrative Structure;” Freeman, “Charting the Narrative Unconscious;” Richardson, “Narrative and Sociology.”

Fieldnotes (December 20, 2007).


Fieldnotes (December 23, 2007).

Kayla in an interview with the author (December 16, 2007), 4.

Vivian West in an interview with the author (December 3, 2007), 8.

Summer Verona, 8.


Kandi in an interview with the author (December 17, 2007), 15.

Ibid.

Vivian West, 10.

Dennis Hof also owns a bar/restaurant across the highway from the Bunny Ranch. The girls refer to it as “the club.” One night a week is their night to go to the club. They have a special V.I.P. section on that night. Some of the women seemed to really enjoy going there on that night while others did not like being the center of attention outside of the club.

Shy Love in an interview with the author (December 2, 2007), 11.

Ibid.


This is a pseudonym for the only woman I interviewed that asked that I not use her work name. Using her work name would identify who she is outside the Ranch.

“Jenny” in an interview with the author (December 27, 2007), 4; Jenny is not this woman’s real or work name. As she works under her real name, to protect her privacy, I chose a random name to identify her.


Kandi, 14

Kayla, 5.

See Chapter 3 for further discussion of this issue. Alexa Albert’s *Brothel: Mustang Ranch and Its Women* (NY: Random House, Inc., 2001) also has an extensive discussion of this system at the Mustang Ranch during the 1980s.

Kandi, 17.

Shy Love, 7.


Vivian West, 14.


Kitten in an interview with the author (December 9, 2007), 6.
612 Bunny Love in an interview with the author (December 10, 2007), 7.
613 Kitten, 8.
614 See Chapter 1.
615 See Chapter 2.
616 Kandi, 9.
617 Bunny Love, 4.
619 Kandi, 13.
620 “Jenny,” 11.
621 Bunny Love, 8.
622 Vivian West, 5.
624 Kandi, 1.
625 Vivian West, 5.
626 Kayla, 6.
628 Ibid.
629 Larry Grant, “MAPping Accountability,” in Whores and Other Feminists, ed. Jill Nagle (New York: Routledge, 1997), 244.

Chapter 7, 310-366

633 Vivian West in an interview with the author (December 3, 2007), 5.
634 The “dominant discourses” that I am referring to are those discussed in-depth in Chapter 1. These discourses include how we have historically come to think of sexual women and prostitutes, the influence of mainstream feminist theories, and mainstream media depictions of sexual women and prostitutes.
For the sake of parsimony, hereafter I will refer to the narrative as the Moonlite Bunny Ranch narrative or discourse.


Jung and Hecht, “Elaborating the Communication Theory of Identity,” 266.


Kayla in an interview with the author (December 16, 2007), 9.

Kitten in an interview with the author (December 9, 2007), 3.

Ibid, 3.


*Cathouse*.

*Cathouse*.


*Cathouse*.

Kandi in an interview with the author (December 17, 2007), 9-10.


Kitten, 10.

Ibid.

Summer Verona in an interview with the author (December 2, 2007), 7.

In Chapter 4 I argue that the visual bias of television demands that the spectacular and exciting moments of life at the Ranch are what predominate in *Cathouse*. These moments are still part of life at the Moonlite Bunny Ranch. However, the information and entertainment aspects of the show trade off, emphasis is often put on entertainment in *Cathouse*.

“Party” is what appointments with customers are called. This is shown on *Cathouse* and is a part of everyday talk at the Ranch.

“Party” is what appointments with customers are called. This is shown on *Cathouse* and is a part of everyday talk at the Ranch.

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668 Vivian West, 5.
669 Bunny Love in an interview with the author (December 10, 2007), 4-5.
670 In Chapter 4 I argue that the visual bias of television demands that the spectacular and exciting moments of life at the Ranch are what predominate in *Cathouse*. These moments are still part of life at the Moonlite Bunny Ranch. However, the information and entertainment aspects of the show trade off, emphasis is often put on entertainment in *Cathouse*.
671 “Party” is what appointments with customers are called. This is shown on *Cathouse* and is a part of everyday talk at the Ranch.
672 Kitten, 6.
674 See Chapter 4.
675 Kitten, 7; I have omitted the name of this man’s hometown to protect his identity and the reputation of his sport’s team.
676 Kitten, 7.
677 Ibid, 5.
678 Summer Verona, 4.
680 *Cathouse*.
681 Bunny Love, 8.
682 *Cathouse*.
683 Kandi, 9.
684 *Cathouse*.
685 Kandi, 2.
686 Blake Aarens, Hima B., Gina Gold, Jade Irie, Madeleine Lawson, and Gloria Lockett, moderated by Jill Nagle, “Showing Up Fully: Women of Color Discuss Sex Work,” in *Whores and Other Feminists*, ed. Jill Nagle (New York: Routledge, 1997), 195-209; See also Chapters 1 and 2 for an extensive discussion of these ideas.
687 See Chapters 1 and 2.
688 Fletcher, “Radically Transforming Work.”
689 See Chapters 1 and 2.
690 Nadia in an interview with the author (December 9, 2007), 5.
691 Ibid, 6.
693 Kandi, 12.
694 Kitten, 8.
695 Ibid, 9.
696 Shy Love in an interview with the author (December 2, 2007), 4.
697 Fieldnotes (November 29, 2007).
698 See Conclusion for further discussion of this contention.
699 Fieldnotes (November 29, 2007).
700 Kayla, 9.
701 Amy has had an on-again, off-again relationship with the other girls and the management at the Ranch, which is also discussed on *Cathouse*. She comes across as very fickle in person. She has come and gone from the Ranch a number of times.
702 Kayla, 9.
Ibid, 4.
705 Vivian West, 4.
706 Jenny in an interview with the author (December 27, 2007), 7.
707 Summer Verona, 13.
708 Vivian West, 8.
709 Summer Verona, 4.
710 Kitten, 8.
711 Nadia, 8; “Kami Kreme” is a pseudonym, as this woman was not part of my interviews, she did not sign
informed consent allowing me to use her name.
712 Jenny, 6.
713 Shy Love, 6.
714 Aarens, et al., “Showing Up Fully.”
715 Vivian West, 6.
716 Ibid, 8-9.
717 Ibid, 14.
718 Ibid, 7.
719 Ibid.
720 Summer Verona, 10.
721 Ibid.
722 Kitten, 4.
723 Kandi, 4.
724 Ibid, 11-12.
725 Shy Love, 3.
726 Kitten, 11.
727 Myra Mendible, “Humiliation, Subjectivity, and Reality TV,” Feminist Media Studies 4 (2004), 335-
338.
728 See Chapter 5.
MIT Press).
731 See Chapters 4 and 5 for a more extensive discussion of each of these factors.
732 E. Michele Ramsey and Gladys Santiago, “The Conflation of Male Homosexuality and Femininity in
733 Fieldnotes (November 29, 2007).
734 Cathouse.
735 Jung & Hecht, “Elaborating the Communication Theory of Identity,” 266.
736 Clair, “The Political Nature of the Colloquialism.”
737 Fletcher, “Radically Transforming Work.”

Conclusion, 367-392

738 Janet E. Halley, Split Decisions: How and Why to Take a Break from Feminism (Princeton, NJ:
739 As noted in Chapter 3, one of the girls implied that she smoked pot, for example, but not on the premises
of the Ranch. I did not see drug use, but given this conversation and what I saw on “Prostitution in the
United States,” 20/20, produced and directed by George Paul (Aired on CBS, March 21, 2008), where two
working girls filmed themselves on Ectasy, I believe that drug use is part of the business. However, I also
think it is important to note drug use was NOT noticeable during my observations despite the long periods
of time I was present. So, while drug use may be part of life at the Moonlite Bunny Ranch, it is officially
banned. Women can be fired if caught using drugs on the premises. Some of the women specifically noted that this did not use drugs, while others implied they used drugs like marijuana on occasion.


Fieldnotes (December 9, 2007); A collection container for Virginia Range Wildlife Protection is located in the marble entryway of the Ranch. One day while I was visiting the Ranch, we saw the wild mustangs running over the newly fallen snow not even 100 yards away from the front door of the Ranch.


I am not going to identify which of the women I interviewed were African American. Primarily, I am making this choice as what I explain in this section may cause conflicts among the women at the Ranch. I do not want to contribute to conflicts, so I have chosen to protect their anonymity here.

Danielle was not working while I was visiting the Ranch. However, she one of the girls featured on the Bunny Ranch matches, a privilege only given to top earners. At the time, there were only three women featured on the matches – Danielle, Airforce Amy and Audrey (who was a consistent top booker while I was there).


Jenna gave an orientation to Nadia on her first day that was observed the author, fieldnotes (November 29, 2007).


Marlowe, “It’s Different for Boys,” 141.

Ibid, 142.

Ibid, 143-144.