

Reclaiming Abolition: Sex Worker Solidarity and Intersectional Organizing

On June 28th 1970, the first anniversary of the Stonewall uprising, two trans women of color, Marsha P. Johnson and Sylvia Rivera, marched with thousands of others to commemorate the sex workers and queer black and brown folks who refused to sit back and be brutalized during the police raid on the Stonewall Inn (Stanley et al. 115). Chants of “Whose streets? Our streets!” defiantly rang out and spurred others to join the marchers as they headed toward the New York Women’s House of Detention in solidarity with the incarcerated Black Panthers Joan Bird and Afeni Shakur (Gossett).

When the march arrived at the jail, the chant changed and the marchers began shouting “Free our sisters! Free ourselves!” In that moment, Johnson and Rivera, along with thousands of others, formed a politics of solidarity that argued trans and queer liberation were coterminous with the struggle against the prison-industrial complex (Gossett; Kunzel 11-37). Regarding Johnson and Rivera's 1970 action, the contemporary radical prison abolition group Queer (In)Justice pointedly asks, “Rather than a relic of another time, how might we read this history as an analytic of the present?” (Stanley 115). The following paper is an investigation into this complex problematic, which proposes questions, interventions, and observations to re-conceptualize sex worker histories of lived struggles, not as historical moments of the past, but analytics of the present.

In doing so, this also requires not only re-imagining legacies of resistance and intersectional solidarity, but re-claiming the political practice and historical lineage of abolition. Due to narratives espoused by anti-trafficking NGOs and non-profits that wish to align themselves with liberatory politics, rather than the colonialist white-saviorist logic that they actually follow, refer to their fight being against “modern day slavery”, and accordingly refer to themselves as “abolitionists.” Yet, the ways in which present-day “abolitionists” seek the end of the “sexual slavery” is by enforcing policies such as End Demand or the Nordic Model, which criminalizes the client buying sexual services rather than the sex worker. It has been proven in numerous studies that this model actually harms

sex workers, by giving them less autonomy and safety for how, where, and under what conditions they perform their work. Here, the abolition of “modern day slavery,” includes with it a massive funding nexus for NGOs, immigrant detention centers, and sex trafficking rehabilitation centers, referred to by Elizabeth Bernstein as “militarized humanitarianism.”

Thus, those who are supposedly saved by abolitionists are actually punished through increased criminality, incarceration, and deportation. Due to the complete illegality of prostitution within the United States (outside of certain regions in Nevada), it necessitates solidarity with migrants, refugees, and those incarcerated in prisons and detention centers, to echo as Johnson and Riviera said, “Free our sisters! Free ourselves!” With this comes the power of autonomy and possibility of a liberatory politics of abolition.

To reclaim abolition for the sex workers rights movement today means the freedom of sex workers cannot end where the freedom of others who are still criminalized has not even yet begun. Sex workers must stand in solidarity with everyone who is marginalized and criminalized in society beyond the spectrum of sex workers. To collude with others who have also been named as criminals and the forms of solidarity that can emerge from such identification and refusing that others be left behind. In relation to the recognition of migrant and sex worker rights, Juno Mac and Molly Smith brilliantly state in *Revolting Prostitutes: The Fight for Sex Workers' Rights*, “To defend the migrant prostitute is to defend all migrants: she is the archetype of the stigmatized migrant. Borders were *invented* to guard against her. There is no migrant solidarity without prostitute solidarity and there is no prostitute solidarity without migrant solidarity. The two struggles are inextricably bound up with one another” (Mac and Smith 86).

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Stanley, Eric A., et al. "Queering Prison Abolition, Now?" *American Quarterly*, vol. 64, no.1, 2012, pp. 115-127. *ProjectMUSE*, doi: 10.1353/aq.2012.0003.