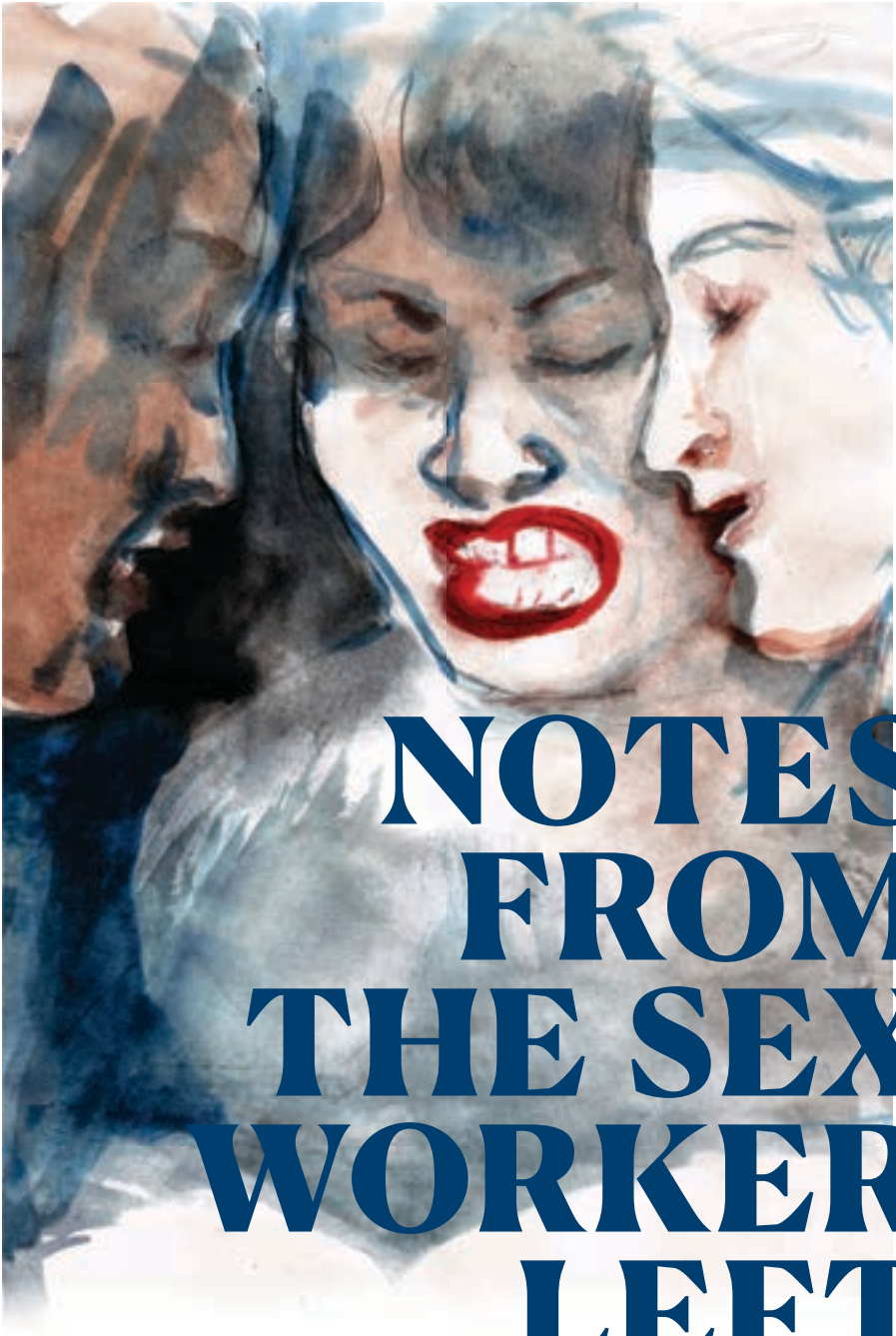




NOTES FROM THE SEX WORKER LEFT

Heather Berg

LUMPEN THEORY

**NOTES
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THE SEX
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LEFT**



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NOTES FROM THE SEX WORKER LEFT

LUMPEN THEORY / Heather Berg

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To the sex worker moms who dreamed up another world with me while our children played. May these not be workers we are reproducing.

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Preface

“If whores were free, it would mean that everyone else would have to be free.” Clara was riffing on the Combahee River Collective’s classic 1977 statement that Black women’s freedom is an index of revolutionary possibility, “since our freedom would necessitate the destruction of all the systems of oppression.”¹ Clara, with the Collective, was making an empirical claim: To free criminalized women of color like her, together with the other single moms, disabled people, queer kids, and migrants who make up sex workers’ ranks, we will have to destroy the institutions designed to keep them in place. The nuclear family, the wage relation, and the gendered racial capitalist state would have to go. Everyone else would get to be free of those things too. Following the Collective, Clara was also making an epistemological claim: Theorizing at the crosshairs of multiple forms of oppression can put sex workers in a good position to critique the present and reimagine the future. Sex worker radicals take the critical potential this opens up and run with it.

This book is an effort to put their thinking to paper and an offering to others thinking about what to do about the rising fascist tide, the failed promises of social democratic reform, and the crises of care. I wrote it because I wanted to share what I was seeing in sex worker organizing meetings, text threads, online, and in reading groups like the one where Clara first encountered the Collective’s statement. I wanted to put that thinking in conversation with the growing corpus of sex worker radical agitprop, essays, and poetry, texts that are often self-published, undercirculated, and undercited.

When I started the project in 2020, I was seeing whole bodies of sex worker theory wiped clean by censorship—Twitter accounts shuttered without warning, blogs targeted by the same policies that make it hard for sex workers to advertise and share safety tips online, a reading group forced to disband because one of its leaders was facing trafficking charges for giving unhoused youth a free place to stay. I wanted to create a record that could endure through this state violence—authoritarians’ appetite for book bans notwithstanding—and one that could be strategically distanced from sex

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workers' legal identities when they needed it to be. The state has not, as yet, found a way to call that "trafficking," though I am permanently banned from using PayPal and Venmo because the platforms figured out I was paying sex workers for their time—fifty dollars for an Institutional Review Board-approved interview about their vision of the communist horizon.

The book was inspired, too, by connections I saw between sex workers and others also thinking about how to build a world worth living in. I wanted to name this thrum of intellectual community, moments where I saw resonance, sparks of connection, and points of comradely disjuncture. This is a comradeship built on shared desire for collective freedom and the knowledge that it will not come through the dead and deadening institutions of family, the "honest wage," or the state.

Notes from the Sex Worker Left trains its gaze away from sex work and toward the institutions sex workers theorize from the outside: the nuclear family and the couple form, the "honest working class," and states that claim to mete out citizenship, protection, and care. Because I want real alternatives to these institutions—and because I think sex workers have a lot to say about what it might look like to build them—this book tries to help sex worker theorizing travel. So, for example, when sex workers theorize sex work prohibition as a way to keep not just sex workers but all people in line, I use this to tell a story of what sex workers know about the state's relationship to low-waged straight work and unpaid sex. When sex workers practice community defense against the violent partnership of civilian abusers and cops, I think about their lessons for community care broadly conceived. I hope the book complements the growing body of sex work history, ethnography, and social movement scholarship that situates sex workers as savvy commentators on life under racial capitalism.² I hope it invites comradely exchange among sex worker radicals and others who look at Left politics from the margins of respectability, others whose revolutionary horizon makes a real break with the violence and tedium of the present.

Early on in this project's formation, I talked to a friend about my discomfort with how my first book, *Porn Work*, sometimes gets cited, with porn workers' ideas attributed to me. I told her that, this time, I wanted to just "quietly curate" interviewees' ideas. I wanted to make my voice small enough so that readers would attribute the interventions the right way. "But curation is always loud, never quiet!" my friend, an artist, said. Of course she was right. Political yearning, rage, curiosity—those are what animated my praxis of gathering these ideas together, sorting what stayed and what did not, and staging the conversations within as I did. I tried to make visible what

I think are the right things (frameworks and tactics, invitations to solidarity, outward-facing critique) and conceal the rest (information the state could wield as a weapon, detail to titillate the curious onlooker). I tried to do it in ways that would make sex worker radical thought available as an instrument for everyone's world-making, but never something to be instrumentalized. So yes, a loud curatorial practice, as they all are.

The kind of questions the book asks are not abstract for me: What kind of world do we want to live in? What tactics should we take up in getting there? How will we keep each other alive in the meantime? I also know that Mario Tronti was right that you should "never throw yourself into a practical struggle without theoretical weapons."³ I wanted to gather some weapons together and offer them up to you. To try to do that, I asked sex workers about what they want rather than about what they have experienced, what they think rather than what they do. This was to move against what Sophia Giovannitti calls the "fetish for lived experience" and the pressure it places on sex workers to "self-extract."⁴ I was also thinking with Eve Tuck and C. Ree, who critique a related pressure in Indigenous studies: "I am invited to speak, but only when I speak my pain." They refuse. "Instead," they write, "I speak of desire."⁵ I wanted to "speak of desire" too. When I talk about "sex worker radical *theorizing*," what I am getting at is this focus on yearning over experience, analysis over mere description.

What follows is not a survey of sex worker politics, or even of the sex worker Left. It does not pretend to be representative, and it does not make a claim that people should "listen to sex workers," as the saying goes. I am thinking about the corrective Allie offered in our conversation: "We [sex workers] are not all going to agree. And maybe sometimes you hear things from sex workers that are wrong." In writing this book, I was less in search of ideas that are *right* than of ones that made me feel less stuck in the world as it is. My favorite conversations were ones where people refused any claim to rightness, ones where thinkers such as Lorelei Lee promised to "keep disagreeing with [themselves]." The chapters that follow are written in the spirit of searching rather than certainty. In a moment so defined by the deadening sense that there is no alternative, I think curiosity, yearning, and a tolerance for disagreeing with oneself are weapons on their own.

And still, there are moments where my effort to offer readers something usable pushes me to focus more on the coherence of sex worker radical thought than on the internal fissures that cut through it, the fights that strain the study groups, the mutual aidists who are no longer on speaking terms. I am thinking with Patricia Hill Collins here, who named that risk in her *Black*

Feminist Thought: She decided to present that tradition as “overly coherent,” she writes, “because I suspect that this approach is more appropriate for this historical moment.”⁶ I share the suspicion. We are in an emergency, and I did not want readers to have to search very far for some conceptual tools to respond. Collins talks about her hope for more writing on Black feminist thought, work that can make more space for “contradictions, frictions, and inconsistencies.”⁷ I hope for that for sex worker thought too. Here, my curation focused on identifying tendencies—political desires and patterns of critique—that are cohesive enough to translate, travel, and, maybe, be put to use.

I share some work experience with thinkers who animate this book, but that is not the most important part of the story of how we are connected. What matters more is a set of shared desires and points of rage. I share with a lot of these thinkers a feeling of claustrophobia when faced with the strictures of late capitalist life. When Clara talked about feeling “like a bird frantically trying to escape a too-small space,” I felt this in my bones. I share a limitless appetite for creative hacks and also a sense of grief that they are not enough—what Irene Silt will later in this book describe as the “solitude that we face on the other side of refusal.”⁸ I share a knowledge that nonsexual boundary crossings at work often feel worse, lasting months instead of minutes. I share a sense of unreality at how much of our time is stolen from us, at the fact that sometimes I have to go to a meeting instead of rambling in the woods with my child. I share a visceral fear of cops and an equally visceral affinity with scrappy femmes. And I share a belief that people deserve good things and an understanding that we will have to fight very hard to win them. It is not that all sex workers on the Left think these things or that nobody else does. But it is sex workers who taught me these things in the first place, and there is no other company in which I enjoy quite the same feeling of common sense around them. That common sense made the conversations that power this book possible. Nobody had to explain the basics.

I hope readers use this book toward their own ends, as a thing to explore, think with, and put to use. That is the spirit of the invitations to co-conspiratorship that populate the pages that follow. Here and in their writing and activism elsewhere, sex worker radicals take the risks of making their ideas public, against the demands of respectability and against the bribe that self-censorship will offer protection from authoritarian violence. They do so because they know those protections are brittle—if you are a certain kind of person, attempts to survive are cause enough for repression, and surviving

quietly only offers so much safety. They take the risk of being louder because they hope their invitations might inspire others to act. Sex workers would be freer, but so too would everyone confronting the violence of the family, the job, and the state. My own risk assessment follows theirs.

I asked Morgane Merteuil about the politics of this choice. Against respectable arguments that “sex work is work,” she had just said that it is not and that this is its main draw. I wondered aloud whether it would be okay—in terms of consent but also tactics—to quote her. Laughing, she quoted Vladimir Lenin in response: “Only the truth is revolutionary.” I think she is right, so I put those unrespectable truths, and others, to paper. “In telling this story, I’m putting my trust in you to use the story well and to only quote bits that can get used well,” Kate F. told me after an interview in which they kept “saying things I shouldn’t be saying.” I have tried, and I am asking you, reader, to try to use the bits well too.

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Acknowledgments

Sharing time and ideas with radical sex workers has been a tremendous gift. Every insight in this book is thanks to your critical eye. Our conversations also helped make these last years (a world-historically bad time!) livable for me. They hardened my resolve that another world is possible and taught me a lot about what is at stake in building it. Thank you for sharing your ideas with me and for trusting me to use them well. I so hope that I've earned it. Thank you for taking time away from the urgencies of organizing and hustling and resting tired bodies and caring for your people to talk to me about ideas. Thank you for asking hard questions and refusing easy answers. Thank you for writing with such force against the family, the wage, and the state, and with such loving rage about how we might take care of each other outside their shadow. Thank you for getting that writing out into the world, despite publishers' appetites just for stories of quirky johns. Thank you for pushing past appeals to be left alone, and toward expansive invitations for solidarity instead. I hope you win the worlds you're dreaming of. Life would be so much richer for everyone if you did.

Sex worker radicals have a lot to say on the politics of time, and especially the time it takes to think and to read together. Time is a resource capitalist life makes scarce and pushes us to hoard. Warmest thanks to everyone who chose generosity instead, giving their time to help me think through these ideas. Two manuscript workshops funded by Washington University's Center for the Humanities and the University of California's Humanities Research Institute shaped the book at crucial stages. M. E. O'Brien's wildly generous feedback transformed the book and my thinking on lumpen solidarity. It was also a lesson in how to read like a comrade, as if this all has immediate political stakes. Angela Jones, Annie McClanahan, Dylan Rodríguez, and Eric Stanley gave key feedback at a later stage. Thanks especially for helping me claim my voice, and full-throatedly. Thanks to Kathi Weeks for her generosity of ideas, and for reminding me to scale up, always. Thanks to the anonymous press reviewers (and those who later shared their names) for the most engaged, thoughtful feedback imaginable. Reading

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your comments, I felt as though we were struggling together for another kind of future.

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fog, I leaned across our shared desk to ask how to spell *sure*. All errors are, of course, my own.

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Everyday people take better care of each other “than the state ever will,” Meredith Hanlin tells us in chapter 3. What a preposterous time to try to write a book, gestate and raise a child, evade authoritarianism and climate disaster, or make it to the grocery store, and none of it remotely possible on my own. To Neda Atanasoski, Janette Bachman, Cynthia Barounis, Herb Berg, Fannie Bialek, Rachel Brown, Ivan Bujan, Raneen Bukhari, Vanessa Carlisle, Talia Dan-Cohen, Hisham Fageeh, Annie Gray Fischer, Sid Issar, Liz Finney, Conner Habib, Nic Haug, Heidi James, Man-Yan Lam, Kate Levin, Ted Mathys, Sara Matthisen, Azzam Merchant, Ian and Zach O’Brien, Anca Parvulescu, Kario Pereira-Bailey, Lily Pourat, John Richmond, Leila Roberts, Rana Roy, Nancy Smemo, Lucy Mathys-Smith, Rachel Greenwald Smith (beloved mole), Michael and Arlene Spiegler, Alastair Stokes, Maria Velasquez, and Rebecca Wanzo, thank you for the good company and good care. Thanks to Margi Waller for her fierce support always, and for being the first person to teach me that rule following is a failure of the imagination. You taught me to love scrappy women and that made, among other things, my career. To Kit Smemo, thank you for raising a magical creature with me and for your abiding belief that we can build a world worth living in for him—the fascists are bound to lose. I couldn’t do any part of this without being able to come home to you knowing that. To Leif, thank you for the snuggles and the rambles and for being so good at asking questions about why things are the way they are (“But why?” indeed). Nobody has taught me more about how we could spend our time if we didn’t have to work.

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Introduction

Run away from home and find other ways to take care of each other. Give up hard work; its ethics are not for you. Steal time for rest, study, and shared abundance instead. Know that liberal democracy is a ruse. Make use of the state when you must, but try to take more than you give. Fight hard to keep each other safe. This might make you against the law.

In dressing rooms, shared cab rides home, group chats, reading groups, printing presses funded by sex work dollars, and in the community defense and mutual aid collectives where they keep each other alive and come up with new ideas in the process, sex workers are theorizing how to live otherwise. They are thinking about how to get from our present conditions to someplace else and searching for theoretical affinities with others who want to get out too.

Grounded in sex worker writing and interviews with sex worker radicals, *Notes from the Sex Worker Left* is inspired by my sense that some of the best Left political thinking today comes from these spaces, by the many times I found myself in a room with civilian (non-sex worker) leftists and thought about sex worker comrades who would make the conversation richer. Thinking from the perspective of the lumpenproletariat—the unruly, precarious, and often criminalized counterpart to the respectable working class—sex worker radicals chart a politics that is anti-family, anti-work, anti-state, and for militant community care. They hold up the mirror of sex work exceptionalism, revealing the violence of the nuclear families and straight jobs from which sex workers so often take leave. They think beyond trade unionism and too-small dreams of social democratic reform, beyond Bolshevik adventurism and hopes to seize state power, and beyond a politics limited to quotidian refusals and the glimmers of living otherwise they provide. These are committed practitioners of prefiguration, everyday refusal, and community care, but many also insist that those alone will not be enough to make the worlds we want to live in. Everyday resistance will have to link up with collective, militant struggle.

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Here, political tactics and future horizons are measured against their capacity to make a good life for sex workers, which is to say a good life for people who are too sick to clock in to a respectable job and who do not want to, for people who know all about white supremacist fascism and the cops who perform it, for border crossers, for single moms and gender refusers and queer kids who ran away from home, and for a range of lumpen others for whom the usual solutions will not satisfy. This way of thinking about politics puts sex workers at the vanguard of Left thought.

Tendencies of the Sex Worker Left

“Whore is an orientation,” writes Sonya Aragon, “not a sexual one; a political one.”¹ That orientation is not monolithic. This intellectual community, such as it is, is crosscut with differences of ideology, identity, and experience. The sex workers I bring together in this book debate tactics and ideas. But they also share tendencies that, I think, represent Left thought at some of its most incisive. I use “the Left” to describe a wide range of people committed to collective struggles against white supremacist ableist patriarchal capitalism. I use “sex worker radicals” and “the sex worker Left” interchangeably, to gesture to an intellectual community defined by common orientations to political struggle and also by fierce comradely debate.

I use the language of “sex work” and “sex workers” unless the people I quote use another term. I used “sex workers” in my call for respondents, and so I continue with the term in the writing that came from our conversations. But most of the thinkers I engage here use the respectable language of “sex worker” only strategically and, like Aragon, claim “whore,” “puta,” and their relatives in other languages as better ways to describe radical sex workers’ oppositional politics. The US writer Pluma Sumaq reads “sex worker” as making the appeal for non–sex workers to “accept us because we are just like you,” and I want to let readers know at the outset that I do not use the term in this way.² The refusal of bids for cheap acceptance is a defining characteristic of what I call the “sex worker Left.” It is what helped me gather ideas under the banner of sex worker *radical* thought.

The thinkers I bring together here share a sense of irresolvable antagonism with three pillars of gendered racial capitalist social relations: sexual respectability and the privatization of care in the nuclear family and the couple form; the moral economy of “honest work”; and states organized to compel productive work and reproductive sex.³ “You always see yourself as at risk and in an antagonistic position in relationship to systems of power,” Sybil told

me. “It’s not like they’re ever going to bring you into their side.” This “always” sets sex worker radicals apart from liberals and, indeed, thinkers on much of the Left, where stubborn commitments to family values, ableist productivism, and the promise of liberal citizenship suggest a belief that these systems can be remade to serve everyday people. Sex worker radicals—those who make up Sybil’s “you”—understand them to be rotten to the core. Readers can turn here for alternatives to both reformist appeals to make capitalism friendlier for hardworking families and to nominally radical visions whose imagined futures still place us in private homes, working hard, and asking some kind of state for rights.

I am most inspired by thinkers who confront exclusion from dominant institutions with threatening reminders of power’s brittleness rather than polite requests for reform. The Other Weapons Collective puts it this way: “Being a sex worker is a powerful shared experience wherein our natural inclinations to survive outside of the state’s control and oversight have the potential to manifest incredibly powerful care networks as well as confrontational responses to those who harm us.”⁴ Each chapter of this book reflects these caring and confrontational tendencies, engaging sex workers who make politics out of this inclination “to survive outside of the state’s control.”

Sex worker radicals place their energies outside the state, building what Sybil describes as “communities as centers of political power.” They argue that others on the Left could learn from this strategy. “Mutual aid, mutual aid, mutual aid,” was Lucia Rey’s response to my question about what distinguishes sex worker radicalism from dominant strands in Left thought. “Where [other] leftists are having trouble even defining what that looks like, sex workers are carrying decades-long traditions of it.” That long history means a lot of practice experimenting with getting people’s needs met through shared abundance. Crucially, Rey frames this not as an end in itself but as key to mass collective action: We need mutual aid, they said, “to (a) keep our people alive and (b) keep the movement sustainable.” “We don’t survive unless we have each other,” Rey says, and we will not plot successful revolts without each other either. We will have to help each other leave home, refuse “dignified” poverty, evade state capture, riot. These thinkers are in good company with other feminist abolitionist practitioners of community care, but distinguish themselves in insisting that care cannot always be peaceful. We will have to take sides.

A sex worker radical approach to politics makes use of the desires that bring people to hustling in the first place and of the skills sex-working life can engender. Sex workers, writes Sumaq, are “people who hustle and make

something where there previously was nothing, who reveal entire worlds amidst rubble.”⁵ Matilda Bickers and Melissa Ditmore make a related claim: “Sex work is a refusal to accept the terms we’ve been given, to accept the violence of poverty, exhaustion, and overwork.”⁶ “We are in motion for the job and on the job, working to evade surveillance from the state, its armed henchmen, and propriety itself,” writes Raechel Anne Jolie.⁷ Creative, scrappy community care helps sex workers navigate the risks they encounter once they have refused, risks they understand are weapons of white supremacist, capitalist, and patriarchal discipline.

I am interested in all the ways these tendencies redound to political life more broadly. These thinkers refuse the terms they have been given in daily life, and they fight to protect others who have refused. Both practices can train a person to refuse the given terms of political life too. “Capitalism, heteropatriarchy, they work because our futures are limited,” Eloise M. told me. “There’s a power in being able to see a life for yourself beyond the day-to-day.” Sex work can buy a little bit of room to maneuver, and some take the power that brings and run with it. The connection is clear when sex workers imagine lush futures out of the rubble of this bleak present. And why not, if you and your friends have already pulled off the impossible, like escaping an abuser to be a single mother on your own terms or crossing a border invented to keep you in place. It is not that these wins come easily—neither will the collective ones—but that reaching for the impossible in one realm can whet one’s appetite to do it again.

Sex workers have a lot of practice with creative intervention, and the thinkers I assemble here bring a hustler’s sensibility to broader political life. Readers will recognize this tendency in invitations to treat the state like a john, taking what one can while giving nothing earnestly in return; in strategies for performing heterosexuality in order to fund queer alternatives to it; and in entrepreneurial scams that buy themselves and their comrades some distance from the discipline of the wage. Throughout this book, readers will find invitations to make use of dominant institutions and plot their destruction at the same time. Vanessa Carlisle puts it this way: “I believe in the possibilities of prefiguration.” Carlisle wants a future not dominated by money, and they believe there are ways to make pockets of that future in the here and now. And also: “Hack” this system “as much as you can, get as much as you can.” Carlisle’s “you” is avowedly collective—Left sex workers get as much as they can, and then they share it. “Holding these practices simultaneously is the key to my anti-capitalism,” Carlisle said, describing a tendency widely shared across the sex worker Left. There is no requirement of pure politics

here, just crafty people getting what they can, sharing it, and thinking hard about what might come next.

In chapters on the family, the wage relation, the state, and the politics of community defense, readers will recognize a tendency to look for creative hacks alongside careful self-criticism about their limits. As someone writing in the wake of a theoretical tradition that has fought to take everyday resistance seriously and sometimes even privilege it over formal political struggle, I have learned a lot from sex worker comrades about the urgency of staying honest about its limits. They join other revolutionary thinkers in insisting that everyday refusal is not enough, as when Kevin Ochieng Okoth critiques renderings of “fugitivity” that leave no room for revolutionary rupture.⁸ These, he says, are symptomatic of a North American academy that has given up on the possibility of revolution. The sex worker thinkers who pushed me most answer that tendency with an insistence that we must aim for more than glimmers of life lived otherwise. The communist horizon still lives. I thought I knew this before starting this project, but interviewees’ correctives taught me that I had not absorbed it fully enough.

I am struck, too, by how resolutely sex worker leftists refuse the tendency in some Left thought to invest so much in revolutions far on the horizon that we excuse ourselves from sober analysis of what it will take to get there. Nor is theirs an embrace of social democratic incrementalism as the only practical alternative. A practical politics of renewed trade unionism or a new New Deal are not really practical at all, because they cannot answer the desires of those of us who cannot or will not work even when the work’s conditions are fine, who need nuclear families to be abolished rather than better supported by the state, who will not survive even the policing meant to preserve social democratic order, and so on.

All three poles of criticism are profoundly hopeful: Social democracy will leave too many people behind, but there are more capacious, and so more practical, alternatives. Everyday efforts to steal resources or moments of escape are not enough, and the good news is that this means we can still win everything. Imagining a distant better future is also not enough, and being sober about world-building is a signal that we are not fooling around.

“We” is an imprecise container for a group crosscut by deep inequalities of race, citizenship status, ability, income, and structural vulnerability to harm. Another tendency among the thinkers who animate this book is to aspire to solidarity while also paying close attention to its fault lines. Many of the people I talked to were careful to be clear that there is not a party line among people who identify as sex workers on the Left, much less anything

like a collective. They articulated ideological humility as one of the most solidaristic impulses one can have. “I don’t really have answers,” Morgane Merteuil told me. “I just have questions. That’s my contribution, just questions.” She was thinking about solidarity across difference: “As who? And for what?” Merteuil had come to the sex industry already an anti-capitalist, but questions like these changed her orientation to politics, “produced the opportunity to understand things politically.” Others shared the sense that sex worker organizing helped them understand politics otherwise, lessons that travel with them when they theorize and organize around matters beyond sex work.

The thinkers who animate this book talk about sex worker organizing’s broader lessons in sitting with ambivalence, a tendency many missed in other Left spaces. This shapes other areas of radical sex worker thought and colors the chapters that follow. I found in sex workers’ writings and in our conversations a tolerance for open questions that I have been missing in lots of writing elsewhere in the Left, and each chapter shows people wrestling with tactical and ideological questions they refuse easy answers to. There are hard lines when there ought to be—never trust the cops, gendered racial capitalism is inherently hostile to human thriving, if you have resources share them—and also a lot of people who sit with ambivalence, change their minds, keep contradiction alive. I am inspired by the deftness with which they move between humility and militant sides taking.

Sex worker leftists trace their political tendencies to sex work experience at the same time as they name rich affinities with those who do not claim it. They also talk about what people who have not traded sex can learn from people who have. I am asking readers to sit with that tension between the specific and the generalizable. Here, sex workers play with the politics of “we,” sometimes making claims about what sex workers, as such, know. In those moments, there is not a lot of time spent on throat-clearing caveats—of course not all sex workers have the “shared experience” Other Weapons names or the politics it can spark; of course differences among sex workers matter as much as a sex worker / civilian divide; of course the boundary is porous; and of course sex work’s specificities make some tactics hard to translate.

Readers might notice an edge that inflects some sex workers’ “we.” When they make claims for sex workers being in on something other leftists are not, some of the people I quote seem to be speaking back to someone who has pissed them off. Comrades outside sex worker circles have asked, who? There are the should-be comrades at Democratic Socialists of America meet-

ings, socialist feminists who want to rescue sex workers more than they want to organize with them; anarchist boyfriends who say your money is tainted at the same time as they freely spend it; the leftist men academics whose Twitter DMs are dripping with “client vibes.” The variations are endless, the uniting thread a tendency to explain radical politics to sex workers as if they are not already reading, thinking, and plotting. Poet Erin Taylor’s “no revolution without whore revolution” rehearses the encounter: “The man asks / ‘are you familiar with leftism?’” Taylor, “causing chaos if only to amuse myself,” replies, “baby, I’m a leftist but I organize / with whores.” “Crickets / they don’t actually like whores / they like / talking points / but not so much / us talking.”⁹ In this book, whores talk, and sometimes with the barbed sex worker “we” that makes a lot of sense in context. At the same time, they yearn for solidarities that reach beyond that “we” and the sex worker / civilian divide it hinges on.

Notes from the Sex Worker Left tries to meet radical sex workers’ “we” on its terms, slippery as they are. I want to honor what is for many a desire to claim apartness and also think about the porosity of the sex worker / civilian divide as an opening for solidarity. Holding those together seems the only way to engage the ideas people come to through varied, nonlinear paths, ones where sex work experience is part of the story but never the whole of it.

Becoming the Sex Worker Vanguard

Sex workers are overwhelmingly poor and working-class women and queers who leave homes and low-paid straight jobs, who cross borders and color lines, who dare to live transgender lives, who mother against the rules, and who resist and otherwise fail at ableist productivity. Sex work is both crafty resistance and last resort, and this dual status can inspire radical politics. A constellation of experience at the intersection of exclusion and refusal brought many of the people I engage here to sex work; it also made many suspicious of dominant institutions long before they had turned their first trick. Once in the industry, people find resources, repression, and new ways of being in community. They talk to each other; they read together, studying each other’s ideas and a broad corpus of political thought not written by sex workers; they come up with new ideas in the process.

With these varied paths to politicization, sex worker radicals come to talk about how sex working helped them think politically. I am going to pause here because, while sex work is not the single experience that brought these

thinkers to their ideas (indeed, many were leftists before they were sex workers), it is the common ground that brings them to this book. It connects them to a long history of sex-working radicals that includes “wayward” Black women, Progressive Era thinkers who demanded “a world not ruled by master, man or the police”; the *pétroleuses* of the Paris Commune; the Veracruz sex workers who, in 1922, refused their exploitation “by the bourgeoisie” and started a mass tenants’ revolt; and Sylvia Rivera and Marsha P. Johnson, those Street Transvestite Action Revolutionaries of the 1970s who helped make Stonewall a riot.¹⁰ Sex work experience also connects the largely English-speaking people I interviewed for this book to contemporary comrades around the world, such as Evren Savcı’s Turkish interlocutors, queers who march with signs that declare “their desire for ‘a world without bosses and without pimps’”; and the Latin American practitioners of *mujerísima* who, in Jules Gill-Peterson’s telling, articulate a radical transfeminist politics “that does not seek the state’s blessing.”¹¹ These are all thinkers whose place on the margins of family, work, and citizenship helped them imagine alternative ways of being in the world. Sometimes, hustling helped them fund what Saidiya Hartman calls “beautiful experiments” in those alternatives.¹² It is no accident, writes Viviana Valle Gomez, that sites of revolutionary struggle historically have so often been “sex worker dense.”¹³

For the thinkers who animate this book, sex work’s connections to Left thought emerge from the place where exclusion and refusal meet. Sex work *can* teach you about living under “a police state, a surveillance state,” as Lucia Rey said; it *can* teach you about sexual politics, race, borders, and wealth inequality. Rey explained, “I don’t think there’s anything inherently radical about sex work, but I think that sex work can oftentimes radicalize people.” The work can be a grind, a rehearsal of the tedium and violence the people who do it find elsewhere. But it is a grind that brings together a motley group defined by its antagonistic relation with the institutions of the family, the job, and the state. Writing on Marsha P. Johnson, Tourmaline names the critical potential that can flow from such antagonisms: “When we are in conditions that are harsh, it can be a perfect time to dream. To speculate.”¹⁴

People come to sex work in search of resources, and wresting them can be an education in the politics of class, race, gender, and (dis)ability. Many talked about moments of political awakening at the grocery store, as when Tara, new to hustling, could finally buy what she wanted. She “realized that some people went to the grocery store and bought grapes and didn’t think twice about it.” There was class rage there alongside gratitude for her new-found ease. “Some people don’t have to trade sex for their security,” she re-

membered thinking; some people are not criminalized for the way they pay the bills. “It made me think about all the dynamics at hand. . . . I’m Black, I’m disadvantaged. The world was never going to hand me anything, I had to go out and get it.” She went out and got it, and, like so many lumpen theorists, started reading and thinking from that place.

Sex workers hustle in order to buy grapes, and also time. Often working fewer hours than they had in other working-class jobs, they use the time sex work frees up to organize, to think, and to read. Sex work, Maya Morena told me, “has helped me develop my thinking and my analysis.” She was already interested in Left politics when she started sex working. Informed by her experience of undocumented status, her vision was different “than what some socialists advocate for . . . because it’s more stateless.” And she had “always loved to research stuff.” ADHD made that research wide-ranging and time-consuming, and sex working afforded more free time than she had ever had. People hear her speak and ask, “How did you not go to college? It’s all because I have this free time. You just don’t have that time if you do other jobs.” In retail and food service, she remembered, “I just couldn’t think.” Emily Dall’Ora Warfield echoes her: “The biggest benefit to sex work,” she writes, “was time. No matter how I felt about sex work or the ugly circumstances surrounding it, I never spent enough time doing it for it to take over my mind.”¹⁵ This can be true even as sex work can feel like always being on the clock, even as it can mean navigating an ever-changing matrix of surveillance and marketing and client demands. Time is a major reason people stay.

The space sex work freed up for Morena came together with steady invitations to think about racial capitalism. “Because I was called a ‘slave’ so much,” Morena told me, “I started to research ‘What is slavery? What is freedom? And who defines these terms?’” There were some Twitter fights, and she started reading voraciously. “That’s where I became really radical.” “How dare these people,” she remembered thinking of the anti-sex worker feminists she argued with online. “Who are they to define these terms for us?” Self-study turned into “a kind of obsession for the next few years,” and her politics continued to mature. She is one of many sex workers who talk about how confrontations with anti-sex worker ideas helped them come to anti-capitalist and anti-state politics. I wonder if the people who hate sex workers (sometimes the same people who say they want to save them) know how many they have helped radicalize in this way.

This combination of persistent invitations to think about politics and access to the time to do that thinking helps make sex worker radicalism what it is. It is a dynamic that places sex workers in conversation with decades of

other working people who have struggled over time not just because they wanted to work less but because they wanted to read and think more.¹⁶

Lived Experience, Including the Experience of Reading

People ask Morena how she could possibly have taught herself so much theory. It is a response I recognize well, after years of introducing this project and being confronted with listeners' incredulity that the poor and working-class people who overwhelmingly make up sex workers' ranks could do this kind of intellectual work. One anti-sex worker feminist told me these thinkers could not be "representative" because they are "reading, not dead," and even more sympathetic readers often express the idea that only the most privileged among sex work's labor aristocracy could be intellectuals.

But poor people can think. Moses moon says as much in response to regular suggestions that she must be "privileged" because she reads a lot and writes beautifully (and, on one occasion, simply because she has access to the internet). I asked moon about this, and she talked about the weaponized language of privilege: "hierarchical models of who is most and least imperiled."¹⁷ These imagine that only people with resources have the capacity for critique, then use that "privilege" to render the critique "not representative." Moon knows "it is a tactic employed to silence us."¹⁸ If voiced concerns about representativeness are sometimes a good-faith effort to correct for the ways that white, higher-paid, and formally educated sex workers have dominated the public face of sex worker activism in North America and Europe, they also risk performing the erasure they critique. "Portraying radical sex workers as white middle-class women, as a highly-paid minority," writes Angustia Celeste, "erases the work of people of color, poor people, undocumented immigrants, and queer and trans people who not only agitate for better working conditions in the industry, but are also on the cutting-edge of gendered labor theory."¹⁹

It also leaves the thinkers I engage, and me, in the position of having to authorize critique with gory tales of violence endured, or a listing of marginalized identities that marks their subject status to the reader. But that is only if we respond on that discourse's own terms. Instead, I will just note that poor and working-class people, in sex trades and outside of them, have always fought for what the radical Thai sex worker organization Empower calls the "right to study."²⁰

It is, absolutely, a fight. Moon writes in the moments between mothering three kids, when she can find just a little bit of space outside the strains

of homeschooling and breastfeeding and living with disability and anti-Blackness and poverty. Sometimes, she writes, “you either can’t think, or you think too much.” In “I’d Rather Starve,” an essay on writing under these conditions, she reveals them to be fuel for theorizing as much as barriers to it. And here again, she takes on the question of the writer’s privilege: “How privileged you are to be a common beast, pricking your fingers, pulling your teeth out, and biting your lips, clenching your thighs, spilling red ink. You have become an author three or more times. What luxury.”²¹ The right to study is hard-won.

Sex workers come to study in all sorts of ways. A former street kid told me they were inspired to read Emma Goldman on marriage after hearing her quoted in a punk song. A dancer picked up her coworker’s copy of Ruth Wilson Gilmore’s *Golden Gulag* in the strip club dressing room. A disabled cam model talked about getting into Marxists.org while stuck in bed with fibromyalgia flares. A cross-class, multiracial group of sex workers met online for the WHO REVOLUTION (“whore revolution” when spoken) study group, where they read Vladimir Lenin, Frantz Fanon, C. L. R. James, and Angela Davis. Group members asked comrades with institutional access to pirate digital copies of the works so that everyone could read for free. Others used sex work to pay tuition and to buy themselves more time to read than other student jobs afford. And there is, of course, the classic love story: More than a few fell for a cute girl who turned out to be a communist with a lot of zines.

“It only takes thirty seconds to politicize a hooker,” Ana told me, and that is because the work is “at the intersection of gender and race and power and money and capitalism.” But there are those thirty seconds and there are also the years spent reading and thinking together, making sense of experience at the intersection of gender and race and power and money and capitalism. Reading and thinking together make the difference between people who sell sex and take on radical politics, and those who sell sex and do not. What we read and who we end up thinking with explain why people who share some raw material of experience arrive at different ideas about how to name the problems of the present, and how to get from this world to the next one.

People often find themselves thinking together because the forces of repression encourage them to. Encounters in the shadow of structural violence inspire lifetimes of study and practice. That is how the veteran organizer Miss Major found politics. Stuck in solitary confinement for being trans, she started talking to the man on the other side of the wall. That was Attica rebellion leader Frank “Big Black” Smith, who treated her like a comrade and helped her think about what it might look like to

“change the status quo and make life really fucking annoying for the Powers that Be.”²² Black gave her readings such as *The Communist Manifesto*, and he taught her that, in a prison riot as in other moments of “getting justice done,” “you can’t leave anybody behind.” “It was mind altering,” Miss Major said, “like that epiphany that rings a bell in your brain. . . . And so I’ve spent the next forty years trying to find out what bell I can set off to wake up my community.”²³

And then there are the moments when failed comradeship galvanizes our politics. Chanelle Gallant describes a widely shared frustration with the white guy leftists some of us encounter. She arrived at college with “all the raw materials to develop a radical anti-capitalist analysis,” raw materials such as growing up poor and seeing her single mother struggle to get by. But her first encounter with anti-capitalists was with a white, male-dominated Left she wanted nothing to do with. Those “Marx bros,” she told me, “delayed my development of a formal intellectual class analysis.” Later, it was queer sex workers “who introduced me to anti-capitalism in a way that made sense.” The trouble was that “these Marx bros—they were so sexist, misogynist, racist. They were boring. They were really all about respectability of the worker.” Gallant said, “I come from the lumpenproletariat, my people are criminals.” Anti-capitalist thought invested in working-class respectability would not do. She read against the grain of her “raw material,” made community with sex-working queers, and got new ideas.

Lumpen Theory

“As the absolute hot mess that I am, I am a lumpenprole.” Disabled, queer, and a South Asian migrant living in a white settler colony, Ki reads anti-capitalist thought against the grain of their experience. Like Gallant, they know who their people are: not people invested in working-class respectability but other criminals and hot messes. And they are clear about what kinds of politics come from that understanding. Theirs is a crip anti-capitalism, a queer brown one, and one that is not afraid of bodies and vulnerability and the messier kinds of care. Here, Karl Marx’s classic “to each according to his need” is refashioned for “anyone other than the standardized worker.” *Notes from the Sex Worker Left* argues that a politics that begins here is better equipped to make a good life for everyone. This is not least because it takes a lot of violence to turn people into “standardized workers,” and nobody remains one forever. When crip theorists note that disability comes for all of us, I read this as a reminder that lumpen politics must too.²⁴

Lumpen theorists claim a queer identification with Marx's lumpenproletariat, a category that placed sex workers alongside others who were criminalized, itinerant, and otherwise making a living of "dubious means."²⁵ This "dangerous class, social scum," wrote Marx and Friedrich Engels, lived precariously outside the social relations that produce a self-conscious working class.²⁶ They were not part of the "working class" at all, and so could not have something like the collective class consciousness that would make a workers' revolution possible. Marxists have done a lot of thinking about the category, a body of work I am not going to survey in full here.²⁷ Instead, I want to briefly place the chapters that follow in conversation with one vein of Marxist theorizing about the lumpen. In the tradition of Mao Tsetung, Frantz Fanon, James Boggs, and the Black Panther thinkers who read them, it thinks about the lumpen's outsiderness as an opportunity: Left politics built around the "standard worker" have failed to get us from this world to the next because they have too much stake in maintaining the status quo.²⁸ Maybe nonworkers, bad workers, and criminalized workers can forge another way. Young Lords Party thinker Pablo Guzmán, writing in the Black Panthers' lumpen theory tradition, puts it this way: "the street people, prostitutes, junkies, two-bit pushers, hustlers, welfare mothers" hold special revolutionary potential "because they've got nothing to lose."²⁹ That, writes Panthers thinker Eldridge Cleaver, is what makes them the "Left Wing" of the proletariat and the working class the "Right Wing."³⁰

And so it has historically been these thinkers, far more than the "Marx bros," who have regarded sex workers as comrades. Rivera talks about meeting the Young Lords at a demonstration against police repression. "I became one of them," she writes. "It was just the respect they gave us as human beings."³¹ Huey Newton of the Panthers, too, "decided we were part of the revolution—that we were revolutionary people." Trans street kids would be at the front lines, these revolutionaries knew.

The idea of a lumpen vanguard reads a basic premise of Marx's "lumpen" sideways: This class has "no stake" in the maintenance of the status quo.³² Where Marx saw only limitation in that untetheredness, the tradition of lumpen theory I am engaging sees a lot of potential. Waged work and the family are, after all, the "twin structures" of life under gendered racial capitalism.³³ And so the lumpen, a category defined by its distance from both, can be a privileged place to turn for clues on what it might look like to imagine something better. At key moments in revolutionary history, it already has been. M. E. O'Brien draws a through line from the *pétroleuses* of the Paris Commune—those "true furies" who "refused to go away"—to Rivera

and Johnson's Street Transvestite Action Revolutionaries (or STAR), those militants who fought for a gay revolution that was resolutely against the state and for collective care.³⁴ These revolutionaries' estrangement from respectable work and family helped ready them to upend it all, and their hustle helped fund their militancy. Even the state understands this. By the time they burned Paris to the ground in 1871, state agents lamented, the *pétroleuses*, "almost all nomads, given to disorder and prostitution . . . had long since forgotten all the sentiments of family and morality."³⁵ Incendiary things happen when we choose to forget.

Following Kathi Weeks, I am thinking about lumpenness not as a reflection of the coherence of Marx's original category but rather as a "critical standpoint," an approach to politics rather than a fixed identity.³⁶ And I am thinking with Grace Hong's rendering of the relationship of identity to theoretical capacity, where "women of color feminism" is "not a reified subject position but a reading practice."³⁷ Not all women of color practice women of color feminism, she writes, but when they do, the identification matters. Not all lumpens do lumpen theory; not all sex workers take on this critical standpoint. When they do, it matters that they see themselves as criminals who conspire. This is less a question of the work itself than it is the "critical standpoint" that adheres to the identification. Once you are "considered a nonperson," Lorelei Lee told me, "everything is open to you." Not everyone takes those openings, but lumpen theory happens when people do. Following Dylan Rodríguez's writing on another lumpen theoretical tradition—the prison intellectual—I am interested in what is "deeply collective and historical" about the theoretical formation that emerges from these conditions.³⁸

Many sex worker radicals join Ki and Gallant in claiming lumpen status, and this book reflects my belief that more interesting ideas come from this identification than one that grasps at inclusion in a respectable working class. The Clandestine Whores Network puts it this way: "We have the clarity that our criminal potential escalates with the formation of bonds with other criminals—with gangs, widows, drifters, homeless youth, scammers, users, those passing through to other borders, and those who we will say we never saw."³⁹ "Criminal" here means mutually against the law, a shared status that lets "criminals conspire to create beauty and abundance by building solidarity in the socio-economic shadows where we meet each other."⁴⁰ Lumpen theory happens here.

Casting your lot with other outsiders takes a risk. The sex worker radicals who put such unrespectable solidarities to paper, and those who spoke them to me on record, are taking a risk. Sex worker radicals take this risk

thinking about the possible costs for sex workers who opt for other ways of framing politics and for those who will be most in the crosshairs if people who want to do sex workers harm find ways to weaponize disrespectability. Respectability politics, as the Black feminist historians who introduced the term make clear, are usually an inside job, interventions born out of a sharp analysis of the immediate political stakes.⁴¹ But they give up a lot, in solidarity and in political horizon. With the traditions of Black feminist and queer critique, the sex worker radicals I am most invigorated by say that the compromises are too many.⁴² Sumaq thus distances her lumpen theorizing from a “mostly white middle-class sex worker rights movement”: “To create a language around . . . an image of a ‘sex worker’ that is normalized and free of stigma did not seem very revolutionary to me.”⁴³ Me neither.

But the normalized language of the “sex worker” is not only the currency of white, middle-class organizers. It appears in cross-racial, transnational, and cross-class organizing, and has gotten real political gains. This book proceeds by appreciating all sex workers have won through those tactics and, at the same time, opts to join Sumaq and others in pursuing an alternative.

Notes from the Sex Worker Left puts contemporary sex workers in conversation with other lumpen radicals whose critical edge comes not in spite of but because of their distance from the norms that guide respectable working-class politics. Lumpen politics take us away from sex worker tactics that are most legible to liberals or even the mainstream labor Left. I am not going to spend a lot of time engaging earnest refrains that “sex work is work” or the unionizing campaigns among strippers fighting independent contractor misclassification. This is not because I think those tactics are unimportant or because the people I engage here uniformly reject them. Like most of the sex workers who animate this book, I am eager to make use of all the tactics we have at our disposal, at least when they do not leave our comrades behind. I focus elsewhere because this book is more interested in what sex workers have to offer Left politics than in how successfully they can take up the mainstream Left’s preferred tactics. Non-sex working readers already have easy access to those “just like you” stories. The stripper union campaign is, for example, mainstream Left publishing’s preferred nod to sex worker inclusion, and I am suspicious of the hunger for this kind of story above all others. “We’re not factory workers in heels,” Clara told me, and these notes from the sex worker Left speak that difference.

But factory workers have long hustled on the side to make ends meet, or have lived alongside people who do.⁴⁴ Sometimes sex workers are factory workers in heels, just not in the normalizing sense Clara critiques. I am as

interested in lumpen / respectable worker, sex worker / civilian solidarities as I am in marking the distance Clara speaks to.

The respectable working-class / lumpen divide was manufactured from the start, produced, O'Brien details, by those who chose to stake their claims for political representation on respectability.⁴⁵ Contemporary observers will recognize this in appeals for a reprieve from anti-immigrant state terror that trade in a lumpen/respectable divide, where it is common sense for union leaders and liberal politicians to frame the emergency this way: "Hard-working people, and members of our family and our community, are being treated like criminals."⁴⁶ I understand the urgency, and the compromises people make in its service. I also know that nobody is free until "criminals" are too.

These are questions of solidarity, yes, but also self-interest. The lumpen / respectable worker divide has always been porous, because capitalism produces racialized and gendered difference, disability, and surplus status.⁴⁷ The threat of lumpenization looms, with lost status as a respectable worker just an accident, a layoff, a border crossing, a husband whose punches start landing too hard, a faltered claim to whiteness or legal (that is, noncriminal) worker status away.

The respectable worker / lumpen boundary becomes more tenuous still as the crises of late gendered racial capitalism advance. I am thinking about the automation that lumpen theorists from James Boggs to Huey Newton have long heralded as a threat to a stable working class, and about the mass lumpenizing events of climate displacement, pandemics set ablaze by crumbling public health infrastructure, and the slow disabling effects of toxic stress, air, water, and food.⁴⁸ We are, writes Leah Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha, headed toward a "majority disabled future."⁴⁹ Working-class politics, as such, cannot hold.

I am thinking, too, about the rising global tide of fascist politics and their promise to render more migrants and trans people undocumented, more Black people incarcerated, more union members criminalized for going on strike, more unhoused people criminalized for trying to rest, and more people refugees of marriages they cannot end and criminalized because of pregnancies they did. Anyone who dares to fight risks criminalization—lumpenization—too. Brit "Red" Schulte names the stakes: "As authoritarianism tightens its grip, more and more people are going to face criminalization upon choosing to organize as workers, resist unjust policies, or practice mutual aid."⁵⁰ In a letter offering sex worker expertise to those new to organizing outside the law, they invite readers to "Let go of any preconceived notions

you had about ‘criminals.’ In fact, let me officially welcome you to the criminal class.”

“The working class will become unemployables or lumpen,” predicted Newton in 1970, and with accelerated deproletarianization, the lumpen would become the vanguard of working-class politics for empirical as much as ideological reasons. Indeed, what Alberto Toscano calls the “late fascist” capitalism of the 2020s cannot be counted on even to reproduce an exploitable working class.⁵¹ The terrain has shifted, and political tactics must too.

“There is no pure proletarian subject rushing forward to save us from the abjection of labor under capitalism,” write Annie McClanahan and Jon-David Settell in their theorization of the sex worker “motley lumpenproletariat.”⁵² The motley lumpen’s practice at mutual aid and survival in the face of state violence can show others “how to survive the ever-increasing depredations of capital.”⁵³ Jolie makes a related claim for what a “fugitive class” of “raggedy whores” has to teach about survival in the ruins.⁵⁴ Revolutionaries will have to take cues from people who already have experience with unemployability, criminality, and life-making outside the law. They will have to take cues, too, from people who know best the violence that states can do.

Ki stakes their revolutionary expertise exactly there: “I am a lumpenprole. That doesn’t make me useless to the revolution.” Instead, sex workers and other lumpens have information all revolutionaries should pay attention to, “because late capitalism has obfuscated what the working class is.” If Marx sometimes believed the lumpen were a precursor to the industrial proletariat, a rabble who would be brought into production and thus working-class identity through capital’s natural evolution, this late stage of capitalist development suggests the opposite. There is no future for working-class politics, but there could be one for broad coalitions of the lumpen and those who are not lumpen yet.

If the lumpen / respectable worker divide has always served to “divide and conquer capital’s antagonists,” as Weeks puts it, *Notes from the Sex Worker Left* joins Weeks, O’Brien, Newton, and others in trying to disrupt that division.⁵⁵ Readers will find sex worker radical invitations to solidarity that are also warnings about all that gets lost when one assumes the longevity of respectability’s bribes. “I want what we have learned, what we know, and what we do to be communicated to all,” Irene Silt writes:

We could have a better understanding of surveillance, racism, the police and what they do with their guns, of labor unions and their failures, of the moralism and emptiness of political parties, of reform, of the

idea of respectable employment. We could be more effective crossing borders, evading law enforcement, resisting paying taxes; at horizontalism, hiding, and self-defense; at helping our friends leave abusive relationships, at planning assassinations, at resisting careerism and other bourgeois aspirations. We could move past the romanticism of the working class, of the noble proletariat. But these discussions remain only between sex workers because of stigma.⁵⁶

There is much to say about how whore stigma harms sex workers, but this book is most interested in how it harms broad liberatory projects by keeping sex workers' vast expertise concealed. Gallant is right that "we don't need various communities brought into the Left because of some empty idea of representational diversity." Instead, "the analysis that we [sex workers] build within community brings solutions and strategies to the Left they would not otherwise have." Gallant and Elene Lam make a related set of claims in their *Not Your Rescue Project: Migrant Sex Workers Fighting for Justice*: "the broader left needs migrant sex worker organizing" just as much as migrant sex worker organizers need solidarity from the broader left.⁵⁷

Sex worker radicals name their position as "canaries in the coal mine," where, per Rey, "the repression that we experience first is a precursor to what we see in the general public, in a police state, in a surveillance state." And they make a claim for lumpens' expertise in the kind of survival and world-building harsh conditions demand. *Notes from the Sex Worker Left* invites all sorts of readers to join up in theorizing from that place, where sex workers build both conceptual and activist community with others who struggle against the gendered racial capitalist state and the institutions it upholds. They find common cause with overlapping communities of queer runaways and battered wives, the colonized and the incarcerated, people who cross borders and people who cross color lines, gender refusers, those who are too sick to do formal work and those who simply do not want to do it. They find common cause with people who know that a good life for these outsiders would mean a good life for everyone.

Since there is no version of sex-working life that is free from repression, especially for the multiply marginalized sex workers who tend toward radical politics in the first place, some calculate that they have less to lose and more to gain in loudly conspiring against the violent status quo. Organized around questions of the family, work, citizenship, and care, the chapters that follow think with people who are puzzling over what to do with the institutions that keep us all in place.

Chapter 1, “Home,” follows the sex worker radicals who take leave from home—the place and the concept. People often come to sex work because they left home, as queer and gender-nonconforming youth, as women fleeing domestic violence, and as single mothers trying to survive systems that privatize care. This forms the foundation of a searing critique of violence in the family and the punishment that awaits those who try to leave it, and a vision of the better ways of living together.

Sex workers, bad at work and hating it, leave the respectable working class too. Chapter 2, “Work,” engages critiques of the “noble proletarian.” Here, sex workers take aim at the mainstream labor Left’s attachment to ideals of honest work and thrift, and articulate a counterpolitics of hustling, rest, and shared abundance.

People meet harsh punishment when they use sex work to leave home and work, and this teaches us something about power. *Notes from the Sex Worker Left*’s second half explores sex workers’ analysis of state and extrastate violence in this context. In chapter 3, “State,” sex workers theorize the function of state power: to compel unpaid reproductive work and low-paid productive work. They think together about what to do with the state once we know that this is true, advancing a politics of tactical duplicity alongside communitarian experiments with how to live outside the state’s shadow.

Chapter 4, “Care,” follows sex worker politics outside the law. At risk of state and extrastate harm and with no expectation of formal redress, sex workers find other ways to care for each other. They contest the state’s monopoly on violence through a politics of militant community defense.

The epilogue closes with an invitation for readers to take up the provocations of the sex worker Left, and to conspire.

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PREFACE

- 1 Combahee River Collective, *Combahee River Collective Statement*, 1.
- 2 See, e.g., Agustín, *Sex at the Margins*; Bernstein, *Temporarily Yours*; Kotiswaran, *Dangerous Sex, Invisible Labor*; Chateauvert, *Sex Workers Unite*; Kempadoo, *Sexing the Caribbean*; McTighe and Women With A Vision, *Fire Dreams*.
- 3 Tronti, *Workers and Capital*, xxxii.
- 4 Giovannitti, *Working Girl*, 101.
- 5 Tuck and Ree, "Glossary of Haunting," 647.
- 6 Collins, *Black Feminist Thought*, viii.
- 7 Collins, *Black Feminist Thought*, viii.
- 8 Silt, "Tricking Hour," 18.

INTRODUCTION

- 1 Aragon, "Whores at the End of the World," 111.
- 2 Sumaq, "Disgrace Reserved for Prostitutes," 17.
- 3 M. E. O'Brien outlines how "the family, the market, and the state" together "inter-connect to reproduce all the key aspects of capitalist society" (*Family Abolition*, 26).
- 4 Other Weapons Collective, "Sex Workers Against Work."
- 5 Sumaq, "Disgrace Reserved for Prostitutes," 21.
- 6 Bickers and Ditmore, "Introduction," 11.
- 7 Jolie, *Radical Sex*, 37. Uncorrected proofs provided to the author; final pagination will differ.
- 8 Okoth, *Red Africa*, 37.
- 9 Taylor, *Bimboland*, 48.
- 10 Hartman, *Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments*, 227; O'Brien, *Family Abolition*, 96; Working Class History, *Working Class History*, 54; Ferguson, "Queer and Trans Liberation and the Critique of Fascism."
- 11 Savci, *Queer in Translation*, 155; Gill-Peterson, *Short History of Trans Misogyny*, 149.
- 12 Hartman, *Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments*.
- 13 Gomez, "Revolution Is Cumming," 30.
- 14 Tourmaline, *Marsha*, 108.

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- 15 Warfield, "Waiting to Be Rescued from My Office Job," 57.
- 16 See Higbie, *Labor's Mind*; Roediger and Foner, *Our Own Time*, 22.
- 17 moon, "Face-to-Face, Street-Based, or in Cyberspace."
- 18 babylon and Berg, "Erotic Labor Within and Without Work," 639. (Note that mooses moon was formerly known as femi babylon.)
- 19 Celeste, "Prorate Confidant," 121.
- 20 Empower Foundation, "Empower's Education."
- 21 moon, "I'd Rather Starve."
- 22 Meronek and Major, *Miss Major Speaks*, 8.
- 23 Meronek and Major, *Miss Major Speaks*, 115.
- 24 Piepzna-Samarasinha, *Future Is Disabled*; Hedva, *How to Tell When We Will Die*, 57.
- 25 Karl Marx, *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*, in Marx, *Political Writings*, 531.
- 26 Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *Manifesto of the Communist Party*, in Marx, *Political Writings*, 71.
- 27 For comprehensive overview, see Barrow, *Dangerous Class*; Weeks, "Lumpenproletariat and the Politics of Class."
- 28 Mao Tsetung, *Selected Readings from the Works of Mao Tsetung*; Fanon, *Wretched of the Earth*; "Huey Newton Introduces Revolutionary Intercommunalism, Boston College, November 18, 1970"; Boggs, *American Revolution*.
- 29 Fernández, *Young Lords*, 220.
- 30 Cleaver, *On the Ideology of the Black Panther Party*.
- 31 Rivera and Johnson, *Street Transvestite Action Revolutionaries*, 13.
- 32 Weeks, "Lumpenproletariat and the Politics of Class," 326.
- 33 Weeks, "Lumpenproletariat and the Politics of Class," 342.
- 34 O'Brien, *Family Abolition*, 96.
- 35 Gullickson, *Unruly Women of Paris*, 177.
- 36 Weeks, "Lumpenproletariat and the Politics of Class," 325.
- 37 Hong, *Ruptures of American Capital*, x.
- 38 Rodríguez, *Forced Passages*, 80.
- 39 Clandestine Whores Network, "Beneath Everything."
- 40 Silt, "Tricking Hour," 4.
- 41 Higginbotham, *Righteous Discontent*.
- 42 See, e.g., Cohen, "Punks, Bulldaggers, and Welfare Queens"; Conrad, *Against Equality*.
- 43 Sumaq, "Disgrace Reserved for Prostitutes," 17.
- 44 See O'Brien, *Family Abolition*, 41; Shah, *Street Corner Secrets*, 41.
- 45 O'Brien, *Family Abolition*.
- 46 Kuang, "'Everybody Stood Up.'"
- 47 Weeks, "Lumpenproletariat and the Politics of Class."
- 48 Boggs, *American Revolution*, 51; "Huey Newton Introduces Revolutionary Intercommunalism."
- 49 Piepzna-Samarasinha, *Future Is Disabled*, 5.
- 50 Schulte, "Read This If You Are Organizing Outside the Law."
- 51 Toscano, *Late Fascism*.

- 52 McClanahan and Settell, "Service Work, Sex Work, and the 'Prostitute Imaginary,'" 509.
- 53 McClanahan and Settell, "Service Work, Sex Work, and the 'Prostitute Imaginary,'" 511.
- 54 Jolie, *Radical Sex*, 35.
- 55 Weeks, "Lumpenproletariat and the Politics of Class," 331.
- 56 Silt, "Tricking Hour," 38.
- 57 Gallant and Lam, *Not Your Rescue Project*, 217–18.

CHAPTER 1. HOME

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- 2 Nash, "Erin Taylor by Ellie Nash."
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- 9 Firestone, *Dialectic of Sex*, 93.
- 10 Taylor, *Bimboland*, 80.
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- 13 O'Brien, *Family Abolition*, 4.
- 14 O'Brien, *Family Abolition*, 117.
- 15 O'Brien, *Family Abolition*.
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- 17 Weeks, "Abolition of the Family," 10.
- 18 Levine and Meiners, *Feminist and the Sex Offender*, 9.
- 19 Page, *Healing Justice Lineages*.
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- 23 White et al., *Navigating Force and Choice*, 8–9.
- 24 White et al., *Navigating Force and Choice*, 14.
- 25 On disability and sex work, see Jones, "I Can't Really Work Any 'Normal' Job." On the links between childhood trauma and disability, see Page, *Healing Justice Lineages*.
- 26 raven, "Abolition Means No More Policing," 104.
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- 28 raven, "Abolition Means No More Policing," 105.
- 29 Loiseau, "In the Video You Took of Us Fucking," 24.