

1-1-1999

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Recommended Citation

Siobhan Brooks, *Sex Work and Feminism: Building Alliances Through A Dialogue Between Siobhan Brooks and Professor Angela Davis*, 10 *Hastings Women's L.J.* 181 (1999).

Available at: <https://repository.uchastings.edu/hwlj/vol10/iss1/9>

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Sex Work and Feminism: Building Alliances Through A Dialogue Between Siobhan Brooks and Professor Angela Davis

*Siobhan Brooks**

INTRODUCTION

In the 1990s sex work has begun to emerge as a focus of discussion among feminists, inside and outside of the sex industry. Events like the unionization of the Lusty Lady Exotic Dance Theater in San Francisco, along with the work of sex worker feminists, such as Margo St. James and Gloria Lockett, and organizations such as COYOTE (Call Off Your Old Tired Ethics) and the Exotic Dancer's Alliance, have helped to bring greater awareness to the issues of empowerment and justice for sex workers.

The discussion of sex work as a labor and feminist issue is by no means new; as early as 1973, Margo St. James founded the prostitutes' coalition, COYOTE. However, the idea of sex work as empowering women has not been popularly explored until recently. Mainstream, white, middle-class feminists of the 1960s and 1970s dominated the discussions on feminism and defined the feminist issues of the era. As a result, sex work was primarily viewed as something that objectified and dehumanized women.

As a young feminist and organizer at the Lusty Lady Theater in San Francisco, I sought ways to get feminists outside of the sex industry involved in supporting sex worker activism. I was especially interested in the views of feminists from earlier generations, when sex work was looked upon more negatively. I interviewed Professor Angela Y. Davis¹ because

*Siobhan Brooks is a union organizer at the Lusty Lady exotic dance theater. She is a writer with a Bachelor of Arts in Women's Studies from San Francisco State University. Ms. Brooks' works have appeared in *Z Magazine*, *Third Force* and the anthology, *Whores and Other Feminists*. She has just completed a forthcoming book about people of color in the sex industry from which this interview is excerpted.

1. Angela Y. Davis is a Professor of History of Consciousness at the University of California, Santa Cruz. In 1994, she was appointed to a U.C. Presidential Chair in African American and Feminist Studies. She is the author of numerous articles and essays, as well

she is a long-time human rights activist. I was curious to know her views on the sex industry, as well as her insight on the political climate of the 1990s.

In the following interview, Professor Davis describes how many feminists of her generation perceived issues of sex work, race and class. Professor Davis also talks about her role in helping prostitutes raise bail while she was incarcerated in New York, her support for sex workers organizing themselves, her views on young people and political activism, and finally, her new book, *Blues Legacies and Black Feminism*.

TRANSCRIPT OF INTERVIEW

Siobhan Brooks: What was your experience with sex workers during your incarceration? How did you observe them being treated?

Angela Davis: One of the things I recall very clearly from my incarceration in New York twenty-seven years ago, was that large numbers of sex workers were continually arrested. During my six weeks at the New York Women's House of Detention, I was struck by the fact that judges were much more likely to release white prostitutes on their own recognizance than Black or Puerto Rican prostitutes. Nearly ninety percent of the prisoners in this jail—some of whom were awaiting trial like myself, and some of whom were serving sentences—were women of color. The women talked a great deal about the various ways racism manifested itself in the criminal justice system. They talked about the way race determined who went to jail and who stayed in jail and who did not. During the short time I was there, I saw a significant number of white women come in on charges of prostitution. Most of the time they would be released within a matter of hours.

Because of the problems many women faced in attempting to raise bail, we decided to work with women in the "free world" who were organizing a women's bail fund. The women on the outside set up the structure and raised the money and we organized women inside. Those who joined the campaign agreed to continue working with the bail fund on the outside once their bail was paid by funds raised by the organization. Quite a number of sex workers became involved in this campaign.

SB: What kinds of abuse did you observe of sex workers of color?

AD: I do not recall that sex workers were singled out, but I witnessed a

as five books, including *WOMEN, RACE, AND CLASS* (1981). Her latest volume, *BLUES LEGACIES AND BLACK FEMINISM* (1998), focuses on emerging feminist consciousness in the work of the early blueswomen. In 1972, she was falsely accused and later acquitted of charges of murder, kidnapping and conspiracy, and emerged as a scholar and champion for human rights.

great deal of verbal abuse directed toward all of the women prisoners. Prisoners, particularly women prisoners, were and still are treated as if they have no rights. They are infantilized. For instance, they are referred to as “girls.” Not only in my personal experience as a prisoner, but also in the work I have done as a teacher in the San Francisco County Jail—where Rhodessa Jones produces collaborative theater presentations—I have witnessed a great deal of verbal abuse directed toward women prisoners. Often guards and other jail personnel are entirely unaware that they are inferiorizing the prisoners.

SB: In one of your essays in *Women, Race and Class*, you mentioned prostitutes trying to form a union in the early part of the century. I know that you are supportive of sex workers trying to organize their work environment. I wanted to hear in your own words what your overall view of the sex industry is.

AD: I can begin by saying that I think the sex industry should be decriminalized. In countries like the Netherlands, where the sex industry has been decriminalized, there are, as a result, fewer pressures on the criminal justice system as far as women are concerned.

The continued criminalization of the sex industry is in part responsible for the expanding number of women entering jails and prisons. This phenomenon of exponential expansion of incarcerated populations is a part of the emergent prison industrial complex. Not only are jail and prison populations increasing at an incredible rate, capitalist corporations now have a greater stake in the punishment industry. More prisons are being constructed, more companies are using prison labor, more prisons are being privatized. At the same time more women are going to prison, more spaces are being created for women and, as a result, ever greater numbers of women will be going to prison in the future.

In my opinion, the continued criminalization of prostitution and the sex industry in general will feed the further development of this prison industrial complex. The dismantling of the welfare system under the so-called welfare reform law will probably lead to further expansion of the sex industry as well as the underground drug economy. The continued criminalization of the sex industry will therefore help to draw more and more women into the prison industrial complex. There is a racist dimension to this process, since a disproportionate number of these women will be women of color.

SB: Do you think prostitution will be decriminalized in the United States in the near future?

AD: This is something we need to fight for. In an age of HIV and AIDS, it

makes no sense to continue to construct social circumstances that increasingly put women at risk. The work that COYOTE has done over the years has been extremely important.

In this respect, Margo St. James is a pioneer. I have read about the work that you have done at the Lusty Lady in organizing with SEIU, Local 790. Hopefully, the work you are doing will become a statewide and national trend.

Certainly if unions such as yours continue to organize, and if the women's movement and other progressive movements take up the demand for decriminalization, there will be some hope.

SB: Do you recall the discussion during the feminist movement in the 1970s regarding sex workers?

AD: During the earliest period of the women's liberation movement, the most dramatic issues were sexual violence and reproductive rights, in other words, rape and abortion. Issues relating to the sex industry were raised in the context of the discussions around sexual violence. For example, there was the debate regarding the Minneapolis statute outlawing pornography, which tended to divide many feminists into opposing camps for and against pornography.

That polarization was a rather unfortunate development. At the same time, these debates led to very interesting questions about what constitutes pornography. This opened up new ways of thinking and talking about sex and erotic practices. The definition of pornography as assaultive, objectifying and violative of women's autonomy and self-determination was strategically important. It allowed for a distinction between what was exploitative and violative on the one hand, and what was an expression of agency on the other. These discussions laid the ground work for moving feminist discourse on the sex industry outside of the vexed framework of morality.

SB: How do you think your own feminist views have changed over the years?

AD: I think they have changed a great deal. For one, I did not really consider myself a "feminist" during the sixties and seventies, even though I was very much involved in work around women's issues.

With the emergence of the women's liberation movement during the late sixties, many women of color, myself included, tended to distance ourselves from white middle-class feminists. Many of us felt as if we were being asked to choose either race or gender, and we wanted to address both at the same time. We felt marginalized in our movements for racial equality, and likewise marginalized in movements for gender equality. If

white, middle-class feminist movements tended to be racist, then many anti-racist efforts tended to be masculinist.

I have come to the conclusion that feminism is not a monolithic movement or way of thinking. There are different feminisms and it is incumbent on the women and men who call themselves feminists to clarify the politics of their particular brands of feminism. I choose to define feminism within a framework of radical, socialist politics that links struggles against male dominance with anti-racist, anti-homophobic practices. This means that we can think about our pasts in different ways as well.

When I wrote the book *Women, Race and Class*, I did not consider myself a feminist. But now I realize that in this book I was attempting to explore marginalized, black feminist historical traditions. My latest book, *Blues Legacies and Black Feminism*, continues that search for working-class feminist traditions in the work of black women blues singers. When I looked at Gertrude "Ma" Rainey, Bessie Smith and Billie Holiday, I discovered that one of the most important feminist themes of their work was sexuality. Blues songs, as well as Billie Holiday's transformation of popular songs using blues and jazz, evoke sex in very interesting ways and often use graphic sexual metaphors. Middle-class blacks have historically disassociated themselves from the blues precisely because of the way it deals with sex.

In *Blues Legacies*, I conclude that sexuality was especially important to black people who had just emerged from the experience of slavery. In the aftermath of slavery, emancipated black people were not really free. Even though slavery was abolished, there was no economic freedom and no political freedom. Black people could exercise agency and autonomy in sexual matters. They could make their own decisions regarding their sexual partners. They could decide whom to have sex with on the basis of their own desire, and not according to the slave master's need to reproduce the slave population. This was one of the most tangible expressions of freedom for a people who were still not free. In my book I analyze women's blues songs in a way that allows me to link sexuality with liberation.

SB: That is a great project because, across the board, black feminism is not acknowledged the way it should be. How do you view political activism and feminism among young people today?

AD: I do not assume, like many people of my generation, that young people today are politically apathetic. Young people are involved in a great deal of important grassroots activism. They are involved in serious campaigns against the dismantling of affirmative action. They are challenging the prison industrial complex. They are involved in the AIDS

movement. They are also doing innovative organizing, like your work as a union organizer in the sex industry.

The main problem, I believe, is the lack of visibility of this work and the lack of national networks. As a result, many people assume that the work is not being done.

I try to warn against comparisons of young people today with their movement ancestors, so to speak, and against the nostalgia that defines the sixties as the revolutionary era and the nineties as an era of political passivity. The circumstances we face today are far more complicated than they were thirty years ago. I really do not envy young activists who today cannot focus on one issue in the way sixties activism focused either on race, or on gender, or on class. Young people today have to learn how to hold all these things in tension and to recognize their intersectionalities.

During the sixties, if you became an anti-racist activist, all you had to do was to figure out how to challenge racism. You knew who the enemy was. Now, of course, we realize that the enemy is not that clear cut. Since we have learned to politicize domestic violence, we can say that the male activist who batters his partner stands simultaneously on both sides of the battle line. These are some of the complicated relationships young people must understand today. I deeply respect the work of young activists, and I try to encourage young people to look among themselves for models as opposed to assuming that they can find them in the past.

I often say that respect for your elders is good, but you have to combine the right amount of respect with a few doses of disrespect in order to extricate yourselves from the historical past. An important part of the work of creating new forms of struggle resides in challenging the previous forms. People of my generation challenged the elders, the Martin Luther Kings for example, in order to carve out new paths. This, I think, is what needs to happen today.

SB: How did you envision the political future of the 1980s and the 1990s after you were released from prison?

AD: There was a great deal of repression in the 1970s when I went to jail and when political prisoners from the Black Panther Party (BPP) and other organizations abounded in the jails and prisons. The FBI and local police forces attempted to wipe out organizations like the BPP.

The 1970s was a period during which government was determined to wipe out radical resistance. Students were the targets of repression, at Kent State, for example. They were successful to a certain extent, on the other hand, there were those who continued to do the work. Even during the Reagan era, there were important and massive displays of political resistance.

Perhaps the present is always the most difficult to understand, but it

seems that this is the most difficult time of all. Now that increasing numbers of women and people of color are in positions of power, we can no longer assume that Black or Latino people, or women of any racial background, will be progressive by virtue of their race or gender. In fact many, like Clarence Thomas and Ward Connerly, here in California, have become spokespeople for the most politically backward and conservative positions.

This means that we need to think differently about our political strategies. We can not strive for the kind of unity upon which people tended to rely in the past. We have to dispense with old ideas about black unity or women's unity. The kind of unity we need is unity forged around political projects as opposed to unity based simply on race or gender. My own hope for the future is not an abstract hope but is grounded in the notion that we have to confront the tasks before us. If we do not do the work, we will be confronting a future far more dire and far more dangerous than the present.

SB: That is a very frightening future. I think that what I find interesting about what some people are calling the sex workers' movement is that it encompasses groups of people from different races, classes and genders. I think that is a good blueprint as to how we can ally ourselves with different activists on the left and create something broader.

CONCLUSION

It is my hope that the dialogue between Professor Davis and myself brings greater awareness to sex worker issues, and helps broaden the concept of what it means to be a feminist. Professor Davis' comments illustrate the ways in which issues for feminists of color frequently differ from those of white middle-class feminists. Her comments remind us to look beyond dualistic ways of thinking about feminism, race and class in creating a more inclusive future for us all. Moreover, moving sex workers' issues from the margins of feminism to a central focus serves to eradicate oppressive attitudes that have hampered feminism's growth in the past.