# Prostitution and the politics of respectability: Sex work, stigma, and representations of the Other

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## **Introduction**

In September of 2015, the Musée d’Orsay in Paris opened an art exhibition entitled Splendeurs and Miseres: *Images of prostitution from 1850-1910*. Two million people from across the world visit the Musée d’Orsay every year, paying fourteen euro to gain entry to see the art on display. Paintings from artists such as Manet, Picasso, Van Gogh and Toulouse-Lautrec are featured highlights of this particular exhibition – and visitors are invited to consume images of prostitutes through the artist’s eye. Walking into first room of the exhibit, the mauve-painted walls and soft lighting invoke an almost hushed atmosphere. There are no exposition booklets available for the viewer to take into the exhibit, only expensive audio guides that added costs on top the cost of the entry ticket. Taking pictures of the textual descriptions (written in both French and English) next to paintings, photos, or sculptures are forbidden. The introduction to the exposition sets out not its purpose or rationale – this is not been curated for the viewer to understand more fully the blue period from Picasso, or the self-portraits from Kahlo. The text does not explain but rather justifies - *why* an entire exhibition devoted to (female) sex workers as the objects of mostly male artists is important:

‘Its [prostitution] ever changing nature, which defied easy definition, was an enduring obsession among novelists, poets, playwrights, composers, painters and sculptors. Most artists in the 19th and first half of the 20th century addressed the splendor and misery of prostitution’.

This idea of splendor and misery is borrowed from Balzac’s Splendeurs et miseres des courtisanes (published in the 1830s), also known as Harlot of High and Low – which described the rise and pitiful fall of the courtesan Esther Van Gobsecka, and framed prostitution as both a class issue and a moral question.

Why, one might ask, is curating an exposition that focuses on a particularly sexualized and marginalized group, in the interest of a relatively conservative Gallery? Exhibits from the Musée d’Orsay typically feature expositions from celebrity artists, attracting thousands to see Monet (exhibited in 2018), Degas (exhibited in2017/2018) and dozens of other well-known painters. This is a Gallery that rarely takes big risks; focusing on artists or subjects that will appeal to a wide and international audience who come to Paris to see the finest and most exquisite art - and charging $15 for the privilege. It is a curious move from still-life paintings and watercolours of bucolic scenes, to an entire exhibit devoted exclusively to prostitution. One must ask, are sex workers so fascinating that they will attract a large, middle-class international audience required to keep the museum going?

The Musée d’Orsay makes plain that the artists we hold in the highest regard, who are adored and admired for the creativity and innovation, who often painted sunsets and cornfields, also painted naked women. While we know this already to be true for most male painters, the museum makes clear that the painters themselves often sketched, drew, and rendered sex working women. Some of the exhibit itself pays attention to the urban issues that emerged in Paris at the turn of the century. It notes the ways in which electric lighting, changes in class and consumption practices, and the scandalous entrance of middle-class women into the streets this metropolis, created or perhaps, reified the ways in which women’s access to public life had important impacts on how respectability and an adherence to certain moral, sartorial, and temporal codes, became an important way to tell a ‘good’ woman from a ‘bad’ woman.

The women presented in the paintings at the exposition are not condemned or castigated, not rendered as disgusting or dangerous, but the very fact that an entire exhibit is devoted their lives, the ways in which they have been depicted, represented, displayed, understood – suggests that the Musée d’Orsay thinks that the viewing public will be just as interested in paying to see an exhibit that focuses exclusively and primarily on women who sold sex as one of rare Japanese block prints. Here, sex workers as fascinating, ambiguous, enigmatic figures is somehow revealing of something bigger. The Musée d’Orsay has capitalised on our fascination of women who act outside of established, morally grounded norms, and selling tickets for middle-class tourists to take a peek at this sensationalised and sexualized world, one a bit riskier than they are used to perhaps.

Using the example of this exposition, an exhibit that features mostly women working in the sex industry and explores hierarchies of sex work, class, gender, and the politics of sex, *Splendeurs et Miseres* gives an intriguing view into how sex work is positioned, rendered, read. This chapter posits that the very creation of an exhibit that explicitly and exclusively includes images of women working in the sex industry reveals a great deal about the stigmatization of this marginalized group. Using feminist literature that explores the politics of stigma, I suggest that an exposition that focuses solely on prostitution and female sex workers reifies a long-held assumption about the Otherness of these women, revealing their ontological and material *difference* that sets them apart from ‘normal’ people, from ‘normal’ women. I argue that for these women, the act of selling sex cannot be read as a simple job or work – something they simply did. Rather, I maintain that the act of selling sex becomes fixed, anchored to a woman – she need only sell sex once to experience an ontological metamorphosis. Having done this act, we do not judge her on not simply what she did (although we do this as well), but now we can also judge her on who she is – a deviant, an Other. Once this label is ascribed, it is not simply part of what a woman does or might have done, rather, it becomes an identity that this woman, these women will always carry.

This chapter will explore how that fixed, bounded label – something that emerges from even one indiscrete museum visi, means female sex workers cannot escape the ontological shackles that bind them to a particular identity that defines them in the eyes of the law, in the eyes of the public who have come to watch them at this famous Parisian location. These women were stigmatized then, and I argue that little has changed since the painters who painted them, the writers who wrote about them– Balzac, Flaubert, Zola… Women who dared to think for themselves, to make their own way in a society that denigrated women and doubted their ability to be fully human. Women working as prostitutes were easy targets, easy to access and create a narrative thought fit with the men’s ideas about women – all women, except that sex workers were the example par excellence of the debauched, degenerate, disgusting truth that define all women. But these women, whether prostitutes down-and-out on the streets or high-class courtesans wrapped in silk sheets – had their own histories and stories to tell. By painting them, rendering them as two-dimensional objects on a canvas, these male artists had the power to construct their narrative, their purpose, their identity. These are the men who called them ‘*les femmes venales’* – women who were mercenary, dishonest, debauched – and painted over their stories, erasing their histories with each stroke of the brush.

It is sad but not surprising that the President of the Gallery – over a century later – using the same terms, and the same derogatory language to officially describe a group of women who made money by selling sex, company, companionship, as corrupted or polluted – as Other. I maintain that women are positioned as Other in the masculine social hierarchy, rendered object and abject, their leaky, viscous sexual bodies are disruptive and need to be controlled and constrained.

The visual consumption of these images at the Musée d’Orsay brings new insights into the ways that stigma is currently understood. My previous work (Sanders-McDonagh, 2015; 2016) has provided insights into the ways in which the gaze functions as a key element in the process of Othering and creates conditions that exacerbate conditions of stigmatization for sex workers. Here I argue that the body of female sex workers function, *par excellence*, as the abjected feminine Other; I maintain that by curating, exhibiting, and displaying these bodies as exhibits in-and-of themselves, the Gallery invokes and invites the museum-goer to see these typical, well-known paintings that might be seen on the walls of any major art gallery in the world as suddenly a bit scandalous. These women are clearly marked out, not as the female muse, or the beautiful ingenue that captures the artists’ gaze, but as a prostitute. The exhibit turns these otherwise unremarkable women into sexualized, fascinating subjects because of what they do, and thus knowing what she does, we also can say exactly who she is.

## **Entering the exhibit**

The first few rooms of the exhibit featured a variety of painted images, mostly rendered in oils, of female sex workers. A potted history of sex work in Paris is recounted here. The paintings feature well-dressed prostitutes promenading the cobbled streets, shop girls known to sell sex to gentleman customers, and ballet dancers and actresses interacting with dark, faceless ‘patrons’ in the back stages of the Paris Opera. The descriptive text on the wall, and some of the specific text under key paintings, refers to class and position in relation to sexual exchanges. All of the sex workers pictured are women – and the clients are largely gentlemen of rank and class. Work from the artist Toulouse-Lautrec, who painted portraits of the poorest of sex workers in their Montmartre haunts, also features the bars and cafes where they worked and lived. The paintings lay bare the complicated politics of looking; while the exhibit seems to be innocently portraying some of the ‘grittier’ elements of Parisian life, knowing that the images on display are not typical urban paintings, not renderings of beautiful boulevards or the paintings of steam trains and new technologies that helped create modern life as we know it; rather, the artistic vision focuses specifically and intensely on the gaze of the artist on these *femmes venales.* The consumers of the exhibit are invited to take up this mantel, reassuming the specular command held by artists as we visually consume these women over a century later, now knowing, how they can and should be read and understood – as deviant, marginal, disgraceful. The curation of this exhibit and the advertising that did and still does accompany it warns us that what we might see is ‘shocking’ and this claim is repeated on the website[[1]](#footnote-1). The same warning was posted at the ticket office added/adds to the sense of deviance that the middle-class bourgeois consumer gets to experience, knowing seeing what we might see, teasing and titillating – as if seeing naked women being rendered in oils, charcoal, pencil, acrylic; sculpted in marble, bronze or clay was unusual, surprising, distressing. Naked women, their bodies, their breasts, the buttocks, are archetypal; displaying these images is not shocking, surprising, or unusual. It would be more shocking to walk into an exhibit from almost any male artist that has ever picked up a paint brush and not find a naked woman – a cherub, and angel, a Greek or Roman heroine. Naked women are not only typical, they are expected. It is only the context, the way in which this exhibit has been advertised, sensationalised, sexualised that it has somehow made it shocking. It is the not the paintings themselves *per se* that draw our attention to the prostitute, but rather the context in which the works have been assembled and curated. By calling attention not to works of art *qua art*, but rather to the female subjects who are represented, these women who are objectified, held in time and place not just as a normal, ordinary female nude, painted by a famous painter – the description and the discourse demands we recognize these naked women we have seen before and passed by unaware, not as normal naked women, but as naked prostitutes. We can be innocent no longer.

Ultimately, for all these women – whether covered in lace and velvet and lying in opulent settings, ballet dancers looking for a dark-clad gentlemen to take them away from the theatre, or absinthe-soaked sex workers on the down and out – they are all different, but their differences matter less than what binds them together. Whether they sell sex to the wealthiest of clients, to middle-class men buying ties, or attending the ballet, or even those who ply their trade on the darkest and most dangerous of Parisian alleyways– they are all the same. They take their bodies, meant to be kept as sacred, virginal, modest and they violate the rules set out that rigidly and savagely enforce the unwritten code that marks them out as polluted, corrupted, disrespectable. Prostitutes are thus set apart, marginalized not just for what they do, but at the same time and intrinsically connected, for who they are. The exhibit alerts us to an important element of stigma that will be explored here – in relation to sex workers but perhaps also relevant to other groups. It is not simply having sex that is the issue, rather, it is having sex outside of the (male) social order that demands ‘appropriate’ behaviour from respectable, middleclass women that we are forced to examine. What these women have done, what they do, cannot be disentangled from who they are.

Opening here with the exposition as an example, this chapter moves past the exhibition to explore a range of social and cultural theorists to claim that stigma for sex working women cannot be understood as simply something they do – a physical act they perform with their bodies, a way to earn money. For the reasons I outline below, being and doing is entwined and the stigma they face never leaves them. This chapter offers a unique theoretical contribution that seeks to extend and reimagine some of the current theories on stigma, and argues that for this group at least, stigma is multifaceted and indelibly connects being and doing and marks sex workers as always and forever Other.

The theoretical approaches included here speak to the impact of these social censures on all women. However, the argument that unfolds attempts to understand the specific impact on sex working women; sex workers are particularly threatening, as they break social mores about how to behave, flout strict rules about the appropriate public display of their bodies, they command attention in public space, go outside at night alone. In short, they are able to do what they want when they want without needing the approval of a husband, father, or brother. Drawing largely on feminist scholars who have considered the ways in which female Otherness is writ onto the material and social body, I argue that sex workers are stigmatized both as a result of the ‘unrespectable’ things they do and by transgressing this boundary of respectability, they *become* Other. It is this double trouble, being and doing, which is the source of the stigma women in sex work experience.

## **Understanding Stigma and Sexual Others**

Erving Goffman was one of the first sociological theorists to write about stigma and its impact on the social order. In his 1963 work entitled *Stigma: Notes on the Management of Spoiled Identity*, Goffman charts the origins of the concept of stigma from Greek society, remarking that in this socio-historical context, stigma referred to ‘bodily signs designed to expose something unusual and bad about the moral status of the signifier. The signs were cut or burnt into the body and advertised that the bearer was a slave, a criminal, or a traitor – a blemished person, ritually polluted, to be avoided, especially in in public places’ (Goffman 1990: 11). Goffman argues that the routines of social interactions create categories of inclusion and exclusion, often based on normative expectations of what constitutes ‘good’ moral character. ‘Normals’, as Goffman calls them, are those who have some commonality with others in a given in-group, while those who are marked by some form of *difference* results in that that person or persons disrupt the social order and consequently are excluded and discredited.

There are serious consequences related to this process of disidentification; Goffman suggests that stigmatized Others are seen as less than human and

[O]n this assumption, we exercise varieties of discrimination, through which we effectively, if often unthinkingly, reduce his life chances. We construct a stigma theory, an ideology to explain his inferiority and account for the danger he represents sometimes rationalizing an animosity based on other differences, such as those of social class (Goffman 1990: 15).

 The work of Iris Marion Young (1990) continues this exploration of the impact of difference and marginalization, providing theoretical insights into inequality, arguing that social group differences play a critical role in the structuring of social relations and modes of oppression. Group identification is always the result of interactions and encounters ‘between social collectivities that experience some difference in their way of life and forms of association, even if they see themselves as belonging to the same society’ (1990: 43). Young asserts that oppression is a fundamental condition of those who are seen and grouped as ‘ugly’ or disgusting; groups come into being because they have been defined as Other in some way by a particular identity marker: ‘Our identities are defined in relation to how others identify us, and they do so in terms of groups which are always already associated with specific attributes, stereotypes and norms’ (1990: 46).

The excluded groups ‘are marked with an essence, imprisoned in a given set of possibilities… the marking of difference always implies a good/bad opposition; it is always a devaluation, the naming of an inferiority in relation to a superior standard of humanity’ (1990: 170). In some cases, this difference relates to what someone is – female, black, Jewish, disabled; in other cases, difference relates to what someone does – men who have sex with men, women who sell sex. Being and doing are equally relevant in the marking out of difference, as is the social punishment that accompanies this Otherness.

Young identifies what she considers to be the five faces of oppression: exploitation, marginalization, powerlessness, cultural imperialism, and violence. While each of these conceptualizations offers something to the understanding of stigma, cultural imperialism provides a particularly powerful insight into issues facing sex workers and focuses on a key argument developed in this chapter – that of the gaze. When dominant cultures define certain groups as Other, ‘the members of these groups are imprisoned in their bodies’ (1990: 123). Certain bodies are seen as threatening, polluted, disgusting – in contrast to ‘normal’ bodies that are seen as respectable, clean, pure: ‘Racism, sexism, homophobia, ageism and ableism are partly structured by abjection, an involuntary unconscious judgment of ugliness and loathing (1990: 45). These Others are marked out as different, as lesser, and classified as part of a distinctive group, and it is because they can be identified as a group that they become excluded and marginalized.

Young’s use of the word abject is important here and draws on the work of Julia Kristeva (1982), who argues that abjection is the sense of disgust that one feels when coming into contact with certain Others. The abject represents the border between self and other, and coming too close to different materials, fantasies, or groups threatens the integrity of self. Bodily excretions, faeces, sweat, and urine, for example, must be avoided in order to maintain the corporeal borders that allow for bodily and psychological integrity. The female body, with her menstrual blood, vaginal excretions, breast milk, and even her tears, threaten the border between self and other, and highlight how fragile and ambiguous this border actually is – and Kristeva notes that the abject can be seen in ‘whatever disturbs identity, system, order. What does not respect borders, positions, rules’ (1982: 4).

The work of anthropologist Mary Douglas becomes useful in trying to make sense of the development of certain social norms, and for thinking about how morality is shaped and ironized in a given society. When considering the origins of social norms and what behaviours or people count as ‘normal’, Douglas (2002) focuses on elements of pollution in her classic text *Purity and Danger*, including marking out certain people and/or practices that are coded as a threat to the social order. She uses the idea of taboo as a way to communicate this idea, arguing that every society develops socially and culturally agreed norms of acceptable behaviours. Those that transgress these socially determined practices risk being seen as ‘dirty’. Transgressing social boundaries has real consequences: Douglas argues that these tainted Others become objects of *disgust.* Disgust, she maintains, has no real basis in objective facts– rather, she argues what we find dirty or disgusting as a society reveals a great deal about the social mores:

[B]iologists have thought that dirt, in the form of bodily excretions, produces a universal feeling of disgust. They should remember that there is no such thing as dirt; no single item is dirty apart from a particular system of classification *in which it does not fit* (Douglas 2002: xvii, emphasis added)

Douglas considers how the moral governance of sexual conduct and behaviour within different societies produces different outcomes, including key differences in what kinds of sexual acts which are seen as dirty or disgusting. Thus, those who do activities seen as deviant elicit disgust. However, the severity of this transgression also takes into account who is doing what. She argues:

I believe that some pollutions are used as analogies for expressing a general view of the social order. For example, there are beliefs that each sex is a danger to the other through contact with sexual fluids. According to other beliefs, only one sex is endangered by contact with the other, usually males from females, but sometimes the reverse. Such patterns of sexual danger can be seen to express symmetry or hierarchy. It is implausible to interpret them as expressing something about the actual relation of the sexes (Douglas 2002: 4).

The gendered dynamics that Douglas highlights here suggest that there are power relations embedded in the coding of certain sexual practices or relations as good or bad, but for certain groups (usually women) these transgressions are read as even more deviant because they are women. Being and doing are wrapped up together here in marking out some Others as more deviant, as more dangerous, as more disgusting.

Building on Douglas, and exploring this idea from an explicitly feminist perspective, Elizabeth Grosz (1994) suggests that the leakiness of the female body has been seen as indicative as some ontological deficit – and sits in stark contrast to the contained and containable male body. Indeed, it is the fluids that escape from the body that are particularly dangerous as fluids can cross bodily boundaries and disrupt the line between the inside/outside of the body: the sticky, viscous body presents the most risk. Grosz maintains that female sexuality is seen as particularly dangerous not because it is more viscous or stickier, but rather because ‘it is the production of an order that renders female sexuality and corporeality marginal, indeterminate, and viscous that constitutes the sticky and the viscous with their disgusting, horrifying connotations’ (Grosz 1994: 195).

It is women’s place in the social order that marks them out as different, as Other; their stickiness is imagined. Indeed, female bodies become transgressive signifiers, and as Rosi Braidotti has argued (1994: 80) they are morphologically dubious: ‘capable of defeating the idea of the notion of fixed bodily form, of visible, recognizable, clear and distinct shapes as that which marks the contour of the body’. Given the danger the female body is seen to present to the male social order, women’s bodies must be controlled, regulated, watched over and carefully monitored to ensure their sticky, viscous femininity does not disrupt the boundary of the solid, concrete male social order. I argue that the bodies of female sex workers are even more dangerous and rendered as uniquely abject, not because they are more dangerous, but because their overt female sexuality greatly disturbs the (male) social order.

As the authors I have referenced in this section make clear, women’s bodies are not inherently more viscous, dangerous, and abject; rather, the male social order marks out women as different, as Other. Women who fail to comply with the social norms and societal regulations about bodily contact, particularly sexual contact, are especially risky. Using sexual scripting theory, the next section will explore how contemporary expressions of female sexuality are set out, governed, and regulated.

## **Desire and the Other: Sexual Scripts and Normative Sexuality**

Sex and sexual practices are constructed and (co)created, moulded in relation to affective elements of culture. Simon and Gagnon (1999) have written about the shaping of gendered sexual scripts, and highlight the ways in which the social impacts upon our understanding of sexuality:

From a scripting perspective, the sexual is not viewed as an intrinsically significant aspect of human behavior; rather, the sexual is viewed as becoming significant either when it is defined as such by collective life - *sociogenic significance;* or when individual experiences of development assign it a special significance - *ontogenic significance* (1999: 30, original emphasis).

These two modalities of the sexual, they argue, are closely related, and act as social settings where the ‘sexual takes on a strong meaning and successful performance or avoidance of what is defined as sexual plays a major role in the evaluation of individual competence and worth’ (1999: 30). It is important to note that scripts are culturally specific, so what might be considered appropriate behaviour for women in one culture may be different for women in another – women in many countries in the Middle East would be expected to be virgins until they marry and sexual experimentation before or outside or marriage would have serious consequences for many women, while in Nordic countries, sexual experimentation is largely accepted and women would have much more latitude to have sexual experiences outside of marriage. However, the idea of a powerful or autonomous female sexual identity is still, in many cultures and contexts, seen as threatening to heteropatriarchal norms. In these contexts, these disparities often lead to reductive, dichotomous structuring of what counts as ‘appropriate’ feminine sexuality meaning that there is a limited range of practices that can be considered socially acceptable for many women. Pheterson (1993) highlights seven particular behaviours that would mark a woman as ‘vulgar’:

[H]aving sex with strangers; having sex with multiple partners; taking sexual initiative and control and possessing expertise; asking a fee for sex; being committed to satisfying men’s lusts and fantasies; being out alone on the streets at night dressed to incite or attract men’s desires; being in the company of supposedly drunk or abusive men whom they can either handle (as ‘common’ or ‘vulgar’ women) or not handle (as ‘victimized’ women). (Pheterson 1993: 54).

Women’s sexual practices are influenced by the discourses of sexuality that dominate cultural norms and it could be argued that ‘sexual scripts’ that code gender behaviours are important in the creation and maintenance of the social/sexual order (Padgug 1999; Bryant and Schofield 2007).

In Lucy Neville’s recent work on women who watch porn she provides a useful account to argue that the very idea of women wanting to watch pornography or obtaining sexual gratification from erotic films, images or shows goes against socially conventional ideas about women’s desire. She argues that ‘there has been a long history of viewing women who are vocal about their sexual desire, or who are proactively involved in the sex industry, as unfeminine, weird, or abnormal in some way. This has led to a pathologizing of such women, and has meant they are often viewed by men (who are allowed access to visual pleasure without a second thought) or the broader public who don’t tend to think of women as sexually desiring, proactive or sexually agentic ‘with a mixture of distaste and fascination’ (Neville 2018: 16). If simply expressing desire, or actively seeking out sexual pleasure renders women as sexually deviant, it does not take much imagination to see why women who actively seek out sex and sexual encounters, who act so far out of the norm for appropriate feminine behaviour – might be so reviled and marginalized.

## **Marking the Other: Language and the Regulation of Prostitution**

Melissa Gira Grant (2014) notes that the word prostitute first entered the English language in the sixteenth century – as a verb – prostitution was something one *did*, not something one *was*. Only in the 19th century does prostitution become an identity, rather than an act. Similarly, and in line with sexual scripts that governed (and to some extent still govern) homosexuality and saw these acts as unmanly, as disgusting, as deviant. This can also be seen in the usage of the terms sodomy and buggery as acts that were criminalized; it was only later that homosexuality would come to be seen as an identity and that identity which combined doing and being and stigmatized gay men for decades. Gira Grant argues that the creation of identities was purposefully employed ‘to produce a person by transforming a behaviour (however occasional) into an identity. From there a class was marked that could now be more easily imagined, located, treated and controlled by law’ (2014: 15).

Luce Irigaray (1981), drawing on structuralist and post-structuralist thinkers, has looked at the importance of language in the creation of discourse, specifically discourses that position women as Other. Language operates on a symbolic level, creating and sustaining claims about the ‘reality’ of the social world and reifying patriarchal norms that solidify the position of women as subordinated. Language is often used to create social divisions that categorize groups: in the US and the UK, we use particular words to mark out ‘good women’: chaste, virginal, pure, respectable. ‘Bad women’ who defy normative rules about how to behave appropriately are called promiscuous, whores, sluts, slags, easy. There are also women who go too far in not having the right amount of sex – these women are frigid, cock-teases, prudes. Women who sell sex, flagrantly flaunting normative codes have a dizzying array of labels: tart, strumpet, whore, hooker, fallen women, street walker, prostitute. Language marks out and categorizes women who fail to act within the confines of appropriate femininity: similar labels are far less common for men. The labels help to reinforce the moral boundaries that mark out and make clear where women sit within the social order: which women have too much sex, not enough sex, or just the right amount to fit in the narrow category of the respectable woman. Women are already marked as Other – their material bodies disrupt and distort the masculine phallic order. Female sex workers, with their seemingly blatant refusal to adhere to the confines of respectability that is demanded of ‘good’ women in order to ameliorate their deficiencies creates an ontological imperative that renders them as irredeemably Other. *It is both being and doing that doubly marks them out.*

The use of language to control women’s sexuality can be seen in an interesting example of UK legislation, but also points to a much bigger issue here that relates to how sex workers can be marked out and recognized as sex workers. Section 1 of the 1959 Street Offences Act, stated that: ‘It shall be an offence for a common prostitute to loiter or solicit in a street or public place for the purpose of prostitution’. The term ‘common prostitute’ was a legal definition, one that could only be applied to women. Any woman who spent too long walking a street late at night, or who was determined by a single police officer to be a sex worker was officially designated as a ‘common prostitute’. Similar issues arise in Ireland in the early 20th century, where Ward (2010) suggests that all women were at risk of being charged as a ‘common prostitute’ on the sole authority of the police. There are no markers or signs that can tell a policeman or a punter that a woman is or isn’t a sex worker – any woman in the area could be a prostitute so *all women* were subject to questioning to ensure they were not, in fact, ‘common prostitutes’.

But how does one *become* a common prostitute? Even 100 years ago in Victorian England, being a woman on your own at a particular place or a particular time was enough to warrant police interest. Walkowitz (1998) and Laite (2012) both give examples of Victorian women arrested or harassed for being alone in public places – any women with the temerity to go window shopping or stroll through a park alone was considered scandalous enough to be picked up the police on suspicion of being a ‘common prostitute’, and many were. Rebecca Solnit has argued ‘Prostitutes have been more regulated than any other women, as though the social constraints they had escaped pursued them as laws’ (2014: 236). She writes about the legal frameworks that governed women’s access to public space in the late 19th century, giving examples of the ways in which respectability was policed. Under the 1960 Contagious Diseases Act in the UK, working class women who were suspected of being a prostitute could be incarcerated or ‘surgically raped’. Women in France were rounded up by the ‘moral police’ who could arrest working-class women at will with no specific charge needed. Indeed, the police would sometimes round up large groups of women on the Parisian boulevards in order to meet their quotas. Solnit notes: ‘At first watching the women get arrested was a masculine pastime, but by 1876 the abuses became so extreme that boulevardiers sometimes tried to intervene and got arrested themselves (2014: 238). The women and children who were arrested faced imprisonment in Saint Lazare prison – where they lived in depraved conditions, including forced labour, little food, and not even the right to speak. Women in France and England who had the temerity to brazenly appear in public faced serious consequences. Solnit argues that laws were created to brand these transgressive harlots as lesser, as Other – while at the same time ensuring that ‘normal’ women were kept respectable by keeping them inside, away from the streets, creating a demarcation between these two groups, and thus, making women’s sexuality:

…a public rather than a private matter. It equates visibility with sexual accessibility, and it requires a material barrier rather than a woman’s morality or will to make her inaccessible to passersby. It separates women into two publicly recognized castes based on sexual conduct… Membership in the respectable caste comes at the cost of consignment to private life; membership in the caste with spatial and sexual freedom comes at the cost of respect (2014: 235).

More recent legislative approaches in the UK and France seems in the surface far less punitive, and as can be seen with Section 16 of the UK 2009 Policing and Crime Act, the nomenclature has changed– firstly removing the gender-specific language of the 1959, and secondly focusing on the act of loitering rather than issues of ‘hygiene’. The 2009 law now makes it ‘an offence for a person persistently to loiter or solicit in a street or public place for the purposes of offering services as a prostitute’. Persistent is defined as loitering taking place on two or more occasions in any period of three months. To demonstrate ‘persistence’, two officers need to witness the activity and administer the non-statutory ‘prostitute’s caution’. How police officers decided (and still decide) what counts as loitering for the purposes of prostitution was and is entirely subjective – it requires no evidence of a sexual exchange to meet the legal threshold. The police simply make an assessment based on their own assumptions about what *they* think looks like soliciting. The hallmarks that might mark a sex working woman out perhaps lie in her ability to pass as a ‘respectable’ woman, or her ability to persuade a police officer that she has some reason to be in that particular area at that particular time. While sex work in the UK is no longer punishable with jail time or incarceration, the use of alternative policing mechanisms that criminalize ‘anti-social’ behaviour has resulted in an increase of women serving time for breaking very specific conditions – in one instance the condition set by a judge was that a sex worker could be sent to prison if she was found carrying condoms on her person (c.f. Neville and Sanders-McDonagh 2017). The penalties that sex workers face are still very real, but it is not just the juridical punishments that impact them; the work that sex workers do make them precarious, but simply being a disrespectable woman suspected of selling sex, being in the wrong place at the wrong time of day or not, or being alone and clearly visible in a public place is dangerous. While sex workers pay a heavy price, the threat of legal and social punishments extends to any woman who fails to adhere to rules about respectable femininity, and leaves all women subject to the legal and disciplinary gaze.

Jill Nagle (1997) writes on a concept known as ‘whore stigma’, which suggests that all women are compelled to demonstrate virtuous and respectable behaviours, otherwise they risk being (mis)recognized as promiscuous or worse, prostitutes. Nagle argues that all women are at risk of experiencing ‘whore stigma’ and as such creates a hierarchy between women – with strategies used to demonstrate respectability to ensure that they are not seen as slutty, dirty, whoreish. Gira Grant (2014: 77) argues: ‘If woman is other, whore is the other’s other’. Being and doing come together in the whore as the other’s other, and this being/doing creates a division, where sex workers are grouped together as Other, in order to counter and preserve whatever dregs of power ‘respectable’ women might be able to hold in a patriarchal society.

## **Marking the Other: Vision, Control, and Sex Work**

While marking out the Other with language and legal systems makes it easier to recognize the Other, strategies for keeping ‘ugly’ groups at a distance are important for maintaining the border between ‘us’ and ‘them’. In her (2002) work on monstrous bodies, Margrit Shildrick argues that categories of ‘us’ and ‘them’ emerge as a way of containing bodies that cannot be controlled, but because these binary distinctions are unstable, at constant risk of slipping, of moving – the essential qualities that define the feminine Other have to be fortified and constantly reified through a range of social, political, and cultural practices. Moral codes set out the tone of controlling strategies, and the emotional repercussions that Other people face in order to cement their marginalization.

Further to this, William Miller (1997) argues that the moral codes that are inscribed in the social order are affective, and he points to the use of disgust as an emotion that is deployed to inscribe particular behaviours as ‘appropriate’, and to fix in place those who transgress the social order. He argues that disgust serves an important social function ‘by helping define and locate the boundary separating our group from their group, purity from pollution, the violable from the inviolable’ (Miller 1997: 194–195). Miller maintains that disgust works consonantly with stigma to reproduce normative social hierarchies, with deviant sexual Others coded as abject. Critically, Miller argues that disgust is an inherently emotional state that has ‘communalizing capacities and is especially useful and necessary as a builder of moral and social community’ (1997: 194). Disgust, in combination with indignation, allow us to become ‘impartial spectators and experience what we would experience in the other’s shows; that is, we experience what we judge the wronged person should be experiencing. Disgust and indignation unite the world of impartial spectators into a moral community, as co-sharers of the same sentiments, as guardians of propriety and purity. These sentiments supply the motivation for punishing certain kinds of offenses’ (1997: 195). Miller’s work goes beyond theorizing categorizations and group affinities, to suggesting that the process of Othering is a practice and a process that actively, if perhaps unconsciously, leads to the denigration of certain groups. Emotions like indignation and disgust are prompts that give *the motivation* to punish, to ostracize those who fail to act respectably. In consideration of this relationship, Miller makes an important point about respectability in the social equation:

One achieves the minimal respectability of being civilly disattendable by showing respect for social and moral norms that govern self-presentation. This kind of respectability has to be achieved; it does not simply come with the territory of being human; it comes as a consequence of making a commitment to follow and then in fact following the rules of propriety, rules which subsume the social and aesthetic into a larger moral order (1997: 201-202)

Miller extends the ideas of Young and Douglas, recognizing the *commitment* that has to be made in order to set oneself apart as better, as more respectable. Emotions like disgust keep the boundaries intact, even while we recognize that ‘ugly’ groups are harmed as a result of their marginalized capacity. Miller does not simply argue that disgust signifies a danger to purity/cleanliness, he maintains ‘the mere sensation of [disgust] also involves an admission that we did not escape contamination… Disgust admits our own vulnerability and compromise even as it constitutes an assertion of superiority. It never allows us to clean. It underpins the sense of despair that impurity is contagious’ (Miller 1997: 204). It is the emotional resonance that disgust creates, the sense of fear and anxiety that is felt when the Other comes too close, that engenders a commitment to creating and maintaining a boundary between Us and Them.

But what methods can be used to ‘push away’ these disgusting Others? How can the ‘normals’ reinforce their normality without having to come into contact with these dangerous bodies? How does the integrity of the ‘I’ maintain its borders when confronted with the abjected Other? Margrit Shildrick (2002) suggests that in the (male) order where (female) fluid material corporealities are experienced as threatening, the gaze emerges as an affective strategy to fix in place those who would threaten the clean and proper with their unclean, improper bodies. Other bodies must be watched and monitored to ensure they stay in place; but not touched. They must remain objects, kept at a distance and ‘pushed away’, but at the same time carefully surveilled in order to reify the existing taxonomy of stigma. Keeping stigmatized populations in view and under scrutiny allows for the social control of these undesirable groups – control that is needed to ensure the threat of the Other is kept physically and psychologically at bay.

Foucault makes clear in his work (1980), that the importance of vision and the gaze emerged as scientific discourses from the 19th century sought to categorize and fix people into groups, in order to recognize and identify who and what is ‘normal’ and who/what is aberrant/abhorrent. In order to properly define difference and (dis)order, and therefore place people in appropriate categories, the scientific gaze became necessary to gain knowledge to reveal the scientific ‘truth’. Young (1990) argues that the virtues of the scientist – typically the white, bourgeois male – unsurprisingly also became the virtues of modern masculinity: ‘disembodied detachment, careful measurement and the manipulation of instruments, comprehensive generalizing and reasoning, authoritative speech backed by evidence’ (Young 1990: 126). The objective, detached scientist was able to authoritatively proclaim some groups as clean/sanitary/safe and other groups as diseased, degenerate and defective. Those deemed as deviant or deficient were brought under the control of the scientific gaze to ensure they could be monitored and segregated from the ‘normals’. The affective reaction to those bodies that defy the social order is profound; disgust and contempt abound for women who flout rigid laws about respectability, who transgress moral plateaus that govern ‘appropriate’ sexual conduct, whose wet/tacky/sticky vaginas threaten the social order. Women are always the Other – the threat of being totally ostracized, cut out of society, cut off from the social is very real – but not all women face the same kinds of stigma.

In many ways, the Musée d’Orsay exhibit is a contemporary expression of the scientific gaze; while not seeking explicitly to monitor the bodies of sex workers, the exposition effectively marks out sex working women as somehow different to other people, and focusing on their poverty and misery as a group illustrates the ‘truth’ about their lives. The very act of creating an entire art exhibit in one of the world’s most celebrated galleries, makes clear that sex workers are a group that attracts the interest of the viewer, of the spectator. While this gaze is not surprising in a lap-dancing club or a cabaret show, the lascivious stares of the cultured, sophisticated, and well-heeled visitors are unexpected. It is only the respectable, hallowed rooms of the Gallery that allow visitors the right to visually consume these curious objects, these debauched women without threatening their own respectable positions.

Young notes that the politics of visibility are important in the marking out of the Other, and she argues that ‘cultural imperialism involves the paradox of experiencing oneself as invisible at the same time that one is marked out as different’ (Young 1990: 60). In this exhibit, sex workers’ bodies are watched and visually held in place, interpreted through the lenses of stereotypes and marginalization; their displayed bodies become the fixed objects that can be gazed up from a distance, categorized, analysed, and dehumanized. This collection of paintings reminds the viewer that sex workers have always been different, and make it difficult to create a sense of identification with these women who become nothing more than objects of the gaze.

I think it is important to add that in 2015, at the same moment the Musée d’Orsay exhibit was showing, the current law in France was focused on banning ‘passive solicitation’ – a 2003 law that is predicated upon three key elements, set out in Article 225-10-1, which indicate that passive soliciting has taken place: a woman wearing clothing considered to be overly sexual; a woman being located in a place where prostitution is known to take place; a woman being present at an unusual hour of the day. While the ‘respectable’ women who visited the exposition at the museum are capable of passing in this illustrious place of culture, should they wander out in clothing that is too revealing in the wrong area at the wrong time, they could easily be arrested or charged with prostitution. But this was not a concern for the women in the gift shop after, who could purchase not only books, posters, and cards from the exhibit, but also DVDs or erotic books, films rated 18 because the content is considered pornographic. This would not be acceptable a few miles away in Pigalle or Blanche – places where in Paris where the smutty, seedy side of the sex industry is still visible - but here, the calm environment, the clean and clear displays of porn alongside philosophy books, suddenly makes it ok for these women to look at, to touch, to consider their own sexuality – knowing that they can do this, in this space, as an extension of the exposition. Context matters.

Keeping that in mind, it is the context of this public display of sex worker bodies at the Musée d’Orsay that is the problem. A sex worker curated exhibit in a space where they have control of the narrative, have control of the use of their image and how it’s described – these exhibits happen across Europe, but not in Galleries like this one. It is, in fact the context of the presentation at this place that becomes a way to maintain the visibility of this abject groups, and reinscribe their continuing difference. The exhibit came with an official warning, both in the Gallery as well as the website, cautioning the viewer for the following: : *‘Please note that some of the pieces presented in the exhibition may be shocking to some visitors (particularly children)’ (Musée d’Orsay, 2020).* But the paintings, images we have seen many times and know very well – are not shocking at all. The idea of shock or the sensational is created by the Gallery to pique our interest, to tell us a new scandalous exhibition to grab our attention, to invite us to look at a group of normal women in their everyday lives, painted by men they knew, men they might have liked, or even loved. While in some ways the artists do not intend to display or lay bare the nature of the work they do – indeed, the paintings are often quotidian, normal, unexceptional – featuring women going about their daily lives. It is not the paintings, or even the gaze of the artist that we follow, looking at the bodies and lives of these women. It is the Gallery, telling us these images are shocking, not suitable for children – creating an exhibit that attracts because it offers titillating, sexualisation – and the opportunity to make a judgement about women that we would normally walk past, admiring the brushstrokes, the tone, the technique, the beauty of the woman in the portrait. But only here are we allowed, nay, invited to consider the morality, the ethics, the position of these women and judge them accordingly.

I argue that in this case, displaying the naked female body in an art gallery becomes controversial when the women being displayed are invited to be seen, to be understood as blatantly, flagrantly disreputable, as dishonourable, as disgusting. These paintings, brought together to demonstrate the unique misery, poverty, and spectacle of the ‘prostitute’ are suddenly provocative because the viewer *knows* that these bodies – bodies that might have been mistaken for a respectable wife, or mother, or even muse – are the bodies of sex workers. These artistic renderings hung innocently in galleries across the world, consumed by unsuspecting viewers who had no idea that these paintings were in fact - shock, horror! – *prostitutes*. Thank god that the Musée d’Orsay brought these indiscrete women to our attention – and demanded that we carefully and conscientiously inspect these paintings in great detail, ideally purchasing the hardback book of the exposition, as well as postcards, posters, and replicas of these ‘shocking’ images.

Most special exhibits at the Gallery focus on specific artists or themes – in the past five years, one could see a number of exhibits focusing on the work of specific artists, Manet, Renoir, Picasso, or explore themes related to portraiture, landscapes, water lilies. By creating an exhibit that focuses specifically on prostitutes as a collective group, this moves beyond highlighting the objects of art, to emphasizing the unique nature of this group of women who, in this context, are dehumanized, presented as *collective objects* that are deserving both of the artist’s gaze and the gallery spectator. The hyper-visibility of sex workers as the subject of the exhibit positions them as not only different but as immoral or ‘shocking’– and it is not simply that they are women selling sex, rather, by selling sex, it tells us about their dishonourable nature, their moral failings and reveals a truth that had been hidden to us before – the gallery reveals for us these women as deviant, disreputable, and firmly, categorically, ontologically, Other.

## **Conclusions**

The exhibit at the Musée d’Orsay would be less troubling, perhaps, if the issues facing sex workers in today’s world were not so pressing, and if stigma was not still so prevalent. The introduction of the Nordic model, a policy model which seeks to end demand for prostitution by solely criminalizing (male) clients adopted by eight countries since 1999 but has been criticized by international organizations such as Amnesty International (2016) as it puts sex workers at more risk of harm, and increases stigmatization. Countries that have sought to move towards systems that decriminalize sex work, such as New Zealand, have found that decriminalizing increases women’s safety in the industry, and reduces (but does not eliminate) the stigma associated with selling sex (Abel et al, 2007). France itself introduced the Nordic model in 2016, just after the exhibit at the Musée d’Orsay. A report from 2018, that looked at the impact of the law on sex workers in France two years after its implementation argued:

Two years after the new legislation, the repressive aspect of the law, the criminalisation of clients, has had the most impact on the lives of sex workers, reinforcing their marginalisation, increasing violence and stigma, and exposing them to greater risks for their health (Le Bail and Giametta 2018: 2)

The status of sex workers, despite the gains that sex workers’ rights organizations have made in many parts of the world, is still governed by the same moral pretexts that were in place when the ‘femmes publique’ were painted by Degas, Renoir, or Toulouse-Lautrec. Sex workers, as an abject group, faced then and still face pity, fear, disgust, and hate from many people. What a cruel irony that their lives are only worth thinking about when placed on the walls of a prestigious gallery, viewed from a safe distance. They become beautiful objects rendered in oils and chalk, far enough away from the real world of sex work to be safe, to be fascinating. The museum goers can consume so called ‘shocking’ images of prostitutes, can gaze at oils on canvas, at acrylics on paper, at marble/copper/clay sculptures and are invited by the official text to feel pity, horror, guilt – or any other anxious mix of emotions that Others present. Of course, museum goers-can and do make up their own views, and may see these women in a variety of ways. But the discourse that guides the spectator, that tells us to be prepared to be ‘shocked’, the uses of derogatory terms, that do little to talk about modern day sex work, or the fight or Parisienne sex workers for laws that would protect them.

There is a clear narrative from the Gallery, that tells us about a historical past where women who sold sex publicly, private, exclusively are all joined together for the spectator to consume. We know, from the exhibit and the explanations given and the discourse that surrounds it, that just selling sex was enough to render them as Other. The being and doing are the core focus of the exhibit – knowing not just how they are, but who painted them and for what reason. We are handed a guidebook of morality on our way in to judge not just women who had sex, but sex workers, prostitutes, *femmes venalles* – respectability was and is the marker that sets women apart that create ‘whore stigma’.

The theoretical perspectives offered in this chapter trace the lineage of respectability – they provide insights into the ways that women are rendered outsiders to the male social order. The oozing, viscous, grotesque female body – bodies that cry tears, give birth, leak milk – are monstrous in their Otherness. Already on the back foot, we have to shore up our reserves and play the game that has been laid before us. As the scholars presented here have argued, dirt and disgust are social categories, not objective realities. Images of prostitution – as laid out in this exhibit at least – are images of women. While there may be some difference between a courtesan, a ballerina, or a shop-girl, they all share the same common base features: not only are they all women, but they all refuse to engage in the practices of ‘appropriate’ femininity. Their refusal to kowtow to the totem of respectability marks them out – and stains them with the indelible print of stigma.

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1. https://www.musee-orsay.fr/en/events/exhibitions/in-the-museums/exhibitions-in-the-musee-dorsay/article/splendeurs-et-miseres-42671.html?S=1&tx\_ttnews%5Bdu\_hr%5D=5%2F01%2F2013&tx\_ttnews%5Bhlm%5D=1&tx\_ttnews%5Btx\_pids%5D=222&tx\_ttnews%5Btt\_cur%5D=33536&tx\_ttnews%5BbackPid%5D=51&cHash=e9896a543c [↑](#footnote-ref-1)