

Service for Invisible Servers: Academy and Community-based Collaborations to Address and Alleviate Problems Faced by Street-level Prostitutes

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Although departments and/or programs may vary in name, Black Studies as an academic field is concerned with issues that face people of the African Diaspora. From its inception, the credo of Black Studies has sought to connect service and learning in ways that benefit Black persons. Authors such as Kershaw (1992) argue that Black Studies should unify theory and praxis, making the implications and purposes of research more engaged and accessible to communities. As an interdisciplinary field, Black Studies encourages researchers and students to engage social issues from a variety of viewpoints, allowing for a convergence of diverse intellectual contributions. In addition to giving students researchable topics with immediate applicability, Black Studies encourages collaborations with community members, which may increase community engagement and decrease town/gown divides. In this paper, I suggest several ways in which Black Studies-centered research projects can be fruitful in addressing the issue of prostitution.

There are a number of issues that surround street prostitution, a type of sex work. I broadly define sex work as including a number of sexualized acts, such as stripping, exotic dancing, or escorting, where workers are solicited as prearranged dates to be met in public or private. More specifically, street prostitution involves the solicitation of sexual contact from a sex worker in exchange for payment. Unlike escorting, the advertisement of services is likely to occur in a public setting, though sexual acts may still occur in private settings. In this paper, I outline some concerns of street prostitution. Often concerns revolve around whether prostitution should exist in a community; but here, I am more concerned about the issues that the prostitutes themselves face in terms of health risks and experiences with the legal system. To the extent that prostitution may operate as an organizing principle for oppressed groups (Kempadoo, 1999), the issues faced by prostitutes may reflect a broader issue. Though this is a highly controversial topic, insights on prostitution reveal that race is very much intertwined with this type of sex work, offering impetus for persons interested in issues facing Black women^{1,2} an avenue to address a social concern. In this case, prostitution serves as a singular entrance to action. The issues raised are in no way exhaustive, but reveal a few avenues through which Black Studies programs can organize students from varied scholarly backgrounds and community members to address these concerns. Since my suggestions for intellectual collaboration are based on the nature of higher education in the United States, my examination of street prostitution is situated there. Sex work occurs all over the world, but for the sake of consistency between the suggestions and context, the United States is the focus.

Arrest rates and further research suggest that entrance into sex work follows racial patterns, emphasizing the necessity of addressing related issues through an intersected lens of race and gender. There is no consistent estimate of how many prostitutes work in the U.S., given legal concerns and consequent, relative secrecy. However, according to statistics available through the FBI website, there were 58,678 arrests made for prostitution and commercialized

¹ Though men can be involved in sex work (e.g., Elifson et al., 1993; Morse et al., 1991), focusing on women allows an engagement of gender inequality that may be left absent in research on race. In addition, since a great deal of research focuses on women, it would be best to have more information on male prostitution before making suggestions.

² Though the term "African American" is appropriate, it does not necessarily capture the ethnic diversity of Blacks who reside in the U.S. Therefore "Black" will be used as the primary racial signifier in this essay.

vice³ in 2008. Of these, 23,987 were Black women. Based on these numbers Blacks made up 40.9% of prostitution arrests, yet comprise roughly 12% of the population, continuing a trend that is discussed more extensively by Monroe (2005), in which Black women are disproportionately arrested for these sexualized offenses. Once one has entered prostitution, there are a number of concerns, such as the physical and mental health dangers of such an occupation. Scholars also suggest that discourse on Black womanhood and sexuality perpetuates insidious racialized ideas surrounding sex work (e.g., Collins, 2000), which may impact how prostitutes are viewed by both the public and the law enforcement that serves communities.

Given that issues surrounding street prostitution are multifaceted, it is only fitting that a number of intellectual disciplines connect to seek solutions. The nature of Black Studies as a field allows for such a conversation, and it is important to capitalize on this opportunity by honing in on particular issues. What are some of the concerns surrounding street prostitution? How can students associated with Black Studies (or are otherwise interested in Black issues) utilize research to create resources to alleviate some of these problems? How might these collaborations manifest? Advocacy for the rights and needs of workers may impact both them and the community-at-large, and it is important that any action taken benefits the community. Consequently, I pull from the existing literature to make suggestions that will not merely aid sex workers in the U.S., but also the communities in which they live and work.

Race and Prostitution Entry

Race and prostitution *entry* is an area that has not been studied extensively (Kramer and Berg, 2003), though much has been said regarding the racial composition of prostitution. There is evidence that race impacts the individual factors that precede entrance into sex work⁴. For instance, research has found that in comparison to White women in the U.S., minority women enter prostitution at younger ages (Kramer and Berg, 2003; McClanahan et al., 1999). Silbert and Pines (1981) and Widom and Kuhns (1996) found that sexual abuse preceded prostitution, but subsequent research (Kramer and Berg, 2003) suggests that sexual abuse may not be a consistent antecedent across racial lines. This does not mean that Black women do not face sexual abuse, but the association was not as strong as it was among White women. Literature implicates negative family experiences as a factor leading to prostitution (see Nadon et al., 1998, for a survey of the literature). Negative experiences may motivate children to run away from home, and some may enter prostitution as a means of support. Though the relationship between running away and prostitution differed across races, McClanahan et al. (1999) found that Black women were less likely to have run away from home before entering prostitution. The authors also discovered that drug abuse or dependence was strongly associated with prostitution, though dependence rates were lower among Hispanic women than their Black and White counterparts.

Looking beyond the individual, it is important to question the social factors that may facilitate these outcomes. Not only does individual focus open the door to racist arguments about sexuality, but neglecting social factors may also make invisible racial inequality and women's resistance against inequality. For example, housing segregation, which has continued despite measures such as the Fair Housing Act of 1968, has a number of negative implications. Farley and Squires (2005) and Charles (2003) have written reviews that explain the implications more

³ Prostitution and Commercialized Vice: "Sex offenses of a commercialized nature, such as prostitution, keeping a bawdy house, procuring, or transporting women for immoral purposes. Attempts are included." This information can be found at http://www2.fbi.gov/ucr/cius2008/data/table_43.html.

⁴ There is some question as to what extent these factors are reliable predictors of prostitution entrance. Nadon et al. (1998) argue that the evidence is sometimes contradictory, and common factors often do not hold up well in the face of proper controls.

fully; but segregation is associated with concentrated poverty, crime, decreased educational quality, and decreased occupational opportunity. In a number of ways, these implications are linked to poverty. Monroe (2005) compellingly argues that poverty is very much connected to prostitution worldwide⁵. A number of combinations of social factors exist and influence one another in many ways. A substantial amount of space is needed to present the ways that educational and occupational opportunities shape the choice to enter prostitution. The point here is that scholarship has demonstrated that Blacks do face a disadvantage. However, disadvantage should not be seen as hopelessness, since prostitution may be a response of agency to one's conditions, as a form of sexual labor (Kempadoo, 1999). In a later work, Kempadoo (2007) argues that sex work operates as a "self-activated...viable alternative for economic advancement" for women (83-84). The need for attention to structural conditions and Black women's agency become even more pronounced, considering the literature on language and sexuality, since discourse tends to rely on individualistic explanations of deviance.

Language and Ideology

Razack (1998) argues that discussions of prostitution are viewed primarily through a gender lens, which obscures the ways in which class and race are also at work in this discourse. Other scholars have also noted the ways in which race, class, and gender operate in issues of sexuality. In unearthing the simultaneity of race, class, and gender, a double standard regarding sexuality, where Black women are labeled deviant, also emerges. Authors Beisel and Kay's (2004) account of abortion discourse in the nineteenth century reveals politics regarding race, gender, and sexuality. Though the abortion discourse from this time is often deemed solely gendered, the public discourse facilitated by medical practitioners reveals that the interests were also racial. Physicians' anti-abortion arguments warned that abortion was barbaric and would lead to the demise of the Anglo-Saxon's political power. By placing limits and strict controls on abortion, it was believed that lesser races (such as other White ethnic groups) would be unable to seize the political power of Anglo-Saxons. Though this example targets abortion, it is another example of the way in which sexuality can be seen as valuable capital, to be treasured, saved, or used for desired purposes. Doezenia (1999) notes the way in which discussions (and subsequent panic) surrounding prostitution and sex trafficking historically have been modeled after "White slavery discourse," where there is fear of an abuse of normative White sexuality. Underlying such fear is an assumption of involuntary victimization and the need to save vulnerable women from impurity.

The associations with Black female sexuality do not take the same tone of victimhood. If anything, the scenario is framed in a manner in which society is portrayed as the victim. Street prostitution, which historically has been associated with urban women of color and immigrants, is closely allied with purposeful sexual deviance (Lucas, 1994). The assumption of inherent deviance possessed by prostitutes are made clear in rape discourse, since they are viewed as "unrapable" due to their activities (Miller and Schwartz, 1995). Additionally, criminalization discourse adopted the language of dangerous, deviant women who were perceived as prostitutes (often minorities and/or immigrants) and sought means to control them (Lucas, 1994). This is further supported by Carby (1992), who offers examples of measures designed to keep Black femininity "under control" on the part of both White and Black society, facilitated by common cultural conceptions and associations between skin color and sexual deviance. Beisel and Kay's

⁵ As noted, prostitution is not just a response of women in the United States. Though the focus here is on women in the U.S., the existence of sex work worldwide should be recognized, especially given its links to material disadvantage.

(2004) research also offers examples of how women of color are associated with sexual deviance in abortion discourse. The perceived need to keep society safe from sexually deviant women demonstrates the pervasiveness of stereotypes and the extent to which Black female sexuality is seen as a problem. Pervading ideologies only serve to hurt women because in addition to the double standard that emerges in language, they facilitate apathy. Black women who prostitute are regarded as similar to “pets” (Collins, 2000); this image serves as an ideological justification for the willful sexual consumption of Black bodies by others. Beyond consequences in public discourse, apathy holds potential ramifications for the treatment of Black female prostitutes in institutions like the law and criminal justice system.

Physical and Mental Health Risks

The threat of bodily harm from potential clients remains a salient and ongoing risk (Barnard, 1993), one that must be highlighted. Prostitutes are at risk of being beaten by a client, raped, or possibly killed (Carter and Giobbe, 1999; Dalla et al., 2003). There are a number of studies surrounding prostitution reporting, in which women have endured such bodily abuse as beatings, stabbings, head injuries, and knife wounds. (Farley and Barkan, 1998; Carter and Giobbe, 1999). Lowman (2000), for instance, argues that prostitutes regularly face the threat of “bad dates,” which can result in sexual assault, robbery, or murder. The hazards faced are either situational, in which violence erupts from the situation and is not premeditated; or predatory, in which the perpetrator premeditates a violation or killing. In some murder cases, women die of overkill when extremely excessive force or trauma is applied. More appalling are the findings by Miller and Schwartz (1995), where some respondents (who were themselves prostitutes) state that law enforcement neglected prostitutes who had been raped, and as a result such crimes often went unreported and under-investigated.

Prostitutes are at risk for a number of diseases, such as the cold or flu, due to regular, intimate contact with others (Kempadoo, 1996). Even more serious, prostitutes are at risk for sexually transmitted infections (STI). Moreover, prostitution is a point of interest concerning the spread of HIV/AIDS (Morse et al., 1991; Elifson et al., 1993). As an aside, it is noted that at least with regards to HIV transmission, sex with prostitutes is not a primary vehicle for infection (Weitzer, 2007; Scott, 2002). Nevertheless, though prostitution is not identified as a *leading* cause, dangers are still present. To understate or overstate the role of prostitution in STI cases is detrimental, which is reflected in legislation. For instance, condom use is mandated in areas where prostitution is legal, such as Nevada (Brents and Hausbeck, 2001; Brents and Hausbeck, 2005; Albert et al., 1995). Though condoms reduce the risk of sexually transmitted infections, a client’s unwillingness to use them is a challenge that prostitutes face (Cusick, 1998). Although some may claim that occupational risk is a component to any job, it is also important to note that this is a job that does not come with perks like health insurance and reliable hours. Women who catch the flu or acquire an STI are often unable to work.

Mental health risks are also present. Though arguments about the prevalence of psychological distress in prostitutes are sometimes appropriated into arguments about the moral shortcomings of such work, to ignore the potential for psychological distress would be misleading. Mental illness health issues suffered include post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), “emotional numbness,” and insomnia (Farley and Barkan, 2008; Carter and Giobbe, 1999). Dalla et al. (2003) find that victimization is common in prostitutes’ narratives, further impacting coping strategies and a sense of well-being. Given the dangers present, or at least their threat, the existence of mental illness is of no surprise, though reports of mental illness should be regarded

critically. This paper claims no position of causality regarding the relationship between sex work and mental illness. However, the coincidence of mental illness and prostitution is of concern, regardless of causation.

Moral and Academic Considerations

Certain moral issues and limitations need to be included in the discussion. There are a number of different stances on prostitution based on personal moral and political beliefs. For some, the problem is the act itself, because it is seen as immoral to solicit and offer sex. Another concern is the amount of crime and traffic it potentially brings into an area. On the other end of the spectrum are varying levels of acceptance of street prostitution. Some may find it a morally repugnant, but necessary, part of society. Others may not have legal or moral apprehension towards the matter. The suggestions that follow take this diversity of opinions into consideration and do not necessarily advocate for a shift in moral convictions or a push for legalization. The discussion of violence and agency is conspicuously absent. Unlike those who stake claim to morality, I do not hold to the argument that all prostitution is a form of violence against women, nor do I espouse it as a means of viable labor. Though my stance is certainly one of “sitting on the fence,” I seek to steer away from this debate in order to note ways that students and community members can be actively involved in addressing tangible implications of prostitution. Although these topics are important and worthy of consideration, the intent is to advocate for services that acknowledge, if not straddle, any disconnect between stances towards prostitution and have a broader community impact. Other scholars have taken on these considerations in much greater depth than are offered here.

Moreover, though the relationship between inequality and prostitution has been emphasized, I do not intend to overstate that relationship. Certainly, there are some who would object to the suggestion that lower incomes automatically make someone more likely to be a prostitute. This is not what is being suggested. The research reveals that a number of factors are involved, and each sex worker’s reason is likely as unique as her experience. The intent is to point to the factors that scholars have named as related. Certainly, there are other alternatives to prostitution to make ends meet. However, in the sense that this paper does not stake claim to the issue of morality, prostitution is seen as a valid means of survival and agency, if that is how the sex worker sees it. Weitzer (2007) has argued that the stated motivations differ, and I seek to respect that diversity. However, there are certainly unique occupational hazards to street prostitution compared to escorting (Weitzer, 2007), and if Black women are disproportionately involved, then they are disproportionately facing these hazards. Therefore, regardless of morality or agency, there are concerns that need to be addressed, perhaps in a broader context.

Finally, due to considerations of feasibility, a number of issues are to be avoided. For instance, though prostitution on the street may attract crime in those areas, suggestions to create safe spaces for prostitutes (brothels, for example) are connected to numerous moral and political considerations. In addition, since students have limited access to law enforcement processes, these sorts of considerations are not present here. Although advocacy and research are certainly encouraged, the goal is for students to work within their means and within likelihoods in which they can become engaged.

Advocacy and Service Learning

Research has aided our understanding of prostitution thus far, and the intent is to remain connected to this research when taking action to alleviate some of the risks that sex workers may

face. There are many conversations that could arise between Black Studies students and the community. Prostitution offers one such starting point for a collaborative conversation. One way that research and action remain connected is through the implementation of service-learning projects, which are the focus of my recommendations. My suggestions are not necessarily new and are likely already being implemented in various locations. The focus here, therefore, is to bring together research, community, and action for concerns that face members of the Diaspora.

Since graduate and professional students are often on the cutting edge of research in their respective fields and possibly attend schools in or near areas where prostitution is a concern, they are a prime population to assist community members. Students can use their academic training and tangible resources to connect to the community in a way that values research, activism, and service. Fostering town/gown collaboration may help students see themselves as more connected to the public, promoting purposeful, community-based research. In the spirit of research, however, *empathetic* understanding cannot be overstated. At no point should researchers subordinate sex workers (or other community members) by regarding them as “objects.” At all times, the utmost introspective acknowledgement of one’s privilege in the academy must be recognized and responded to accordingly. Based on recommendations concerning how these projects may take shape, I offer the following suggestions: 1) seminars designed to check one’s assumptions and stereotypes; 2) sexual health seminars to promote safe sex practices; and 3) implementation of low-cost mental health services. All of these suggestions are intended to draw upon the issues that have been presented regarding sex work.

Language, Stereotyping, and Law Enforcement

Scholarship has demonstrated a discursive relationship between race and sexual deviance. One place in which the connection is particularly problematic is law enforcement. Unless prostitution is made completely legal, enforcement will continue to be necessary. Based on excerpts in Miller and Schwartz’s (1995) research, there is questionable treatment of prostitutes within the legal system. This is not the case in all communities, but in places where there may be a tenuous relationship between law enforcement and constituency, solutions that bridge gaps would be the best approach. Language provides one avenue in which community, academia and law enforcement can come together.

The intent is neither to demonize law enforcement officials nor to use academic discourse as a way to patronize others. The hope is that dialogue facilitated by students can help community members and law enforcement find common ground. Under a great deal of pressure, they have to meet the demands of both the law and their constituency. Such stress could lead to the use of heuristics to ascertain how best to address a potential situation. However, heuristics could be based on assumptions and/or training, including the materials that are available to officials, with the understanding that there simply cannot be training for every single possible situation faced by enforcement officials. The Department of Justice website offers a manual on how to handle prostitution (Scott, 2002). Overall, the manual is fairly race-neutral; there is no mention of particular identities that are associated with sex work. Race does come up regarding questions that officers should ask regarding the neighborhood composition and the reputation(s) of sex workers in the area⁶. On the one hand, this is a fairly progressive move. I am not suggesting that such manuals should use race explicitly—to do so could be quite detrimental. However, law enforcement officials, like anyone else, are exposed to culturally espoused ideas

⁶For example, one set of questions found in the manual: “What is known about the prostitutes (e.g., age, gender, race, criminal history, social service history, substance abuse history, residence)?” (Scott, 2002, 11).

regarding who fits certain profiles. Though a great deal of these ideas are likely colored by reality, what is “known” about prostitutes may be unintentionally colored by one’s perceptions. Regardless, it is important that prostitutes and community members at large do not feel unfairly targeted by enforcement. What is needed is a guided strategy that will survive the tide of institutionalized attitudes towards prostitution. If the law becomes more or less stringent, any course of action should survive the changing climate. Turning one’s attention to discourse is one viable path, since changes can be implemented by highlighting the origins of one’s personal views. By focusing seminars on the community and law enforcement, common ground is achieved.

Sensitivity training may be an overused term; however, there is something gained by implementing seminars that attempt to instill critical evaluation of one’s assumptions. Rather than manifesting as a list of ways to be more sensitive, the approach should be more Socratic in nature and seek to create discussion on the linkages between sex and race. As mentioned, the materials cited (Scott, 2002) are quite sensitive and insightful in their approach, but it is dangerous to prompt questions and not discuss the implications of the answers. A discursive association between deviance and Blackness is one that is culturally facilitated and often goes unchecked.

A team of scholars, ideally, humanities, law, and social science students who are interested in sex work profiling or discourse, would be best suited for planning programming. Residents who are familiar with policing patterns in a given community may also collaborate to ensure that specific needs of the community are met. A seminar aids in questioning assumptions regarding race and perceptions of sexuality and may prove useful to officials of all races and levels of power. Rather than preach about what officers should and should not do, a fairer approach might pose the following: “Describe what you ‘see’ when you think of ‘prostitute.’ Why do you think that is the case?” Drawing from further research on discourse and attitudes, a Socratic manner of untangling one’s assumptions may be very revealing of how people form certain perceptions. Such programming is less threatening because it takes for granted that ideas are culturally facilitated, not simply created by malicious beings.

The goal is not to label officers as racist, name racist officers, or tell the law how to do its job, but to call into question the heuristics that could be used in a law enforcement situation. The goal is to highlight the consequences of relying on one’s assumptions and question where those assumptions may originate. The assumed relationship between race and deviance is insidious and often hard to identify. Such is the problem with internalized cultural heuristics. Likewise, the discussion produced in these sessions are linked to concerns that are held by community members, prostitutes, and law enforcement. Although this more Socratic, “Police ‘n’ Me” approach may come off as gentle, there is a great deal that can be learned from it. Students will better understand the legal process from a highly debated point—the minds (and intentions) of law enforcement.

Ideally, sex workers would be involved in the implementation of the seminar, though, for legal concerns, involvement may have to be limited to planning. Involving prostitutes would compel students to use sampling and interview skills to reach an assessment of the community climate towards prostitution and law enforcement. If there are concerns, it is the students’ responsibility to take action and help develop solutions. This suggestion does not intend to frame academics as community saviors, but where there are tense relations, perhaps the privileged status of the academy would prove useful in at least starting dialogue. In this case, and in all

other cases mentioned, students will have to be mindful of their privilege and be open to shedding it.

Health and the Community: Sexual and Mental Health Concerns

The other two sets of considerations related to sexual and mental health draw on the burgeoning expertise of students who are interested in health care, be it mental health, public health, etc. (Black Studies departments will vary in the extent to which there are students in these programs, but linking up with students in these departments who have interest in Black issues is a possibility for interdisciplinary collaboration.) Additionally, the considerations stem from the assumption that if prostitutes feel constrained with regard to occupational options, it could reflect a lack of community resources at-large. (By no means is this always the case, but research makes a compelling connection between disadvantage and prostitution.) In advocating and providing solutions for a number of issues that face many community members, there may be a reduction of social distance between neighbors and prostitutes. The pooling of resources and common points of advocacy draw attention to the conditions that many are facing, increase solidarity, and offer useful solutions. If structural inequality cannot be alleviated, then at least there is some attempt at addressing some of the issues that prostitutes face and issues prostitution poses for a neighborhood. In some cases, these are strategies that have already been implemented in some communities. Again, the focus here is to push for a collaborative implementation of programs so that there is a meeting between Black Studies and the community.

Sexual Health Concerns

Research has revealed some of the sexual health risks, as well as how client interactions complicate any attempts to remain sexually healthy. Simply put, prostitutes sometimes find themselves in situations where clients do not want to use barrier contraception (i.e., male/female condoms). Insistence on condom use could create a dangerous situation with a hostile client. Are there resources available that will aid prostitutes in navigating such situations? If a client cannot be persuaded, are prostitutes aware of the options that they have at their disposal? Making sexual health resources more prostitute friendly may be one way to address such concerns.

One solution is seminars on sex work and contraception, created and facilitated by students who have the appropriate certifications. More advanced students of public health and many of the social sciences would benefit through the applied nature of the work that needs to be done. Although it is important to keep the service up to speed on the most recent research, they may not be as versed in praxis. In partnership with students who are trained in interview methods, participants could interview prostitutes about their experiences regarding contraceptive use. Along with community members, students could create programming or materials that address the “logistics” of contraceptive use in uncertain situations. Sexual health centers often provide a number of pamphlets on contraceptive use, but how does one deal with contraception when a client is uncooperative? Based on the research, students should create materials that address these situations. Not only would the materials highlight certain effective types of contraception, they also would offer insights provided by sex worker informants. For instance, some prostitutes might already have successful strategies for incorporating contraception with little client protest. This is information that could be collected and disseminated for public consumption. Students gain experience on various means of distributing health information and discover ways to gather proper materials to make them available to target audiences. Prostitutes and community members would benefit from advice on safer sexual practices. The same tips and

strategies would be useful for anyone who is struggling with an uncooperative partner. The sessions would be open to the public, and care should be taken to produce a cooperative and non-judgmental atmosphere. Again, based on legal considerations, former and current prostitutes should use discretion in the extent of their involvement and should be advised, accordingly, of their rights. They should not be treated in a manner that would compromise their safety or “out” illegal activity.

More broadly, research would be more attuned to the experiences of sex workers through their own eyes. Rather than focusing on the disadvantages and dangers, the knowledge that prostitutes have gained through their experiences would be emphasized. Of course, this means that students must remain very mindful of the sensitivity of the work and be particularly empathetic. Without a doubt, this suggestion poses greater challenges than the others because the benefits tip towards students and the community more than to prostitutes. Though sex workers could potentially benefit from the seminars, there is less tangible benefit. Therefore, if there are ways in which sex workers engaged in research collaborations and outreach can be compensated monetarily or symbolically, students should take care to do so.

Mental Health

There is likewise a concern regarding the mental health of sex workers who work in the area. Although research has shown the psychological factors that precede prostitution (Kramer and Berg 2003; Carter and Giobbe, 1999), there are also possible emotional effects, as in any other job. Addressing this is likely an easier endeavor than physical health, due to the need for medical equipment. By developing a space and some basis for compensation, communities should offer a place where prostitutes have access to counseling, even if it takes the form of free use of a recreational facility. Since licensure to counsel can be attained in fewer years than some medical degrees (community counseling is permitted in some places with a master’s degree and some additional training), it might be easier finding individuals who are able to offer limited mental health services. This could serve as training for psychology or social work students who are certified. Those in other disciplines who specialize in mental health could gain better cultural competency (in dealing with minority communities) from the experience to invest in their research. Prostitutes benefit in having an understanding, confidential environment. As a Black Studies-centered approach, praxis cannot become equivalent to subordination. Students who have undergone training as mental health practitioners are certainly to be versed in benevolence for their clients. Additionally, if there are area pastors or ministers who are expanding outreach services, the door is opened for individuals needing religious-based advice. In addition to counseling services, law students and criminology scholars could also make available information regarding the rights of prostitutes and potential courses of action in instances where a prostitute seeks to press charges or is curious regarding her/his rights. More broadly, any information that makes clear the sexual rights of others and offers affordable mental health services in times of sexual trauma could positively affect community members.

Conclusions

The suggestions discussed are in no way exhaustive, and they vary in feasibility for various areas. In offering these resources, the community as a whole benefits. The conditions that facilitate entrance into prostitution may be reflective of the area itself. Rather than viewing sex work as an individual pathological response, the presence of it can be seen as a proxy to estimate the types of resources and opportunities that may (not) be available in general. As a

result, people may be more inclined to pool resources and lend time to others, especially with the volunteer-based suggestions. Not all contributions have to be costly; some merely call for time commitments. The hope is that highlighting commonalities will reduce social distance, not inspire blame within the community. Since universities often have research grants and other monies at their disposal, the use of students is a means to create community resources without burdening the community itself.

These suggestions also would strengthen the academic community. The efforts outlined would vary with the students who take on such endeavors, but experience fosters growth. Not only do students find a way to serve the community, they enhance their own research. If students are mindful of their positions in the academy, certainly empathetic praxis can result from their work, benefitting the community from which their experiences came. Any scholar who claims to be concerned with the public should be able to relate their research to the actual public. What better means than to include the public, especially for the benefit of the whole?

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Reflection

I have enjoyed the experience of putting together a completed manuscript from start to finish, though it was challenging at many times. I was excited at the prospect of addressing a topic that dealt specifically with the intersections of race and gender and having to think through the implications of race and gender oppression in order to suggest tangible solutions. On the other hand, creating tangible solutions was the task that was most challenging and in many ways intimidating. I appreciate that through the process I had to step back from the project to “take the role of the other.” *If I were someone in a community where prostitution is visible, what merit would I find in these solutions? What if I were a current or former sex worker? What if I knew someone engaged in sex work? What if I were a law enforcement official? Would I find value in these suggestions?* I believe that in having to question myself throughout the process, I began to really appreciate the praxis-oriented scholarship that Black Studies has to offer and the necessity of critical empathetic thinking in research. Now that the process is over, I am most grateful for the experience of writing collaboratively. Friends and colleagues became the harshest critics and loudest cheerleaders, and working with others who were also invested in the process strengthened my essay substantially from its beginnings as a course paper. If there is anything that I hope someone can gain from this essay, it would be seeing the potential for collaborative work between the academic sphere and the community.

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