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Talk Back: Sex Workers in the Maritimes (review)

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TALK BACK: SEX WORKERS IN THE MARITIMES. By Leslie Ann Jeffrey and Gayle MacDonald. Vancouver, British Columbia, Canada: University of British Columbia Press, 2007. 273 pp. Softbound, \$29.95.

Gayle MacDonald (a sociologist) and Leslie-Ann Jeffrey (associate professor of history and politics) interviewed sixty sex workers in three cities in the Maritimes region of Canada: Halifax, Saint John, and Moncton, as well as some police, health, and community workers and politicians. This book presents in-depth extracts of those interviews, with a commentary drawing on critical political analysis. It is not an oral history book per se. But it skillfully blends these oral sources with a thorough critique of a range of good sex work literature. In common with most other sex work oral history, the authors take an explicit and acknowledged stance that draws on the insights of sex radicalism and pro-rights feminism, emphasizing sex worker agency and resistance. They do not claim, or contemplate, any shared authority in design or method but clearly listened well and then produced a hard-hitting analysis that is challenging, nuanced, and rolls out in sensible recommendations for workplace standards and sex worker-driven policy and organization.

The chapter structure of the book is topic based, presented in order of the authors' assessment of the sex workers' most salient concerns, and stylistically, the six chapters are nicely balanced to use long extracts and a good variety of sex workers' voices (e.g., Chapter 1 constitutes five pages of theory, balanced against thirty-eight pages of artfully woven extracts and author commentary). We start with a chapter on money that ranges through work rates, financial choices to funding addictions. There is some lovely subtlety in some of the extracts with, for example, Jason from Moncton talking about the desire to "waste" illegal money. Throughout, the authors draw a strong link to social inequalities in this part of Canada.

A fabulous chapter follows on what is good and bad about sex work. This mixes the messy reality of sexuality, violence, and loneliness with the pleasures of life that are also sex work: personal growth, humor, sexuality, and street smart knowledge. It

locates the multilayered world that is sex work. The next chapter is on social control, policing, and sex work. It is in this chapter that we start developing some flavor of local conditions particular to the geographical setting. For example, there's mention of one shop owner "assaulting sex workers with bucketfuls of water, a strategy often used to remove dogs from properties in rural areas of the Maritimes" (112). And the authors offer some fairly daring analysis of (hypocritical) policing. They raise similar hypocrisy in the following chapter on media coverage, with stark and engaging examples, particularly on the generation of "pimping panic."

The health chapter is well pitched, emphasizing occupational health and safety issues and prioritizing the "sex worker as safe sex expert" line that (still) goes against the grain of much health policy and programs. A final chapter on politics and public and private responses to sex workers sets out issues relating to public sentiment and bad laws and ends with future recommendations for decriminalization and sex worker self-organization.

Overall, it's a good read and contributes to the global dialog on sex work. However, it also glosses over areas that a specific oral history perspective might mine rather effectively. As stated, this is not an oral history book per se and does not claim to be. But this means it misses placing sex work within the full lives of the people interviewed, with sex work as only part of that life story. Reference to some of the really interesting early oral history-based sex work literature is also missing, perhaps by not going very far back historically. It therefore appears in a sense rather naïve by not recognizing its position as part of a tradition. Scholars have interestingly always tended to carry out sex work oral history (and granted, there is not that much of it and it is often not presented explicitly as such) from a similar "sex-positive" perspective and nearly always in a context of political advocacy. For example, the late Jeremy Sandford (*Prostitutes: Portraits of People in the Exploitation Business*, 1975) used his collection of life stories of British sex workers as a platform to launch Prostitutes United for Social and Sexual Integration and Eileen McLeod (*Women Working: Prostitution Now*, 1982) used her fifty UK life stories of prostitutes and clients in agitation for decriminalization in the early 1980s. This advocacy role for sex work oral historians was also reflected in Roberta Perkins' interviews with female and male sex workers in Sydney, Australia, which became part of a submission to the Parliamentary inquiry into prostitution in 1983 (later published as Roberta Perkins and Gary Bennett, *Being a Prostitute: Prostitute Women and Prostitute Men*, 1985). The interesting question that the authors do not get to is why similar, though clearly more progressive, nuanced, and articulate work like theirs, with similar advocacy claims, is being produced in 2006 in Canada? Where are the parallels? What has changed? And what has not?

Due to its analytical focus, the book does not ask broader methodological questions, fascinating to oral historians, about whether and how this activist role colored the availability and hence choice of the people interviewed and biased the analysis. If we openly side with our subjects (against some other group or set of circumstances), how is that alliance balanced with the commitment to thorough scholarship? With only 1.5 pages on method in a 237 page book, details that oral historians might consider rather important are extremely brief. The description of "a series of qualitative, open-ended interviews" leaves us unclear as to how many the authors might have conducted with each person, how they built rapport, how long the interviews were, etc. Four outreach agencies set interview schedules and recruited

interviewees apparently, but the authors never interrogate this relationship in any way (and in fact they present sex work support agencies throughout the book in a very unquestioning way, imbued with startlingly good intentions and decency, which may or may not be appropriate). Sex workers were paid a flat rate for their interviews, again uncommon perhaps in oral history. Debriefing and support was offered but we learn nothing more here about whether and how this was used.

Eloquent and articulate on many issues, it goes further than many other books of its type have done for several years. However, we have now fairly often been told that sex workers are “rarely seen as capable of analyzing the world in which they work” (publisher’s publicity leaflet), and this book is being promoted under this same hook. I am not sure it is still true. The agency of sex workers has been apparent and evidenced for a long time now. The challenging and exciting thing about this book is perhaps how it will unfold in the Maritimes. Will it engender a political response and movement that is different, that manages to empower sex workers and be led by them? I hope so.

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