The resulting film is moving, charming and sad, a tribute to Ms. Briski’s indomita-
bility and to the irrepressible creative spirits of the children themselves.
—A. O. SCOTT, NEW YORK TIMES FILM REVIEW

Why did [Briski and Kauffman, the film’s directors] show only the seamy side of [sex
workers’] lives and not the positives, especially how they have been raising their chil-
dren and protecting them from harm?
—PARTHA BANERJEE, THE FILM’S TRANSLATOR, LETTER TO THE EDITOR OF THE
TELEGRAPH

We fear the global recognition of such a film, giving a one-sided view of the lives of
sex workers in a third world country, may do a lot of harm to the global movement
of sex workers for their rights and dignity. It can even have an impact on their hard-
won victories for rights, unstigmatized healthcare, and access to resources.
—SWAPNA GAYEN, SECRETARY, DURBAR MAHILA SAMANWAYA COMMITTEE, LETTER TO
THE EDITOR OF THE TELEGRAPH

The camera zooms in on what appear to be small brown moths flying weight-
lessly around a bright bare bulb hanging from a ceiling, a delicate dancing
fragility, slowed and grainy, their presence intensified. Next, we see a child’s
eyes watching something to her left; her brown skin and a small dot, or bindi,
on her forehead are clear. Her gaze shifts to center on the camera, a knowing
look joins her to us as her fellow observers. She looks at us just before we see
a narrow alleyway that leads to a red-lit destination.
So begins the award-winning documentary *Born into Brothels*. It offers us in the first few frames the narrative of a child who invites us to view what is framed as the suffocating, narrow path into prostitution she is facing. We are invited to solve this problem with and for her through Zana Briski, a photographer who entered the red light district of Sonagachi, in Kolkata (Calcutta), India, to study the lives of sex workers. This film presents a double move, delivering titillating erotic access yet immediately providing the alibi of an entreaty for a “return” to normative innocence through the rescue of the children. This contradiction of erotic solicitation, illicit consumption, and erotophobic judgment is the crux of the film.

*Born into Brothels* introduces us to eight children said to be living in brothels, suffering under “conditions of abject poverty and abuse.”\(^2\) Briski explains that she arrived in Sonagachi to live in the community, in hopes of photographing women in sex work. Finding this difficult, she changed her focus to teaching photography to children of sex workers, providing cameras and instruction. Footage of individual children speaking to the camera, red light district alleys and rooms, and each child’s photos depicting what they see fills the early frames of the film. Briski’s presence becomes more explicit as her actions tell us how she takes the children on day trips to the zoo and the beach, showing them what she sees as a world beyond their experience. As she spends time with the children, she decides to use their photographs to raise awareness in order to avert what she sees as their certain future, the girls’ entering into sex work at a young age and the boys’ facing few employment opportunities. To fund their separation from the red light district through possible entry into boarding schools, Briski arranges an auction of the children’s photographs at Sotheby’s, in New York. She struggles to find schools willing to take children of sex workers, to obtain multiple government documents like food-ration cards required for admission, and to cajole parents hesitating to let their children go. As the film ends, five of the eight children go to boarding school, and three stay enrolled.

Sonagachi is the largest of Kolkata’s six major red light districts, with an estimated sex-worker population of twelve thousand.\(^3\) Sonagachi has a broad spectrum of clientele, including college students, professionals such as doctors and engineers, shopkeepers, taxi drivers, and manual laborers. However, its mainstay is businessmen who live in the city or visit Kolkata. Like the diversity of its clientele, Sonagachi has a variety of sex-worker labor forms, from the comparatively wealthy, updated versions of courtesans called *agra-wallis* to the three more widely practiced forms of sex work: indenture, com-
mon for new arrivals (*chokri*); working for 50 percent commission (*adhiya*); and paying a set daily rent (*nijay ashi*, or on my own).

Documentaries rely on convincing us that they bear a direct relation to the historical world and therefore on their “ability to induce us to derive larger lessons, broader outlooks, or more overarching concepts from the detail [they] provide” (Nichols 1991, 234). The film and the accolades it has received are very much a part of a U.S. media discourse that continues to constitute and amplify the fascination with, and yet the vilification of, erotic diversity and differently raced, ethnicized, sexualized, gendered, and classed configurations and membership in families.

The film delivers the voyeuristic intrigue of seeing into the officially disparaged space of the red light district, excitingly sexual and seductive, accompanied by the alibi that viewers are looking at the request of children who need us to witness and rescue. By Briski’s teaching the children the medium of photography, the children’s photographs further alibi our voyeurism under the assumption that they will subject their surroundings to the judging gaze, and that such objectification will aid their “rescue.” However, the film differs from Victorian rescue narratives in that it questions not only the competence of brown men, but also of brown women, leaving only children as worthy. This reinvention of the rescue narrative fits well, as we will see, with a current Christian moral panic that takes shape in the demonization of sexual others, such as prostitute mothers. Politically, this has fed increased interest in sex-worker families as synonymous with sex trafficking, resulting in U.S. policy that withholds funds from nongovernmental organizations and governments that work with sex-worker rights organizations. These sex-worker organizations, like India’s Durbar Mahila Samanwaya Committee (the Unstoppable Women’s Coordinating Committee), have been global leaders not only in implementing safer sex through sex-worker empowerment, but also in advocating for respecting sex workers’ rights to have, raise, and educate their own children.

*Born into Brothels* resonates in the context of U.S. fears and desires both morally and economically. Spectators in the United States often see the red light district of *Born into Brothels* as illustrative of “Asia’s” erotic availability and horrifying immorality. At the same time, the red light district of Asia functions in many American imaginations as emblematic of a globalizing market, where outsourcing jobs is seen as undercutting U.S. wages and job security. The rising Indian market’s impact on the U.S. economy is part of the fear of diminishing U.S. global power.
As an activist-scholar, I used participant observation and conducted over eighty interviews of sex workers in Sonagachi and the working-class red light district of Kalighat, in Kolkata, from 1993 onward. For more than a decade, I have listened to the kinds of assumptions and questions that U.S. audiences bring. Like Zana Briski and Ross Kauffman, I have interacted with various nongovernmental organizations, including the pro-rescue Sanlaap, which they include in the film, and the sex-worker rights organization Durbar Mahila Samanwaya Committee, which they do not. In order to contribute to an ongoing dialogue among overlapping groups of spectators, sex workers, researchers, policymakers, and other constituencies, I analyze Born into Brothels by placing it in the context of my research in Sonagachi, the writings of the Durbar Mahila Samanwaya Committee, and other activist scholarship. In particular, I am interested in the tension between multiple, contestant voices and what I see as the necessity of activist work that seeks representational strategies to intervene in hostile public discourses. Media events are powerful discourses that can maintain or rewrite barriers between sex-work communities and non-sex workers, even as they appear to transcend them. Furthermore, they can underwrite policy that withholds international funding and locally cuts the politically allocated supply of utilities, like water and other resources, to red light areas. The questions for me are always how hostile discourses potentially impinge on life in red light districts and what responses there are from activists in these communities. Finally, what representational strategies can we put into play not only as scholars, but as members of a global community of activists?

Context

Born into Brothels won the Academy Award in 2005 for best documentary feature. It has been the winner of numerous accolades, including Sundance’s audience award, the L.A. Film Critics award for best documentary of the year, audience and best documentary awards at a number of sizable film festivals (Atlanta, Bermuda, Chicago, Cleveland, Durango, Nashville, Newport Beach, Portland, Seattle, Sydney), and prizes from the U.S.-based international nongovernmental organizations Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International. Most major newspaper film reviewers and self-appointed reviewers on the Amazon.com website gave it favorable treatment. Yet, the reaction to Born into Brothels has not been all positive. A few critics found it lacking in context and emotionally manipulative: “As the scenes with Zana Auntie pile up, we start to wonder: Who’s the subject here, anyway? Certainly not the children’s parents, who serve as little more than potty-
mouthed props. How about some insight into what makes the adults tick?”

Reactions in important scholarly and Indian media have been sporadically critical, raising questions about the disregard and disrespect for the sex-worker community and the global South. A reporter from the Indian national newsmagazine *Frontline* wrote, “If *Born into Brothels* were remade as an adventure-thriller in the tradition of *Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade*, its posters might read: ‘New York film-maker Zana Briski sallies forth among the natives to save souls’” (Swami 2005). This is a decidedly different view from American reviewers who saw Briski and coproducer Kauffman as morally courageous: “The obstacles are stupendous, but so is Briski’s indomitability.”

Why does *Born into Brothels* play so well in the United States now? Three contextual themes emerge. First is the influence of the Christian conservative movement on U.S. foreign policy over the last three decades. Second, the initiatives of secular organizations have created international awareness and concern about human trafficking. Finally, the United States is now experiencing anxiety about its economic place in the world.

The film provides an opportunity to reformulate a moral panic that carries traces of a Christian sexual-purity narrative dating from the 1800s, regarding gender and sexuality. A current fundamentalist Christian incarnation of this narrative shows itself in part in the racialized, patriarchal administration of recent U.S. presidents—conjoining the “protection” of particular family forms and children through the regulation of brown women’s bodies. “For over a century, no tactic for stirring up erotic hysteria has been as reliable as the appeal to protect children” (Rubin 1989, 271). An important victory for the Christian Right was the Bush administration’s global gag rule, implemented in 2005, ensuring no U.S. funds would go to organizations and governments that supported sex-worker rights. On an international level, the Christian Right’s concerns translate into the protection of brown children, protection from not only brown men but brown women as well. *Born into Brothels* contributes to a moralistic and nostalgic neocolonial unease, administered by portraying Indian adults as irresponsible parents and hyper-desiring sexualized adults. Longing to reestablish the moral order of an imperial relationship through infantilization, the focus on Briski’s relationship with Indian children positions the West as the concerned, de-eroticized parent and therefore, perhaps, the morally correct and rightful, if imperfect, imperial governor. Given *Born into Brothels’* narrative of the corrupting, adult Asian world, only the next generation of children seems worthy of saving.
The broad-ranging support for *Born into Brothels* coincides with an escalating concern over human trafficking and the debate between abolishing sex work and enhancing sex workers’ rights in the mid-1990s, at international conferences including the Beijing Conference on Women in 1995. In 2000, the Trafficking Victims Protection Act (TVPA) was passed under U.S. president Bill Clinton’s administration. Due to strenuous lobbying by Christian fundamentalists and prostitution-abolitionist feminists, the TVPA, which concentrates on sex trafficking, won out over a more progressive bill, which focused on the problem of forced labor in every industry, without stigmatizing sexual labor per se. The progressive bill was broadly supported by the State Department and organizations like the Prostitutes’ Educational Network and the Center for Health and Gender Equity. While the Bush administration labeled the TVPA’s demand that grant recipients commit to not working with sex-worker rights organizations, the “Prostitution Loyalty Oath,” opponents of the TVPA, observing the way the oath undermined AIDS-prevention work in which sex-worker empowerment is the critical factor in effectively negotiating with customers for condom use, renamed it the “Anti-Prostitute Oath.”

The United Nations Optional Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons, Especially Women and Children, which includes contradictory definitions of trafficking, and the TVPA invited high-profile media exposés “featuring sordid stories of global trafficking networks and the women and children ensnared in their web” (Soderlund 2005, 74). The rise of intertwined erotophobic and antitrafficking ideologies is an important part of the U.S. political context in which *Born into Brothels* won numerous awards.

The political and economic backdrop for the reception of *Born into Brothels* is the increasing U.S. anxiety about its current and future place in the world (Buruma 2008). “America feels unsure of its value in a number of domains: world military politics, global economics, ecological practice, and in the claim that the nation has a commitment to sustaining justice, democracy, and the American dream when there seems to be less money and reliable work to go around” (Berlant 1997, 18). This anxiety about the near future may explain why the next generation, vis-à-vis the figure of the child, has become iconic of the nation. Politicians are able to justify legislation based on the purported protection of future citizens.

The American anxiety that haunts the red light market of *Born into Brothels* may also be a growing reaction to the fact that former colonies such as India are making inroads into the market. Setting aside its protectionist
import-substitution strategy that had been in place for the decades following independence from Britain in 1947, India came more fully into the international marketplace in the early 1990s, with large-scale manufacturing and diversified production. India no longer fits neatly into the traditional “colonial division of labor” in which the global North was able to extract profits from their raw materials and cheapened labor. With the push for neoliberal, “free market” capitalism in which capital, jobs, and goods can cross national boundaries more easily than people, a neoliberal India has become a growing location for outsourced jobs, undercutting not only working-class but also middle-class job security in the United States. Under British colonialism and now Euroamerican neoimperialism, India has been, and continues to be, fantasized as a tantalizing opportunity for extracted riches and as a threatening epicenter of marketplace competition. Little wonder that the American spectator, through the eye of the camera in *Born into Brothels*, seems to stride, haunt, and pace the streets in lengthy shots of the Indian Lal bazaar, or “red market,” full of bodies ready to work, at once banal and mysterious amid speeding “ethnic” music that might be interpreted as exotic and foreboding.

**A Paradox of Erotic Consumption and Judgment**

If *Born into Brothels* had been about the children of sweepers living under similar conditions and challenges, it is unlikely that it would have received U.S. accolades. Central to the film’s appeal is the delivery of erotic consumption through solicitation in the red light district, alongside the moral narrative of rescuing children.

*Born into Brothels* belongs to a welter of Western media representations of Asia or “the Orient” as a place in the Western imagination of “not only fecundity but sexual promise (and threat), untiring sexuality, [and] unlimited desire” (Said 1979, 188). The “almost uniform association between the Orient and sex” in the Western imagination was for well over a hundred years “as standard a commodity as any available in mass culture” (Said 1979, 188, 190). The allure of recent bestselling books like *Memoirs of a Geisha* continue to deliver this erotic engagement (Allison, this volume). The renewed interest in the United States for consuming Asia as sexual commodity has to do in part with U.S. struggles over the diversification of sexual ideology. The Reagan-Bush-Clinton-Bush years have certainly delivered an intensified dialectic about what is “deviant” and what should be normative.

The opening moments of the film demonstrate the paradox of erotic consumption and judgment of sex-work solicitation. The filmmakers allow the
viewer covert positioning as a consumer (or perhaps a john) free of guilt and monetary obligation to the sex workers who supply the performance. At the same time, it is the eyes of children in intimate close-up, looking at their surroundings, who seem to invite (or perhaps solicit) the viewer to judge the guilt of sex workers and customers as negligent or abusive adults. It is a satisfying double move of objectification of the adults, titillating and judging, and yet presumably compassionately identifying with the children (Mulvey 2000).14

A particular vision of the red light district is made available as the camera takes the spectator past nighttime solicitation in the alleyways where women stand on display and men stroll and evaluate. The camera allows us intimate access yet “clean,” disembodied distance by positioning the men between the video camera and the sex workers.15 The spectator becomes both a potential customer looking over women (and children) while being simultaneously differentiated from the customers in the frame. At other times, by shooting sex workers soliciting from a child’s eye level as we follow the children’s small forms moving through the lively nighttime streets, the film seemingly absolves us again of explicit erotic consumption. Instead, following in the wake of children surrounded by sexual commerce, the voyeuristic gaze becomes “the normalizing gaze, a surveillance that makes it possible to qualify, classify and to punish. It establishes over individuals a visibility through which one differentiates and judges them” (Foucault 1977, 25).16

*Born into Brothels* is a plea for a “return” to normative innocence, even while it delivers erotic access. It has been coded as the children’s film, mediated and ostensibly shaped by their standpoint, their story, their voices, and photographic stills. It provides a guilty pleasure of gazing into the “sordid,” private spaces of sex workers’ work and family, incitement to a prurient fascination. The film can be furtively sought as hoped-for porn by officially moralistic spectators, because it is seemingly rendered wholesome by making the children complicit in the objectification and fetishization of their mothers’ worlds as well as their own. The use of photography is central to this process.

“The Eyes of a Child”: Transformation Using the Gaze

The spectator’s gaze into a red light district is officially recuperated in the hands of the children and the cameras they are given.17 In the words of one of the most widely read Amazon.com reviewers, “The best thing about ‘Born into Brothels’ is that it allows the children to tell their stories in their own words. . . . The documentary is dominated by interviews with the children.
and by their photographs, with occasional voiceovers or footage of Zana Briski.” Many Amazon.com and newspaper film reviewers focused on how “simply teach[ing] the children the art of photography” would allow them “to express themselves.” As one Amazon.com reviewer wrote, “They have witnessed humans at their worst, and no one outside wishes to bear the weight of such witness. Yet, they will not be silenced, and if we do not wish to hear them speak, then Briski has given them cameras to let them capture their worlds, inside and out, and bring them to us.” The language of these reviewers is rife with the message that “photography has broadened their outlook,” photography which begins by “peering through a lens into the darkest shadows of life—into the world of prostitution” but leads to “exposing them to a larger world view” beyond the world of the red light district. The camera becomes a means for the children, reshaping their evaluation of the world around them, and bringing them “alive with new hopes and goals,” providing them with “a fighting chance slim as it is to a life of normalcy.”

According to a reviewer at the San Francisco Chronicle, Briski “is not just documenting these unfortunate children, but letting them document, and therefore consider, their own circumstances as she introduces the possibility of escape.”

The Westerner’s use of the camera and the sudden ability of the “native” to picture self and surroundings through a photograph have a strong history in representing an imperial relationship. “Historically, it was first the mirror and then the camera that were thought to prove the superiority of the Westerner who invented and controls them” (Lutz and Collins 1994). Like many mid-twentieth-century National Geographic photographs displaying the reaction of natives to the camera and resulting photographs, Briski’s lessons to the children to photograph each other, their families, and the red light district suggests her delivery of technological modernity. Indeed, their “epiphany of newly acquired self knowledge” is made available largely through the hands of a white person (Lutz and Collins 1994).

In addition to these photographs, the genre of documentary Briski employs, interactive rather than simply expository, with its voice-of-god narrator, contributes to formulating a connection between the children, the filmmaker, and her prospective audience in the global North. “The interactive documentary stresses images of testimony or verbal exchange and images of documentation. . . . Textual authority shifts towards the social actors recruited: their comments and responses provide a central part of the film’s argument” (Nichols 1991, 44). The interviews are delivered as conversations as each child speaks directly and knowingly into the camera, form-
ing a growing relationship between child and spectator from the “outside” world. Clearly, in the world of this film, Briski’s distribution of cameras and, by extension, the very act of filming appear to give the children a growing critical awareness and a means to reach someone who might make a difference: the viewer is represented by and through a sole white, British-born, and American-based woman (Zana Briski) who must find a way out for these children. This is the story that Briski purports to tell, often using hidden cameras, interviewing the underage children, and using necessarily selective editing.

**PhotoVoice and the Children of Asia**

This film exemplifies a growing movement and method called photovoice, in which “the disenfranchised and marginalized, the voiceless Other, have the tools to speak in the universal language that is photography,” says Philip Jones Griffiths, patron of PhotoVoice, the organization that bears the name of the broadly used term. PhotoVoice is intended to carry “the views and stories of members of marginalized groups out into the world,” to showcase their “newly gained skills” and “even [to] earn much needed income.” As in Briski’s work, there is an assumed need to teach media technology in order to “develop” recipients. Photography is represented as “the vital opportunity to tell their stories for themselves.” Yet, the PhotoVoice website nearly replicates the symbolism of moral judgment and rescue that Briski uses, linking children to poor living conditions and then supplying a metaphor of uplift through Western intervention. Just as the PhotoVoice website uses birds to symbolize escape, Briski uses kites rising up from children’s hands, far over the confines of the brothel area, supplemented by the light, soaring music of a flute. This vision of escape is linked to displaying each child’s photos with the same dreamy flute. Such “truths” are often standard images that fulfill apparent desires for the well-to-do seeking titillation via media depictions of the global South as unrelieved urban slum, or what some are calling “poverty pornography,” a term used to name the subsequent but similar fascination with the iconography of the celebrated film *Slumdog Millionaire*.

The question remains, do those using photovoice (including Briski) provide a space for “communication from below,” or a means by which the marginalized, particularly children from nations of the South, are constructed as mute and then edited and spoken for? If the accolades and predominantly positive reviews of *Born into Brothels* are anything to go by, the problem of neoimperialism and resultant inequality is abridged into something “manageable” through personal, Western charity (in the form of Briski) and the
children’s individuated aspirations to achieve their (perhaps Americanized) dreams. By representing and objectifying iconic aspects of their surroundings through photographs, which Briski then auctions off at Sotheby’s to raise money for the children’s boarding school education, their purported dreams can be realized.

Neither PhotoVoice nor Briski’s affiliated organization of Kids with Cameras attend to “unequal looking relations” (Griffiths 2002, 328), in which they snap and to which we gaze in the far off frames of well-to-do galleries. In viewing the PhotoVoice website, spectators will obtain little context that suggests that corporate globalization, the latest incarnation of Euroamerican imperialism, and a rising international class of elites extracts wealth out of impoverishment of Asian working-class families. Rather, with the infusion of mediated technology, PhotoVoice suggests in one of its Asian program locations that “working class children can perhaps effectively overcome the Bangladeshi political inequality.”28 PhotoVoice website images can shoot views that exclude the sewing machines of Dhaka’s textile export factories that frequently pay less than working-class parents need to keep their children fed. How might Briski reinscribe or transgress PhotoVoice’s view of parents in Asia?

**Sex Work and Parental Fitness**

*Born into Brothels* examines parental fitness by bringing the viewer, through the camera, into Indian families. Beyond the alleyways lined with sex workers and customers, we are led into the small quarters where sex-worker mothers prepare themselves for work while fathers seem to look on passively or do drugs rather than perform the supposedly normatively masculine roles as disciplinarians and breadwinners. Many of the film’s reviewers can be represented by this comment: “We are suitably horrified by their parents, the uncaringness of their uncles and, worse, the bureaucracy that seems more interested in getting the right form signed in triplicate.”29 Yet, the film does present some variation among the children’s familial relationships. One child’s father is reported to have tried to sell his daughter; another father looks on in a hashish fog while his son makes recalcitrant drinkers pay up for unlicensed liquor. One child, whom Briski reports is expected to join the family business of sex work, is the darling of the mother and grandmother, while another sex-worker mother worries about her daughter’s future. She continues in the work, but keeps her daughter and son separated from it by a curtain in the room or by sending them up to the roof terrace to play when a customer arrives. One somewhat older girl has an aunt who purportedly
plans to send her into sex work in Mumbai, where she can earn more for
the family, and one young girl says, “I have to do something with my sew-
ing and photography. I need to make a living and take care of my sister and
me.” A young boy dreams, “I wish I could take Puja away from here,” perhaps
expressing a longing to restore heroic masculine intervention in an upside-
down world where women and children earn and men appear to be idle.

In a moment of onscreen maternal care, a young son is loudly resisting
being bathed by his mother and grandmother. When a verbal fight erupts
between sex-worker mothers, one woman encourages the mother to beat
her noisy son saying, “Beat that son of a bitch! Beat the son of a cunt fuck-
ing bitch!” The other responds, “Oh god! You are not the only one who's
brought up kids! . . . Acting the part of the butt-fucking saintly wife!” thereby
accusing the other mother of interfering and a holier-than-thou arrogance.
Briski chooses to represent this sex worker as a mother who is open to an
accusation hurled by the woman who yells, “You fucked your son and your
grandson!” While the scene is one of the few moments of supposedly rare
maternal care, it is nonetheless a spectacle of what many will read as devi-
ance and violence. It is an explicit accusation of mixing blood kinship with
sex—incest—one of the most vilified acts in contemporary U.S. culture, and
one thought to cause irreparable damage to the child. Briski’s constant and
explicit expectation that female children will be trafficked into sex work by
their families is consistent with her valuation of sex-worker families as sites
of erotic excess, providing no apparent sexual boundaries between children
and adults.

Not Fallen or De-eroticized Mothers

A growing number of activists and scholars—including sex workers—are
challenging the construction of prostitution as “a social or psychological
characteristic of women, often indicated by ‘whore,’” arguing that the sexual
labor women perform be called sex work, recognizing it as “an income-
generating activity” (Kempadoo 2005, 3).30 Born into Brothels relies on the
reductionist binary of, in the words of the Sonagachi-based sex-worker
activist organization Durbar Mahila Samanwaya Committee, “de-sexed
motherhood and domesticity” and the prostitute as “‘fallen woman’—a sex
machine, unfettered by any domestic inclination or ‘feminine’ emotion.”31
Gayle Rubin, in her classic “Thinking Sex” states, “Modern Western societies
appraise sex acts according to a hierarchical system of sexual value. Mar-
tal, reproductive heterossexuals alone are at the top of the erotic pyramid,”
while sex workers are often grouped by the mainstream among “the most despised” (1989, 279). Rubin is not simply discussing sex acts, but a hierarchal ordering of desires.

Durbar Mahila Samanwaya Committee, or the Unstoppable Women’s Coordination Committee, is an organization of sex workers with more than six thousand members, lobbying for workers’ rights at the state headquarters in Sonagachi. Because it challenges the standard narrative of rescue, Durbar has struggled to gain visibility in the media. Along with a number of activist organizations, Durbar claims the right to be sexually active in and beyond marriage with other adults while retaining the right to have and raise children: “We feel that every woman has the right to bear children if she so wishes. But we also think that through trying to establish motherhood as the only primary goal for a woman the patriarchal power structures try to control women’s reproductive functions and curb their social and sexual autonomy.”

In contrast, Briski and the majority of the film reviewers rarely question the dominant ideology suggesting that commercial sex is a form of immorality rather than work. This renders the variety of parent-child ties presented illegitimate or void. A film reviewer for the Arizona Republic challenges this ideology. He cannot judge, because the documentary “gives us surprisingly little information: There is no context. We are never told even basic things, such as . . . what the cultural expectations are for prostitutes, or for women in general, or what the Indian cultural norms are for children.”

Born into Brothels provides little footage exploring the ways mothers structure the possible division between family and work. In my interviews with sex workers in Sonagachi and Kalighat, some mothers spoke of renting a separate room elsewhere, sending the children to be cared for in the village, the use of screens or separate levels in a room because rent is high in locations like Sonagachi, and how they wished they had more of an ability to keep work and family separate. One woman working in Sonagachi explained that she had only one room, which was difficult: “I had just one room. It was hard work. When customers arrived, if the boys were studying with their tutor, I had to wait outside with my customer or use someone else’s room. So, I took another room upstairs. They live upstairs, and I use the room downstairs.” Some sex workers said their children knew what their mothers did for a living. Others had not been told until mothers thought their children would have the maturity to see beyond the discrimination sex workers face.

Assumptions that sex workers are incapable of parenting children co-

9.2. A Durbar coordinator leads a discussion with STD-prevention peer educators who will then go on their rounds in Sonagachi. Courtesy of Mrinal Kanti Dutta of Durbar Mahila Samanwaya Committee.
incide with hegemonic, prurient expectations that sexual minorities have an omnivorous excess of erotic longing. This expectation constitutes sexual minorities that have no boundaries and, as such, who are eager to sexually abuse or violate their children. How do sex-worker activists suggest intervening in underage sex work?

**Regulating Entry by Age**

A major concern in *Born into Brothels* is that children have been or will be eroticized as sexual objects and pressured into sex work. As one film reviewer states, these children are “born to prostitutes and fac[e] certain futures in servitude to the sex trade.” In my interviews, mothers working in the sex trade voiced a variety of viewpoints, with many hoping their children would seek other, less-demanding work, and others said they would respect their children’s decision to enter the trade once they were old enough. Most wanted their children to have a choice as to what kind of work they would take up and when.

Although the filmmakers said they could not get adequate access to the lives of prostitutes and therefore shifted their attention to the children, Durbar has welcomed some researchers and an occasional filmmaker in the hopes of getting representation for their approach, which counters the dominant rescue narrative. Durbar has set up self-regulatory boards in a number of red light districts in West Bengal. One sex worker, a member of Durbar, explains: “To make sure that children don’t get into this profession, we are going forward. We have created a board. So a newcomer has to come in front of the board and if she is eighteen years of age, of marriageable age and claims her family is in trouble and she needs to help them, we will assess where the problem is. How much money does she need and does she know the implications of being a sex worker, can she accept it?” When a new person enters the trade, the board investigates whether the person is eighteen years or older and has taken up the work without coercion. Durbar can arrange for the new arrival to return home if he or she is underage or wishes to do so, providing an explanation to family that does not mention sex work. Or, if preferred, Durbar members can educate him or her by explaining how the business functions, including the different types of economic agreements between madam or landlady and worker, and the accompanying benefits and hazards. *Born into Brothels’* silence about these boards is a choice that erases representation of one form of collective agency occurring in sex-worker labor activism taking place in Sonagachi.
Indian Neglect and the White Woman’s Burden

Scene: the camera focuses on an older male clerk who writes one child’s name on a government form needed for access to school. His hand moves on a piece of paper, misspelling the child’s name. He attempts to respell it on the official form, under direction from Briski’s group. Again, the child’s name is misspelled. Finally, with a messy cross-out reminiscent of a child’s copybook, he claps his hand to his head, laughs, and anticipates laboriously crowding the child’s correct name into the narrow margin of the form.

A standard justification for keeping locations like India under colonial rule was the assumed necessity of supplying proper white, Christian, custodial oversight. A number of British and American women since the 1800s have represented themselves as bearing a white woman’s burden that requires assuming the “moral responsibility” of acting as the guardians of victimized women and children in India, holding out the promise of redemption (Burton 1992; Mohanty 1991). Born into Brothels resurrects the parallel drawn between the supposed failure of family leadership and the impudence of allowing Indian self-rule, as well as the need for foreign intervention. The documentary is thus part of a longer genealogy of maternal imperialism and racialized motherhood (Burton 1992, 144, 138). Many argued for saving brown women and children from brown men (Spivak 2008). Yet there is a significant shift in the contemporary narrative. In this neoimperial iteration, Briski finds only the brown children worth saving since brown women have become culpable, rather than infantilized victims.

Scene: in a small crowded room with dark walls, a young girl stands nicely clothed in a school uniform, her hair neatly combed, waiting. She stands quietly above her kneeling grandmother, who shifts through disheveled papers piled on the floor, looking at one, then another, unable to find the right document that will allow her charge to go to school. Fade to black.

Spectators see Zana Briski’s slim figure clothed in androgynous slacks and shirt, striding through the city in search of educational opportunity for the children. Briski’s image contrasts with that of ineffectual grandmothers and full-figured mothers adjusting their saris and deepening their eyeliner as they get ready for work, or as they wipe on cold cream after an evening’s work. As the film continues, the children call Briski “Zana Auntie,” constructing her as the children’s surrogate family. As one Amazon.com reviewer wrote, “The work of Auntie Zana, the woman who teaches them photography, is wonderful. She shows true care for the kids, fighting for their educations and futures.” Through this selective contrast, many reviewers
interpret her as a model of appropriately responsible and asexualized adult behavior in the face of perversity, serving a moralizing agenda. Intriguingly, the Bengali word for aunt, *masi*, is translated only when applied to Briski, but remains one of the few words not translated in the subtitles when children use it to name a brothel manager who is called auntie (*Geeta Masi*, or Aunt Geeta), a common usage for brothel managers in red light districts. The lack of translation upholds a constructed division between the red light district and Briski, attaching the status of family to her rather than to sex workers in Sonagachi. The intentionality of this nontranslation is not legible to most viewing the film. It is not intended to be.

Zana Briski worries on screen that she is not competent to intercede. However, in her frequent selection of scenes of parents absent, drugged, absorbed in their work, “hooks and fathers who think nothing of selling their daughters into the profession,” Briski’s performance of competence is made all the more evident, gilded by her own de-eroticization. As she meets with administrators of what are often missionary boarding schools, she explains, “I am trying to get them out of there.” She rolls her eyes and shakes her head, “Trying to find a school for them.” The Christian whiteness of a number of the school administrators she approaches reiterates that non-Christians, people of color, and nonnormative sexual communities, are less competent parents, and that white people are clearly the ones who act to “save the children” through removal from their families or perhaps from Indians in general. The Christian subtext was not lost on professional film reviewers or those on Amazon.com. Zana Briski has “the patience of Job” and personifies Jesus. And the *Washington Post*’s critic adds, “Heroism can come in subtle forms. This is one of them.” In a rare critique, the *Arizona Republic*’s film critic described the film as “divested of any social, historical or even factual context,” a film whose “story becomes sentimental, a kind of cultural tourism” that focuses on the exploits of a “wealthy woman from the developed world.”

*Born into Brothels* is consistent with decades of U.S. domestic policy that shifts social responsibility from government to private hands. In that way, individual “sanctified philanthropists” can be asked to “substitute intentional goodwill for the nation-state’s commitment” (Berlant 1997, 7).

**Removal and Assimilation: Supplying Education**

Scene: A boy talented in art looks at the camera: “My mother used to say jokingly, ‘I am going to send you to London to study.’ We don’t have money to live let alone for studies.” The camera shifts to a series of his photographs,
which end in a self-portrait, his head in profile, the shot remaining blurry while the red light district is in sharp focus. Scene shift: a bus carrying Briski and the excited children pulls away from the red light district, the scenery changing from congested urban streets to the lush green of ponds and palm trees. On the bus, the children eat and nap. Scene shift: the children are exultant, running into the waves of the sea. They play in the tide and on sand, looking out on the sudden light expanse of water, beach, and sky under sun and a pale daytime moon. As they shoot pictures of each other and their surroundings, the film shows us the photographs they have composed—alluring, playful, enraptured with the natural surroundings. These scenes make the lanes and dark rooms of the red light district appear more suffocating and “impure” upon return.

The use of darkness and light in the film shows up in the language of the Amazon.com reviews in disturbing frequency. The children are portrayed as seeing into “the darkest shadows of life” and facing “eventual dark lives.” These statements hauntingly replicate the language of British, Victorian, white women bent on leading their selected imperial wards—women and children of color—out of prostitution and “into a position of greater freedom and light, which will enable them to fight their own battles” (Butler, quoted in Burton 1992, 144). Consistent with this, the children’s trip to the seashore under the care of Zana Briski displays a sudden expansive and naturalized horizon of light, wind, and tide in which the children are displayed as at once fully childlike, inventive, joyous, and innocently adventuresome. A number of Amazon.com reviewers described the white woman Zana Briski’s care as akin to the “pure light of love” contrasting with the brown children being “pulled back into the darkness.” The contrast of darkness and light carries both a racialized and erotophobic charge, where children are viewed as the victims of their culture, community, and nation of color (Narayan 1997).

Briski’s presentation of the children as uneducated is contradictory. At times she confers with white, Christian nuns who agree that the children are not in school, because “nobody’ll take them. Who will take them?” Yet we see one child in school uniform, another who is being pressed by his grandmother to study for upcoming exams, and adults listing a number of the children as fourth-grade level. Some can write, not only in Bengali but in English. This contradiction is never sorted out. Briski repeatedly makes the case that they must be removed.

Consistent with the expectation that the rehabilitation of children requires submersion in an institution with minimal contact with their fami-
lies, a white, male school administrator lectures above the heads of three worried mothers that prescribed vacations will be identified, but that a death in the family, birthday, or wedding is not sufficient cause to justify leaves of absence for the children, denying them access to the events that cement kinship ties. He offers them what he contrastingly terms “a normal life.” Not long after, Briski adds her voice to persuade an ambivalent child, “Isn’t it better to be with good people that care about you and want to teach you well?”

In the film, sex workers seem to exist only in Sonagachi, unable to move beyond the family’s room or the alleys where they work, except to look over boarding schools before they return to their place. Sex workers who are mothers cannot join their children in the glare of television cameras that will greet them at the well-heeled Oxford Bookstore and Gallery, where an intensely serious journalist will echo Briski’s use of photographic media for “one single purpose, a decent education for the children and hopefully a chance to know a world outside the red light district.” When Briski decides to show the children’s photographs at a Kolkata gallery so that the children can attend, it shows us an implicit moment of rupture that Briski’s discourse sets up. The children and their mothers are invited to attend, but only the children come; the mothers are cooking and taking care of their other children. Briski’s narrative emphasizes the contradiction where women can and cannot be mothers and sex workers simultaneously. Briski’s contradictory relationship with the children’s mothers is at its most obvious here. She wants to include them and speaks periodically about how close she feels to them. Yet, at the same time, she wants to remove their children from them. Sex workers have addressed this contradiction.

Resisting “Rehabilitation”

As Svati P. Shah has suggested, “The prospect of portraying Sonagachi as a red light district with no active non-governmental organizations (NGOs), no history of activism regarding HIV/AIDS and trafficking, and no relationship with local authorities is incredible” (2005). Indeed, sex-worker activists have made steady use of self-published websites as a means of representation, attempting to counter and respond to dominant rescue narratives such as that found in documentaries like Born into Brothels. In interesting contrast to the film’s portrayal of sex-worker mothers unable to appear at media events, members of Durbar grant interviews and regularly take up standpoints in the public eye.

Organizations such as the Durbar Mahila Samanwaya Committee have
been highly critical of the assumed need for rehabilitation, objecting to being “targets of moralizing impulses of dominant social groups, through missions of cleansing and sanitizing.” They also register objections to having their children subjected to similar attempts at assimilation. Contrary to Briski’s implied generalization, the sex workers of Durbar headquartered in Sonagachi present themselves as actively seeking better education for their children.

Durbar would agree with Briski that the children of sex workers have difficulty being welcomed in schools, but would add that sex workers have learned to draw on a number of techniques to overcome these barriers. On a summer day in Sonagachi, I asked to enter the single-room family home of a woman dressed as an ordinary housewife, with a streak of red powder in her parted hair and a red bindi on her forehead. The silver and white bangles on her arm, symbolizing married status, clink quietly as she speaks. She dresses this way to accompany her son to and from school, disguising her profession to protect him. Moving outside the red light district, she risks not only his but her own safety if she does not dress this way. “When they see us, they say amongst themselves, ‘See that woman? She does this kind of job. She lives in that house.’ If I am waiting at a bus stop, because of who I am, they push
me because there is nothing to pushing a whore. If we protest, they say, ‘Oh, are you a respectable wife?’” She worries about her son’s treatment at the hands of others: “Yes, when people see my son, they say, ‘Whore’s son!’ But your child is also born the same way, after the same process. Children are children. If you hold my child, do you become unclean and if I hold yours am I supposed to feel grateful? I feel very hurt when they say ‘whore’s son.’” She takes him to school and brings him home in full housewifely regalia: “He spends all day after school with me.” She looks over at him as he watches a small television in the well-lit room that includes a small fridge and a neatly made bed. She explains that she leaves him with a childcare provider when she works. She continues, “I cannot bear to eat well and think he isn’t getting anything nice because who knows what he’ll get there? So he eats with me . . . then I drop him off at the lady’s place. She takes care of him. I’m doing my work for him, so I should feed him well.”

This mother’s approach to managing the social stigma of being a sex worker is dressing in housewifely drag, keeping him with her as much as possible, and paying for childcare when she is working to support him. The Kolkata-based nongovernmental organization Sanlaap, which Briski briefly included in the film, argues that the children should be accepted despite the occupation of their mothers. They suggest that children be seen as innocent, while remaining critical of sex work. In contrast, the Durbar Mahila Samanwaya Committee, omitted from the film, argues that the children of sex workers will continue to carry a stigma as long as sex work does. Therefore, they actively work to remove the stigma associated with sex work, work for labor rights, and advise that communities “mainstream the children within the local school system rather than sending them away to residential homes.” When teachers in the local schools told the children that their mothers were doing bad work, and that they should work hard to “take their mothers out of the place,” Durbar interceded, asking, “Do we do this to other children?” Durbar has worked to close the divide between the red light district and the “outside” world by encouraging teachers and members of other “respectable” institutions to dialogue and interact with sex workers, seeking acceptance as human, multifaceted people.

Durbar is intent on addressing a high drop-out rate among the children of sex workers, which they attribute to the expense of school and fluctuating income, crowded living situations that do not easily allow studying, scheduling conflicts between daytime school and parental night shifts, and a lack of adults to help with homework. In my interviews in and about red light districts, however, sex workers said that education remains difficult mainly
because of the stigma and discrimination the children of sex workers face in school and wider society.

Sex-worker activists like those in Durbar make the case, as do so many sex-worker organizations, that the way labor is structured in some occupations, especially those that take a toll on workers and their families, can and should change, without outlawing the occupation itself. Durbar asks, “If other workers in similarly exploitative occupations can work within the structures of their profession to improve their working conditions, why can not sex workers remain in the sex industry and demand a better deal in their life and work?”

**Conclusion**

Scene: closing dedication: “In honor of the women and children of the red light district.” Roll credits. Final scene: Briski, hand in hand with four children, appears to walk out of the red light district into the daylight.

Documentaries offering “the iconography of victim” and the “benevolence of charity” curiously mix connectedness and stigmatizing difference (Nichols 1991, 234). This is precisely how an Indian British woman deeply engaged with the film. “This is not a perfect documentary in any sense of the word,” she writes, “but is in fact a snapshot into a world most of us will never venture into because we are very lucky here in the West, we are not born into brothels, we are not Calcutta’s red light kids and most of all we are not destined [to] ‘walk the line’ as fallen women whose legacy for their children is tragic as it is sordid.” She writes, using the pseudonym “Kali,” the major Hindu goddess of the city of Kolkata, in which Sonagachi resides, that she “experienced Asia” in the film. Simultaneously she experienced a reinforcement of distance with her unconsciously erotophobic, classed, and ethnocentric response of “we are very lucky here in the West.” Sex workers and their children apparently are other people in other places.

Purnima Mankekar and Louisa Schein (this volume) state that desire is “actively incited and sustained by media in conjunction with other social institutions such as the state, structures of family and kinship, and demands of labor and capital.” The rescue narrative in the documentary *Born into Brothels* resonates with the desires and fears currently active in the United States, desires and fears surrounding a number of contested questions and social institutions. The popularity and plentitude of constructions of Asia in the imagination of the global North, constructions of hyper-erotic red light districts, make these sites appear emblematic of nations and regions. Spectators in the United States view *Born into Brothels*’ nighttime scenes in the
alleys of Sonagachi, a marketplace filled with ready and available bodies. The image of Asia as a market where seemingly everything is for sale may be a part of an intensifying U.S. anxiety about the viability of American political and economic dominance in a postcolonial world, where some prior colonies are becoming huge emerging markets with highly competitive production capabilities. The images of markets may haunt U.S. middle- and working-class viewers as they see Asia as a location for outsourcing what were once stable, living-wage blue- and white-collar jobs in the United States. This is a locus of desire and fear.

The spectators’ understanding of *Born into Brothels* contributes to constituting a mediated and entwined erotics and anti-erotics of Asia. The red light district of working mothers and the fear for brown children trafficked into sex work function relationally for a consuming Orientalist gaze toward mothers and children as objects of intrigue, desire, disavowed titillation, and horror. This resonates with and through a moralizing fundamentalism, particularly exemplified in the antitrafficking discourse of the Trafficking Victims Protection Act and the global gag rule, which states that organizations receiving U.S. government funds must take a loyalty oath against “prostitution.”

As seen through the interpretations of reviewers in major U.S. newspapers and on Amazon.com, *Born into Brothels* presents an eroticized location where spectators can view parents of color as sexually deviant. As such, their children, presumed to be on their way to neglect or abuse, require white intervention. There is a substantial and tragic history of North American whites’ removing children from African American and Native American families. Current interest in the United States in adopting children from countries (and parents) in the global South is sometimes justified by perceptions that children seem to be without (proper) family. This familiar rhetoric was used by elite Indian women who founded a Kolkata rescue home in the 1930s for young female prostitutes “deprived of all of their kith and kin,” requiring “someone who cares” (Sinha 2006, quoted in Dell 1990, 207). With the current high profile of American debates to expand legal and cultural definitions of what constitutes proper family (same-sex marriage, and lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgendered, and queer adoption and foster care) and challenges to erotophobic, fundamentalist Christianity’s normative heterosexuality, it makes sense that Briski’s film resonates with questions of whether another sexual minority such as sex workers should be designated as fit to head families and raise children (Buti 2004; Kendell 2003; Roberts 1991). The apparent need for removal and assimilation in the film produces
afresh a longtime and ongoing response to taking children away from communities of color and intervention to keep children away from queer families. These actions often have more in common with U.S. interest in adopting children from the global South than is realized.

European and American interventions into what have become nations of the global South were and are “understood as a case of ‘White men saving brown women from brown men’” (Spivak 2008, 297). Scholars have shown that some white women also actively took up a “white woman’s burden” in the name of pursuing their own share of imperial rule and thereby some women’s rights. In contrast, *Born into Brothels* and charitable organizations such as PhotoVoice suggest that the worthy recipients left in the global South are brown children who must be saved from brown adults and brown nations by white people, through educational assimilation, if not adoption. As they historically have been stereotyped in the United States, brown women overseas seem to have become less infantilized and more culpable as bad mothers and sexual deviants. In the documentary, the work of a white Euro-American in concert with largely Christian, white boarding school administrators offers a location of rehabilitation and assimilation of Asia’s next generation.

Documentaries are realist narratives, promising “to tell us what really happens” and how things really are (Nea 1988, 140). Kenneth Turan, of the *Los Angeles Times*, writes that “the draw of this irresistible film” can be considered by quoting one of the children who looks at a photograph of a veiled woman. He contends, “Though it is hard to face, we must look at it. Because it’s the truth.” “Truths” like the pictured, veiled, Middle Eastern woman and the Asian “prostitutes” of the film are often standard images that include widely accepted, carefully framed interpretations and exclude others. They become believable in the capturing of particular locations, such as the brothel, that is, and yet seemingly cannot be, considered a home, and in capturing the character of a sex worker who is simultaneously, yet apparently cannot be, considered an appropriate mother. Sex work and sex-work communities are restigmatized by “literally being seen as a red light zone” and “the proliferation of visual representations of the district and, by extension, of ‘prostitution’ itself” (Shah 2006, 287). This particular kind of repeated voyeurism produces a consumable Asia and underwrites the contradiction of the spectators’ engagement and differentiation.

Yet, “prevailing conceptions of Asia” as “an eroticized space formed through desires and anxieties embedded in ‘the Western gaze’” are being challenged by Asian media as well as a global sex-worker community
(Mankekar and Schein, this volume). The counternarrative of sex-worker rights is less familiar than the dominant language or image of concern, judgment, and rescue in much of the media. Through the media of websites and listservs, however, the Durbar Mahila Samanwaya Committee represents itself as one of dozens of sex-worker activist organizations around Asia at work in coalition with and across communities. These organizations seek to subject standard contradictions of connection and rescue to their own gaze and critique, complicating “any reductive understanding of Asians as always-already victims of an objectifying Western gaze” (Mankekar and Schein, this volume). They argue to overcome distancing between their family homes, local day schools, governments, and wider audiences. They see a need for greater erotic, business, family, and community self-determination as well as collective work through a network of fellow human beings in the wider world. Their voices are more likely to be available through websites and occasional academic journal articles, rather than mainstream entertainment like *Born into Brothels* or PhotoVoice.

**Notes**

The title of this chapter, of course, draws on the work of Chandra Mohanty’s “Under Western Eyes.” I thank the Durbar Mahila Samanwaya Committee (Unstoppable Women’s Coordination Committee), the Indian sex-worker activist organization fight-
ing for workers’ rights. I thank them for educating me, sharing their insights and experience. I thank Indrani Sinha, of Sanlaap, for generously providing her knowledge. Kajori Dutta Ray’s exceptionally thoughtful interviewing and translations, along with her ability to think beyond stereotypes, were such gifts, for which I thank her. Aloka Mitra’s Women’s Interlink Foundation provided important research capabilities. I also thank the social workers of the Society for Community Development for their kindness and insight. My warm thanks to Suzanne Cherrin for her support and advice. Bonnie Mayo’s editing and intellectual acumen made this chapter a far better piece, for which I am grateful. Finally, my abiding love and appreciation for the political affirmation and editorial expertise provided by Pat Langley.

1. This clip is available through YouTube. It had received nearly 13,000 hits by February 19, 2008, with a rating of four out of five stars.


3. The numbers of sex workers are notoriously difficult to calculate. However, see All India Institute of Hygiene and Public Health’s (1992) report.

4. My sample of newspaper film reviews was constructed by selecting two newspaper reviews from each region of the country, from newspapers with a circulation of over 300,000 found on the film-review website rottentomatoes.com. However, only one newspaper in the southeast qualified, the Miami Herald. The remainder by region are the Dallas Morning News, Arizona Republic (Southwest), San Francisco Chronicle, Los Angeles Times (West), Chicago Sun-Times, Milwaukee Journal-Sentinel (Midwest), Washington Post, and New York Times (Northeast). My sample of eleven self-selected reviewers on the Amazon.com website was constructed of all reviews that had been read by a minimum of ten people, with 50 percent or more finding the review useful. Both websites were accessed on or around January 1, 2008.


8. For a sex-workers researcher’s critique of this, see Chapkis’s (2003) study.


11. For the United States, India is “the world’s biggest democracy,” according to Time, and possibly the “next great superpower,” which requires Americans to quickly learn “how to ride the elephant” in order to maintain the current hierarchies of nations (Green 2006, 46, cover). Time’s cover of June 26, 2006, offers the erotics of a mediated Asia with a richly bejeweled Indian woman, a call-bank telephone operator whose provocative sidelong glance suggests she is ready to serve.

12. These include not simply twenty-four-hour call-center work or data processing, but also white-collar labor, including radiology, software development, and paralegal work.

13. These aesthetic choices of exotic, evening streets are the very same vision that appears in Time’s stills of “brash, messy and sexy” Bombay (now Mumbai) and the film Slumdog Millionaire (Perry 2006, 40).


15. Anne Allison’s use of the term “distant intimacy” somewhat parallels the documentary’s mediation (this volume).


17. The quote in the subheading is a television caption used by the Hindi-English cable station StarNews in coverage of the children’s photography show in Kolkata’s Oxford Gallery. News clip included in the film.


19. Lawyeraau, “A Photo Opportunity . . . ,” Amazon.com review, November 26, 2005, accessed January 3, 2010, http://www.amazon.com. While I will not explore it in this chapter, the construction of art as transformation, as overcoming one’s roots or experiences, at times can have a decidedly classist (or ethnocentric) sense to it. “The transformative power of art,” which is one of the promotional lines for the film and a section in the Amnesty International Companion Curriculum guide, implies that mediating capabilities of photographic art and filmmaking stand in stark contrast to the assumed damage done by the sex-for-money scenario of commercial sex work. It would be worth unpacking this judgment, the shades of aristocratic amateurism. There is an elitist sense of art’s being nothing one does for money, nor something that could be working class. This classism in the guise of sympathy is evident in Born into Brothels reviews as well as in the regrettably paternalistic prose of Arjun Appadurai’s “Global Ethnoscapes.”
24. This growing critical awareness under the care of a white woman is consistent with Chandra Mohanty’s argument that Third World women are often seen as lacking agency unless Westernized or, indeed, acted for by Western intervention (Mohanty 1991). Coinciding with this, Kamala Kempadoo (2005) convincingly argues that sex-worker communities, particularly those of color in the global South, are some of the last to be recognized by non–sex workers as exercising agency.
30. There are many invaluable studies of sex work as labor that do not reduce it to sexual assault. See especially Kempadoo’s (2005) study.
32. Durbar got its start from funding that arrived in red light districts for HIV-prevention education in the early 1990s. Through a collaboration between a doctor and members of the sex-worker community called the Sonagachi Project, they established clinics and an extensive peer-education system in which sex worker educators visit sex workers in over thirty red light districts. Dr. Jana and the sex-worker activists realized that they would have little impact on keeping rates of HIV and other STDs low if sex workers did not respect and value their own survival enough to advocate with customers for safer sex. As it stands, thanks in very large part to this collaboration, Kolkata’s red light districts have impressively low HIV rates. Durbar’s work has been so impressive, regardless of its relative lack of coverage beyond medical circles, that the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation has funded replicating Durbar’s methods in six other Indian states. Peer educators founded Durbar and have since taken over the running of the clinics and preventative education, as well as advocating for full decriminalization and rights for sex workers and their children. Durbar is an organization that includes sex workers and the children of sex workers.

34. Nilsen, “Review of *Born into Brothels*.”

35. U.S. spectators realize, for example, gay men are still represented as child molesters, such that some states ban adoption or foster care. Lesbian mothers are still constructed as sexually corrupting or insufficient role models who, in child custody cases, are sometimes forced to choose between living with their lovers or their children. These stereotypes of sexual minorities—that cut across heterosexism and sexual normativity—say more about the desiring imaginations of those who believe them than those they are applied to. The breakdown of boundaries in the mainstream projected onto particular groups points to the dominant fascination of children as objects of erotic interest. It is worth considering how these stereotypes contribute to upholding patriarchal privilege, in line with seeking younger and younger females for “clean” sex in the age of AIDS and the maintenance of unequal gender relations in a world where adult women no longer “know their place.”

36. Baumgarten, review of *Born into Brothels*.

37. There are a least three major economic arrangements: indebtedness in which only tips are kept by the worker, a 50 percent split between worker and brothel manager, and daily rent. For more information on this, see the work of Dell (1999) and Sleighthome and Sinha (1997).

38. Philippa Levine suggests, “Prostitution became a symbol of considerable significance in the condemnation of societies regarded as immoral or amoral, unconcerned with brutalizing women. Colonial men’s indifference to the shame of their womenfolk became an index of male brutality, and the unquestioned acceptance of prostitution a mark of coarse and unfeeling societies” (2004, 160). The bestselling, sensationalist book *Mother India*, by the American author Katherine Mayo, was just such an argument, constituting an India in the Western imagination as a place that subjected its innocent to degradation and perversity. If Mother India could not protect her own, then, Mayo suggested, proper imperial custody would have to remain in place. Indians had been fighting for self-rule for many decades and would obtain national independence just short of two decades after Mayo’s apology for colonial rule was published (see Sinha 2006).

39. Wilson, Amazon.com review.

40. Briski’s filmic presence of minimal makeup and a lack of emphasized, erotic, “feminine” allure is so pronounced that viewing her self-presentation at the Academy Awards, including full makeup and low-cut evening gown, with a man beside her, is surprising.


42. Baumgarten, review of *Born into Brothels*; Wilson, Amazon.com review.

43. Thomson, “Review of *Born into Brothels*.”

44. Nilsen, “Review of *Born into Brothels*.”
Aists, Amazon.com review; Wilson, Amazon.com review.

This scene is available near the end of a clip posted on YouTube. As of February 19, 2008, the clip had received over 4,500 hits, with a rating of four of five stars.


The scene of the grandmother pressing for her grandson to study for exams is available at YouTube. As of February 19, 2008, the clip had been viewed 3,461 times, with a rating of four out of five stars.

The scenes of the school administrator speaking to the mothers and the boy being asked if he wants to study with “good people” are available at YouTube. As of February 19, 2008, the clip containing both scenes had been viewed 3,461 times, with a rating of four out of five stars.

The Durbar Mahila Samanwaya Committee has posted quite a number of documents electronically. They are continuing to address one of their earliest goals of breaking down the presumed divisions between the sex-worker communities and non–sex workers, using an annual conference, petitions, protests, letters to newspapers, and other media-worthy actions.

Ibid., 3.
