

# Saving us from penetration – ponderings from a trans rentboy

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**ABSTRACT :** A Chinese diasporic trans rentboy, reflects on the contested arena of sex work. Ponderings on whorephobia as a strategy of imperialism, the continued oppression of femininity, and the murky politics of penetration.

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Some lines are blurry from far away, getting clearer the closer you get. Other lines are defined when you gaze towards them in the distance, but get fuzzy when time or space draws you into them. Sometimes they cease to be lines, turning into myriads of varying shapes and shades. Lines on lines. Little ones you can't see. Ones that make up bigger pictures, nets, or borders.

I can see the seduction of clear lines, of 'having to drawing a line somewhere'. But who gets to carve those lines, and whose bodies are those lines and borders driven through?

I thought I'd share a bit about how various lines have passed through and over my body, as well as lines and borders I've crossed.

Before I started doing sex work, I transitioned. Before I transitioned, I was a butch androgenous diasporic Chinese woman.

I stumbled across what I was told was Feminism – white middle class English-speaking university Western Feminism, before I found out later that it was just one kind of feminism. I came across queer/women's/lesbian space a little earlier. I found those (white) spaces even more alienating, although my white queer women counterparts told me those spaces felt like coming home. I was envious and perplexed.



Inevitably, some of the pressures of sexist womanhood and restrictive femininity settled on my butch shoulders. But it was more like dust than a yoke for me. I could see it heavy on feminine cisgender and trans women, and also on femme and camp men. I see masculinity in queer space desired and seen as more 'natural', transgressive and radical, and femininity huffed at, dismissed and said to be 'normative'. I see trans men praised and trans women ignored. I see masculine men upheld, allied to and deferred to, and camp men mocked and pathologised. I see men stumble home in the dark on Friday nights and sleep drunk in parks, while women are followed home and cat called with violent invitations.

Later when I transitioned my butch andro self into a masculine man, I could see more clearly how femininity in any gender is scorned, derided and heavily policed. My masculinity in my new male body was a loud contrast to the sexist street harassment and constant sexism I saw around me.

I began to be praised loudly for doing the housework I'd always done, while my girlfriend's housework went expected and unacknowledged. Men apologised to me after they'd sexually harassed my feminine girlfriend before they noticed we were together, apologising for infringing unknowingly on my 'property', while not being able to see how disrespectful they are being to her. If I said, or repeated the same thing as a feminine person who had spoken before me in a group, it was my *masculine* voice that was listened and responded to, while her voice and ideas were allowed to dissipate into the group hum.

I've also noticed colonial, racialised, classed and cis-centred underpinnings to the vilification of femininity and whorephobia.

Colonial justifications follow deeply etched patterns of Empire penetrating 'virgin' lands. The Dark Temptress's, Dusky Maidens and Exotic Orientals are just begging to be taken. *Well it sounds like they're saying that, who knows what they're saying, they should speak English anyhow. They may resist, but they secretly want it.* Once 'given it' they remain inferior. The coloniser knows what's best for these women and lands, knows when they want it and how. Indigenous women, land and culture are rendered silent and inactive. The penetrating coloniser takes the lead role. Indigenous women, land and culture are to be used, and then stigmatised for being 'used'. And the 'user' is lauded and patted on the back.

Femininities of colour, class and diverse gender, that actively desire are dismissed as over-sexualised, or seen as having ulterior motives. We know the ste-

reotypes. The insatiable black witchy woman, the migrant slut that's with that white guy to get a visa or a citizened baby. The noble but savage dusky maiden. The oriental geisha – submissive, demure but with ancient sexual tricks (or ping pong balls). *And don't forget those coloured folk that breed too much and cause over-population, using up all the jobs and resources.* A classed dynamic of the gold digger, the hard bitch always on the hustle. A cis-centred violent rendering of trans women only, and always being sex workers.

*Got to watch out for women that want it too much, or give it up without a fight, means they're whores or they're after something*

Within an Imperialist dynamic, the entered/used site is always inferior and un-trustworthy, and must be controlled by saving, occupying or eradicating.

Mucking about within over-lapping spaces of 'Queer', 'Feminist' and 'Activist' arenas, I've been surprised at what a shit time femininity is given.

Decades of feminism might have changed the assumptions and rules about what unmarried women can do with their bodies, married women even. You can have sex before you're married, be a lesbian, have casual sex, have kids alone, and you can even enjoy sex. Women are allowed to have sex for desire. For their freedom and choice. But only if that choice is not about money. Women's agency is acknowledged, accepted and applauded in a thick matrix of gender, race, class and status, when it comes to desire and sex. But that same agency is ignored and dismissed as an impossibility, when considered around sex and money. The boundaries of the 'good' and acceptable woman have expanded. But the arena of the 'bad' woman still remains.

The rules surrounding femininity have changed a bit, but there are still rules that are policed and enforced strictly and violently.

The Virgin and the Whore have been rebranded for modern times. The Virgin doesn't have to be a virgin. But the Whore is still a whore. Except she's not.

The slur 'whore', and 'whorephobia' as a cultural violence, isn't only about sex workers. It's about feminine sex workers. You can't tell from looking, whether a woman is a sex worker. You can only assume. And those assumptions rely upon old-school enduring power blocks. The term 'whore' and its bludgeoning surfaces, are used to target women's sexual behaviour and feminine gendered expressions. It comes from the same family as '*She was asking for it, look what she was wearing, she looks like a whore.*' Also known as rape culture.

Whorephobia is part of rape culture and refers to the sexist controlling of women's behaviour, sexuality and gendered expression. It affects women and femininity, in all their shapes, forms and manifestations. For many people with feminine identities, the use of the term 'whore' is a threat. A slur and judgement always ready to be flung if certain things are done, boundaries transgressed. For feminine people that are also people of colour/poor/trans/undocumented, whorephobia isn't just an impending threat, it's also an assumed state that justifies violence.

I remember a contrast between two feminist groups, that made me chuckle. One group consisted of mostly white middle class, English as a first (and only) language, citizenized, uni-educated young women. Their main activity was protesting against sexist advertisements through letters and social media. The other group comprised of multi-lingual, intergenerational migrant and refugee women of mixed statuses of documentation and education. Their main activities were addressing child marriages, domestic violence within visa marriages and emergency housing. I have absolutely no doubt that the second group would agree that sexist advertising was awful and should be opposed. And I have no doubt that the first group would agree that child marriages shouldn't happen, that domestic violence occurring within a relationship where the abuser was the access for a woman's residency was horrific, and that emergency housing was a serious issue. The contrast and movement on the ground however, meant that both groups were engaged in very different things. And that the things they put their energy towards, were the things that affected their subject positioning the most.

This is what I've been thinking about when it comes to the groups of people who are anti-sex work. They are against *women* doing sex work, not men. And by stark sight of their actions (or lack thereof), they are more concerned with the perception of women being seen as whores and sluts, rather than the tangible circumstances that women who do sex work have to contend with. They are concerned with the reputation of women and femininity. Not the poverty, violence, racist border policing and profiling, incarceration, state violence that many women (some of which are sex workers) must navigate.

The vocal anti-sex work voicing, has an elite (white) agenda to it. The loud oversized worry about reputation is one that often seems to concern the middle and upper classes. You have to have a reputation in the first place, to worry about it being tarnished. And when the dynamics of gender is applied, it's been middle

and upper class white cis women, whose virginities, reputations and wombs have been violently guarded historically by raced and classed empire states. After all, the continual re-birth of the white nation must be defended by all genders, or else the coloured masses will out-number them and take over.

But there must also be a Public Relations Campaign to make this palatable. Here is where the colonial saviour comes in. Our control must look like we care, because care is in fashion. And maybe we do really care, but then there is violence in unexamined 'caring' and good intentions.

Enter stage left: The Rescuer Saviour barges into the debauched den of badness, to save and speak for the poor helpless woman.

*'No need to listen to her, she's just been duped and suffering from false consciousness. We can speak for her, because we know what is better for her than she does. And if she does defend what she does, does she not know her actions taint all of us on a larger scale?! Her bad women ways make us good women look suspect.'*

Exit stage right: Global economic inequity, racialised incarceration, poverty, state and administrative violence, police brutality and ... sex workers. *(Your part in our play is over, thank you goodbye.)*

Lead Saviour takes a bow.

Applause!

I'm wary of missionising saviours, based on their 'saving' and 'caring' history with indigenous peoples. I'm wary of saviours that would 'help' to 'cure' homosexuals, trans people, energetic children and women who would not take any shit. So I'm wary of women who try to rescue and save women sex workers without examining whether they are trying to save their own reputations, careers and subject positions, all while not caring about sex workers immediate realities. The 'alternatives' they often offer sex workers to exit sex work, are so patronising that one sex worker crunched the numbers for a minimum wage job the saviours and exiters told her to apply for, and found that she'd be getting into debt each week if she applied for that job. Funnily enough, none of the saviours offered her their well paid jobs ... This white saviour phenomenon of offering sex workers badly paid jobs is global enough that the logo of the Asia Pacific Network of Sex Workers has the red circle with a diagonal line across, and a sewing machine inside ([apnsw.org](http://apnsw.org)). This logo

in direct response to sex workers being 'rescued' and made to work in garment factories sewing clothes as 'rehabilitation'. Another sex worker led organisation in Thailand made a fantastic skit about the holy alliance of NGO saviours (character portrayed with a superman style cape), social workers and the police, working together to target, arrest and make life more difficult for sex workers, while conveniently ignoring crimes that have a tangible negative effect. (*Last Rescue in Siam, Empower Foundation, 2012*)

I feel like the other main thing at play here, once you sort through the rhetoric, shoddy 'research' and rescuer-grandstanding, is the murky politics of penetration.

My thoughts on the politics of penetration go like this. From the various hegemonic narratives constantly at play, once you are penetrated you are eternally subjugated and dominated. The act of being penetrated is positioned as inherently degrading and not a good thing. So one of the reasons that sex work can't be seen as work, is that being penetrated as a woman, by a man, is degrading. Only love or desire mitigates that inherent 'degradation'. Not money. These underlying feelings about sex work, are pretty old-school essentialist, as well as sexist, homophobic, and colonial.

Women are penetrated (so inferior to men who penetrate), therefore 'real' men don't allow themselves to be penetrated because men's bodies are sealed and impenetrable and all powerful. Same with the colonial nation. It enters (colonisation), but does not want to be entered (border control, anti-immigration).

Some of the feelings that premised the arguments against penetrative sex and BDSM in the 80's, are also around penetration and this reductive belief about penetration. What acts are thought to be inherently dominating and others submitting, and that those states and acts are fixed, un-negotiable and un-navigable.

I think a lot of the anti sex work arguments stem from a place where people simply feel icked out when thinking about sex work. Not too unlike homophobic people feeling icked out about gay men because they immediately imagine gay male butt sex.

These ideas about penetration build upon an assumption that certain arenas of power are impenetrable, inflexible and fixed. It's sexist, narrow minded and patronising to believe that people are unable to navigate and negotiate with agency, circumstances and situations that are laden with complex interplays of power.

We all navigate overarching power structures every day. Agency within individual and collective constraints, constraints in individual and collective agency.

Hegemonic power affects much of our lives, but we don't hear narratives telling women that they shouldn't go for a job if there's a male boss because she'll be immediately exploited and objectified under capitalist patriarchal systems, and that her being an employee of a man, will condone the subordination of all women.

When various feminists silence and dismiss the voices of women, allow and encourage the state to further stigmatise, target and criminalise those same women, and then blame them for gendered oppression, it doesn't look like feminism to me. It looks like victim-blaming.

It's also telling that the positions that anti-sex work voices come from, tend to be white middle class women who are making their money and careers from being anti-sex work. And that the women they target and blame, are often already navigating white supremacy, poverty, transphobia, administrative violence and racist border policing.

It seems clear that their arguments are less about sex work, and more about the feelings that come up for them surrounding penetration and women's 'proper' behaviour, as they don't have much to say on male sex workers and trans women workers. Nor do they offer any meaningful and substantial alternatives that would survive a simple policy audit. They sound like bullies to me.

Well that's what it looks like to me as a male sex worker who uses his cunt to help pay the rent.