Prostitution & Feminism
Towards a Politics of Feeling

Maggie O’Neill
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Polity
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Introduction: Socio-Cultural Contexts – Renewed Methodologies for Research

How do we get to grips with the complexities involved in understanding feminist responses to prostitution at the turn of the century? This book seeks to answer this question by focusing upon the interrelationships between feminist research, feminist theory and feminist practice in late modern/postmodern times. The text provides:

- a feminist socio-cultural analysis of prostitution in changing times;
- a comprehensive introduction to the major feminist debates on prostitution as a cultural practice, as well as an examination of the figure/image/representation of the prostitute through examples of art and literature;
- ethnographic data with women and young people working as 'prostitutes', which serve to demystify and demythologize stereotypical images and representations of 'prostitutes' and prostitution;
- a renewed methodology for social research, defined as ethno-mimesis. Ethno-mimesis combines ethnographic research and the re-presentation of ethnographic data in visual/artistic form. Re-presenting social research in visual/artistic form can provide a rich understanding of the many issues surrounding the lived experiences of women working in prostitution; challenge stereotypes; and also bring the work to a wider audience. Life-history accounts re-presented in visual/artistic form can develop public understanding and feed into social policy (for example, see chapter 3).

This work stresses the importance of critical feminist theory wrapped up in the material and personal experiences of women working as prostitutes. Focusing upon the personal/experiential aspects of women's lives helps to develop an interpretive understanding of prostitution in contemporary
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society. This enables us to better understand gendered relations, masculinities, male violence against women and the social organization of desire, represented most acutely in the dynamics of destruction and the desire operating between pimp, client and prostitute.

The ethnographic material documented here was gathered over a period of nine years. One of the major obstacles and difficulties in conducting ethnographic fieldwork is the time and emotional energy involved (Murdock 1997). Within the context of the pressure upon researchers in universities to publish, and the depleting resources for research in some universities, involvement in ethnographic research and especially participatory research is, for many, too high a price to pay. However, the benefits and impact upon teaching and learning are considerable. Participatory action research (PAR)¹ provides a renewed focus upon the role and purpose of academic involvement in the public sphere, especially in relation to facilitating processes of social inclusion and regeneration with and for the communities involved in the research. The impact of this research upon social policy (via the inclusion of the stereotypical 'subjects' of research, usually seen as 'outsiders' or 'outlaws') may appear to be small scale but has much wider repercussions in terms of the impact upon the groups and communities involved. For example, PAR promotes: the self-esteem of individuals and groups; the development of skills and empowerment; and the ownership of a stake in creating change, in creating praxis.

The research that led to the production of this text takes an ethnographic approach to working with women and young people rooted in the principles of PAR. As a feminist and a researcher, I am committed to challenging and changing sexual and social inequalities with individuals/groups/communities. This commitment forms the driving force for my work.² Moreover I am committed to exploring intertextuality and collaboration across genres to explore social worlds and lived cultures. This includes working with the stereotypical subjects of research through PAR as well as working with artists, photographers and performance artists in the re-presentation and analyses of social research (see chapters 2 and 5).

Ethno-mimesis: towards a politics of feeling

A new theoretical concept – ethno-mimesis – is introduced here to capture the process and outcome of doing participatory action research with marginalized groups as well as the re-presentation of the research in artistic form. This concept privileges the interrelationship between the psychic and social processes involved in the process of PAR. It illuminates the researcher's self-reflexive involvement in the research, including being immersed in a physical and emotional/psychic sense in the lived cultures of the individuals and groups who are the co-creators of the research. For the researcher, immersion in 'lived cultures' is necessarily followed by interpretation, commentary and
criticism. The concept describes a dialectical, self-reflexive, interpretive relationship based upon mutual recognition. It privileges the exploration of lived experience within the lived cultures of the group that the researcher is working with and the re-presentation of the research in visual, poetic, artistic forms. The process of conducting ethno-mimesis is captured for me by the term a *politics of feeling*.

A politics of feeling is a related concept to ethno-mimesis, and both concepts emerged in the process of conducting ethnographic research with and for women working as prostitutes. A politics of feeling describes the exploration of the politics of everyday life through women's narratives, through their inclusion in the research. It also describes a critical feminist standpoint(s) approach. Immersion in the life-worlds of women and young people working in prostitution, combined with analysis of the interrelationship between the micrology (following Walter Benjamin) of women's lives and broader social processes, underpins the critical feminist standpoint(s) approach outlined here.

One of the central themes of this book is the development of renewed methodologies for socio-cultural research as ways of working and writing in societies that are post-traditional but are also marked by the traditional; in societies that are dis-enchanted but are in the process of being re-enchanted; and, if we agree with Sejepan Meštrović (1997), in societies that are postemotional but also contain possibilities of and for authenticity.

For Meštrović, contemporary Western societies are entering a new phase of development where 'synthetic, quasi-emotions become the basis for widespread manipulation by self, others, and the culture industry as a whole' (1997: xi). What he calls 'postemotional types' are able to 'feel' a vast array of emotions without necessarily being motivated to action. In the postemotional society emotions have not disappeared but rather a 'new hybrid of intellectualized, mechanical, mass produced emotions has appeared on the world scene' (1997: 26). Moreover, in the West we are suffering in part from compassion fatigue (1997: 33). Postemotionalism, for Meštrović, is a 'new theoretical construct to capture the Balkanization, ethnic violence and other highly emotional phenomena of the late 1990s that are being treated mechanically — and not just in the Balkans but throughout the industrialized West' (1997: 40). Meštrović draws upon Adorno's thesis regarding the growth and power of the culture industry in helping to create and sustain an almost totally administered society, where spaces to think and feel critically are constantly diminishing.

The work presented and discussed in this text takes a participatory action approach to working with and for women and young people working as prostitutes. This work is influenced by and draws upon Adorno's dialectic of mimesis and constructive rationality. Adorno's use of mimesis was heavily influenced by Walter Benjamin (Adorno 1984; Benjamin 1978; Nicholsen 1997). I have argued elsewhere (O'Neill 1999) that the work of Adorno is very useful for contemporary feminists. He emphasizes negativity and the
need for non-identical thinking, for critical analytical thinking; he focuses upon micrology (drawing upon Walter Benjamin) — upon the small scale — upon the minutiae of lived experience and upon living a damaged life, through the ambiguity and ambivalence of modern and hyper-modern times. He develops a relentless attack upon essentializing the feminine at the same time as proclaiming the utter loss of hope in the enlightenment as progress, as the promesse de bonheur. He focuses upon the paralysis, the pessimism, contained in the hopelessness of challenging and changing administered society, but at the same time he never gives up hope for transformative possibilities; for him this was contained in the liberating potential of art and aesthetics.

Ethno-mimesis is illustrated in chapter 2 through a combination of ethnographic participatory work and the re-presentation of this work in visual/artistic form. In re-presenting ethnographic work in visual/artistic form we can reach a wider audience, beyond academic communities, thus facilitating understanding, interpretation and maybe even action/praxis in relation to prostitution as a social issue. Certainly, in re-presenting ethnographic data in artistic form we can access a richer understanding of the complexities of lived experience and this can throw light on broader social structures and processes. The complexities of lived experience include the material and the 'immaterial' (Van Loon 1999), the 'Phenomenal' (Battersby 1998) and what Adorno alludes to as the 'unsayable', those aspects of lived experience that are hard to put into words.

Immersion in the life-worlds of women working in prostitution through ethnographic research enables the foregrounding of feelings, meanings and experiences from the multiple standpoints of women, and may facilitate the development of 'thick' descriptions of lived cultures. This may help us to better understand their lived experiences (Geertz 1973). Indeed, such self-reflexive works also help us to understand our own lives and lived cultures. Working with women in participatory ways to develop changes in attitude, policy and practice promotes feminist praxis as purposeful knowledge — from the standpoints of the women concerned. The process of conducting ethnographic participatory research through 'feeling' involvement can give rise to a politics of feeling. Resistance, action, transformation can ensue and be progressed in participatory ways with the co-researchers.

A politics of feeling is developed through participatory research, through a critical feminist standpoint(s) approach and through ethno-mimesis. This approach neither romanticizes nor idealizes marginalized peoples (West 1994) and it resists 'postemotionalism' (Meštrović 1997), the domination of our social worlds by synthetic emotions and compassion fatigue.

Postemotionalism mirrors Postman's concern (1987) about what he calls culture-death and is influenced by Meštrović's reading of David Reisman's The Lonely Crowd (1950). Our cultural life is being turned into a perpetual round of entertainment; we absorb media images in a state of relative inattention. Postemotionalism is indicative of contemporary 'me-dominated' and media-
saturated society (see Tester 1994), where spaces to think and feel critically are diminishing. There is a degree of pessimism and paralysis in our responses to the crisis and plight of others. This paralysis is a marker of postemotionalism. We turn the page, switch off – unmoved. In this book it is accepted, to a degree, that our lived relations are in the throes of what Meštrović terms 'postemotionalism', a loss of 'feeling'. However, this is not so widespread as Meštrović claims, for we are able to – and do – resist this tendency in the politics of everyday life.

Conducting participatory action research (PAR) with individuals and groups promotes purposeful knowledge that may be transformative and certainly counters paralysis and pessimism. The relationship between thinking, feeling and doing (Arendt 1970; Tester 1995), commitment and collective responsibility, is central to PAR, and is illustrated in chapter 2 and Part II through the participatory action research with women and young people working as prostitutes.

A politics of feeling privileges emotions, feelings and meanings in accessing 'lived experiences' or 'lived cultures' and explores experiences, meanings, practices through the tension or mediation between feeling and reason involved in critical interpretive ethnography. Ethno-mimesis is both a process (methodological tool) and a constellational form (an outcome) of interpretive research. Ethno-mimesis combines ethnographic research and art forms in the development of hybrid texts as one possible outcome of PAR. In chapter 2 I use the example of performance art and video (from collaborative work with Sara Giddens) to re-present life-history narratives of women working in the sex industry. The intertextuality between ethnographic data and artistic representation illuminates the complexity of women's lives through what Taussig (1993) alludes to as 'sensuous knowing'.

Key aims

The key aims of this book are twofold. First, I aim to problematize feminist theorizing and feminist research – specifically the epistemological and methodological issues involved in knowledge production – in late modern/postmodern times. I recommend that we develop more participatory, constellational and hybrid ways of doing and re-presenting research with women and young people working as prostitutes. This may include working with performance artists and/or photographers. Second, I aim to problematize the categories of prostitute and prostitution by drawing upon self-reflexive ethnographic accounts of women's lived experiences, the available literature and fictive or cultural texts, in order to explore neglected gender issues, especially around subjectivities and difference.

The outcomes are also twofold. First, I stress the desperate need for feminists to build bridges across the divides between feminists who are working in the sex industry and feminists who are not (including intra-group
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differences), as discussed in chapter 1, and I include recommendations for this bridge-building that are founded upon mutual or inter-subjective recognition (J. Benjamin, 1993), collaboration, participation and collective action. Second, I suggest a methodological approach to 'doing sociology', or 'doing cultural studies', combining ethnographic approaches and artistic representations of ethnographic data, which I call ethno-mimesis, as a renewed (revitalized by processes of participatory action research and collaboration across genres such as performance art) methodology for doing social research in postmodern times of de-traditionalization and postemotionalism.

This work is influenced by the methodological work of Atkinson and Coffey, Maria Mies, Norman Denzin, William F. Whyte, Orlando Fals Borda, Augusto Boal, Trinh T. Minh-Ha and the critical theory of Jessica Benjamin, Theodor Adorno, Walter Benjamin, Stjepan Meštrović and Michael Taussig. It is, of course, ultimately embedded within a critical hermeneutic project, but one that looks to social research as praxis. This feminist, sociological project involves developing hybrid responses to interpretive, qualitative research. Hybrid responses include developing alternative forms of re-presenting the lived experiences and lived cultures of marginalized groups, with their help, in order to counter postemotionalism and foster committed responses to the sexual, social inequalities we live in and through.

Prostitution and Feminism is about creating the intellectual and practical spaces for women's voices to be heard and listened to in order to better understand the lived experiences of women working as prostitutes; to counter 'othering'; to better understand gendered relations, including a focus upon subjectivities, difference and identities; and to work towards collectively resisting, challenging and changing sexual and social inequalities in postmodern times through feminist praxis. It is also about exploring renewed methodologies for social research in order to acquire a better understanding of the complexity of our social worlds through intertextual feeling forms.

The chapters

This book is organized into three parts and each of the parts can be read as a discrete whole or taken together, integrated as part of a larger (unfinished) story.

Part I comprises chapter 1 and chapter 2. Chapter 1 outlines and discusses the feminist debates on prostitution, stressing the importance of collective action, of feminist action research. Feminist action research can develop a more thorough understanding of the complex experiences, meanings and practices involved in understanding the phenomenon of prostitution and the experiences of women. This chapter also calls for feminists working as prostitutes and feminists not working in the sex industry to work together.

Chapter 2 outlines and illustrates ethno-mimesis as a renewed methodology for social research in current times. An interpretive feminist account of
women's life-histories, rooted in immersion in the feeling worlds of participants is re-presented through fragments of women's narratives, live art and photography. This ethno-mimetic approach is developed from a commitment to:

• the interrelation between feminist thought and practice involving processes of immersion, interpretation, commentary, criticism and praxis;
• critical feminist theory, the usefulness of the work of Adorno, Walter Benjamin and Jessica Benjamin – specifically the role of critical theory as interpretive philosophy, the concept of 'mediation' and the central dialectic of mimesis and constructive rationality;
• interpretive ethnography as a way of understanding women's lived experiences, especially the development of critical standpoint epistemologies (influenced by the work of Maria Mies, Orlando Fals Borda, Augusto Boal, Trinh T. Minh-Ha and Norman Denzin).

Part II (chapters 3 and 4) seeks to tell the stories of certain women, young people and children who sell sex.

Chapter 3 explores women's experiences of routes into prostitution, 'making out' in prostitution, routes into prostitution from local authority care, and possibilities for exiting. The interrelationship between psychic processes and social processes is a key theme, specifically the ways that the micrology of women's lives can shed light on broader socio-economic structures and processes.

Chapter 4 examines child/juvenile prostitution by exploring: the interrelationship between prostitution, homelessness, leaving care and runaways; and the central importance of developing social knowledge as social critique, as feminist praxis. The chapter concludes with a call for changes to attitudes, policy and practice towards the involvement of children and young people in prostitution. We desperately need to stop treating these children and young people as 'social junk', as 'criminals', and to deliver child-centred responses across the spectrum of agencies and services with which young people have contact. Ultimately, the way we respond as a society to this issue is a mark of our 'postemotionalism' or 'compassion fatigue'.

Part III examines neglected gender issues in the debates around modernity and postmodernity by focusing upon fictive texts and lived experience in the area of sexuality and prostitution. Exploring (triangulating) ethnographic texts and fictive texts is, I argue, a useful way of understanding the complexities involved in debates around prostitution, desire, identities and the differences involved in gendered relations in postmodern times.

Through postmodern ethnographies we can better understand the socio-cultural-political (macro) relations and interrelations, and the multiple (micro) 'realities' we might want to transform. Accessing and documenting lived experiences in a self-reflexive, critically aware way can lead us to better understand psychic processes (feelings/meanings/identities) and
socio-cultural structures and processes. This knowledge in turn may help us to develop transformative possibilities. This process — a politics of feeling — draws upon 'feeling forms' (Witkin 1974), such as art, life-story narratives, film and dance to re-tell, re-present, the multiple stories generated through interpretive ethnographic research. Critical interpretation and reception of multiple stories may lead to new awareness and to changes in attitude and practice towards marginalized social groups like 'prostitutes'.

Chapter 5 explores the interrelationship between prostitution, sexuality and the social organization of desire. The image and representation of the 'prostitute' and the aestheticization of the whore in contemporary culture are examined. In the conclusion it is argued that through a combination of interpretive ethnography focusing upon life-history narratives and fictive texts, such as art, literature and film, feminist research/analysis can move towards changing 'the instruments of culture', our sign worlds of sexuality, by saying the 'unsayable', by telling our stories outside of the dominant discourses that constitute the 'between men' culture (Irigaray 1993). Feminist thought and praxis rooted in interpretive ethno-phy is potentially transformative, especially when it is linked to PAR.

Chapter 6 explores masculinities and male violence against women by focusing upon pimps and punters. In order to develop a clearer understanding and analysis of the gendered organization of prostitution we must turn our attention to the men involved in prostitution and the organization of the wider sex industry. The narratives of men are explored through interview material with men (and with women on men) who are clients of 'prostitutes' alongside James Boswell's biographical account of his sexual 'wanderings'. Triangulating historical analysis with interview material (narratives from men as clients and from women on male clients) and fictive texts can give us a better understanding of the men involved in prostitution, the social organization of desire through time and the wider sex industry. Historical and fictive sources (critical recovery of history) are useful for uncovering greater knowledge and understanding of social issues. The interrelation between history, philosophy, literature and social theory is vital to a better understanding of our social worlds (Winch 1990).

The Conclusion brings together the main themes in summary and discusses the importance of feminist analyses of prostitution in conditions of reflexive modernity/postmodernity that engage with lived experience and develop feminist praxis through interpretive ethnography. Within this text, ethno-mimesis as a politics of feeling provides a theoretical construct which describes a research methodology. As a theoretical concept, ethno-mimesis describes the combination of interpretive ethnography or participatory action research and visual artistic re-presentations of the research data.

Ethno-mimesis as a 'politics of feeling' privileges the personal, the 'micrology' of actions and interactions, and in the tension between mimesis and rationality, through critical reflection/interpretation, 'gets at' a thorough understanding of prostitution in current times. By triangulating life-story
interviews (narratives of self) and fictive texts (literature, film, photography, art works) this work challenges stereotypes and illuminates ideology and ideological effects surrounding ‘prostitutes’ and prostitution. Moreover, it accesses the micrology of lived experience, the unsayable, the phenomenal, the immaterial or the non-conceptual, thus serving educative and potentially transformative roles.

Coming to understand the reflexive relationship (mediation) between the lived experience of women working as prostitutes and the wider social and cultural structures, processes and practices through feminist participatory action research is constitutive of what I call a ‘politics of feeling’.

The fragments of stories (life narratives, fictive texts, video stills) documented here are fragments of the politics of everyday life. They speak and show the embeddedness of feeling, meaning, being and becoming, in the lived, embodied experiences of the women, men and young people working as prostitutes. There are resonances for all women in the stories that unfold throughout this text. Through these examples of ‘lived cultures’, there are important implications here for ‘doing’ sociology and women’s, cultural and media studies in postmodern times.
Part I
Feminist Knowledge and Social Research: Understanding Prostitution
One aim of this book is to show that academic involvement in the public sphere, in the articulation of the lived experience of women's lives, can be 'powerful' and have potentially transformative consequences. Furthermore, in the process of conducting participatory action research, I have found that the social construction of academic knowledge is enriched and a 'democratization' effect develops with the groups one is working with, given the reflexive relationship between critical feminist theory, women's lived experience and policy-oriented practice. Women's voices and participation through ethnographic work are central to this process. Feminism is a practice and a politics as well as 'a strong intellectual movement' (A. Gray 1997: 90).

This text is concerned with the development of 'knowledge for', as critical feminist praxis (Stanley 1990), embedded within a cultural politics of difference. The work documented and discussed here is located at the intersection of contemporary feminist theory and socio-cultural research. It is situated at the crossroads of feminist theory, interdisciplinarity, intertextuality and renewed methodologies for social research in late modern/postmodern times.

Renewed methodologies involve ways of researching and writing in societies that are post-traditional but also marked by the traditional. Societies that are 'postemotional' (Meštrović 1997) are marked by mechanical, mass-produced emotions and compassion fatigue; but they also contain possibilities of and for authenticity. Renewed methodologies are a response to the fragmentation, plurality and utter complexity of living in postmodern times.

The crisis in representing ethnographic data, which occurred during the 1980s, encouraged reflexivity around issues of class, race and gender and at the same time critiqued the moral and scientific authority of the ethnographer (Atkinson 1992). Texts produced and re-presented as the outcomes of ethnographic fieldwork are no longer accepted unproblematically (Atkinson and Coffey 1995; Denzin 1997). Ethnographers can no longer presume to produce uncontested 'realist' accounts of the experiences of individuals/groups/‘others’. Rather the self-reflexivity inherent in the ethnographic process, coupled with the deconstruction of conventional discourses, serve to question the status of ethnographic texts within sociology, cultural studies, women's studies; and the ways in which ethnographers claim to re-present socio-cultural phenomena.

To illustrate: ethnography is a gendered project (Trinh 1989, 1991; Clough 1994; Denzin 1997). Feminist thought, queer theory and post-colonial thought have challenged and deconstructed the 'oedipal logic of the heterosexual, narrative ethnographic text that reflexively positions the ethnographer's gender neutral (or masculine) self within a realist story about the 'other'’ (Denzin 1997: xiv). As a response, there have been demands for experimentation in the re-presentation of ethnographic data to enable specific gendered and racialized boundaries to be transgressed (Trinh 1991; Denzin 1997).

In this work, what I call renewed methodologies for social research that incorporate the voices of citizens through scholarly/civic research as participatory research can serve not only to enlighten and raise our awareness of
certain issues; they can also produce critical reflexive texts which may help to motivate social change (O'Neill et al. 1999). The tension between a modernist ethos of resistance and transformation through participation as praxis (working with women through participatory action research) and a postmodern ethos of hybridity, complexity, interdisciplinarity and intertextuality (anti-identitarian thinking, re-presenting women's lived experience through art forms; illuminating the interrelationship between the fictive and the real in our lived cultures) is uneasy but represents the dynamics of the work presented here. Renewed methodologies can uncover important messages about the complexity of everyday life.

In this work, renewed methodologies for social research seek to speak in empathic ways with women, in order to counter postemotionalism, valorizing discourses and the reduction of the Other to a cipher of the oppressed/marginalized/exploited. Renewed methodologies facilitate a politics of feeling. This is illustrated in chapter 2 through live art/performance as a response to the life-story narratives of women working as prostitutes.

The central thread that runs through this work is the relationship between theory, lived experience and practice, articulated in the relationship between psychic processes and social processes; between critical feminist theory and feminist praxis; between theory, lived experience and community activism. An important aspect is the attempt to collect and show in a purposeful way what usually remains hidden in the literature and research on women working as prostitutes and on prostitution. This will be revealed through the combination of women's stories and cultural or fictive texts. The transformative possibilities of doing feminist participatory action research are identified, developed and analysed in the course of this section, which provides a review of the literature and an outline of ethno-mimesis — a theoretical concept that describes a research methodology indicative of a politics of feeling.

All purposeful manifestations of life, including their very purposiveness, in the final analysis have their end not in life, but in the expression of its nature, in the representation of its significance. (W. Benjamin 1972: 73)