



Comparing the Arguments Regarding Sex Work in Rachel Moran's *Paid For* (2013) and Mac and Smith's *Revolting Prostitutes* (2018)

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Abstract

What laws should be in place regarding selling sex, and how should we think about people who do so? Two books produced by women who have engaged in transactional sex—Rachel Moran's *Paid For* (2013) and Juno Mac and Molly Smith's *Revolting Prostitutes* (2018)—offer two very different responses to these most politically and emotionally charged of questions. This essay compares the two texts and argues that their divergent views and narratorial methods are representative of the polarisation of the debate around law and the sex trade. Ultimately, this article argues that Mac and Smith's respectful tone and careful handling of data put forward in service of their belief in decriminalisation sit in stark opposition to Nordic Model proponent Moran's more emotion-centred approach.

Keywords

Sex work, prostitution, Own Voices, memoir, Nordic Model

Introduction

This article examines two pieces of long form nonfiction written by former or current members of the sex trade—Rachel Moran's *Paid For* (2013) and Mac and Smith's *Revolting Prostitutes* (2018)—and how the form and content of both books contribute to the debate concerning the legal models best suited to the sale of sex. First, I consider how the writers frame their

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SEXTANT: www.sexantnotes.com. ISSN: 2990-8124

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arguments, and argue that both books make a significant contribution to the relatively new field of Own Voice books written by women who have exchanged sex for money, either historically or presently. I then contend that both texts are self-announced departures from testimonies about selling sex which foreground the experience of the sexual act. Both Moran and Mac and Smith also keenly distance themselves from the 'victim subject' figure who attracts or depends on third-party succour. Instead, the authors present themselves as forceful actors with the agency to agitate for change regarding legal regimes pertaining to the sex industry. However, after considering where the three women's contributions fall within the two established, polarised extremes of opinion regarding the debate regarding the sale of sex, I claim that Mac and Smith's work is consistent with the aims of the pro-decriminalisation movement as defined by figures such as Carol Leigh and Margo St James. Contrarily, Moran's work, in repeatedly misusing the voices of females who have sold sex—including her own—perpetuates the violence against women that those who support the Nordic Model seek to eradicate. Second, I will turn to the substance of the issues debated by Moran and Mac and Smith, with my analysis centring on their attitudes towards three key areas: trafficking, the Nordic Model, and decriminalisation. Finally, I will make a note on language and imagery, which will highlight Moran's misogyny and apparent lack of trustworthiness, which contrasts with Mac and Smith's more measured lexical choices and, by extension, their more analytical, factually robust and, ultimately, less misogynistic approach to the public consciousness-raising project they share with Moran.

This article will involve fine-grained textual analysis, situated alongside critical scholarship regarding the sale of sex. This approach seeks to pay attention to the linguistic and intellectual nuances of each book while also rooting *Paid For* and *Revolting Prostitutes* in the critical and socio-historical context of which they are a product. A couple of preliminary definitions and contextual clarifications are necessary. As Mac and Smith (2018) point out, the majority of people selling sex are female, and most buyers male (p. 4), an observation that informs this essay. Furthermore, intense academic and public debate exists discussing the advantages and disadvantages of using the terms 'sex work' and 'prostitution' when describing the trade of sexual services (Hansen and Johansson, 2022). Rights organisations consisting of members of the sex trade commonly argue that 'sex work' is the correct term to use due to the historical stigma and negative bias attached to the word 'prostitution' (Global Network of Sex Work Projects, 2013). In addition to being a liberation from the word 'prostitute,' such groups also assert that the creation of the term 'sex work' was a deliberate attempt to unite sex workers of all genders and sectors of work, and to highlight the labour that the sale of sex involves (ibid). However, such cohorts also allow that sex workers themselves sometimes use the word 'prostitute' for a variety of reasons (such as those motivating Mac and Smith) or when addressing different audiences. At the same time, 'prostitute' is used by many law-related agencies, such as the Crown Prosecution Service, as the word is the

legal term for someone who sells sex as defined by section 54(2) Sexual Offences Act 2003 (CPS, 2024). When discussing Moran and Mac and Smith, I use the terms selected by each author. Otherwise, this essay features variations of the terms ‘transactional sex’—defined as ‘exchanging sex for money, drugs, or things of value’ (Atkins et al., 2024)—or ‘selling sex’ in attempts to apply the most impartial descriptors.

Framing of the Arguments

Paid For and *Revolting Prostitutes* can be placed within a genre broadly known as Own Voices, which refers to an author from a marginalised or underrepresented group writing about their experiences (Duyvis, 2015). Specifically, the books belong to a canon of literature written by people who have exchanged sex for cash who use that history as a place from which to offer critical commentary on the sex trade. Within this genre there is usually an acknowledgment of life history combined with an attempt to differentiate this text from memoir, allied with an admission of explicitly political aims. This authorial approach is effectively described by former sex worker and writer Melissa Gira Grant (2014): ‘so often in telling sex work stories, the storytelling process is a form of striptease indistinguishable from sex work itself [...] this is not a peep show [...] my job here is to reveal through an exchange of ideas’ (p. 34).

Moran’s text is consistent with Grant’s approach, with *Paid For* (2013) opening with the sentence: ‘This book will not read in the style of a traditional memoir; it is not intended to’ (p. 1). She adds that her experiences selling sex have led her to conclude that to do so is a collective rather than an individual experience, and therefore her work attempts to ‘alternate between the personal and the universal’ (p. 1). From this we can surmise that she will recount moments of her life history alongside details of thoughts and situations experienced by women with whom she has worked. Her embrace (or appropriation, depending on one’s viewpoint) of the diverse perceptions and experiences of others is to serve a specific goal: ‘to take something bad and try to alchemise it into something good [...] there is something good in exposing prostitution for what it really is’ (2013, p. 2). In the closing sections of the book, Moran makes her precise aim explicit: ‘A global implementation of Sweden’s laws, which criminalise demand, is the one thing I’d most like to see before I die’ (p. 258).

Mac and Smith (2018) take a similar approach to Moran, in that they distance themselves from the memoir form: ‘Despite the expectation that sex workers will “tell our stories” this is not a memoir and we will not be sharing any sexy escapades’ (p. 5). Additionally, both books feature chapters relating to different aspects of the sale of sex, with titles that give a strong insight into the tone and preoccupations of each author, from Moran’s ‘childhood social exclusion’ and ‘the damage to relationships and sexuality,’ to Mac and Smith’s ‘Borders’ and ‘Prison Nation’. A final similarity is that the authors of both works are keen for their readers to realise the

benefits of supporting a particular legal model, in Mac and Smith's (2018) case, decriminalisation: 'Criminalising sex work isn't working [...] Prohibiting it produces evasiveness and risk-taking among sex-workers, driving them into the margins and exposing them to even more harm' (p. 190). Like Moran, Mac and Smith also project a sense of selling sex as collective experience. However, their clearly defined joint authorship makes their definition of collectivism much more legible and arguably more ethical than Moran's rather more vague desire to speak for the 'universal' experience of women who exchange sex for money.

A New Direction

Paid For and *Revolting Prostitutes* are influential pieces of work: the acknowledgements of Julie Bindel's *Pimping Prostitution* (2017) thanks Moran 'for writing *Paid For*, and for bringing together survivor abolitionists from all over the world to fight to end the sex trade' (p. xxi), which is evidence that supports Smith and Mac's (2018) assertion that '[h]er story is cited by other advocates as the illustration as to why the Nordic is needed' (p. 159). It also gives weight to their claim that Moran's work was a key factor in Northern Ireland's adoption of the Nordic Model in 2015. Similarly, Marxist feminist Silvia Federici termed *Revolting Prostitutes* '[a] book I have been waiting for,' and praised Mac and Smith for providing 'a powerful account of the work itself, the issues it raises, the institutional policy that shape it, all the while demonstrating that sex workers' struggles are crucial to any movement for social justice' (2018, quoted on the cover of *Revolting Prostitutes*).

The respect afforded to both books could be identified as a response to, or celebration of, the agentic turn the emic perspective employed by all three authors represents in depictions of those who have engaged in transactional sex. Quoting Ratna Kapur (2001), who suggested that '[t]he victim subject has allowed women to speak out about abuses that have remained hidden or invisible in human rights discourse' (p. 5), Agustin (2005) argues that, in the context of law and human rights, it is invariably the abject victim subject who seeks rights, primarily because she is the one who has had the worst happen to her (p. 107). Moran, Mac and Smith are writing about what they consider to be human rights violations they have suffered or observed while working and could therefore be identified as 'victim subjects' by Kapur's definition. Agustin further argues that:

One problem is that the person designated a victim tends to take on an identity as victim that reduces her to a passive object of others' actions. According to this logic, the subject of the discourse becomes irrelevant, and the 'helper' takes centre stage, encouraged to propose strategies that are reminiscent of imperial interventions in the lives of the native subject (Agustin, 2005, p. 107).

Moran, Mac and Smith foreground themselves as people who have exchanged cash for sex and use this as an identity upon which to base their polemics, thereby refusing to be reduced to a passive object of others' actions, or in need of help. Instead, they use this identity to explicitly or implicitly charge their readers to agitate for political change: Moran (2013) describes her hope 'that people [...] will begin to lobby their politicians for the implementation of Swedish-style prostitution laws' (p. 294), while Mac and Smith (2018) 'strive to make the demands of our movement visible' (p. 21).

Abuse vs Work

While *Paid For* and *Revolting Prostitutes* share certain qualities and aims, they diverge in a considerable number of ways. First, Moran (2013) identifies as having 'exited' the sex trade, whereas Mac and Smith (2018) are current practitioners. Second, these works illustrate the broader debate regarding the sale of sex, which generally polarises in a manner efficiently parsed by Agustin (2005): 'The first side tends to rely on feminist concepts, especially that of "violence against women" whereas the second tends to take pragmatic "harm-reduction stances"' (p. 96). Moran's work falls squarely on the first side, Mac and Smith's on the second. However, while Mac and Smith's approach is consistent with the aims and methodologies of the broader community with which they identify, Moran's narratorial practices frequently perpetuate the violence against women that she purports to wish to see removed from the world.

In tight keeping with Agustin's (2015) definition of the two spheres of thought regarding the sale of sex, *Revolting Prostitutes* (2018) attacks contemporary feminist anti-sex trade perspectives for being unmoored from pragmatism (p. 2). It is also highly focused on a harm-reduction stance, with the authors identifying themselves as 'working towards a radical feminism that can abolish [...] the sex industry without causing harm to sex workers' (p. 175). Their use of the term 'sex worker,' coined in 1978 by member of the sex trade and activist Carol Leigh (p. 1), in addition to their tenets of belief, signal that the cohort that Mac and Smith are referring to when they discuss 'our community' is the group whose beliefs and aims were first coherently drawn together by Margo St James in 1973. St James established COYOTE (Call Off Your Tired Old Ethics) in San Francisco to advocate for the rights of women in the sex industry. The general goals of COYOTE were to decriminalise all voluntary adult 'prostitution,' to educate the public about the abuses and problems inherent to its criminal status, and to work towards eliminating stigma by normalising commercial sex as work (Lopez-Embry and Sanders, 2009, p. 95). The mid-1970s saw the formation of 'prostitute unions' across Europe, following the 150-strong takeover of a church in Lyon, France, in 1975, by women who sold sex, protesting police maltreatment. Their efforts led to increased unionisation which culminated in the New Zealand Prostitutes' Collective campaigning leading to the Prostitution Reform Act (2003) which decriminalised the sale

of sex for those over 18 (Lopez-Embry and Sanders, 2009, pp. 95-99). Mac and Smith's (2018) politics—'[w]hen sex workers assert that sex work is work, we are saying that we need rights. We are not saying that work is good or fun, or even harmless, nor that it has fundamental value' (p. 55)—are consistent with the aims of their unionised 'sex worker' forbears and contemporaries, as is the method by which they convey their politics: they do not put forward unattributed quotations or anecdotes; their work is footnoted and indexed in a scholarly fashion.

Moran's (2013) politics can be located as belonging with what historian Judith Walkowitz (2017) terms 'another group of activists, a combination of progressives and right-wingers, [who] condemn commercialised sex as a degraded victimisation of women and as sex-based violence' (p. 20). Legal theorist Catharine MacKinnon (1993) argues that 'in prostitution, women are tortured through repeated rape [...] In rape, the security of a woman's person is stolen; in prostitution it is stolen and sold' (p. 3), and her encomium of *Paid For* is telling: 'The best work by anyone on prostitution ever [...] riveting, compelling, incontestable' (Amazon.co.uk). Indeed, incontestability is a quality claimed by Moran (2013) when she locates herself—a woman who has sold sex—as having not only one, but *the only*, viable voice in the discussion about the subject: 'You cannot argue the shape of an experience with someone who has not lived it. You can discuss it, you can examine it; you can offer your experience [...] but you cannot argue the structure of it' (p. 154). Her justification as to why people who have sold sex are best qualified to understand the sex industry is explained unapologetically reductively: 'The wearer knows best where the shoe pinches' (p. 154).

However, in a move contrary to what might be expected of a person who is attuned to and deeply against all manifestations of violence towards women, Moran denigrates her former self and anyone who has sold or is currently selling sex who does not agree with her opinion that to do so is abuse:

There will be prostitutes out there who will not like the sound of this. I am certain of that [...] I'm sure also that there'll be some former prostitutes who'll not appreciate it either. There is a fantasy some women in prostitution indulge in: that they are exceptionally strong, in control of all of this, *far* above being abused. I know this because I once indulged in it myself, or tried to (Moran, 2013, p. 111).

Moreover, Moran offers an imaginary commentary on how she would have felt if a particular legal regime had come to pass while she was selling sex:

Had the criminalisation of demand been enacted in Ireland during my time in prostitution [...] my understanding of the basic decency inherent to legislation like this would have prevailed over my worries and fears (Moran, 2013, p. 215).

Those 'worries and fears' are frequent features of criticisms concerning the Nordic Model which are often made by people who engage in transactional sex; they are made explicit by Mac and Smith:

...lack of clients gives her less power to refuse a man she might otherwise turn down [...] Maybe he offers her half her usual rate and refuses to wear a condom [...] trying to make up the shortfall, she stays out working much longer than usual [...] the clients who remain are disproportionately likely to be impulsive, drunk or violent (Mac and Smith, 2018, p. 144).

By insisting that her perspective is the most valid in the discussion and claiming that she would have allowed her innate morality to prevail over her fears should criminalisation of demand have occurred when she was selling sex, Moran (2013) essentially demands that people who do not sell sex should accept the exposure of people who do to the dangerous working conditions associated with the Nordic Model. She also implicitly suggests that people who currently sell sex should accept these conditions as well. In sum, Moran suggests that people who sell sex lie to themselves and others, and should—indeed must—accept potentially lethal working conditions in service of a larger moral good. Her diminishment of women is shared with some other abolitionist activists: Andrea Dworkin (1993), who sold sex before becoming an 'anti-prostitution' campaigner, spoke of women who do so as 'covered in dirt [...] contagious' (p. 6). Abolitionists such as Moran and Dworkin seem to find no inconsistency between the respect they claim to afford women and the disrespectful language and assumptions they frequently offer when discussing them.

Arguments Regarding the Sale of Sex

Unlike Mac and Smith (2018), Moran (2013) neglects to engage with the subtleties of the relationship between migration, trafficking and the sex industry. Moran (2013) uses a range of statistical evidence to serve her perspective that legalisation or decriminalisation of the sex trade leads to increased sexual trafficking of minors, in particular: 'An estimated 2.5 million people worldwide are in forced labour, according to UN statistics, and of these 1.2m are children. A total of 43% of victims of human trafficking are used for "forced sexual exploitation" and 98% of these victims are girls and young women' (p. 208). The accuracy of Moran's claims are difficult to assess given that, as both the sex industry and around half of all migrations are clandestine, apparently robust figures such as those upon which her analysis rests cannot exist (Agustin, 2005, p. 108). Furthermore, Moran (2013) does not distinguish between migrant and 'trafficked' sellers of sex: 'there has been little research undertaken with migrant sex workers and even less is known about those who may have been trafficked' (Agustin, 2005, p. 99). Moreover, conflating the sex trade

with trafficking has been identified by Amnesty International (2016) as actively destructive to people who have been trafficked into the sex trade, as the approach can result in broad and overreaching initiatives that seek to eradicate all commercial sex as a means to end trafficking (such as the criminalisation of demand characteristic of the Nordic Model). Such approaches can make sex workers and people who have been trafficked more vulnerable to violence and harm. Additionally, there is a lack of evidence to suggest that such approaches are successful in addressing trafficking (Amnesty International, 2016, p. 28). Moran (2013) disagrees with these points, asserting that 'the notion that decriminalization and legalization serve to protect the women in the trade is another of the myths of prostitution, and a particularly dangerous one. Since legalization, the human trafficking of females has exploded in Australia' (p. 208). However, how she has reached that conclusion, or ensured the veracity of her statistics, is not part of her argument; only some of her facts are referenced and her book does not include an index.

Migration is the subject of a chapter of Mac and Smith's (2018) book, with their central argument being that people should have the right to live and work where they wish (p. 63). They are frustrated with members of 'their movement' (people who support the decriminalisation of the sale of sex) who argue that sex work is not trafficking, but who do not problematise the framework of international movement across borders. They believe that the current system, which sees undocumented or insecurely documented people 'enmeshed within a punitive state-enforced infrastructure of deportability, disposability and precarity' forces migrants to depend on others, and it should therefore be no surprise that some undocumented migrants are led or coerced into selling sex by those they rely on (Mac and Smith, 2018, p. 70). In order to build their argument, they historicise the issue, beginning with the conflation of the sex industry with slavery carried out by the Women's Christian Temperance Union in 1899: 'There is a slave trade in this country and it is not Black folks this time, but little white girls – 13, 14, 16, 17 years of age – and they are snatched out of arms and from our Sabbath schools and from our communion tables' (Mac and Smith, 2018, p. 61). Their chapter ends with an admission that discussion of this matter is challenging given that the two sides of the debate do not agree on basic principles: 'For carceral feminists, the problem is commercial sex, which produces trafficking; for us the problem is borders, which produce people who have few to no rights as they travel and work' (p. 83). A frequent criticism regarding discussion of this issue is that much of the research that does exist on people being supposedly 'trafficked' into engaging in transactional sex does not clearly separate out the issues (Agustin, 2005), but instead conflates migrant labour with coerced trafficking (Butcher, 2003; Outshoorn, 2004). Moran's approach could be said to perpetuate such flaws, whereas Mac and Smith seek to reflect on and interrogate them in order to build a more detailed understanding of the relationship between migration and the sale of sex.

Decriminalisation

The central issue dividing Moran (2013) and Mac and Smith (2018) is that Moran believes that prostitution is a symbol of female oppression and as such should be eradicated via criminalisation of demand. Mac and Smith, meanwhile, are rigidly focused on how current legislative regimes cause harm to people who sell sex rather than what selling sex suggests about women at large. For Moran (2013), the sex industry is a symbol of patriarchal abuse of women; ‘a demeaning exploitative business that is hugely damaging to women, both within and without the industry’ (p. 89). Mac and Smith (2018) give this argument little credence, dismissing ‘the relatively abstract anxieties of non-prostitute women about “messaging” and arguing on behalf of the practical needs of working-class people who want their work to be safer’ (p. 205). Mac and Smith’s proposed way of increasing the safety of people who sell sex is decriminalisation, which Moran (2013) dismisses because ‘decriminalising the sale of sex would be to support prostitution itself’ (p. 206). In justifying her position, she states:

Trying to frame prostitution as legitimate and normal work opposes logic on innumerable levels, one of the most obvious (and almost laughable) being that European Union health and safety legislation prohibits sexual harassment, violence and work that causes work-related stress! Needless to say, these negatives [...] are understood by those in prostitution as occupational hazards (Moran, 2013, p. 224).

However, Mac and Smith (2018) write that ‘[w]hen your workplace is criminalized, there are no employment tribunals, no HR departments, no legal contracts or health and safety inspectors – and therefore extremely limited recourse when your working conditions are bad’ (p. 110). They allow us to infer that if selling sex were to be decriminalised, the hazards that Moran lists could be to some degree mitigated by employment law, and are therefore not simply occupational hazards that all women who sell sex must accept.

The Nordic Model

While Moran (2013) does not offer any evidence of the Nordic Model’s success, she does offer one, relatively minor, criticism: ‘A women who has been repeatedly abused within prostitution can expect to see the client who has used her to receive a sentence of not more than twelve months, whereas the woman who has been repeatedly abused within a relationship can expect her abuser to receive a sentences of not more than six years’ (p. 211). Mac and Smith (2018) are more forthcoming: ‘When women have less access to resources they are more vulnerable to violent men’ (p. 151), and also comment that anti-sex trade feminists hone in on the abuse and exploitation of pimps and punters while overlooking—or tacitly supporting—

similar abuses by police, landlords, and immigration officers (p. 167). Finally, they condemn the model's lack of effectiveness by relaying statistics that suggest that in Stockholm in 2009, the police believed there to be ninety Thai massage parlours. By 2013 this figure had risen to 250. They quote an unnamed Swedish politician: 'We never thought we could eradicate prostitution with it, but it is an important signal of what is acceptable in a society and not' (Mac and Smith, 2013, p. 167). This anecdote serves to present the flaws of the prostitution-as-symbol-of-male-violence approach to the sex industry—an approach espoused by Moran, but demonstrated by Mac and Smith to be one that ultimately leads to increased violence against women who sell sex.

Significant Lexical Choices

To conclude, the language and imagery used by Moran (2013) and Mac and Smith (2018) gives a significant insight into the spirit and motivations of their books. Moran relates an anecdote involving a woman that she knew who sold sex who had a client who found his mother's used tampon in a bin when he was a boy. He sucked it and subsequently developed a fetish for the experience. As Moran (2013) recounts, '[t]hey would organize their meetings to happen only when she was in the heaviest part of her period [...] she'd wear a tampon for at least a day before their meeting [...] he would relive his childhood experience' (p. 86). The grotesque framing of the experience belonging to another woman could arguably be viewed as appropriative, or even fabricated: the risk of Toxic Shock Syndrome, odour, and leakage would likely prevent any menstruating person from wearing one tampon for a twenty-four hour period. Either way, the imagery is used to shock the reader, and to encourage them to view someone who sells sex as someone who subjects themselves, or is subjected, to the most repulsive acts and is therefore a figure to incite disgust or pity. The story has echoes of the etymology of the word 'putain', meaning 'whore' in French, which comes from the Latin *putida*; putrid (Corbin, 1986, p. 2). Through this anecdote, Moran presents and reinforces long-established stereotypes of the 'prostitute' as the corrupt and corrupting body.

Another intriguing semantic moment occurs when Moran (2013) takes issue with the term 'sex worker,' describing it as a 'rhetorical weapon' that seeks to normalise the sale of sex. She writes that the phrase was 'received with a knowing snigger among the prostitutes I've known [...] it was useful as tits on a bull, and we know it from the most reliable source of all – personal experience' (p. 223). The essence of her argument could constitute a straightforward, legitimate point. However, seeking to validate it by using the idea of her former colleagues sees her, again, appearing to speak on behalf of or over other (anonymous, unverifiable) women who have sold sex, commandeering the argument in an unassailable way ('the most legitimate source of all'). Furthermore, the crude phrase 'tits on a bull' jars with the usual tone of her prose, which is frequently marked with phrases that seek to conflate and convey a sense of morality and beauty, such as

'the spiritually ruinous loss of connectedness to the self' (p. 181). Indeed, many people who oppose anti-women's objectification – as Moran claims to – would object to the violence of the word 'tits' for breasts, and the use of the female breast as a punch line to a joke, which further highlights her hypocrisy in this section of her text. Mac and Smith's (2018) prose features no such misogynistic moments: the final sentence of their book quotes a named group of women, and represents the moderate style they maintain throughout their book: 'In the words of Black Women for Wages for Housework: 'When prostitutes win, all women win' (p. 220).

Conclusion

Overall, both *Paid For* (2013) and *Revolting Prostitutes* (2018) belong to a micro-genre of Own Voice texts produced by women with experience of selling sex who lay claim to their agency, which they use to agitate readers to seek change regarding sex trade legislation. Moran is a key proponent of the Nordic Model, which seeks to criminalise demand, whereas Mac and Smith look to decriminalise the sale of sex and emphasise the need for workers within this industry to be accorded labour rights. The authors' divergent views and narratorial methods are representative of the polarisation of the debate around law and the sex trade. In this article I have compared three strands of their different approaches to trafficking, the Nordic Model and decriminalisation. Ultimately, I argue that Mac and Smith's (2018) respectful tone and careful handling of data sit in stark opposition to Moran's (2013) more emotion-centred approach which, at points, veers into a misogyny which is at odds with her declared anti-objectification stance towards women.

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