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# The Sex Work Historian

**Evania Pietrangelo-Porco**

## **Abstract**

*The Sex Work Historian* is a multi-media collaborative effort that utilizes the author's skills and experiences as a trained historian to highlight the many struggles and resistances of sex worker communities. As a collaborative effort, *The Sex Work Historian* is both living and ongoing, prioritizing and working alongside those already combatting whorephobia. Often operating outside the bounds of traditional academia, *The Sex Work Historian* consists of a blog, its own Twitter/X, Instagram, and Bluesky social media accounts, and a Discord and Twitch channel, all of which focus on sex work and sex workers. Through these various modes of engagement, *The Sex Work Historian* offers one more voice, comprised of various stories, experiences, and realities, in the fight against the endless cycles of erasure sex workers and their histories face.

## **Keywords**

activism, whorephobia, blogging, history, multimedia

## Introduction

At the core of *The Sex Work Historian* is the belief that the legal and social treatment of sex workers reflects broader issues. It reveals that many places, ideas, and practices are deeply discriminatory, corrupt, intolerant, and cruel. It showcases how the past impacts the present and how the present reflects the past- not just for sex workers but **everyone**.

- Evania Pietrangelo-Porco, 2023 b, para. 2

The above quotation, taken from *The Sex Work Historian's* mission statement, is just that: a statement. It speaks to the multiple truths that sex workers have already made clear. The legal and social treatment of sex workers **does** reflect broader issues both on international and local scales. It **does** showcase how history is nebulous. "History" has neither a clear beginning nor end because systems of domination, such as colonialism, classism, white supremacy, and patriarchy, **still** govern many countries in both the global north and south. Historical oppressions have only evolved rather than dissipated with time. This evolution has resulted in, for example, harmful legislation in the contemporary world, such as Canada's *Protection of Communities and Exploited Persons Act* (PCEPA). The PCEPA, also known as Bill C-36, is a violation of both sex workers' labour and human rights, as it prohibits sex workers from safely conducting their business. It is also being challenged, currently to no avail, in the Ontario court system. As a result, many sex workers, not just within Canada but globally, live in states of constant flux. Yet, at the same time, the wider systems that condition and constrain their lives remain fixed.

The pervasiveness of anti-sex worker stigma, or whorephobia, forces sex workers to always be learning new ways to love, survive, and resist. It is consistently inconsistent-creating states of transitional being where sex workers push against false notions, narratives, and beliefs, into seemingly endless and predictable sociocultural

voids. Most importantly, these continued fluctuations are not new. *The Sex Work Historian* is but one of many parts of this ebb and flow.

In this piece, I try to capture parts of *The Sex Work Historian*-depicted using images from its blog. These parts are shown word for word. Line by line. Doing so shows my own praxis as well as those of my contributors and collaborators. Such praxis includes land acknowledgements, clickable links and resources embedded in each post, and naming practices where some individuals remain unnamed because of the violence they have caused to people in and outside of the sex working community.<sup>1</sup> This piece only features *The Sex Work Historian* blog, as it is the original and primary source of my activism. Since its creation in August of 2022, the blog has expanded to include a Twitter/X, Instagram, and Bluesky account, as well as a Discord and Twitch channel. However, I have added a "Further Reading/Viewing" section at the end of this piece for those wanting to engage the other components of *The Sex Work Historian*.

## Background

*The Sex Work Historian* is a multi-media collaborative effort that utilizes my skills as a trained historian to highlight whorephobia in all its forms. It is an effort because it is living and ongoing. It is ever evolving and changing thanks to those who are always formally and informally shaping it. It prioritizes, works alongside, and is informed by, those already combatting whorephobia. It treats those at its centre as fully dimensional persons rather than "research" to be conducted, or "projects" to be undertaken. Often operating outside the bounds of traditional academia (a site of both liberation and violence for marginalized/otherized folks).

The purpose of *The Sex Work Historian* is twofold: reiteration and critical reexamination. Through archiving and dialoging the realities and knowledges of sex workers, this project reiterates, and thus amplifies, the many struggles and resistances they face. Central to such reiteration

acknowledgment and accountability, their names do not.

<sup>1</sup> Naming is power. It gives people, and things, an identity. While certain people's behaviours deserve both

are the practices of accreditation, compensation, and tangibility. Sex workers' physical, emotional, and intellectual labour often goes unaccredited because of the false assumption that their work can go uncompensated. *The Sex Work Historian* combats this by compensating sex workers for their time. This effort compensates its contributors through monetary reimbursement, mutual promotion, and the sharing of their materials (see "Contributors/Collaborators" section). This effort likewise engages in tangibility by crediting, promoting, and sharing the work already being undertaken by others. Additionally, most posts on the blog have further reading and resource sections. Not only is this a part of this effort's practice of tangibility, as it credits and highlights the work of others, but it also provides a guide for further exploration of various issues and topics discussed in the blog.

With reiteration comes reexamination. It makes lawmakers, politicians, and "normative" community members consider why so many people, me included, must repeat the same calls for decriminalization and abolition, and thus urges them to do something about the multiple factors fueling these calls. Sex workers are people's professors, doctors, neighbours, friends, family, and persons deserving of respect. This piece and *The Sex Work Historian* as a whole, argues for a world where this respect is a given and where it and similar efforts become few and far between.

*The Sex Work Historian* is not the only effort, past or present, that exists concerning the history of sex work. Activists, community members, academics, sex workers, and allies/accomplices have discussed sex work and its histories at length. They have done so in books, journals, magazines, blogs, and newspapers. Sex workers speak for themselves on podcasts, social media, television, radio, and streaming platforms. Lastly, sex workers attest to their experiences in their daily lives and through their presence in various legal and sociocultural spaces. *The Sex Work*

*Historian* does not overshadow, appropriate, or commodify the longstanding work of sex workers and their allies/accomplices. Instead, it acts as another voice in the fight against the continued cycles of erasure that sex workers and their histories face. It reiterates the calls of other advocates for global decriminalization and the total abolition of whorephobia.

## The Blog

*The Sex Work Historian* emerged as a blog in the Spring of 2022 and launched through Squarespace<sup>2</sup> in August of the same year. However, due to the website fees, I had to delete the website a year later. I have since relaunched the blog through WordPress.com—maintaining (as best I could) the original layout and content of the blog. Much like the original website, the new blog includes a homepage that features all the blog's content. Such content includes a Land Acknowledgement, mission statement, and an about and contact page (Pietrangelo-Porco, 2023a, para 139). The original blog did not have a subscription page, whereas the new blog does. It also included a collaborations page and an art gallery (see Appendix 1). I have since integrated the collaborations page into the blog's main posts. However, I removed the art gallery. I will bring it back at a later date, featuring art made by sex workers. Where applicable, each section of the blog has links and notes outlining my additional thoughts, resources, and praxis.

## Land Acknowledgements

Land acknowledgements play a significant role in my praxis. They appear on the blog as a primary webpage and in relevant posts and collaborations. *The Sex Work Historian* Twitch channel also has a land acknowledgement spoken before each broadcast. When done meaningfully and followed by tangible action, land acknowledgements are a time for settlers to "recognize their position on stolen land(s) and what being on this land means for Indigenous Peoples" (Pietrangelo-Porco, 2023c, para 3). I use Land acknowledgements

<sup>2</sup> Squarespace is a website for building and hosting webpages. It allows users to use pre-built templates and

drag-and-drop elements to create customizable websites.

because my work exists due to my residing on stolen land. From “the food I eat to the roof over my head to my access to electricity, I have (as a cis white woman) benefitted the most from the displacement of the Indigenous Peoples of what some call Turtle Island” (para. 5). So called Canada is built on the stolen lands of Indigenous Peoples, and especially, Indigenous sex workers. The unsafety of their bodies is the foundation of this nation. I make this clear, in overt and covert ways, in my Land Acknowledgement. No more; it is “time for Land Back” (para. 10).

### Content Warnings

This review discusses misogyny, the sexualization of underage girls, sexual assault, sex trafficking, murder, MMIW2S, gender-based and FBI/police violence, domestic abuse/violence...anti-Black racism...fatphobia..., gender-based discrimination, and violence against sex workers. – Belle Blake and Evania Pietrangelo-Porco, 2023b, para. 5

Content warnings are also a substantial part of my praxis. While all parts of *The Sex Work Historian* reflect the bubbly personalities of both me and my collaborators, it also educates people on the continued mistreatment of sex workers. My collaborators and I often tackle numerous interlocking systems of oppression—especially as they relate to whorephobia. These oppressions include, for example, racism(s), classism, misogyny, colonialism, fatphobia, and ableism. Content Warnings inform readers about the content of each post. They give folks the ability to prepare themselves for reading or viewing this often emotionally onerous content.

### Collaborations

**Interview with Steph Sia.** Steph Sia (she/her) is a stripper, digital content creator, and pole dance instructor in Vancouver, BC (Pietrangelo-Porco, 2023a, para. 139). Steph was the first person I collaborated with for the blog. Our collaboration was joint. I interviewed Steph for *The Sex Work Historian* blog, and Steph interviewed me for her podcast *Stripped by SIA*. Steph’s blog interview

is entitled “Supporting SWers Responsibly in Academia with The Sex Work Historian.” In it, she speaks with “... Evania from The Sex Work Historian...A PHD candidate herself, Evania has been impassioned to support SWers responsibly within her field” (Sia, 2022). As I wrote in the description for Steph’s interview: “This interview is a stripping down (as it were) of Steph and her work” (Pietrangelo-Porco, 2023a, para. 4).



Fig 1: An image of *Stripped Down: An Interview with Steph Sia*.

**An Interview with Belle Blake: Righting the Wrongs.** Belle Blake (she/her) is a former Clip Artist, Cam Model, and author, and has a BA Combination Degree in Film Studies and Journalism (Blake and Pietrangelo-Porco, 2023b, para. 61). Belle was my third and final collaboration for the previous blog and her review was the fifth blog for the old website. In her review, Belle thought-provokingly asks readers to consider Megan Fox as a feminist, argues for the merits of one of her latest films, *Midnight in the Switchgrass* (2021), and asserts that the film is ultimately a story of redemption (para. 6). It’s for the “‘slasher girl turned hero, a succubus, the resurrected, an FBI agent, and a wife.’ If that’s not feminist, nothing is” (para. 33). The post’s tagline is “The thrills, chills, and feminist ills of *Midnight in the Switchgrass* (2021)—a film review by Belle Blake.” (para. 1). Both the original and relaunched posts were accompanied by promotional posts and streams across our many platforms.



Fig 2: An image of *Righting the Wrongs of Megan Fox's Past*.

### Blog Posts: Barbie Gets a W

“Barbie Gets a W” was not on the original blog. I wrote it to accompany Belle Blake’s reuploaded film review of *Midnight in the Switchgrass* (2021). In this review, I argue that Greta Gerwig’s

*Barbie* (2023) revolves around fear-of sex workers, its feminist parentage, men, and itself (Pietrangelo-Porco, 2023c, para. 5). I also did an accompanying promotional campaign for this post (see Appendix 2 for additional materials).



Fig 3: An image of *Barbie Gets a W*.

### Blog Posts: Red Umbrella Day

“Red Umbrella Day: A Retrospective” is a commemorative post for a joint charity Twitch livestream between *The Sex Work Historian*, the British Columbia Coalition of Experiential Communities (BCCEC), and Sex Workers Outreach Project Los Angeles (SWOP LA). The 8-hour livestream took place in December 2022 and was the largest collaboration for *The Sex Work Historian*, collectively raising \$1000 USD divided amongst the BCCEC and SWOP LA. (Pietrangelo-Porco, 2023d, para. 11). “Red Umbrella Day”—the blog post—celebrates/documents this livestream and its many accomplishments (See Appendix 3).



Fig. 4: An image of *Red Umbrella Day: A Retrospective*.

### Check My Notes

In the foundational *Decolonizing Methodologies* (1999), Linda Tuhiwai Smith argues that “research” is a dirty word for many Indigenous Peoples. The idea of research being “dirty” applies to many (and often intersecting) marginalized folks and communities—including sex workers.

—Pietrangelo-Porco, 2023a, para. 138

In addition to collaborations and blog posts, *The*

*Sex Work Historian* provides what I call “Notes.” Aside from the knowledge contributions of our collaborators, notes are this effort’s most meaningful element. Some notes act as general pieces of information. Other notes outline the blog’s praxis, such as its stance on naming. However, the majority of the notes are where most of the sex work history can be found in *The Sex Work Historian*.

### Further Reading/Viewing

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### Contributors/Collaborators<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> As part a *The Sex Work Historian’s* practice of tangibility, this section highlights the voices of my contributors and collaborators, the necessary work they

are doing, and ways they can be supported (monetarily or otherwise).

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## Acknowledgments

*The Sex Work Historian*, in all its components, would not exist without sex workers. Sex workers have been speaking for themselves long before this effort's conception and will do so long after. My collaborators and contributors are no exception. They have fundamentally shaped this effort and me in countless ways. Their contributions cannot go unacknowledged. Thank you, Steph Sia, for being the blog's first contributor. Your guidance throughout this process informed our collaboration and guided me as I navigated the online landscape. You are skilled, wise, beautiful, talented, and the most hardworking person I've ever known. Thank you, Belle Blake, for being the blog's first guest post. Your film review is by far my favourite piece to date. Not only are you a skilled and clever writer, but you are an intelligent and thoughtful human being. I'm grateful to have worked with you and to call you my friend. In 2022, I was honoured to join the fight against whorephobia alongside the British Columbia Coalition of Experiential Communities (BCCEC) and Sex Worker Outreach Project Los Angeles (SWOP LA) in a joint Red Umbrella Day Livestream. This livestream was my largest collaboration and one of the most rewarding. Thank you to the folks at the BCCEC for putting up with my emails, taking early meetings, providing honorariums, and being pillars of Canadian sex work activism. Thank you to the folks at SWOP LA for helping with event organizing and money management, social media promotion, for taking part in the stream, for the incredible work you do, and for having smiles that light up a room. You all hold a special place in my heart. Thank you.

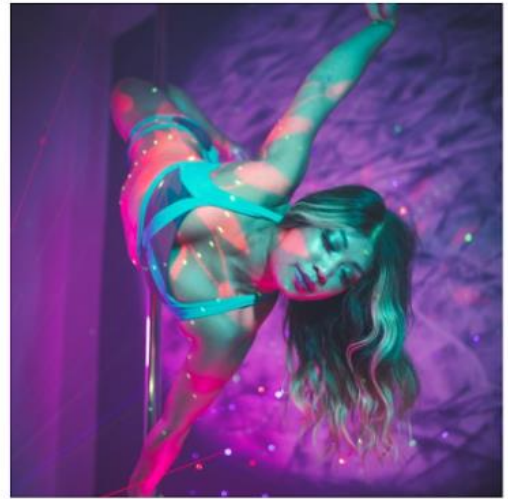
## Author Biography

Evania Pietrangelo-Porco (she/her) is a sex worker ally/accomplice, trained historian, blogger, abolitionist, and, as she likes to say, an opinionated feminist harpy. She is getting her doctorate in History—focusing on 20th-century Canadian, 19th and 20th-century feminist, 20th-century North American Indigenous, and contemporary sex work history. Evania won the Joseph-Armand Bombardier CGS-Master's Scholarship (2019) and the Social Sciences and Humanities Research

Council of Canada Doctoral Grant (2022). She has published works in the *Journal of International Women's Studies*, *Canada Watch Magazine*, and the *Canadian Historical Association's Teaching and Learning Blog*. She has presented at conferences hosted by the University of Guelph, York University, the University of Buffalo, and the University of Calgary. Evania also holds various professional affiliations with the Critical Trafficking and Sex Work Studies Cluster, Centre for Feminist Studies, Robarts Centre, and the History of Indigenous Peoples Network. Lastly, and perhaps more importantly, she has worked with many members of the sex worker/working community, including the British Columbia Coalition of Experiential Communities (BCCEC) and Sex Workers Outreach Project Los Angeles (SWOP LA).



## Appendix I: Collaborations page and Art gallery



2022 Red Umbrella Day Charity Livestream!

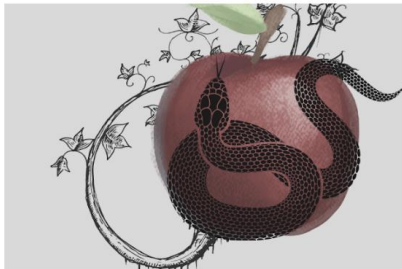
Stripped-Down: A Collaboration with Stripped by SIA

Figure 5: An image of the collaborator's page for the original website.

Home Mission Blog Exhibits Contact

The Sex Work Historian

Twitter Instagram YouTube



2023-02-23

### Succubus

This is the art piece for the collaboration between *The Sex Work Historian* and Belle Blake. Its title, "Succubus," was inspired by Belle's observations about fear.

Across various cultures, succubi are described as demons occupying female/femme bodies. They overtake these bodies so they can steal men's souls through sex. Thus, therefore, are creatures to be feared. Succubi especially embody cis-hetero patriarchal fears surrounding uncontrolled (and uncontrollable) female sexuality. The artwork's differing elements represent this by encapsulating various forms of fear.

The vines represent feminine "impurity" Or rather, the Western Christian concept of "virginity and fears surrounding cis white women's purity in particular.

Snakes symbolize fertility, rebirth, and transformation. They also represent sensual desire and its supposed venomous effect.

The apple represents temptation. It is associated with Eve (the Greek goddess of erotic and discord) and Eve (Christianity's original "fallen woman"). The apple embodies women/femme persons' "destructive" capacities and their supposed temptations to men. The colour red also represents sensuality. The apple featured here is left in a muted red colour to symbolize the socio-cultural erasing of women/femme persons' sexuality more broadly.

In many ways, the fears surrounding succubi are the same fears surrounding female/femme sex workers.

Figure 6: An image taken from *The Sex Work Historian's* art gallery. The artwork accompanied the original release of Belle's film review.

## Appendix 2: Righting the Wrongs and Barbie Gets a W



Figure 7: An image of the blog's Femtober campaign taken from my Instagram. Femtober promoted both the relaunch of "Righting the Wrongs" and the release of "Barbie Gets a W."



Figure 8: The promotional image for the relaunched "Righting the Wrongs" taken from my Instagram.

### Appendix 3: Red Umbrella Day

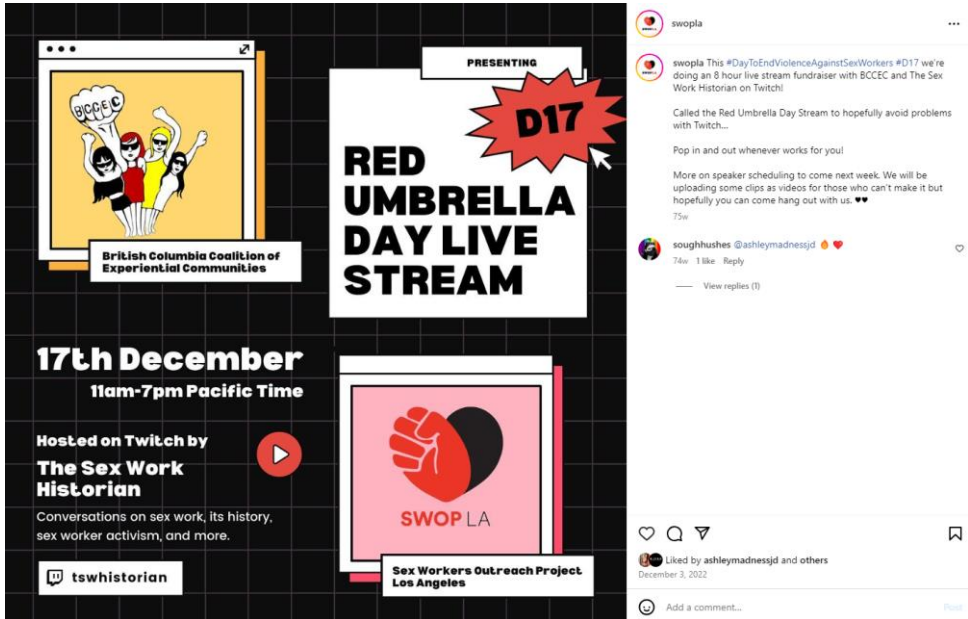


Figure 9: A promotional image for the original Red Umbrella Day 2022 livestream pulled from SWOP LA’s Instagram.

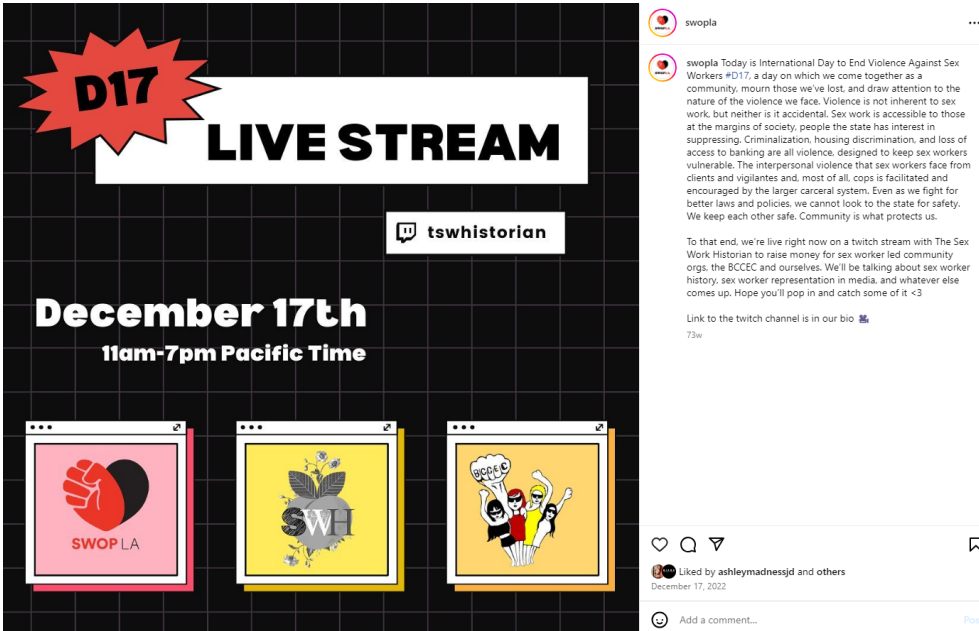


Figure 10: A post discussing the significance of The International Day to End Violence Against Sex Workers (Red Umbrella Day) and the joint livestream pulled from SWOP LA’s Instagram.