

# The Writings of Thelma Hell

2017-2019





***Thelma is Gone - Woman, whore, artist and activist***  
***Thierry Schaffauser, December 18<sup>th</sup> 2019***

Thelma had several names. She also went by Zelda, but for the close circle of her “activist family”, she was Maia. Maia decided to leave us on the night before 17th December, the International Day to End Violence Against Sex Workers. We didn’t see it coming, and her final post on 1st December on this blog could, with hindsight, be seen as a last goodbye.

Maia was multifaceted and had many qualities. She had done all kinds of jobs, practiced different art forms, was engaged in the cause as an activist, and was co-author of this blog. She was sensitive and intelligent, and understood everything very quickly. I met her for the first time at the “Festival Explicit” in Montpellier. She was spokesperson for the STRASS [French sex workers union] in Marseille, where earlier that year she and Marianne Chargois had organized a series of performance nights for “Les Putains de Rencontres”.

She was the author of the guide “Féminisme pute pour les nul.le.s” [“Whore feminism for dummies”] and was the first sex worker-rapper to be interviewed in Madame Rap.

Maia was full of promise. She was one of only a handful of activists who spoke openly, since most can still only do so anonymously. She had a real political instinct and was not afraid to take risks or to confront the different forms of authority that stood in her way. To us she seemed strong and powerful, but for sex workers, visibility makes you a target. Maia fought against all of the forms of discrimination with which she was faced in her professional and artistic circles.

Personalities like hers are so rare. Maia’s passing is a huge loss for the sex work community: all of her actions were so full of courage and determination. I can only describe the shock amongst us at yet another hammer blow. In so little time she gave us so much, and everything that she did will stay with us. We’ll miss you, sister.

*When a young woman destined for the intelligentsia joins the ranks of the margins and the whores.*

Let me be frank. If I've taken up writing again, it's not because I intend to say any old thing. The lines that follow will be violent, polemical, angry, revolutionary, feminist, and disgusted. I'm shaking a little myself at the prospect of writing them. The millennial oppression exercised by the patriarchal system over the class of women has stacked the deck of my existence against me from the very beginning, so offering myself the luxury of discussing it in crude terms seems to me a reasonable form of revenge.

How did I end up tricking? None of your business. The sinuous constructions of my identity and my political thought are tightly linked to my private life and I don't want to talk about them with just anyone. And what's more, quite honestly I would be afraid of disappointing: I was never an illegal immigrant, I never suffered sexual abuse as a child or a teenager, I have never been mentally ill, I studied at prestigious national art schools that I entered via competitive exams and which I left with diplomas. I managed to pay my way through 7 years of study with a means-tested bursary, housing benefit, and odd jobs. For someone so precarious I got by pretty well, and towards the end of all that I could even afford to turn the heating on in winter. Nothing spectacular, then.

I started tricking as a student. It wasn't an easy choice, but before selling sexual services I had been a waitress, a telephone operator, a cashier, a babysitter, a museum invigilator, a cinema usher, a bookshop worker, a grape harvester, a cleaner and a photographer for Google, and none of these jobs had allowed me to be happy or to have a decent standard of living. The "phenomenon of student prostitution", *c'est moi*, basically. But my dates with clients were always logistical/health/security operations worthy of a military campaign rather than a helpless blonde girl rolling around in satin sheets stroking her face and lips. Sorry not sorry.

Pretty quickly, I felt that clients expected emotions of me that I didn't have. To better adhere to the image of the trade I should have hidden myself away, should have been ashamed, should have been afraid of a whole load of things, should have felt disgusted by myself and by my clients. I can't say that all my clients are perfect gentlemen, far from it, but overall I have been lucky, since they behave like your average straight male: fantasies that are sometimes gross, sickening courtesy, and abuse of their position of power. The violence that I have experienced as a whore is the violence of systemic heterosexuality, which I had already experienced as part of a couple, within my family, at work, or simply walking down the street. Sorry to those readers who think of sexuality as a perfect osmosis between two bodies in fusion, to those who are convinced that the couple arises from the free, equal, loving and respectful union of two people. Take a quick mental inventory of your experiences and you'll soon see that nothing could be further from the truth. Sacralising sex, making it into a gauge of loyalty, and considering feelings as proof of an equitable relationship will get us nowhere. After Weinstein, #metoo, #balancetonporc [#shopyourpig, a French hashtag used by women to share their experiences of sexual harassment and violence] and *Paye Ton Couple* [a blog that invites women to share their experiences of sexism and violence within couples], it is time to face our reality. And yet I've lost count of the number of times that, out of love, politeness, or simply out of dedication to my status as a woman, I have fucked half-desperate and waiting for it to be over, and where – on top of everything else – no one offered me money in exchange, nor asked me if I felt dirtied or abused. Now, at least things are clear: I fuck for work or because I want to. Apologies to the numerous boys who I've asked to go home, sometimes late at night or early in the morning, simply because I prefer to sleep alone in my bed, and who looked at me in amazement, or insistence, convinced that I was making a bad joke by refusing to give myself to them. No, *messieurs*, I don't owe you a thing. I won't sleep with you just to console your pride or just for your pleasure, even if you're nice, even if you're cute. I have become much more independent sexually since I have been a whore, the proof that we are all already more or less whores, and that everything else is just a question of framing.



### Écoutez "La loyale"

sur Amazon Music Unlimited (ad)



Allô?

Allô...?

Pourquoi tu raccroches quand j'tappelle?  
Pourquoi tu réponds jamais à mes cartes postales?

Pourquoi tu m'fais attendre toute seule sur le tarmac?  
Pourquoi tu m'donnes jamais d'nouvelles?

Pourquoi tu m'aimes pas?

C'est pas juste...

Moi j'ai un grand cœur!

J'suis pleine de belles valeurs

J'ai toujours le mot qui faut

La patience...

J'fais d'mon mieux pour réchauffer les cœurs  
Si t'es mou t'inquiète pas moi j'ai de l'énergie pour deux!

J'pourrais t'accompagner dans tes projets

Croire en toi

Moi j'suis pour l'égalité entre les femmes et les hommes

Et pour qu'on laisse les putes tranquilles

Et qu'on leur paye même une retraite

Parce qu'elles cotisent, hein

Elles payent des impôts

J'suis prête à aider tous les gens qu'j'aime

Même ceux que j'connais pas

C'est vrai qu'parfois j'ai l'air de faire la gueule

J'calcule pas les gens

Mais c'est qu'j'suis dans mes pensées!

C'est vrai qu'parfois j'suis rude

Un peu trop exigeante

Mais bon on s'en fout de ça!

Non?

C'qui compte c'est d'être loyale

Et solide

De toujours assumer

De s'battre pour ses idées

Et puis de communiquer

On dit jamais assez les choses

## ***Scandal in Nice: a Whore Speaks (1/2)***

***Thelma Hell, December 26<sup>th</sup> 2017***

### ***How seedy fantasies, collective representations and bien-pensant liberals put sex workers in real danger.***

On 13th December, I travelled to Nice at the invitation of one Mr. Vignaux. A psychoanalyst by profession, this older gentleman is the founder of a discussion group “for contemporary ethics”, for which he regularly organizes thematic debates and workshops. On that Wednesday a few weeks ago, the aim of the discussion was to determine whether or not prostitution was compatible with “the liberation of women”. A vast subject, on which I have more than a few things to say. I therefore naturally accepted Mr. Vignaux’s respectful invitation to give my two cents on this societal question, before doing some research on the group and the profiles of the other guests.

In addition to Mr. Vignaux, who would moderate the debate, there would be five guests. Amongst this group were two representatives of ALC / Les Lucioles, a charity “for victims of prostitution”, a representative of Médecins du Monde, a representative of l’Amicale du Nid, and myself. I immediately noticed that this was to be a majority male debate (the speaker from l’Amicale du Nid was the only other woman) and that, with the exception of Médecins du Monde, all the charities represented were abolitionists; what’s more, I was the only guest to have first-hand experience of tricking. I struggle to imagine what kind of “debate” could have taken place without my presence, given the whorephobia of all the other speakers. By coincidence, Nice was the city in which I lived when I started out as a sex worker. As a recent arrival from a small village in Provence where the cost of living was low, I quickly realized that in Nice my bank balance was going to melt away like snow in bright sunlight, and it was this that led me to take the plunge. And now, here I was again, having to explain that we are not bad women, we are not victims, we are not tumours in the social body: we simply want our rights.

I arrived as planned in the auditorium where the debate was to be held. To open the discussion, Mr. Vignaux gave a short introduction to the subject, complete with the obligatory powerpoint presentation, in which a handful of historical events were thrown in with one or two literary references and a generous dose of personal fantasies. Then, it was over to me. He didn’t want me to speak from the stage but rather from my seat in the audience – as if he wanted to remain the sole leader of the debate. However, I felt it was important to have eye contact with my listeners, so I pretended that my microphone wasn’t working in order to get up on stage. I began by returning to several points in Mr. Vignaux’s presentation, in order to offer a few correctives to parts which were only half-true, others which were false, and others which were outright dangerous. A quote from Philippe Brenot had attracted my attention in particular. “With prostitution, the man pays so that the woman cannot fix any limits”. It seemed to me that it was essential to rectify this notion from the outset, in case someone in the auditorium took this statement seriously. This idea seemed to me to be extremely harmful to the whores of the world. The very idea of a paid sexual service is based on a contractual exchange between the sex worker and their client. This contract fixes the fee for the service, but also the conditions (the client has to shower first, for example), the practices that will be involved, and, conversely, those which will be excluded (“taboos” in the jargon of the trade). The clients are thus perfectly aware of the limits of the encounter that they are paying for, and it is shocking to suggest that, from the moment that we sell sexual services, we suddenly become incapable of giving or denying our consent. On the contrary, it is fundamental for us and for our safety that our conditions and limits be understood and strictly respected.

Let’s be clear. If a client pays me for a date of one hour, and if, despite my having previously informed them that the service will not include anal sex, the client forces me to have anal sex during the date, then this is non-consensual sex: rape. Saying or writing that sex workers are paid to “not fix any limits” immediately relegates them to the status of submissive women, objects, sex slaves.

But this fantasy, drawn from the purest misogynist tradition, feeds into a false collective unconscious which stigmatizes sex workers and makes it ever more difficult for them to obtain effective recognition of the limits that they do, in fact, fix prior to any date. We know how ineffectual the current legal system is with regards to protecting women who are victims of violence, and the extent to which the judicial process can often represent a further form of oppression for these women. So imagine what sex workers have to face when they go to make a complaint against a rapist. Who's going to take them seriously? As soon as they encounter the first link in the chain, the police officer charged with taking a statement, they are already out as a sex worker, and the officer will likely spend the better part of the interview discrediting the victim's words: "huh, but you usually like cock, don't you?" or the more polite but rare "but *madame*, if this man paid you, then you had an agreement, didn't you?". The stigma of the whore is not some mere annoyance: it is powerful, violent, and degrading. The conclusion is obvious: for the simple reason that we transgress the norm by using sexuality as a tool in our work, we prostitutes become rapeable women in the eyes of the police and the law. So you can imagine that seeing the engaged and receptive audience from the stage as I spoke was, for me, something like a small victory.



## ***Scandal in Nice: a Whore Speaks (2/2)***

***Thelma Hell, June 10<sup>th</sup> 2018***

### ***Sex work and student precarity: when experience allows for the deconstruction of stigmas and representations***

Since this blog doubles up as a diary, I'll start out by admitting that I would have written this text earlier but the idea of reliving the Nice episode flooded me with anxiety. Weeks and then months elapsed without my having been able to channel the anger that gnaws away at me and the bitterness that haunts me. The words have stayed stuck inside me, little open wounds that can't heal. Mea culpa. I'm sure my emotions will get the better of the structure in this text, but today I'm going for it.

On 13th December last year, after having declared in an affront to the basic rules of respect and security that "With prostitution, the man pays so that the woman cannot fix any limits", Mr. Vignaux went even further in his stigmatisation of sex workers and his alienating representations. In his speech, which was given to open a debate on the question of whether or not prostitution was compatible with the liberation of women, he made the following statement:

*"Money has a decisive place within prostitution. Money is either carefully saved in order to start a business, or frittered away to give an impression of belonging to a privileged social class [...] It can be a question of an opportunist desire to resolve a financial need [...] or an unconscious desire, since money bolsters self-worth and allows one to combat very marked feelings of inferiority."*

You might say that in some ways he's right. But this statement is only partially true, and more than anything else is fundamentally demagogic. Why? Because the notion that money is "frittered away to give an impression of belonging to a privileged social class" and that it "allows one to combat very marked feelings of inferiority" suggests that whores are subject to a pathological dependence upon money. And so what do we see, in our meticulously illustrated collective imaginary? A venal woman, a profligate spender fixated by luxury, a capricious *cagole* whose aim isn't to earn a decent quality of life but instead to deck herself out in luxurious dresses and priceless jewellery while snapping duckface selfies with the latest telephone to reassure herself by exhibiting to the masses as many exterior symbols of wealth as possible. Listening to Gérard Vignaux speak about whores I imagined Kim K. strutting around or Marie-Antoinette idly declaring "Let them eat cake" (which, by the way, is a historical fabrication – she never said that).

So, yes, this fantasy exists. And it hasn't come out of nowhere: for years, it has been fed and circulated through television, social networks, pop music and the media in general, which have recently been fascinated by the life of Zahia Dehar [a model and designer implicated in a scandal involving sex workers and footballers from the French national team]. But in reality, although the media are besotted by this kind of fantasy it-girl with a seedy past, this kind of woman represents only a tiny minority of sex workers. Most often recruited through modelling agencies and TV shows, they operate in the secret circuits of power, organized crime and big business. If a tiny handful of them eventually decide to go into business seriously, most stop as soon as they realize the human "cost" of a pair of Louboutins. Others find easier ways of making money: product placement on Instagram, for example, or selling stories to the media about their girlfriends who have decided to continue working.

Sex work is not "easy money". Quite the contrary: money earned from sex work is hard earned. The famous "dependence on money" and "feelings of inferiority" that Mr. Vignaux mentions are real, I won't deny that, but they would be better summed up with just one word: precarity. I'll happily acknowledge that all people in a situation of precarity are in a situation of financial dependence and social exclusion. It's a bit like acknowledging that water is wet. But of course the debate wasn't oriented in this direction, and so it seemed essential that I underline this. Mr. Vignaux perhaps felt offended, wrong-footed...



Only he can know the emotions that compelled him, at the exact moment when I was asking my audience to be wary of lazy conflation and approximations, to publicly interrupt me and say, with the bored and mistrustful air of an expert:

*"Well, come on, we know that today some young women, students especially, are not necessarily in grave need and get into prostitution in order to buy themselves an expensive handbag..."*, before adding with a repellent certainty, *"In fact, that seems to be true in your case."*

Silence. I hear, digest, channel, take note. I look at my bag: a small fluorescent pink backpack purchased at Go Sport for 4 euros.

I therefore asked, politely but, I imagine, somewhat bluntly, on what exactly Mr. Vignaux was basing his statement, and whether it was by any chance because I was wearing glasses, had white skin, and seemed intelligent that he assumed that I was bourgeois. A wave of unease swept the audience. To clear things up, I specified that I had paid for my seven years of study with a means-tested bursary that I received as well as housing benefit and odd-jobs, that I was from a precarious milieu, and that it was in fact when I discovered the cost of living in Nice when I moved there for my second master's that I began to turn tricks. Amongst my colleagues, I know one woman who worked the street in Paris and charged 20 francs for a blowjob on the rue Saint Denis, saving banknote after banknote to buy a small *chambre de bonne* and free herself from the anxiety of eviction. I know another who funds festivals and community arts projects, while others deplete their savings accounts so that our union, deprived of all financial aid by the cabinet of [minister for gender equality] Marlène Schiappa, can continue its work. No, we don't trick for fun, or for luxury. We trick so that we can live – survive – and pursue our projects, and this because we were born and continue to live on the wrong side of liberal capitalism. Backed into a corner but undoubtedly used to controlling the terms of the debate, Vignaux stammered:

*"No, I mean... not 'bourgeois' that's not what I meant... But... I mean... That some women are not completely lacking in tools..."*

Ah! There we go Gérard. That wasn't so hard, was it? There is no such thing as prostitution, but many prostitutions. And yes, whores are good at fucking, and on top of that they're smart. They can speak to an audience, develop political thought, and organize themselves as a counter-power. They aren't just professionals of sexuality, but also keen observers, magicians of representation, able to slip into a set of suspenders for a client one minute and the next put on a pair of dungarees to fix a car or do some DIY, write an article, turn back into a model employee or go home to look after their kids. Mercy! Not an easy pill to swallow for the patriarchy, which thought it could so easily impose its authority by reducing us to worn-out Barbies. And believe me, it's hard, very hard, painful even, to look you in the eye and to realize that, when it comes to us whores, your stupidity immediately outweighs your humanity. Every day, we have to face this kind of thing. Sincere and politically engaged, we go on, veins open and the truth on our tongues amidst the mocking laughter and the unshakeable power of images and of the Spectacle.

Which brings me to an episode that occurred a few months ago. Following the titillating advertising campaign run by the website RichMeetBeautiful last autumn, the national media – thrilled to be able to weigh in on the taboo subject of intergenerational sexuality – suddenly became interested in the precarity experienced by students thanks to this sex angle, although of course they would never have bothered to discuss the five-euro cut to monthly housing benefit. In the midst of this polemic, a guy from Europe 1 [radio station] rang me up:

*"Bonjour Madame, I hope I'm not bothering you, I'm looking to speak to the STRASS oh perfect well so I'm working on a segment and I was wondering if it would be possible for you to put me in touch with a young woman, preferably a student, who's being kept by just one or two clients and who, in fact, doesn't feel like she is prostituting herself at all. The segment will be broadcast tomorrow so I would need to speak to her sometime today."*

Silence. I swallowed, scratched my ear, and asked him to repeat his request.

He replied very distinctly: "A young woman, a student, who's being kept by one or two clients only, and who, in fact, **doesn't feel like she is prostituting herself**. Today." So I had to face facts: this man, an educated adult who (in theory) had a training in critical thinking and who was, to boot, in the business of broadcasting information and representations, was seriously contacting a self-organized union as if we were a casting agency ready to hand over a colleague in the sole aim of feeding into a low-rent sexual imaginary worth of the "teenager" and/or "step father" category on YouPorn. I gently sent him packing whilst nonetheless pointing out the absurdity of his request. I added that if he was looking for a woman who "didn't feel like she was prostituting herself", he only had to interview his wife or his mother. The patriarchy governs all relationships between men and women according a continuum of economico-sexual exchanges that encompasses a large spectrum of practices from marriage to prostitution. \* \* In terms of their independence, little separates a married woman (who inherits a new surname, her husband's material goods, his status and his social environment) and a whore (I'll come back to this in a future article). Let's recall, though, that in France today the refusal or the absence of sexual relations within a couple can be invoked in a divorce case as a fault on the grounds that it represents a dereliction of conjugal duty. I ended the call by suggesting very politely – although I couldn't altogether stop myself from being a little bitchy – by saying "please don't hesitate to call me if you ever do a segment that deals with the reality on the ground (increase in assaults, systematic stigmatisation, increasing precarity, STD outbreaks) and the refusal of our fundamental rights." Of course, he never called back.

All day, I couldn't stop thinking about this call, so offended was I by the producer's request. In my daily life, I encounter people from across all social and professional milieus. From the model housewife to the sex worker, from proletarians to the grand bourgeoisie, from crust punks in safe spaces to overworked chief editors, without forgetting of course the champagne-fuelled circle jerks of the contemporary art world. The common ground amongst all these milieus, which all claim to be both critical and tolerant, is their outright discrimination towards whores. But we whores – unlike drug addicts or homeless people – have the advantage of presiding over the heart of the perversity of their representations. While we elicit their mawkish pity, their contempt, and their stigmatisation, we also have the scandalous power to get people off. The combination of these two reactions allows us to become case studies in depravity. Constantly available (because all we do is fuck), we ought to thank them for the space that they allot to us in the great circus of national news and information, we should be proud of our moment in the spotlight. We, the unloved, the bad women, we should be flattered that the intelligentsia deigns to pay attention to us and to make our community an object of study in the service of government propaganda.

Today, this makes me so angry that I dream about killing. And by killing, even if it's only in my dreams, I simply reaffirm my transgressive position. I understand that society has no place for me, no more than I do for society, and that to survive as a free man I have no other choice but to stray into rebellion or delinquency. The slightly too lonely client asks me for a blowjob and doesn't make a fuss about forking over the cash. The journalist from Europe 1, on the other hand, a sleepwalking puppet in the service of power, asks me to hand over a sister, to compromise myself by joining a bogus system and agreeing to betray human values on behalf of the sacrosanct media representation. In exchange, he offers no money and nothing but the mirage of a social ascension from the pavement to reality television. A passage, as brief as it is illusory, into the "real" side of life: a norm that has become so fragile that it must solicit our help at the same time as it undermines us in order to perpetuate and stabilize itself.

Be it in Nice or at Europe 1, I can only bitterly observe the same contemptuous condescension whose sole objective is to turn us into walking advertisements for obscenity so that bourgeois morality can maintain its complacency and so that women remain docile under the threat of exclusion.

\* \* On this point, see the work of anthropologist Paola Tabet, *La grande arnaque. Sexualité des femmes et échange economico-sexuel*, Paris, L'Harmattan, 2004.



## ***Whore Feminism for Dummies***

***Thelma Hell, 5<sup>th</sup> July 2018***

***La maman ou la putain? If this means nothing to you, read our 4-point guide!***

### ***1. “No bad women, only bad laws” – A history of dissimulation and lies.***

Though it's often labelled an oxymoron, whore feminism exists, and has existed for around fifty years. I'll admit that unless you're an expert on the question, this might be hard to believe, given the extent to which the struggles of whores been undermined by an all-powerful Morality. Through a series of deftly orchestrated historical reconstructions, today's institutional feminism – which presents itself as the rightful heir to the sexual revolution of the 1970s – invokes the heritage of the MLF [French Women Liberation Movement], Simone Veil, and *The Second Sex*.

And yet sex workers are at the heart of the History of feminism, and have always fought against oppression. In 1975, the occupation of the Church of Saint-Nizier in Lyon by prostitutes cleared the way for a broader protest movement. By occupying the church, these women denounced police oppression and the unjust fines that were regularly handed down to them by the authorities. This mobilization spread throughout France, and represents a historical turning point in that it was the first time that a community of sex workers organized around so large a collective action and at a national scale.

In a rare turn of events, they were supported by Catholic social activists and feminist allies. Even Simone de Beauvoir dropped by in between two manuscripts. The tracts and banners of the MLF bore the message *“Nous sommes toutes des prostituées”* [“We are all prostitutes”]. With this slogan, activists looked to send a clear a message: no matter their social position, all women are subject to the same oppressive dynamics inherent to patriarchal societies, and all women need to rise up together to demand the same freedoms and the same right to existence enjoyed by men.

Building on the occupation of Saint-Nizier in June 1975, sex workers continued their mobilization and organized meetings like the one held at the Palais de la Mutualité in November that year. Their explicit demands were the recognition of their activity as work, and the respect of their right to self-determination. At the time, Françoise Giroud, Secretary of State for the Feminine Condition, refused to respond to their questions and declared herself “incapable” of acting upon the demands of these activists, who were simply seeking the same rights as other workers. Faced with the people's demands, a deaf and brutal political power refused all negotiations. Following strong criticism of its indifference, the government ultimately set up an investigative committee on prostitution. The initiative resulted in no noteworthy progress for those concerned.

Thanks to the magic wand of patriarchal History, the importance of whore-led revolutions for the history of feminism is no longer discussed. By common agreement – present company excepted – all that has been swept under the rug like an ugly family secret. Because ultimately, the history of whores is a bit like the history of colonialism: a stain on the nation's pride. Telling the truth could even open the floodgates, motivate activists, provoke public debates, popular uprisings, OR EVEN a third sexual revolution. More than enough to wrong-foot the Élysée [French presidential palace]. No time for all that. However, from 1975 up until today, although relegated to the margins whore feminism has continued to develop, and can be articulated around three main axes.

### ***2. “Sex work is work” – Sex work as work.***

By demanding the respect of their fundamental freedoms and rights, as well as the integration of sex work into labour laws, sex workers help to make visible the sexual services that all women must provide free of charge in our capitalo-sexist societies.

At the same time as whore resistance movements began to emerge in the 1970s, other feminist movements began to call for the recognition and compensation of domestic labour in order to counter the assumption that housework should be unwaged. Some of these feminists supported

the demands of sex workers that their labour be recognized as such. They considered that sexual services within the couple belonged to the class of tasks that “naturally” befell women and/or wives, and therefore – like housework – deserved recognition and compensation. By making sex work visible as work, prostitutes clearly had a place at the heart of feminist currents of the time, forming part of the resistance to the (universal) injunction according to which women must satisfy, without compensation, masculine desires. Long before I began sex work, I experienced first-hand the world of the ‘straight couple’, in which my private life was punctuated by “*Babe, give me a blowjob, please, I really need to relax, I’m under a lot of pressure at work in the moment, you know...*”, by “*Babe, can’t you make a bit of an effort? Would it kill you to wear g-strings more often? You know I hate those briefs*”, by non-consensual sex acts, for example when I was asleep. A series of violent acts and imperatives protected by the status of heteronormative Love.

Anthropologist Paola Tabet talks about “*economico-sexual exchanges*”. In her book *La Grande Arnaque, Sexualité des femmes et échange económico-sexuel* [*The Great Scam: Women’s Sexuality and Economico-sexual Exchange*], she observes the way in which our patriarchal, capitulo-sexist societies dispossess women of the means of production and deny them access to wealth. To attain either of these, women are therefore obliged – often unconsciously – to capitalize on their bodies and their sexualities, using these as a means of exchange that affords them access to more resources, to greater security. As I mentioned in my previous post, the “continuum of economico-sexual exchanges” can encompass a large spectrum of practices, from marriage to prostitution. In reality, in terms of their independence little separates a married woman (who inherits a new surname, her husband’s material goods, his status and his social environment) and a whore (who receives money directly and spends it as she chooses).

In 2000, psychologist Gail Pheterson (another leading feminist ally of the prostitutes’ movement since the 1970s) analyzed the relations between men and women through what she called the “prism of prostitution”. Building on Paola Tabet’s work, she considers that prostitution exists apart from other forms of economico-sexual exchanges, a stigmatized and illegitimate part of the continuum. And sex workers indeed continue to be considered as a category separate from the broader class of women...

### **3. *SLUT (noun): a woman with the morals of a man – sex work as gender transgression.***

This third point is essential because it (partially) explains why sex workers are systematically stigmatized as a dark, subversive mass.

Gail Pheterson suggests that the reason why sex workers are stigmatized and excluded from the *continuum* is that these women dare to explicitly demand financial or material compensation for the sexual services that they provide, and that in doing so they reveal the fact that these services are not part of some *natural* process but are, in reality, *work*. To a certain extent, sex workers demand the same freedoms of existence as men by refusing to sacralise sex and instead practicing their sexuality according to their desires, their pleasure, or their economic interests.

While expressions of femininity (or of masculinity) are nowadays more diverse and more frequently subject to attempts to undo binaries (particularly in queer circles), some expressions of gender can function as restrictive stereotypes. For many sex workers, it is obvious that the forms of sexuality, seduction, and emotion that they need to mobilize when they present themselves constitute an exercise in performance that is directly linked to the influence exerted on the contemporary codes of femininity by particular types of representation. As whores, we accept to *perform femininity*. As feminist whores who work with sexuality, we are well placed to observe and understand the artificiality of the gender that all women are compelled to perform on an everyday basis. Make-up, outfits, underwear, hair, and accessories are so many material underpinnings of an edifice constructed exclusively according to the logic of male fantasies and their corresponding sexual and pornographic representations.

However, for sex workers who perform this femininity as part of their job, the performance of gender demanded of them outside of their professional activities, in their everyday lives, can

become harder to bear – not least because it is unpaid. Think about it: why make the effort to dress up, look sexy, smile, have perfect nails, and pay attention to men's (uninteresting) conversation if we aren't getting paid for it? Speaking for myself, since I became a sex worker, I spend most of my "civilian" life in leggings and a crop top (what some of my friends refer to as my "pyjamas"), not out of negligence but because I feel totally free from the perpetual injunction to seduce that is imposed upon women as a class.

Of course, it is important to recognize the fact that this injunction to be feminine is not the preserve of sex workers. Many of us have worked in other professions where we have also had to pay attention to our appearance, our outfits, our attitudes. When I worked as a cultural mediator, in the middle of a heatwave my manager came to see me with the following discreet reminder: "Thelma, don't forget that tomorrow you're in charge of the visit for the sponsors and the patrons, make sure you don't wear sandals and shorts like you do for the general public." Afraid of losing my job or having to endure unwelcome comments, I fell into line. A few years ago, a friend of mine was interning as part of her nursing studies, and was also called in to see her managers who considered that her necklines were inappropriate for the hospital environment. There are countless examples of this kind of episode, including in the highest spheres of power, where women politicians are subject to all kinds of comments on their physical appearance or on the emotions that they express (or fail to express) in public. On an anecdotal level, we could point to the totally unremarkable floral dress recently worn by [housing minister] Cécile Duflot that led to her being ridiculed and whistled as she gave a speech in the Assemblée Nationale. This scandal had the merit, at least, of revealing the extent to which everyday sexism is ingrained in our contemporary societies, regardless of social milieu. It's almost as if the notion of "appropriate clothing" is decided by a handful of libidinous, phallogocentric bigwigs...

Here again is an aspect of women's work which they are forced to carry out for free. Women are not paid more than men despite the extra minutes that they work "getting ready" to "be presentable" at work, nor for the emotional labour that they are expected to carry out in contrast to their male counterparts. In general, women are actually paid less than men.

We can thus conclude that by rendering visible the artificiality of gender and the uncompensated, performative work required of women, sex workers emerge as a third gender. Perfectly capable of mastering, mobilizing and exchanging feminine attributes for financial compensation, their "professional" bodies sometimes bear little or no resemblance to their everyday personae. In this, they are not recognized as respectable women but rather singled out as unruly elements that upset the gender binary. For example, they are tolerated in nocturnal public space, typically considered by society as strictly masculine domain. In fact, in contemporary society, a woman alone in the city at night is a whore (who is working) and/or a vulnerable woman (who can be attacked or raped).

#### ***4. "Proud to be Whores" – Empowerment against the stigma of the whore.***

It is important to remember that the "stigma of the whore" is by no means limited to sex workers, but is rather a weapon used by the patriarchy to control and regulate the behaviour, speech and movement of all women.

Because the stigmatisation of the figure of the prostitute makes possible the creation of a separate gender identity within the class of women, it also functions as a counter-model that contrasts with the legitimate statuses of wife and mother (to give two examples). The insult "*pute*" ["whore"] therefore not only serves to stigmatise sex workers but is also weaponized to malign all and any initiatives and gestures of emancipation, rebellion, affirmation, or gender transgression by women. To give just one example – admittedly, an example which is of personal importance to me, as I'll explain later – rap music today functions as a platform for the oppression of women, and this regardless of the talent of rap artists. A true business of male domination, in which gang rape is transformed into art, slut shaming is a song that we all know by heart, and the insult "*pute*" is as necessary a symbol of one's authenticity and belonging to the rap game as a Nike tracksuit. But



despite the omnipresence of this word, rap artists rarely talk about sex work, and instead tend to address their fans and their exes.

In the face of the stigmatisation of the whore, the strategy of “mainstream” feminists (whose leading representatives are my mother, my mother in law, and [minister for gender equality] Marlène Schiappa) has been to encourage women to distance themselves as much as possible from the category of whore, up to and including abolishing this category altogether. But rather than fighting against stigmatisation, this approach tends to simply reinforce the dichotomy between “normal women” and “bad women”. Because of this, it is incompatible with an inclusive, intersectional feminism.

To fight against this stigmatisation, we insist on the term “sex work” because this notion has a number of advantages: it presents an active, autonomous subject (in contrast to the passive “*prostitutée*”) and denaturalizes the provision of sexual services to make them visible as a form of labour. Above all, it accounts for women’s capacity for action and their desire to organize collectively to demand the rights and protections that have been obtained elsewhere by workers’ movements. Finally, it allows for the coming together of different categories of sex workers who otherwise tend to be isolated and divided according to the form that their work takes (street workers, escorts, strippers, camgirls, porn actresses, etc.).

Another strategy in the struggle against the stigma of the whore is to reappropriate this stigma with pride. This strategy of empowerment is not intended to convey a message about the state of our working conditions or our feelings about these conditions. Whether our experiences are positive or negative, whether we like our work or hate it, we do not need to justify ourselves. When I was 19 years old, I was a cashier, and my working conditions made me very sad. If I was stupid enough to complain about them, people explained that that’s the way things are and that I had better get used to it, and fast. Yet as whores, we have to hide our work, justify ourselves, and explain our activity to others... The ambient discourse could be summed up by the following list of injunctions:

*Listen, cashier, depressed and precarious worker, life is hard, but you had better shut it and get over it. Don’t forget to ask each customer for their loyalty card. If they don’t have one, offer to sign them up for free. Thanks to your smile and your charm, they’ll always be loyal to our chain. We’ll treat you with quiet contempt, but you’ll be forgiven because you allow us to keep our everyday capitalist life ticking over. You, on the other hand, whore, precarious and transgressive worker, you are hereby ordered to explain yourself before Morality. We will openly despise you, and we have the ability to exclude you from the class of women. You will be condemned to the margins, because by making visible the economic genocide and the suppression of women’s voices, you are openly sullyng the dignity of the patriarchy.*

So, if today we are whores and proud of it, it is because we will never allow ourselves to be shamed into silence. We won’t give an inch, and we will continue to fight against whorephobia and the stigma of the whore, forces whose principal aim is to prevent us from revealing what we know about gender relations thanks to our daily confrontations with the injunctions of the patriarchy and with men.



# La maman ou la putain? Si vous n'y connaissez rien...

THELMA HELL 12 DÉCEMBRE 2018 (MISE À JOUR : 12 DÉCEMBRE 2018)



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## "Le Féminisme Pute pour les Nul.le.s" est enfin disponible au format papier !

Envie d'un cadeau de Noël original? De sortir des sentiers battus? De se diriger vers les chemins périlleux de la réalité historique? De s'élever contre les assignations et la censure politique? Ou, tout simplement, d'en apprendre un peu plus sur un sujet qui vous intrigue? Quoi de mieux pour agrémenter vos réunions familiales, débattre en ami.e.s et déconstruire les stigmates tout en peaufinant votre culture générale ?

Bonne nouvelle! En cette période de fêtes de fin d'années: notre article intitulé «Le Féminisme Pute pour les Nul.le.s.» a été revu, corrigé et publié sous la forme d'un petit livret ! Après son succès fracassant à l'occasion du SNAP! Festival à Paris, plusieurs exemplaires sont maintenant disponibles à petits prix.

N'attendez plus! Rendez vous sur [notre point de vente](#) !

À lire et à offrir sans modération!





## ***Why I No Longer Write This Blog***

***Thelma Hell, 1<sup>st</sup> December 2019***

### ***When the stigma of being a whore leads to harassment and stops you from living.***

At the beginning, there is luxury and there is poverty. Poverty, in one of its most elitist forms, means being a graduate of several prestigious schools and yet having no place whatsoever on the job market. Luxury means the luxury of choice. The ability to choose, basically, between working in the kitchen of a McDonalds, sitting in the cash register of a department store, dealing drugs, or turning tricks. Having tried all of these once, I quickly made my choice. Tricking allows me to be self-employed, to choose my hours, my rates, and my conditions, and – because it has historically developed around the struggles of workers and feminists – to situate myself politically. I started off alone and isolated. It's at this point that you are most vulnerable on the sex market. I didn't know any of the codes, the rules, or the concepts, not even that of "outing", and I found myself faced with shady propositions for which I was expected to take disproportionate risks. Fortunately, I quickly understood the strategies of the sketchy client. The client who asks you, for example, to reserve a hotel room and wait for him there with a bottle of champagne. This means revealing your identity, and paying out of your own pocket, and it's a sketchy plan. Another client will offer you thirty thousand euros for a week-long cruise on a yacht. Obviously, no-one knows what's going to happen to you once you're at sea. Another sketchy plan. Others offer a nice apartment in the city centre in exchange for a few dates. Yet another sketchy plan. Accepting this kind of proposition would reveal not only your enormous vulnerability but also your lack of experience, and this is exactly what the ill-intentioned people behind these offers are looking for. One of them once wrote to me saying that he wasn't interested in me because I was "too intelligent and too together". As a solitary young woman, I was lucky enough to have a perfect grasp of French, a roof over my head, and my feet on the ground, all of which kept me out of danger. Later, I learned that the restrictive legislation around sex work in France always comes at the expense of the most vulnerable individuals, whilst doing absolutely nothing to make them safer.

Let's go back to the concepts for a second. I already mentioned "outing". Being out as a sex worker means that you are known as a sex worker and don't have to hide this fact from anyone. It means waiving your anonymity, openly acknowledging that you are a sex worker, and considering sex work first and foremost as a political choice. The slogans are fairly self-explanatory: "sex work is work", "*pute autogérée*" ["self-managed whore"], "my body my choice", "*putain de féministe*" ["fucking feminist"], etc. Being out means being able to say that you're a sex worker without facing a tidal wave of mockery and judgment. Not everyone is lucky enough to be out. Some of us have children, a family life, a private life that we must protect from the violence of others. I saw myself as a renegade and I didn't think I had to hide the fact that I was a sex worker from anyone. I quickly got involved with the STRASS, went to my first protests, gave my first statements to the media, and participated in projects whose watchwords were whore empowerment. I wanted to publicly acknowledge and own my status as a woman, a whore, an artist and an activist. Others had done this before me, and in doing so had left their mark on history. I am proud to be part of this lineage, and I have always foregrounded it in my work, my art and my activism.

My life changed the day that I picked up a microphone and started to make music. I started out singing, but quickly shifted to rap. And so I began rapping as I had begun tricking: alone, isolated, with no experience and no idea of the concepts and the codes of the milieu. Supportive listeners advised me to share my work with so and so, told me I had to meet such and such, but the pro-whore discourse in my texts was always a problem. Similarly, I made mistakes as a young rapper, just as I had made mistakes as an isolated young sex worker with no guidance and no-one looking out for me. However, what I found in the rap game was nothing like my experience tricking. Because I was out, I was open to harassment and the worst kind of shit that people are capable of. The texts and the talent of a whore who raps don't matter: she's still a whore, and the status of whore is incompatible with that of rapper.

I would like to do justice in writing to the nightmare that I went through. To be completely surrounded by words as if caught up in a strong mistral wind, to let them slip out beyond my mind, beyond all kinds of affect, beyond all difficulty. To retranscribe the cruelty at its most raw,

brutal, abject. But I won't even try. The terror, the anxiety, the agony all seem beyond words, out of reach of all coherent and lucid thought.

Online harassment takes the form of a vast web, an arborescence of known or unknown individuals connected by the sole desire to harm someone else. It is particularly pernicious in its ability to creep in everywhere, to take every possible path, no matter how convoluted, to pervert and annihilate love, family, friends, confidants, work, bodies, privacy, sexuality and desire in all its forms. Once it has taken root, harassment destroys everything. From logical thought to the order of discourse, from the capacity for empathy and affect to self-esteem and self-image.

The image is the weapon of choice for online harassment, and the site of its first defeats. In images, I found the whore, the worthless person who can be raped by everyone and anyone; the dirty, scruffy artist. The image of the fragile little girl, lost and upset, or her opposite, the strong, indestructible woman. In this way, online harassment means first and foremost being reduced to exactly that which you are not, or being reduced to something that is only one part of you. Nothing in online harassment reflects any empirical, embodied or intelligible reality. It is simply objectification, prejudice, palimpsests of images, stereotypes and clichés.

Drowned by a flood of people who point the finger whilst never taking a look at themselves (anything but that – to do so might destabilize their role of aggressor), at times you come to forget who you really are. Under the spotlights of a vicious, sneering mass, you can feel all your forms of resilience and all of your singular beauty begin to disappear, liquefy, and dissolve. Far more complex than the insipid imperatives of societal models, the reality of a person facing harassment is beyond the comprehension of most people. The vast spider's web of online harassment is a porous material that closes in around you, covering and smothering each organ. Struggling is useless: every movement, every attempt to extricate yourself serves only to thicken the sticky threads that bind you.

For over a year, well-meaning people around me implored me to turn off my screen, to cut myself off from social networks, to digitally disappear. Others suggested antipsychotic drugs, a hospital stay or a retreat of some kind. As if I was in need of treatment for simply being. Being a whore, and therefore harmful and damaged. Being an artist, and therefore unstable, precarious, good for nothing. Being a woman and therefore mad, guilty. After all, I had asked for it. The rabble-rousing slut, hypersensitive and afflicted by the sickness of the world, rebellious, unable to play the games of relationships of power and domination, I am the margin. And this margin, like all the others, like our cousins the homeless, the mad, the drug addicts, must be treated so that it can be folded back into society. Thanks dad, thanks Macron.

So here I am. Harassed and, at the same time, cornered by the illusion of social reintegration. Traditional psychiatry fails the moment it proposes treatment and medication to victims of harassment. The results are all but catastrophic. Antipsychotic and anti-anxiety drugs mean you give less of a shit. The vipers' tongues that have been licking my pussy for an eternity now seem a little less rough, a little more distant, a little less real. But are they really? Medication dulls my rage, but the forked tongues keep wagging, continue their wild dance around me, bitching away. And we're back where we started, at the eternal injunction to be: be a whore, be an artist, be a woman, be sick. And that's that. Sexy, right?

Once the harasser has found their prey, nothing can throw them off the scent. Eating, sleeping, shitting, fucking are all just pretexts for them to destroy every form of life. Fascination, disgust, fantasy and hatred merge with one another and are expressed at random with varying intensity. Escape is impossible: at best you can ignore it. The search for truth is equally futile. You have to accept that you will never understand, never obtain a rational explanation. The ability of malicious people to avoid open dialogue at all costs means that any attempt at this simply thickens the quagmire with another infusion of misdirected hatred. Accepting the other is out of the question. Making peace is not part of skill set required of the harassed woman, less still of the harassed whore. All that is expected of her is that she shut her mouth and that she endure everything that is thrown at her. Her words only feed into the strategies of the harassers. For them, persecution, intimidation, mockery, and theft are all just means to two sacred ends: they get off, you shut up.

## ***A Last Hommage to Maia/Thelma***

***Thierry Schaffauser, 3<sup>rd</sup> January 2020***

Maia/Thelma/Zelda's funeral service took place this afternoon. Many people seem to have appreciated the words I said there, so I am reposting them here, on the blog that Maia and I shared:

I am from a left-wing family. My parents were trade unionists, as were my grandparents before them. And whenever a comrade passed away, the union was always there for them, until the end.

When I was asked to speak today, I said yes, because I think that I owe that much to Maia, and also because, through me, it is partly the STRASS that is speaking. But I have to admit that it's not an easy exercise. How can I do justice to Maia in just five minutes after all that she left us?

Over the last two weeks, I have re-read Maia's writing, I have watched her videos, and I have understood things about her artistic work that I hadn't seen before. I dived back into our conversations and I realized that I am the first person at the STRASS that she contacted to propose a partnership around an artistic project. That's how I put her in touch with "the community", the community of sex workers, starting with those in Marseille, and then little by little everyone else, in particular at the large national meetings organized in Marseille.

Maia was brilliant. She very quickly turned me onto the concept of "*féminisme cagole*" ["cagole feminism"\*], the transgressions of gender norms by working-class women, and of course, "*féminisme pute*" ["whore feminism"]. She contacted me after having read my book, and I gave her all of my bibliographic references, in particular Gail Pheterson's work on whore stigma and its weaponisation by the patriarchy as a means of policing women's gender. She sent me the articles that she had written and I encouraged her to keep at it, and eventually she asked if I would write a blog on *Libération* with her.

We often discussed which policies to pursue on behalf of the movement and minorities in general. I have to say a mind like hers is rare. Maia had an incisive analysis of the mechanisms and the manifestations of oppression, and her work, both political and artistic, has a lot to teach us about this. Maia was a tireless fighter. She was bold and incisive, and took on different powers and authorities with strong and well-documented arguments, which made her a formidable figure. She also brought pleasure to her activism through her humour and her tenderness, through her new forms of activism that used art and performance, through her gentle mockery of those who she found a bit too boring or conformist. Together with Marianne [Chargois, a friend, sex worker, artist, activist] she knew how to draw out the element of madness in each of us to make a spectacle, to make shared moments that brought us together.

Activism can easily become hostile and depressing, particularly when you are part of a minority and on the back foot against crushing political power. We were all afraid of what is referred to increasingly as "activist burn-out". Did Maia suffer from this? Did it affect her more than it did others? Were we unable to protect her from it? She never criticised us for anything, because she wasn't the complaining type.

She knew that activism wasn't just a question of protests and petitions. She knew that it meant building a movement, a community of like-minded people, class consciousness, and therefore taking care of others. The best activists know this, and Maia knew. For example, she suggested running photography workshops at national activist meetings. This might have seemed a bit futile to me at the time, but even today I still hear people talk about those workshops as a moment in which she empowered others and helped them to boost their self-esteem.

The question of representation was central to her work. She understood perfectly the importance of reappropriating discourses about oneself when the history of art is dominated by men depicting women or minorities. She worked to ensure that those who are and who always have been the objects of discourses and representations could finally be their own subjects. She empowered us

in a world which considers us as less than nothing. In so little time, you did so much, and your memory, your art will stay with us. On behalf of the STRASS and your sisters in struggle, thank you.

\* Translator's note: originally a slang term in Marseille, "*cagole*" entered into common usage in the late 20th century as a pejorative label with sexist and classist overtones. Basically a foil for the demure "*parisienne*", the "*cagole*" is everything bourgeois patriarchal society considers a woman shouldn't be: a working-class young women from southern France (Marseille in particular) who is bold and outspoken, and who enjoys make-up, bright and colourful clothing, sex, alcohol, swearing, etc.





**Thierry Schaffauser has been a sex worker since 2002, and is co-founder of sex work union STRASS. He is well accustomed to sex industries since he has worked in the street, as an escort and as a porn actor.**

**Thelma Hell has been a sex worker since 2015. She studied sociology, political science and graduated from the école des Beaux-Arts de Nice. She is a spokesperson for the STRASS, a member of the collective Art Whore Connection. Caring for the pleasure of others, she does her best.**

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*"Whore Feminism for Dummies" finally available printed !*, advertising for the book

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All texts, including the short biographies at the end of this booklet, are extracted from the blog *Ma lumière rouge*. Founded in 2017 by activist and sex worker Thierry Schaffauser, *Ma lumière rouge - Actualités des industries du sexe [My Red Light - News of sex industries]* is a blog dedicated to sex industry and sex workers' rights, hosted by French daily newspaper Libération. Maïa Izzo-Foulquier, who was a spokesperson for sex workers' union STRASS, and started writing sporadically for the blog shortly after its creation.

All translations from French by James Horton.

This booklet is published on the occasion of the exhibition "Propaganda Women: Maïa Izzo-Foulquier, Thelma Hell, Zelda Weinen" at Galerie Emanuel Layr, in the context of *Curated by Vienna*, 5<sup>th</sup> September - 3<sup>rd</sup> October, 2020.

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