Chester Brown and the Queerness of Johns

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Abstract

Sex trade clients have become a contested identity in academia and mainstream media. Some construct clients as exploitative and inherently deviant, while others destigmatize them as complex and varied. Regardless of one’s position, almost all of the discourse is authored by non-clients (or those who do not identify as clients). Chester Brown’s *Paying For It: A Comic-Strip Memoir About Being a John* marks an autobiographical intervention into the literature. In this 2011 Canadian memoir, Brown chronicles his journey from being a monogamous boyfriend to becoming a client of multiple sex workers.

This article uses *Paying For It* to situate Brown, and sex trade clients in general, as queer subjects in their rejection of relational normativity and engagement with criminalized consensual sexuality. Part I surveys the changing construction of sex trade clients from ordinary to deviant men, and reviews scholarship that reads sex work as queer activity. Part II begins by analyzing comics as a genre teeming with queerness. It then queers Brown by considering both aesthetic choices and depicted life episodes, with a focus on his rejection of romantic labor, and fostering of alternative kinship arrangements.

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Sex trade clients have become a hot topic in and beyond academia. There are now dozens of studies and articles that explore what kind of man seeks to buy sex: his age, his race, his class status, his motivations, the risks he poses to others, and the risks he may face. Some of this scholarship has served to demystify the sex buyer, even to normalize him. For example, according to one meta-analytical study, as many as sixteen to eighteen percent of adult American men have paid for sexual services. On the other hand, studies committed to an “anti-prostitution” ideology typically purport to expose the client’s inherent villainy. Such studies tend to conclude by advocating for intensified criminal sanctions against those who “drive the demand” for sexual services.

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1 Women and gender-variant clients exist, but they are the minority and tend to be overlooked.


3 See, e.g., Melissa Farley et al., Comparing Sex Buyers with Men Who Don’t Buy Sex: “You can have a good time with the servitude” vs. “You’re supporting a system of degradation,” Psychologists for Social Responsibility Annual Meeting (2011).
However, the objects of these investigations and debates, the sex trade clients themselves, have been mostly silent in the public sphere. Chester Brown’s *Paying For It: A Comic-Strip Memoir About Being a John*, breaks this silence.⁴

![Book Cover for Paying For It (2013)](image)

In this 2011 Canadian memoir, Brown chronicles his journey into the sex trade as he learns how to connect with the types of workers he most desires, while mastering the etiquette of being a well-behaved client. The narrative is interspersed with debates he has with friends about the regulation of sex work, and his decision to pay for sex while abandoning monogamous romantic love. Although most of the book is in graphic form, it includes a written polemic for the decriminalization of sex work. Given the deviant status of clients in recent popular and political discourse (particularly in Canada, the U.S., the U.K, and the Nordic region), and the conflation of sex work with sex trafficking, this graphic memoir makes an audacious “counter-storytelling” intervention. Through its first-person voice and graphic depictions, Brown unapologetically centers the sex trade client’s situated experience.

The standpoint from which Brown produces knowledge can best be understood as one of *ambivalent* intersectionality. While intersectionality theory originates in Black feminist thought and broadly addresses, foremost, the qualitative difference in experience and perspective when multiple marginalities intersect in one identity,⁵ in Brown’s case, privilege

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meets marginality. Brown is a privileged heterosexual white cis man. But he is also a sex trade client, a criminal outlaw. This ambivalent standpoint provides a unique vantage point from which to theorize the social world in relation to sex work, gender, heterosexuality, power and oppression. In my view, this standpoint is decisively queer.

Although queer theory was first promulgated largely by thinkers of same-sex sexualities, it is premised on rejecting the homo/hetero binary and troubling rigid sexual identity categories. I thus turn to queer theory as an anti-identitarian critique that exposes how sexual dissidents are constructed, labeled, reified and regulated. Within this framework, I consider the anti-normative challenge of Brown’s practice and defence of being a “john.” I argue that Brown’s desires are queer in their blatant monetization of sex, and in their transgression of compulsory coupling, monogamy and romance, even as his specific attractions are quite hegemonic. I further highlight the political relevance of Brown’s abdication of the emotional labor in sustaining normative romantic love, including the work of couple fighting, managing his own and his lover’s jealousy, and remaining sexually “faithful” to one person.

Part I overviews the discursive evolution of sex trade clients, from ordinary men to deviant criminals. I then analyze some of the demeaning anti-john language circulating in anti-prostitution campaigns, and how the sex workers’ rights movement is challenging such campaigns. Next, I explain recent changes in Canada’s sex work-related law, the national context of Brown’s memoir. I end this section by considering scholars who read sex work as queer activity, so as to build a foundation for theorizing the queerness of sex trade clients.

Part II, “Queering the Sex Trade Client,” analyzes Paying For It as a queer artefact in form and content. I open by glossing the sparse scholarship that resists client stigmatization. I then provide some biography on Brown along with a plot summary of the book. In the first section of Part II, I claim that comics should be recognized as a queer art form by exhibiting: 1) the ways comics conflict with Canadian law; 2) comics’ status as childish and low-brow; 3) comics as a space for “critical fabulation” and multiple perspectives; 4) the double meaning of “graphic” as pictorial and sexually explicit; and finally 5) how the caricature amplifies meaning and simplifies the subject to promote identification. In the second section of Part II, I consider Brown’s memoir as a queer narrative by evidencing the kinship arrangements he rejects and those he fosters. Specifically, I analyze the anti-work imaginary that emerges from his rejection of “boyfriend labour”: couple-fighting, jealousy, and confinement to monogamy. I draw on theorists of queer friendship to consider how Brown’s relationships defy hegemonic, institutionalized and predetermined scripts. Focusing on the affective modes of vulnerability, honesty, estrangement and authenticity, I consider Brown’s friendships with his male friends, his ex-lovers, the sex workers he visits, and finally with “Denise,” a person whom he both loves

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and pays for sex. I conclude the paper with a consideration of the ways Brown’s text contributes to the emerging field of “queer heterosexuality.”

I. Making Johns Deviant

What do you call a man who pays for sexual services? In the U.S. and Canada, the most common terms are “john,” and sometimes, a “trick.” In England, Australia and New Zealand, they are often dubbed “punters” or “curb crawlers.” Those who seek to prohibit sex work (hereinafter “prohibitionists”), particularly those who claim to do so from a feminist vantage point, condemn them as “men who use/violate/exploit women in prostitution.” More neutrally, sex workers may refer to the people who pay them as “clients,” “customers,” “patrons” or “dates.” And some of the johns/clients, in virtual forums, call themselves “hobbyists” or “mongers.” These terms, pejorative, descriptive, and/or political, reflect the contested nature of purchasing sexual services. They suggest something queer might be going on.

However, one hundred years ago, such men were generally not seen as condemnable. They did not require labelling, nor did they perceive themselves as marginalized. Rather, they were understood as regular men who had surplus desire because they were single, or were away from home, or had wives who failed to satisfy them for whatever reason. Their desire for non-marital paid sex was seen as a natural—if lamentable—consequence of the male libido. At worst, their activities amounted to a social nuisance that needed to be regulated. On the other hand, sex workers—who had transgressed gendered ideologies of female modesty and chastity—were stigmatized and bore the brunt of criminalization efforts and deviancy narratives.

Since then, and particularly in the last fifty years, things have slowly shifted and in some cases inverted. The prohibitionist discourse has ostensibly taken pity on sex workers. Once seen as deviants and disease vectors, many Western jurisdictions now construct sex workers as victims who need to be saved—forcibly if necessary—from their clients, traffickers, drug addiction, poverty, or their own bad decisions. Meanwhile, mainstream perceptions—alongside psychological and social science studies and various legal regimes—

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have started to peculiarize the client. The figure of the client has gone from unremarkable, to object of inquiry, to—in some cases—deviant criminal.\textsuperscript{12}

The current pervasive image of clients as deviants and sex workers as victims dovetails with the popularity of asymmetrical models of criminalization, in which purchasing sexual services is criminal, but selling it is not. This approach, often referred to as the Swedish or Nordic model because of its origins in that region, is rooted in the conviction that sex work inherently damages women, communities and gender equality as a whole. Implicitly infantilized, pathologized and patronized, the belief is that sex workers have either been coerced or brainwashed, which justifies vitiating their consent, and denying them labor rights and bodily autonomy.\textsuperscript{13} In this ideological vein, clients are perpetrators of exploitation and violence, whatever their intent or conduct.

This deviantization of clients is reflected in the language of efforts to “end demand” for commercial sex.\textsuperscript{14} For example, in the early 2000s, Sweden launched a poster campaign to dissuade potential clients from seeking sexual services, and to raise awareness of the criminality of their desires. In one, the caption reads, “Time to flush the johns out of the Baltic.”\textsuperscript{15} This poster depicts the torso of a man wearing a suit and a wedding band, and targets Swedish men who travel to Baltic countries as sex tourists. Significantly, the word “flush” constructs clients as excrement; in this context, labeling them as “johns” concretizes this identity as a deviant social type. The wedding band amplifies the moral transgression; this “john” is breaking his vows. Finally, the fact that his head is cut off in the image adds both to his generality (he could be \textit{any} man) and his dehumanization.\textsuperscript{16}

\textsuperscript{12} Elizabeth Bernstein, Desire, Demand and the Commerce of Sex, in Temporarily Yours: Intimacy, Authenticity, and the Commerce of Sex 112 (2008).

\textsuperscript{13} See Janine Benedet, Marital Rape, Polygamy, and Prostitution: Trading Sex Equality for Agency and Choice, 18 Rev. Const. Stud. 161 (2013), whose essentialist argument maintains that sex work is inherently harmful to women and sex equality as a whole, and thus must be prioritized over notions of consent, choice and autonomy.

\textsuperscript{14} See, e.g., Don Kulick, Four Hundred Thousand Swedish Perverts, 11 GLQ 205 (2005).

\textsuperscript{15} Nordic Council of Ministers, Nordic Council of Ministers Secretariat, Nordic-Baltic Campaign Against Trafficking in Women Final Report 2004 (\url{http://urn.kb.se/resolve?urn=urn:nbn:se:norden:org:diva-777}).

\textsuperscript{16} This is one of the interesting paradoxes of anti-client discourse, that seeks at once to deviantize clients as Other, while also establishing the ubiquity of “sex buying” among men.
In a 2013 anti-client campaign in the United States, authorities in Nassau County, New York initiated “Operation Flush the Johns,” a massive sting operation during which undercover cops posted faux newspaper ads for sexual services. But unlike the Swedish awareness campaign that sought to establish the “john” as a deviant generalized identity, the goal here was to expose and shame specific individuals. After the arrests, the authorities released the mugshots and names of all of the men under the caption, “Flush the Johns.” Again, alleged clients were equated with feces to grab headlines, shame the men arrested, expose them to their families and community, and deter potential clients. Then district attorney Kathleen Rice justified this extralegal shaming punishment, and the disregard of due process, by rehearsing Nordic model conceit: “This whole concept of looking at johns as victims—they’re not victims! They’re further exploiting and victimizing trafficked women and men.”


19 According to a 2016 article in the New Republic, out of the 104 men:

18 men pled guilty to the misdemeanor charge, 67 pled guilty to disorderly conduct, six were acquitted, including the scientist, one was designated as a youthful offender—a teenager whose records are sealed—and seven cases were dismissed. Of the 104 men originally arrested in Operation Flush the Johns, only one was convicted at trial.


20 Id.

In opposition to this approach—which sees clients as wrongdoers and sex workers as victims—the growing sex workers’ rights movement has sought to give a more empirically informed, and sex worker-informed, understanding of the market for sexual services. From this perspective, sex work is a legitimate though often marginalized form of labor. In order to address the challenges associated with the trade, most sex worker rights activists call for decriminalization, the benefit of general labor protections and human rights, and an end to puritanical discourses that overgeneralize the provision of sexual services as inherently harmful.\(^23\) It should be noted that the sex worker rights movement does not idealize or romanticize the occupation. It argues that general laws that target assault, sexual assault, fraud, and trafficking should be applied to address violence and coercion, which of course can and does happen in many areas of work and intimate life. At the same time, it contends that labor rights, including the rights to safe work environments, to be free from discrimination, and to fair wages, should be applied to ensure proper working conditions. The pithy sex worker slogan “Rights Not Rescue” sums up this perspective.\(^24\)

The debates between the prohibitionist and sex worker rights movements have recently played out across the national stage in Canada, where Chester Brown resides. At the time he was writing *Paying For It*, the *Criminal Code of Canada* did not directly target the selling or purchasing of sexual services.\(^25\) Instead, the laws criminalized activities associated with the trade, including soliciting sexual services in public as either worker or client, and

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operating, or being found on the premises of, a brothel. In December 2013, the Supreme Court of Canada found these prostitution-related laws unconstitutional, primarily on the basis that they violated sex workers’ right to security of the person, protected by Section 7 of the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms. While this appeared to be a victory for the sex workers’ rights movement, the then Conservative government responded with the Protection of Communities and Exploited Persons Act in 2014. These new laws now directly criminalize the purchase of sexual services in all circumstances. Canada has thus joined the ranks of countries adopting a version of the “Nordic model,” where adult sex work is prohibited, sex workers are officially labelled “exploited persons,” and clients are cast as criminals.

To make sense of and situate the criminalization of sex work, a few theorists have turned to queer theory. In their introduction to Queer Sex Work, the editors recognize how both queer subjects in the trade and sex work itself may disrupt heteronormative logics, imperatives, identities and discourses. In her chapter in the volume, “Queer in/and Sexual Economies,” Nicola Smith asks the reader to consider “how the placing of the sexual within the economic itself represents a challenge to heteronormativity and how the lack of social validation (indeed, the literal policing) of commercial sex should be seen in the light of this.” In another chapter, “‘Serving it’: Werq queers our sex, $ex queers our work,” Vergie Tovar suggests the neologism “werk” (which purposefully misspells “work”) conveys the “queer labour that has been de-legitimised/criminalised through racist heteropatriarchal labour discourse/law.” Brooke Beloso enacts a queer genealogy of sex work through a Foucauldian lens, tracing the emergence over the centuries of the figure of the Prostitute, both in relation to the figures of the Madman and the Homosexual, and as a social type and problem that needs to be solved. In her article, “Is sex work queer?,” Corina McKay answers in the affirmative, focusing on the ways sex workers challenge gender roles and heteronormativity perpetuated by certain scientific and feminist discourses. But notably,
McKay ends with an epilogue that asks, “If the act of selling sex is queer, is the act of buying sex queer?”35 She does not definitively resolve this question, but suggests that, given the distaste many feel for clients, it is questionable whether people are interested in hearing about the client’s perspective.

Fifteen years after McKay put forward the potential queer subjectivity of clients, Toronto’s alternative weekly published a piece entitled, “Will Johns become the new ‘fags’?”36 The 2014 article was considering the Canadian government’s then-proposed bill that would directly criminalize clients (which, as explained above, has since become law). Klein states that under this new regime, “Johns will become the new ‘fags’—the people fed into the fear factory of career-ending public exposure and the criminal underground because of their personal sexual choices.” When we take into account the criminalization of clients, along with the metaphors, stereotypes and over-generalizations associated with client identity, Johns are the new “fags” (that is, queer subjects) in this historical moment. Admittedly, just like normative non-client men, many clients seek out conventionally attractive women for standard sexual activities, and to that extent, they also perpetuate hegemonic constructions of desirability that rest on racism, fat-phobia, trans-phobia, ageism and other systems of beauty oppression. Nonetheless, clients are criminalized and deviantized for gratifying their desire through commercial exchange, be it for companionship or coitus.

II. Queering the Sex Trade Client

The deviantization of clients is being challenged by multiple stakeholders. Scholars have produced evidence-based research on the heterogeneity of clients, showing they are not fundamentally peculiar, pathological, or significantly different than other men.37 Sex workers attest that client criminalization does nothing to alleviate the stigma, nor reduce the risks, of working in an illicit trade.38 While there are online subcultures of “hobbyists” who justify purchasing sexual services,39 these men tend to stay within client-centered forums; they are not influencing sex work debates. In this environment, Chester Brown’s graphic memoir chronicling his entrance into commercial sex, including its appendix that defends sexual commerce, is a rare client intervention into public discourse. In this section, I read the deviantization of clients in relation to Brown’s memoir, so as to elaborate on the

35 Id. at 53.
38 Andrea Krüsi, Brenda Belak, and Sex Workers United Against Violence, Harassing the Clients Is Exactly the Same as Harassing the Workers, in Red Light Labour, supra note 9, at 213.
39 Blevins & Holt, supra note 8.
queerness of sex trade clients.

Chester Brown is an award-winning Canadian comic artist whose work delves into deeply personal and political areas, ranging from his early consumption of pornography to a historical graphic biography of Métis leader Louis Riel.\textsuperscript{40} \textit{Paying For It} unapologetically depicts Brown’s evolving status from boyfriend to john to something in-between. At the beginning of the story, Brown is living with his girlfriend, Sook-Yin Lee, who wants to explore her romantic feelings for another man. This leads to a break-up, but the three of them (Brown, Lee and her new boyfriend) end up living together for several years. During this time, Brown realizes he wants to have sex regularly, but not within the confines of a romantic relationship. After some research, he begins to hire sex workers. The story ends with Brown establishing a monogamous “non-possessive” relationship with “Denise,” a former (and possibly current, depending on one’s definition) sex worker. While much of the narrative chronicles Brown’s experiential and emotional journey into the sex trade as a client, several passages are dedicated to conversations with sex workers, current and former lovers, friends and family about platonic friendship, romantic love, and sex work.

In assessing Brown’s text as a queer artefact, as well as a narrative that evidences the queerness of sex trade clients, let us consider form: “a comic-strip memoir.” As Darieck Scott and Ramzi Fawaz point out, regardless of the sexual orientation of the characters, “there’s something queer about comics.”\textsuperscript{41}

As a genre, the comic form was queered by Canadian law. In 1949, the \textit{Criminal Code of Canada} criminalized the selling of “crime comics” under the section entitled, “Offences Tending to Corrupt Morals.”\textsuperscript{42} The moral entrepreneurs who campaigned for this section were concerned with a wide variety of comic types, including gangster, horror, superhero and “true love” varieties, which they believed led to juvenile delinquency. Even though the stories concluded with the bad guys (or bad girls) receiving their comeuppance, there was concern that the depiction of wrongdoing or vigilantism would entice susceptible young people to engage in immoral or violent acts.\textsuperscript{43} Although the section was rarely used and is currently being removed from the \textit{Criminal Code}, it speaks to the illicit queerness of the comic genre, which allowed for fantasies of criminal and libidinal transgression.

Another comic-related, “queering” legal issue is the Canada Border Services’ (CBS) prohibition on the importation of obscene materials. Erotic comics are continually seized.\textsuperscript{44} Anime-style comics are a frequent target, as are those with explicit BDSM (bondage-discipline-sado/masochism) themes. Most famously, a gay comic called \textit{Meatmen: Special


\textsuperscript{44} Comics Seized by Canadian Border Officials, Comic Book Legal Defense Fund (http://cbldf.org/resources/customs/comics-seized-by-canadian-border-officials/).
S&M Comics, deemed obscene by the CBS, was at issue in a 2007 Canada Supreme Court case.45 The claimant, the queer bookstore Little Sisters, had already established that the CBS had violated its constitutional equality rights on the basis of sexual orientation in a 2000 Supreme Court decision.46 At that time, the CBS had made assurances to the Court that the systemic problems with censorship of, and discrimination against, queer literature had been corrected through revised policies. In their second case against CBS, Little Sisters argued that the government body continued to infringe its constitutional rights through the consistent targeting of gay erotica like the Meatmen comic. Little Sisters launched an application for advanced costs to challenge the ongoing homophobic censorship. The funding was not granted because a majority of the Supreme Court judges found that the censorship of the comics (along with two books of written gay erotica) was not of sufficient “public importance” to warrant advanced costs. I hypothesize that it was, in part, the nature of the texts themselves that allowed the Court to trivialize the infringement of the fundamental right to freedom of expression. Comics thus emerge as queer texts, both because the content addresses alternative sexual pleasures, and because they are considered an unimportant and lowbrow genre.

The lowbrow status of comic books, along with the mainstream understanding of their consumption as an adolescent pastime, are cited by Scott and Fawaz as key aspects of the genre’s queerness. Adults indulging in the childish entertainment of comic book-reading can be understood as engaging in “queer temporality.”47 Moreover, by reclaiming the comic form as a serious medium to explore and argue sexual politics, Brown converges and disrupts the “childishness” of comics with his refusal to grow up and “settle down.” That is, by shunning marital or romantic coupling by continuing to pay for sex, he has not “matured” by societal standards. He is engaging in what Joe Fischel describes as a polymorphous adolescent sexual orientation, which positions “sexuality not as always already organized by a predetermined gendered object, but rather sexuality as a becoming, as a figuring and refiguring of which objects matter and how . . . .”48

Another aspect of the queerness of comics, according to Scott and Fawaz, are the ways they engage with what Saidiya Hartman calls “critical fabulation,” inviting reiterations, reinventions and revisions, and thus holding space for multiple and contested points of view.49 Brown takes advantage of this comic book tradition, and the flexibility of this low-tech medium, to call into question the factual accuracy of parts of his account, respond to feedback, and invite alternative viewpoints. For example, the 2013 edition of Paying For It

47 Judith Halberstam, In a Queer Time and Place: Transgender Bodies, Subcultural Lives (2005).
48 Joseph J. Fischel, Sex and Harm in the Age of Consent 132 (2016).
49 Hartman, supra note 6, at 202.
is made up of several parts, including a Foreword written in 2010; the graphic memoir of Brown’s experiences with purchasing sexual services, spanning from 1996-2010; an Afterword; twenty-two appendices which advance a polemic for the decriminalization of sex work; a twenty-third appendix written by Brown’s friend Seth, who appears at different points in the book; a 2011 Notes section from the original edition; a 2013 Notes section; and finally, a photograph of Brown.

In the various auxiliary sections, Brown eschews his own authorial mastery, drawing attention to the pragmatic and political decisions he made in crafting his narrative, and allowing for contradiction or criticism from outside voices. In the Foreword, Brown explains that to protect the sex workers’ anonymity, he refrained from including any identifying physical attributes or personal details. In other words, the criminal and stigmatized nature of their encounters compromised his ability to provide a full and rich portrayal of the sex workers he hired. In other places, Brown further calls attention to the imprecision of memory, external marketing pressures, or the pragmatic need of conflating two conversations into one, explicitly inviting the reader to understand the memoir as a subjective genre, which is also beholden to the need to tell—and sell—a good story. As for alternative perspectives, Appendix 23 is written by Brown’s friend Seth, who rebuts or comments upon some aspects of the main narrative. In reference to Brown’s depiction of an argument they had about whether sex workers should be required to undergo regular medical check-ups, Seth writes, “I do think that Chet [Chester] comes off a little better here than he would in real life.”50 Other notes from the 2013 edition outline what some critics objected to, or were confused by, when the book was first published. Although Brown explains himself to these critics, relaying their objections allows for divergent perspectives on Brown’s ethicality, and the ethics of sex work. To the latter point, the main narrative includes numerous conversations with friends who object to Brown’s decision to hire sex workers.

Another queer aspect of Brown’s comic rests in the double meaning of “graphic.” While the text can fall under the genre of “graphic autobiography,” Brown is also depicting illegal sex in graphic detail. There are dozens of images of Brown receiving fellatio and having penis-vaginal intercourse in various positions. We can read Brown as a confessional pornographer engaging in sexual labor, with the readers thus hailed as porn consumers. The comic stylistically performs its point: that the distinctions between licit and illicit sex, between paying for sexual pleasure and non-monetary dating, and thus between sex work and non-sex work, are unstable and arbitrary.

Ironically, Brown employs the cartoon form to challenge the caricature of sex trade clients. Scott McCloud argues that cartoon depictions of human faces operate both to amplify meaning and convey universality.51 While they exaggerate and simplify, cartoon figures are iconic distillations of the human form, working to focus the reader’s attention

50 Brown, supra note 4, at 256.
51 McCloud, supra note 7.
to particular characteristics or aspects of the story. Compare, then, the first cartoon image of Brown in *Paying For It* with the photograph on the last page.

Figure 4. First image that depicts Chester Brown in *Paying For It* 52

Figure 5. Final image that depicts Chester Brown in *Paying For It* 53

Although brilliantly capturing the essence of his “look,” the cartoon is a radical simplification of his features. Significantly, the straight line used to convey his mouth, which never deviates no matter what emotions he may be experiencing, indicates Brown’s dispassionate outlook on life. Indeed, Seth explains in appendix 23 that he sometimes refers to Brown as “a robot” with a limited range of human emotion. Given that much of Brown’s argument for the decriminalization of sex work rests on appeals to logic and rationality, his choice to represent himself in such a deadpan way underscores this message. On the other hand, McCloud explains that by providing such a basic image of the human form, cartoon images also invite the reader to identify with the character being portrayed. Readers can relate to, and even project themselves into, the simple icon because it is so accessible and non-specific. Readers may find themselves more easily empathizing with Brown, as someone who struggles with gender normative expectations and ultimately decides to transgress respectability politics to gratify his sexual desires.

*Post-Work Intimacy Imaginaries*

The last two issues relate to the queer content of Brown’s memoir. The narrative

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52 Brown, supra note 4, at 1.

53 Id. at 201.
begins in 1996, with Lee and Brown ending their romantic relationship. Brown accepts this change, does not experience jealousy when Lee’s new boyfriend moves into their home, and realizes that he is happy not being in a committed romantic relationship. But as a single man, Brown faces a queer dilemma. He states to his friend Nakamura (a former girlfriend), “I’ve got two competing desires—the desire to have sex, versus the desire to NOT have a girlfriend.”

Initially, he does not believe these two desires are reconcilable, as his other two options, having one-night stands or paying for sex, seem unfeasible. From his perspective, casual sex is out of reach because he lacks the social skills to pick up women. As for sex work, he has reputational, pragmatic and legal concerns. First, he believes others (both future girlfriends or regular friends) will consider him to be a “loser.” Interestingly, Brown does not contemplate the option of seeing sex workers in secret. To the contrary, he says that if he does decide to see sex workers, he will feel compelled to share the news. In other words, he would not stay in the closet about his illicit sex. Second, he is unsure about the pragmatics of arranging a date with a sex worker. Finally, he fears getting arrested. For these reasons, Brown remains single and sexless for two years. His inner struggle registers as, or at least resonates with, the paradigmatically queer human condition. Queers navigate finding partners in illicit sex, and weigh the cost of sexual deprivation against the risks of criminalization and stigmatization.

After two years of unwanted celibacy, Brown decides to visit sex workers. During his first encounter, he is nervous and scared that he might be scammed, mugged, drugged, beaten up, ripped off or arrested. But the encounter is enjoyable. Afterwards, he shares with the reader, “As I walked out of the brothel, I felt exhilarated and transformed. It was so honest—upfront. It felt natural. A burden that I had been carrying since adolescence had disappeared. The burden has never returned.” This extraordinary encounter has all the markings of a queer subject’s “first time”: the initial fears, the escape from heteronormative constraints, the subsequent pleasure and naturalness of the forbidden sex, and the idea that a burden was irrevocably lifted.

54 Id. at 16.
55 Id.
56 Id. at 48-49.
After this encounter, Brown shares the news with his close friends, takes notes after each subsequent date with a sex worker, and ultimately produces his graphic memoir about “being a john.” In this way, we can read both his documented conversations, and the book itself, within the queer tradition of “coming out” to the community. As Jen Bacon comments, “[T]o come OUT is to move from the private secret into a public discourse. And the discourse is central given that queer sexualities are in many ways invisible until they are spoken into existence through the act of coming out.”

Brown’s book is a testament to the personal being political. He not only decides to overcome his fear of judgment to fulfill his sexual desires, but also comes out to his friends, and ultimately the world. By paying for sex and reporting on it, he is bringing the “john” identity into existence as a viable subject position. Indeed, to the extent that many people use the term in a derogatory fashion, his “john” self-identification is akin to the appropriation of the term “queer” as both positive identity and an anti-normative political critique.

Brown’s politics in the memoir are overt. Throughout the book, we see him advocating for the decriminalization and destigmatization of sex work to his friends. In the appendices, Brown directly and comprehensively rebuts familiar anti-sex work claims. His arguments draw upon principles of health and safety, harm-reduction, dignity, autonomy, liberty, rationality, and consistent application of law.

Interestingly, these arguments address labor from at least two different perspectives: sex workers’ rights to labor, and Brown’s desire not to engage in the labor of romantic love. Brown protests the effort involved in having romantic fights, experiencing or provoking jealousy, and remaining monogamous.

![Figure 7. Conversation with “Edith,” a sex worker Brown visited in 2002](https://elitedaily.com/dating/couples-fight-love-more/723139)

Brown’s rejection of the labor of love transgresses the hegemonic truism that “good relationships take hard work.” In particular, popular discourse positions negotiating, processing and fighting as requisite for true love. But Brown rejects this imperative. He

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58 Brown, supra note 4, at 201.

recounts to Nakamura that when he hears Lee fighting with her new boyfriend in their shared home, he is relieved that he no longer needs to self-censor conversations, particularly those in relation to finding other women attractive.

The jealousy that Brown wants to escape is linked with mononormativity (the prevalent ideology that positions monogamy as mature, moral, normal and natural) and amatonormativity (“the assumptions that a central, exclusive, amorous relationship is normal for humans, in that it is a universally shared goal, and that such a relationship is normative, in that it should be aimed at in preference to other relationship types”). As Kathi Weeks argues, the work ethic of romantic love is built on compulsory monogamy: “[T]he same productivist asceticism, which was designed to encourage work discipline and thrift, has also served to animate the ideal of heterosexual marital monogamy.” Similarly, Laura Kipnis asks, “[W]hen monogamy becomes labor, when desire is organized contractually . . .

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60 Brown, supra note 4, at 11-12.


with marriage a domestic factory policed by means of rigid shop-floor discipline designed to keep the wives and husbands and domestic partners of the world choke-chained to the status quo machinery—is this really what we mean by a ‘good relationship’? In choosing paid sex over standard romantic partnership, Brown refuses what he deems to be overvalued, unnecessary, arduous and painful emotional labor.

The flip side to this queer refusal of boyfriend labor are the friendships that Brown invites, reinvents and nurtures. In mainstream society, friendships are often overlooked or undervalued by legal and cultural institutions, particularly in comparison to familial or sexual relationships. In resistance to this relational and intimacy hierarchy, Brown invests deeply in friendships that speak to a queer alternative. Proehl defines “queer friendships” as “relationships that resist and parody heteronormative institutions and rituals, challenge binary understandings of gender and sexuality, and destabilize categories of romantic and platonic love.” This description aptly describes Brown’s close relationships. In “Friendship as a Way of Life,” Foucault discusses friendship between gay men as “a historic occasion to reopen affective and relational virtualities.” Beyond the transgression of homosexual sex, gay men’s friendships create oppositional connections that resist hegemonic, institutionalized and predetermined scripts. Similarly, I argue Brown’s relationship with his male friends and brother, his ex-girlfriends-cum-close friends, the sex workers he sees, and finally with “Denise,” all open up novel ways of being together, relating, and caring outside of institutionalized marriage, monogamy, heterosexual relations, and standard homosociality.

Let us begin with Brown’s friendships with men. There is no explicit erotic connection between the men, nor are they playing with gender presentation in any overt way. Nonetheless, their intimacy is queer. In this regard, Foucault asks, “What is it to be ‘naked’ among men, outside of institutional relations, family, profession, and obligatory camaraderie? It’s a desire, an uneasiness, a desire-in-uneasiness that exists among a lot of people.” A careful read of the conversations among men in the book reveals an eschewal of “obligatory comraderie,” a willingness—even an eagerness—to be metaphorically “naked” with one another, and the resulting “desire-in-uneasiness” that is produced.

Foucault’s notion of obligatory camaraderie is unpacked in Judith Taylor’s essay on female friendship, where she suggests that “Foucault usefully asks for an examination of agency and authenticity in relation to friendship, to imagine relationships that are not

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64 Laura Kipnis, Against Love: A Polemic 19 (2004).
65 Ethan J. Leib, Friendship & the Law, 54 UCLA L. Rev. 631 (2007); Elizabeth Brake, Special Treatment for Lovers: Marriage, Care, and Amatonormativity, in Brake, Minimizing Marriage, supra note 62, ch. 4.
66 Kristen B. Proehl, Sympathetic Alliances: Tomboys, Sissy Boys, and Queer Friendship in The Member of the Wedding and To Kill a Mockingbird, 26 ANQ 128, 128 (2013).
68 Id. at 136.
superficially predetermined or presumed.\textsuperscript{69} Consider this insight in relation to “guy talk” about cars, technology, sports (which Brown never discusses in the book) or sex. Sex talk among men is not expected to admit personal feelings or struggles, but rather to convey conquest. Beth Montemurro et al. argue, “Men learn to talk about sex in cruder ways that demonstrate their dominant position in heterosexual sexual encounters and reinforce women’s status as objects to be used for men’s benefit.”\textsuperscript{70} On a superficial read, some of Brown’s conversations about sexuality fit within conventional “locker room talk”: he and his “guy” friends discuss the attractiveness of Brown’s ex-girlfriend; or whether or not receiving fellatio with a condom is pleasurable. But that is not all they talk about. Indeed, their discussions reveal emotional nakedness, that is, a willingness to expose vulnerability, self-doubt, pain and loneliness. For instance, Brown’s “coming out” as a john to his friends opens him up to their judgement of him as a “loser” or an abuser.\textsuperscript{71} His friends are not unequivocally accepting, charging that Brown has “cheated” the system by paying for sex, that he is repressing negative emotions, that he lacks self-respect, or conversely, that he is arrogant. They worry the sex workers he is seeing may be under-age or trafficked, querying whether he might be benefitting from their exploitation. Brown welcomes these debates, tries to explain his perspective, and at times, questions the ethicality of his choices. Brown and his male friends express doubt, envy, and anger, as well as empathy, affection and understanding. Their willingness to delve into the hard stuff, including arguing and working through it, resonates with Foucault’s “desire-in-uneasiness”, and Taylor’s notion of friendship authenticity.

Brown’s friendships with Nakamura and Lee reflect an intimacy comparable to that which he has with his male friends. They discuss their personal lives and debate romantic love, along with Brown’s decision to renounce couplehood and pay sex workers. What makes Brown’s relationship with the two women noteworthy is that, as former lovers, cultural stereotypes suggest that once the romance has ended, so should their relationship. As Foley and Fraser state, “Our language describing former romantic relationships is very final. We ‘breakup,’ our ‘relationship fails,’ and we have an ‘ex-spouse’ or an ‘ex-lover.’ These terms leave little room for change and redefinition.”\textsuperscript{72} Interestingly, the little research that has been done on “post-dissolutional relationships” indicate that it is not entirely unusual for exes to become friends.\textsuperscript{73} Nonetheless, for those who attempt the friend-route,
one of the challenges of navigating the relationship from romantic to platonic status is the lack of cultural scripts about this process. One study suggests that post-dissolutional friendships between men and women are of lower quality than cross-gender friendships that were always platonic, showing for example, less support, trust, intimacy, and investment in the other’s success and happiness. Other studies suggest that in such post-dissolution friendships, certain topics should be avoided, namely new sexual relationships or reasons for the break-up. In Brown’s friendships with Nakamura and Lee, none of the limitations typically associated with post-dissolutional friendships are present. Indeed, the opposite holds true.

Not only do Brown and Nakamura discuss romantic and sexual issues, they rehash old conflicts. In positing that romantic relationships bring out the worst in people, Brown suggests to Nakamura that they get along better as friends than they did as lovers, later declaring that the year they were together was “hell.” Although Nakamura counters, “Hey, I was only eighteen”, the conversation does not escalate into a fight. Rather, they continue their debate about the pros and cons of romantic relationships. Brown’s friendship with Nakamura is an intimate and authentic bond that involves honesty, love, contestation and disagreement, with no taboo topics of conversation. With Lee, things are queerer still. Brown and Lee’s relationship evolves from a cohabiting couple; to Brown supporting Lee in exploring her attraction to another man, Justin; to Brown overhearing them having sex in their shared home; to Justin moving in with both of them as a housemate and as Lee’s lover; to Brown effectively relegated to the “friend zone” (his preference); to Justin and Lee breaking up a few years later; to Lee beginning to date another man; to Lee eventually requesting that Brown move out because she wants to live exclusively with her new boyfriend; to Brown moving out. Throughout this time period, Brown and Lee check in with one another about their feelings and perspectives to ensure mutuality as their relationship evolves and transforms. Brown informs Lee when he begins paying for sexual services, and while Lee raises no moral objections, she requests that he not bring sex workers to their shared home. Brown responds to Lee’s boyfriend Justin not with resentment or jealousy, but with equanimity. Overhearing the couple’s fights underscores Brown’s preference for being a friend, instead of a boyfriend. The fact that there was no transition time between the break-up and their friendship, and that they continued to live together for several years with Lee’s new lover and Brown seeing sex workers, speaks to a particularly queer arrangement. As Yasmin Nair states,

[Q]eers ask, on some level: whom do you love in ways that exceed bounds of conventional romance, and whom might you sleep with and then bound back with into a long and abiding friendship without feeling the need to “break up?” … queers have perfected the

74 Foley & Fraser, supra note 72, at 209.
75 Schneider & Kenny, supra note 73.
77 Brown, supra note 4, at 13.
art of friendship as something not defined by whom you are or are not sleeping with but who excites you and whom you keep in your ambit: Who makes you crazy with love when you see them?78

Brown’s friendships with his exes thus do not follow the patterns associated with post-dissolution. Taylor’s analysis of the oppressive constructions of female friendship can help us understand the emancipatory promise of Brown’s unconventional friendships with Nakamura and Lee. Taylor suggests that both mainstream and feminist renditions of female friendships rely on models of high-expectation, intensity and merged attachments, which are often followed by fervent drama, conflict or disappointment. In her analysis of two feminist novels that break from this construction, Taylor analyzes alternative depictions of female friendships that are more relaxed, featuring self-reliance and respect for boundaries. Similarly, Brown’s evolving relationship with Lee sidesteps the obligatory drama and emotional turmoil associated with breaking up. Instead, his friendships with women are based on unconditional and non-possessive love, honesty and respect for everyone’s autonomy.

Tom Roach’s elaboration of Foucault’s notion of friendship, which he interprets as promoting a model of “estrangement,” speaks to how Brown connects with former lovers and male friends. Based on the friendships cultivated during “Buddy Programs” that paired volunteers supporting PWAs (people with AIDS), Roach argues that such relations represent “an ethics of nonrecognition—I can’t see myself in the other, I can’t subsume the other into myself—which leaves the radical foreignness of both parties intact and unharmed. Such nonviolative relationality affords an opportunity to cultivate foreignness, to nurture unseen selves and unusual intimacies.”79 This ethic applies to Brown’s friendships, which allow for nonrecognition and “radical foreignness,” as Brown’s rejection of monogamous romance and his decision to purchase sex is strange and unrelatable to his friends. Their willingness to analyze, dispute, and even mock Brown’s political and ontological strangeness, without forcing empathy or agreement, paradoxically creates an unusual queer intimacy between them.

Conversely, the cultural scripts that would cast Brown’s relationship with the sex workers he hires as emotionally distant and disconnected are foiled. Instead, there are surprising moments of recognition and “bounded authenticity,” which Elizabeth Bernstein defines as “the sale and purchase of authentic emotional and physical connection” characterized by middle class and indoor sex work in post-industrial cities.80 Based on her research with sex workers and clients, Bernstein found that clients are often interested in getting acquainted with the sex worker they are visiting, forging (or believing that they are forging) a genuine connection, but containing the experience of intimacy through transactional and temporal boundaries. For Brown, in his first encounter with “Carla,” there

78 Yasmin Nair, Jason Momoa, Aquaman, and the Queer Art of Friendship (http://www.yasminnair.net/content/jason-momoa-aquaman-and-queer-art-friendship).
79 Tom Roach, Friendship as a Way of Life 114 (2012).
80 Bernstein, supra note 12, at 103.
appears to be a moment of mutual empathy. Post-coitus, the reader enters a conversation mid-way, where “Carla” is describing the emotional strength a sex worker needs as “a certain amount of courage to do this work . . . . [Y]ou never know what kind of guy will show up . . . .”\(^{81}\) This is followed by her observing a similar predicament for clients:

![Image](image)

Figure 9. A conversation between Brown and “Carla”, the first sex worker he visits\(^ {82}\)

The idea that sex workers and clients both face risks, including threats of violence or police arrest, challenges the notion that clients enjoy all the power and privilege while sex workers endure all the fear and danger. Significantly, the conversation evidences friendliness that materializes through a sex worker and her client recognizing overlapping challenges in the buying and selling of sexual services.

Brown connects with other sex workers through conversations about their respective jobs and working conditions. One sex worker discusses how she preferred erotic massage to escorting, but that the police raided the last parlor where she worked, and she did not want to risk another arrest.\(^ {83}\) Conversely, a different sex worker says she found escorting “less work” than her previous position at a “rub and tug” establishment.\(^ {84}\) And yet another relays that she transitioned from erotic dancing to escorting, as she felt uncomfortable hustling customers for private dances. When Brown shares he is a cartoonist, a number of sex workers are intrigued. He presents “Anne” with a copy of his book on Louis Riel.\(^ {85}\) As he states to his friends, “Talking—getting to know the girls a bit—it just adds to the whole experience—makes it seem less cold and impersonal.”\(^ {86}\) Mixing sexual activity with personal disclosures—along with Brown’s gift-giving—contributes to

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\(^{81}\) Brown, supra note 4, at 46.

\(^{82}\) Id. at 47.

\(^{83}\) Id. at 214-15.

\(^{84}\) Id. at 146.

\(^{85}\) Id. at 86.

\(^{86}\) Id. at 96.
the congeniality and affection between Brown and the women he hires, intimacies nevertheless circumscribed by commercial transaction.

To be sure, not all of the sex trade dates exemplify bounded authenticity. With several sex workers, Brown feels neither emotional connection nor even attraction. He perceives a few sex workers as purposefully or inadvertently falling short, and in response ends the date early, gives them a smaller or no tip, or leaves negative feedback on the Toronto Escort Review Board. With another sex worker, “Anne,” he feels ambivalence. Although he experiences a profound sexual and emotional attraction towards her, Brown experiences a sense of “emptiness” after each visit. He wonders to himself whether his friends are correct—that sexual contact requires romantic love to be satisfying. Yet “Anne” is the only sex worker with whom he struggles in this way. The experience points to the unpredictability and perhaps unknowability of the emotional dimensions of sexual contact. It also makes Brown’s memoir more credible, for he entertains the possibility that the sex trade naysayers may have a point.

The conclusion of the story also complicates Brown’s stance on romantic love and monogamy. In 2003, Brown meets a sex worker named “Denise,” to whom he feels especially drawn on an emotional as well as a physical level. For a year or so, he visits a few other sex workers, but in 2004 Brown begins seeing “Denise” exclusively. Brown develops strong feelings for “Denise,” which Lee interprets as romantic love despite Brown’s protests. As readers learn from the final passages of Paying For It, Brown has been monogamous with “Denise” since 2004, and she has been monogamous with him for “several years.” They love each other, but are not “in love.” “Denise” has a day job unrelated to sex work but Brown pays her for sex. Brown suggests “Denise” would not have sex with him otherwise. Brown ends by advocating for non-possessive relationships that, even if functionally monogamous, are still open to either party having sex with others in the future.

Brown and “Denise’s” relationship muddles the categories of sex work and romantic partnership. One could argue that it resembles the relationship between a sugar baby and sugar daddy. However, their relational history as client to sex worker, Brown’s precarious work as a cartoonist, his tight budget and humble mode of transportation (cycling), their relative closeness in age (less than 10 years), along with the fact that “Denise” has, in Brown’s words, a “regular nine-to-five job,” does not fit the “sugar” paradigm of age, economic and status asymmetries. What is clear is that they are genuine friends. But they are queering the friendship, as Proehl defines it, by effectively parodying and readapting heteronormative scripts and roles, while discarding elements that undermine their connection. In this way, Brown challenges heteronormative (and homonormative) monopolization of “romantic love” and “monogamy” by co-opting these affective modes and kinship arrangements, and placing them within a sexual market. By commingling love,

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87 Id. at 123.
payment, and flexible monogamy, Brown and “Denise” balance on a tightrope between celebrated romantic partnership and criminalized transactional sex.

III. Conclusion

Brown’s “coming out” graphic memoir is ground-breaking in the face of a growing “end demand” anti-sex work movement, the degrading language used to smear clients as contaminants, and the proliferating laws that target clients as sex criminals throughout the globe. While sex workers and evidence-based scholars have challenged client stereotypes, hatred and phobia, clients themselves have generally not entered the fray. This might be because clients are such a heterogenous group, and/or because for many, paying for sexual services is an occasional act of leisure rather than an identity position. However, given the growing use of “john” (and its equivalents) as epithets, an identity may be thrust on them whether they want it or not. The anti-client discourse also, ironically, may cultivate a sexual dissident identity: “the injurious address may appear to fix or paralyze the one it hails, but it may also produce an unexpected and enabling response. If to be addressed is to be interpellated, then the offensive call runs the risk of inaugurating a subject in speech who comes to use language to counter the offensive call.”

We can read the words and images of Paying For It as using language to counter the offensive call. The memoir complicates and humanizes client subjectivity, while criticizing the hypocrisy and misery often produced by mono- and heteronormative imperatives.

Paying For It reveals that sexual normativity is policed in a variety of contexts, heterosexual too. In this regard, James Dean has suggested that, “queer heterosexualities can challenge identity categories themselves, calling into question a normative order premised on clearly defined sexual desires and behaviors that align with static sexual identities.” Brown’s narrative questions the normative order that decrees monogamous romantic partnership as the ultimate, most precious relational form, and as the sole guarantor of steady sexual contact. Forging a queer kinship network, Brown cultivates intimate and abiding relations with his male platonic friends and family, his female post-dissolution friendships, some sex workers, and Denise. These relations include personal disclosure, vulnerability, criticism, conflict and appreciation for divergent perspectives. With the sex workers he visits, as with Denise, he offers a post-work imaginary, where sex detaches from the romantic toil of couple fighting, jealousy and compulsory monogamy.

Brown’s comic form expresses a queer aesthetic which mirrors the unexpected queerness of its message. As a graphic memoir it recalls the history of Canadian criminalization of obscenity and crime comics; it celebrates a low brow, childish genre; it graphically depicts illicit sex; it provides multiple and conflicting perspectives; and it creates a caricature that, ironically, invites identification. This is a welcome intervention into ongoing debates about the buying of sexual services. Whether denounced or defended, clients are almost always

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objects of analysis for other people’s political agendas. In personalizing the discourse and controlling the frame (figuratively and literally), Brown positions the client as an intelligible—yet queer—subject.