

“Nothing Feels Better than Getting Paid”: Sex Working Trans Latinas’ Meanings and Uses of Money

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Abstract: Based on ethnographic research with transgender Latinas in Chicago, this article answers Susana Narotzky and Niko Besnier’s (2014) invitation to think “economy otherwise.” I contend that in order to think “economy otherwise” we must think it queerly, and attend to feminist ways money animates possibilities beyond racist-cisgenderism. I bring together economic anthropology, feminist anthropology, and queer of color critique to queer money, specifically money earned from sexual labor performed by transgender Latinas. An ethnographic examination of trans Latina sex workers’ lives reveals that money accessed through sexual labor is assigned a number of queer and contested meanings. Its’ use is based in feminist ethics that eschew dominant economic logics in favor of building relations of care. It enables the creation of transgender bodies, and the development of queer networks of care with biological and chosen kin, in the U.S. and beyond. Trans Latinas, then, use money from sex work to support trans Latina ways of being that exceed the racist-cisgenderism. Sometimes, however, their uses of money reinforce racist-cisgenderism. I argue that the women’s fraught uses of money reveal the complex intersections that sustain racist-cisgenderism, and how they are experienced and negotiated in people’s everyday lives.

Keywords: transgender, Latina, sex work, money

Layla¹ is an eighteen-year-old transgender Puerto Rican woman who lives in Humboldt Park, the heart of “Puerto Rican Chicago.” After she left school to escape bullying, she applied for

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countless jobs. If she was selected for an interview, she was not offered a job, likely because of her appearance as a transgender woman or because her legal documents do not reflect her name and gender. She was finally hired at a fast-food restaurant. However, customers called her transphobic names, and her boss, a non-Latinx white cisgender man, forbade her and other Latinx employees from speaking Spanish at work. Unable to bear the harassment any longer, she quit after only a few weeks.

Layla's experiences are not unique; they are representative of the experiences of the twenty-three transgender Latina women with whom I worked during fourteen months of ethnographic research in Chicago, Illinois. I met Layla shortly after she quit her job. She was living with Dora, a thirty-eight-year-old Puerto Rican trans woman, who took her in after she was kicked out of her biological family's home. On this particular afternoon, we were lounging in Dora's small studio apartment listening to Layla complaining about her experiences at the restaurant. Dora lovingly, yet sternly, said to Layla, "You have two options in life: you either suck dick or be beautiful to make money." The first refers to sex work that involves physical contact, and the second refers to webcam work, which does not require bodily interaction. Layla would go on to do both. She explained to me matter-of-factly but almost proudly, "When you can't get what you need in the house, you go out into the streets." She continued, smirking, "Nothing feels better than getting that money."

Layla's story could be read through the lens of hypervictimization. She experienced racist-cisgenderism in the formal educational system and employment sector and was forced to sell sexual services in an economy built around the hypersexualization of trans women of color. Once involved in sexual economies, she was exposed to various violences, which can be lethal. Increased attention has been given to the murder of trans people in recent years, the majority women of color, and many involved in sex work. However, scholars of trans of color critique have cautioned that the association of trans women of color with death only

further dehumanizes them and subjects them to even greater violence (Lamble 2013; Snorton and Haritaworn 2013). Therefore, rather than focusing on interpersonal and structural violences, I offer a different reading that combats the dehumanization of sex working trans women of color. I shift the focus to the money that trans women earn. While the women's sexual services were compensated in different ways, including cash, favors, and material goods, they valued money more than other forms of compensation. Of course, money is a prerequisite for survival for trans Latinas as much as anyone else, but it is also more than this. I argue that focusing solely on trans Latina sex workers' need of money for survival, without recognizing the complex ways that money garnered from sex work circulates in their lives, contributes to their victimization and ultimately their dehumanization. An ethnographic examination of trans Latina sex workers' lives reveals that money accessed through sexual labor is assigned several queer and contested meanings. It enables the affirmation of their gender and the development of various forms of trans Latina kinship and mutual care. Trans Latinas, then, use money from sex work to support trans Latina ways of being outside the racist-cisgenderist status quo.

Racist-Cisgenderism and Meanings of Money

Scholars have called for more research on the material realities of transgender people's lives (Driskill 2004; Ellison et al. 2017; Irving 2012). In response, some research has shown how multiple types of discrimination intersect to socially, politically, and economically marginalize trans people (Bhanji 2013; Haritaworn et al. 2014). This research recognizes that extreme marginalization encourages trans people to do sex work. Dean Spade's (2011, xii) clients at the Sylvia Rivera Law Project had "no hope of finding legal employment . . . and therefore turned to a combination of public benefits and criminalized work—often in the sex trade—in order to survive." Faced with interlocking forms of structural violence, they, like

Layla and my other interlocutors, turn to sex work, which only increases their exposure to violence (physical, sexual, and emotional) from various sources, including but not limited to clients, police officers, and people just passing by. The multiple oppressions of trans people should not be underestimated. This is especially true for trans people of color in the US, whose lives are also circumscribed by racism.

To capture the intersectional nature of the oppression of trans women of color in the US, I employ the term *racist-cisgenderism*. This term acknowledges critical understandings of cisgenderism that are suspicious of a cis-trans binary that can obscure more than it reveals (Agid and Rand 2011). Yet, I use the term to highlight the systematic and multi-layered nature of the oppression of trans peoples (Ansara and Hegarty 2011; Lennon and Mistler 2014). Moreover, my conception of racist-cisgenderism relies on definitions of cisgenderism (Aizura 2018; Namaste 2005; Spade 2011) as inherently informed by racism. However, it also explicitly centers racism and processes of racialization that are otherwise at risk of being underappreciated by white, transnormative approaches to cisgenderism and acts as a reminder that racism and cisgenderism are inextricably tied. Attention to the racialization of Latinxs in the United States also begs analyses of the border industrial complex, linguistic imperialism, anti-Blackness, and anti-Indigeneity within/around Latinidad—all of which warrant more research in transgender studies. While I am unable to address all aspects of the racialization of sex working trans Latinas in this article, or the implications for larger theorizations of Latinx gender, an ethnographic look at their use of money begins to get at some.

The year I conducted the bulk of my research, 2016, was the deadliest on record for transgender women in the United States, with over twenty-seven women murdered, prompting some to call a “state of emergency” for trans women of color (Iannone and Ferrari 2019). Most victims were women of color, and many were involved in sex work. While the seriousness of violence against sex working trans women of color should not be

underestimated, presenting the women solely as victims is inaccurate and contributes to their dehumanization. In *Funk the Erotics*, L. H. Stallings (2015) argues that Black transaesthetics and economies require that we “trans” sex work to think beyond labor and economy. I draw from Stallings and interrogate assumptions about the relationship between sex work and money and the ways sex workers—and especially trans women of color—view and use money earned from their labor to animate their lives. Because there are particularly rigid assumptions about trans women of color in the United States (Rev and Geist 2017; Vidal-Ortiz 2009), ethnography is especially fruitful for illuminating the meanings and uses of money among trans Latina sexual laborers.

With the help of two key interlocutors who were trusted figures in the community,² I conducted participant observation and semi-structured, in-depth interviews with twenty-three transgender, Latina sex workers in Chicago between June 2015 and August 2016. Reflecting Chicago’s Latinx population overall, the majority were Mexican or Puerto Rican, and some were Cuban and Ecuadorian. Two Puerto Rican women identified as Black, and two Mexican women identified as Indigenous. Apart from the two Black Latinas and two white Latinas, the women were read as “brown.” “Brown” as a racial category for Latinxs has been rightly scrutinized for replicating anti-Black and anti-Indigenous erasure (Rosa 2019). However, in this context, I use “brown” carefully and intentionally to recognize both the lack of white privilege as well as the existence of non-Black privilege. Such racial distinctions, while imprecise and imperfect, are necessary for understanding complicity in anti-Black transnormativity.

The participants identified as “transgender women.” When referring to the women in the research, I use the term they use to refer to themselves: “Latina.” When referring to the larger ethnic community which includes people of various genders, I use *Latinx* to recognize those who identify outside of the gender binary. While much thoughtful debate has occurred

around Latinx (de Onís 2017; Vidal-Ortiz and Martínez 2018), I ultimately use the fraught term to attempt to combat pervasive and internalized cisgenderism among and about Latinxs. I am also inspired by Alan Pelaez Lopez's (2018) use of Latinx "as a wound" to signify the violences of colonization, slavery, displacement, and femicide that make Latinx identity impossible to easily articulate.

In the face of constant violences, transgender Latina women's involvement in racialized sexual economies of labor³—and more specifically the money earned from it—offers numerous socially productive possibilities. I build upon the work of anthropologists Susana Narotzky and Niko Besnier (2014, S5), who urge us to rethink the economy to center "the complex ways in which people attempt to make life worth living for themselves and for future generations" and "what they do to strive toward that goal, particularly under conditions of radical uncertainty ('crisis')." I attend to how money earned from sexual labor is utilized in attempts "to make life worth living," to produce key elements of both Latina trans identity and community during the crisis that is white supremacist, settler colonialist cisgenderism. After arguing that we must locate their meanings of money within sex working trans of color ideologies, I focus on how money from sex work is employed to produce and empower Latina transgender identity, and I explain the need and use of money to transition in a world that is hostile to trans women of color and their bodies. Next, I draw attention to the relationship between money and kinship. I analyze the roles of money to both create queer kinship and maintain biological kin ties, locally and transnationally, across the US border in Latin American countries. Such familial ties also make trans Latina life "worth living" during a "state of emergency."

As the aforementioned uses of money nourish trans Latina existence, they work toward a world beyond racist-cisgenderism, where trans Latinas can survive and thrive. I reveal how the women's approach to money is based in feminist ethics that eschew dominant

economic logics in favor of relations of care (Beneria et al. 2016; Ferber and Nelson 2003; McDowell 2004) and a queer of color politics that is attentive to glimpses of a queer future in the present (Muñoz 2009). The focus on money and its role in supporting trans Latina ontologies, however, does not preclude the necessary critique of capitalism; instead it is inspired by queer of color critique that is materialist while also allowing queer uses of capital to wield critiques of capitalism itself. My approach is similar to Roderick Ferguson's (2009) reading of the "black drag queen prostitute," not as evidence of capitalist pathology but rather as an embodiment of the ability to exist in excess of capitalism and related race/gender normativities. Sex working trans Latinas creatively use money in ways that directly defy neoliberal capitalist frameworks. As the women use money to support trans Latina ways of being and challenge racist-cisgenderism as an ontology, epistemology, and political system, they simultaneously trouble capitalism, which is central to racist-cisgenderism.

Simultaneously, to avoid romanticizing trans women of color, which can be just as flattening as hypervictimizing them, I recognize how sometimes the women's uses of money also reinforce transnormativity, especially as informed by anti-Blackness. Therefore, their uses of money force us to reckon with the complex intersections that sustain racist-cisgenderism. The relationship between trans femininity and white beauty ideals, and transnormativity and anti-Blackness, and the ways Latinas both challenge and reinforce such constructions require further ethnographic examination to understand racist-cisgenderism more generally and how it is experienced by people in their everyday lives. This queer ethnographic approach to money calls into question assumptions about trans women of color sex workers and the relationship between money and sex work. It deepens understandings of the complex social worlds of sex workers, transgender women, and Latinxs. It is also instructive for working toward a world free of racist-cisgenderism.

Situating Money Within Trans Latina Sex Worker Ideologies

Dora was complaining about sex work. She said it caused her to have an unhealthy relationship with sex and sometimes brought her to “a dark place.” She was tired of clients’ disrespect, undercompensation, and unrealistic expectations. She elaborated, “Clients nowadays want you to jump toward the ceiling, do a backflip around the chandelier, and then land on the dick. Anddd THEN they have the nerve to ask for a discount!” She continued, “I’m done with sex work. Today I am done.” At the time, however, she was experiencing racist-cisgenderism in her other job, which she needed to quit sex work. She worked at an LGBTQ community organization. Despite the agency’s mission to help all members of the LGBTQ community, a white, queer, cisgender woman coworker asked Dora not to use the women’s bathroom when other people were in it. This demonstrates how trans individuals are marginalized within the LGBTQ community and its cis-centric neoliberal organizing efforts (Stryker 2004). The day she told me she would quit sex work, she also shared how difficult it was for her to work for this organization. I was surprised when I saw her the next day and she had a huge smile on her face. She explained that one of her clients was generous and just paid her extra money. She said, “I love sex work.” She later posted a picture of a large wad of cash on Facebook with the caption: “I love my life.”

A few months later, Katalina was also venting to me that she was unhappy with her life and wanted to quit sex work. The labor was physically and emotionally demanding, and she lamented that most of the men were “gross.” She wanted to “make something of herself” and planned to start applying for jobs. That night, however, she saw a high-paying client that she had not worked with in a while, and the next morning she too posted a picture to Facebook of several \$100 bills fanned out. The caption read “Love my job.” When I saw her next, she said she was feeling better about herself and her situation and no longer planned to apply for other jobs.

There are likely many reasons why Dora and Katalina posted pictures of their earnings on Facebook. The women often complained that competition between sex workers was fierce, especially as the economy worsened. They perhaps showed off their earnings in rivalry with other sex workers with whom they are Facebook friends. Their differing attitudes toward sex work also exemplify that sex workers can have contradictory feelings about commercial sex (Brennan 2004; Stout 2014). Regardless, I argue that they felt genuinely empowered by the money they earned. If we consider sex worker ideologies, money takes on several different meanings beyond the economic (Cliggett 2003; Graeber 2001).

Layla once said to me that despite the disgust she feels when having sex with clients whom she finds unattractive, “nothing feels better than getting paid.” Getting paid well affirms that one is a good sex worker, and, moreover, plays into a prestige hierarchy. Large amounts of cash distinguish a person from sex workers who are paid less, or, to be more specific, street sex workers. The evaluative meanings projected onto the figure of the street sex worker go beyond a simple class differentiation for the women in the project. Trans street sex workers are often associated with their appearance and are imagined to be more masculine looking because they cannot afford feminizing procedures. Therefore, they do not “pass” (are regularly perceived as “women” by others) and are thus less womanly in the gendered hierarchy where “passing” trans women are at the top and trans women who do not “pass” or seek to “pass” and thus reject the gender binary completely are at the bottom. When Dora and Katalina received larger amounts of cash for their sexual labor, they were not only affirmed as good sex workers but also higher-class sex workers and “passable” trans women.

For these reasons, money earned from sex work can boost the interlocutors’ confidence and improve their own perceptions of themselves as sex workers and women. While it bolsters transnormativity, their interpretation of money troubles the patriarchal belief that when a woman receives money for providing sexual services she is utterly degraded.

Therefore, while sex working trans Latinas' valuation of money in some cases reinforces transnormativity, they still trouble patriarchal, hypervictimizing assumptions about the relationship between sex work and money, especially for trans women of color.

When giving me an overview of Chicago's sexual economies, the first interlocutor I met emphasized that trans women sex workers, unlike cisgender women sex workers, "don't have pimps." She explained, "I am very proud to say that in my almost sixty years of living I have never met a trans girl with a pimp. . . Give someone else the money that WE worked for!? Trans girls aren't that stupid." Several other interlocutors also proudly stated that trans girls didn't have pimps. Indeed, I never met a trans sex worker who did. Some had boyfriends who expected financial support, but none had pimps who oversaw them or demanded a percentage of their earnings. The popular idea that trans sexual laborers do not have pimps differentiates trans sex workers from cisgender sex workers. While the differentiation perhaps reinforces the victimization of cisgender women who are supposedly more likely to have pimps, it rejects the victimization of trans women of color sex workers. Therefore, while distance from the victimized cisgender sex worker affords less sympathy for trans sex workers from the public, it presents trans sex workers as self-sufficient and undeserving of pity. Moreover, it suggests that they are "smarter," independent, and entrepreneurial—valued characteristics otherwise denied to them by society.⁴ It also evidences the pride they feel when securing money from sex work.

Of course, Dora and Layla were not always proud when receiving compensation for sexual labor; sometimes they felt degraded. The objectification of trans women, and especially trans women of color, in sexual economies of labor is not to be taken lightly. Yet in addition to feeling degraded, they also felt other complex and contradictory emotions. The women felt dignity when securing money and ensuring their own survival in a racist-cisgenderist, capitalist society that seeks to eliminate them. Brittni, who was 27 years old and

Mexican, said, “It feels good to make money. To have something, ya know, when society doesn’t want you to.” Many others expressed similar sentiments. Only allowing trans sex workers to feel shame about their work, instead of the spectrum of human emotions, may contribute to their dehumanization and justify violence against them. Similarly, their approaches to money that are informed by sex worker ideologies sometimes sustained transnormativity, and thus racist-cisgenderism, and other times disrupted it. Acknowledging one reality and not the other, and placing the burden of combating racist-cisgenderism, a system in which we all live, upon trans women of color, is perhaps as equally dehumanizing as requiring them to be hypervictims.

Furthermore, focusing on individuals’ negative emotional responses to specific instances of degradation within sexual economies conveniently takes attention away from larger political, economic, and social structures that dehumanize trans sex workers, as well as other socially acceptable sources of abuse, such as police officers. It also presents sexual economies as the only spaces where widespread violence occurs, ignoring the larger patterns of gendered, sexual, racial violence that shape the lives of trans Latinas. Therefore, as I focus on how money from sex work makes the women’s lives meaningful, I heed Heather Berg’s (2014) warning that humanizing justifications of sex work should not depoliticize sex work and obscure its persisting history of anticapitalist critique. The other primary reasons money made trans Latina sex workers’ “lives worth living” are similarly located in sex working trans Latina ideologies that trouble racist-cisgenderism and capitalism.

Financing Gender and Producing the Body

After financing basic needs like food and housing, the most popular expense the women cover with income gained from sex work are medical and cosmetic interventions to feminize their appearances. Such interventions include surgical procedures that feminize the face,

breasts, and hips, as well as hormone therapy, hair extensions, and permanent and semi-permanent face and body hair removal. All are costly. For example, the average cost of breast implants, one of the first procedures many of the interlocutors desired, is almost \$4,000. Notably, however, the women did not desire genital surgery, nor did they see their penises as incompatible with their womanhood (see also Plemons 2017). In this way, their understanding of trans Latina womanhood is not transnormative.

While explaining sex work in the trans Latina community and its connection to the need to transition, one collaborator said, “What would you do if you felt trapped in a cage? What would you do to feel alive? Work at McDonalds and make minimum wage and wait twenty years to transition . . . or maybe even wait forever?” Her quote exemplifies that we cannot understand sex work if we do not also account for the role of *money* in aligning one’s physical body and gender. Sex work, as the source of this life-giving money, can be viewed as a courageous and self-affirming sacrifice that allows transgender women to transition and live as what they articulate as their “true gender identities.” Although not all transgender people understand their gender in this way, or feel the need to change their bodies, those who do face unfeasible expenses. Dissatisfaction with one’s body and appearance has been linked with diminished mental health and quality of life for trans folks (Ainsworth and Spiegel 2010). The women in the project valued money from sex work because it was the only way they could modify their bodies, which they viewed as essential for achieving their gender identity and thus their mental well-being.

In my initial interview with Katalina, she interjected, “I just feel like I don’t love myself” and burst into tears. When I asked why, she couldn’t articulate reasons. A few weeks later at an HIV organization meeting, Katalina excitedly rushed toward me. Glowing, she exclaimed, “I got my boobs! I feel like I love myself now!” She had just returned from

getting breast implants via a doctor who travels from Mexico to Florida to provide discounted surgeries to transgender women. She paid entirely with money earned from sex work.

The use of money received from sexual labor to finance trans women's transition challenges the popular assumption that when one is "selling their bodies," they are thus "selling their selves." Quite the contrary, trans Latinas use money from sex work to honor and build the body. While the women's desires for gender-affirming medical procedures, and their appreciation of the money that makes it possible, may seem individualistic, I argue it is anything but. Living in a body that affirms your transgender, as a woman of color in the United States, directly defies racist-cisgenderism as an ontology, epistemology, and political system. Moreover, the trans Latina body is the heart of trans Latina sexual economies, which house resistant forms of care and kin. These alternative ways of being work toward more radical futures. None of which would be possible without the development of the trans Latina body—and the money to fund it.

The women's pursuit of gender via bodily modification is deeply racialized. They invest in beauty practices to emphasize their "Latina-ness," such as injecting silicone into the hips and butts and wearing red lipstick. While such feminizing practices are not specific to Latina communities, the women understood them as accentuating traits stereotypically associated with Latinas. For example, Veronica, a thirty-seven-year-old Cuban woman, described her round, silicone-enhanced hips by saying, "I paid for these hips, honey. I don't need hips to make me a woman, but they help make me a woman, and I'm a *Latina* woman, okay." She viewed round hips as characteristically feminine but more specifically "Latina" in their shape and thickness. Notably, the traits that the women personally found attractive also made them more desirable to clients and thus more successful in sexual economies of labor. While altering the body is necessary to succeed in the sex market, it is primarily understood as gender-affirming and helped women to feel "beautiful in their own skin," as Katalina said.

However, notions of beauty in the Americas, and around the world, are steeped in colorism and anti-Black racism. As they sought to make themselves look more feminine, many of the women simultaneously sought—consciously and unconsciously—to make themselves appear whiter. Apart from one Afro-Puerto Rican woman, all the interlocutors straightened their hair. A number had rhinoplasties to make their noses look both more feminine and less Black and Indigenous. This reveals that while some of the women’s bodily aspirations surpass white, cisgender ideologies, they develop in a larger cultural context that is anti-Black and thus sometimes replicate anti-Blackness. A serious limit of their liberatory project, this importantly shows the ubiquitousness of internalized anti-Blackness in US and Latinx communities. While research has considered how Latinxs engage in anti-Black racism to gain proximity to whiteness (Bonilla-Silva and Dietrich 2008; Darity et al. 2008), less attention has been paid to how desires for whiteness intersect with desires related to femininity, especially for transgender femmes. Sex working trans Latinas’ fraught ideologies around the body, and how they simultaneously challenge and support transnormativity, show how anti-Blackness intersects with gender, transgender, and transnormative aspirations. Attending to such dynamics has implications for broader theorizations of Latinx gender and a more comprehensive understanding of racist-cisgenderism and how it is negotiated in people’s daily experiences.

Money and Trans Kinship

Sex work and transitioning are often done with the help of a “trans mother.” Trans mothers provide emotional care, and oftentimes shelter, for their daughters and are an example of queer elders supporting younger community members in a society that renders them impossible (Rubin 2011; Shange 2019). Trans mothers teach their daughters how to be trans

women, and in this case, they also teach them how to get started in the sex trade. If they have already begun, they encourage safer sex practices and share tips for getting more clients.

Attention to money uncovers the contours of trans mother/daughter relationships. While Marlon Bailey (2013) recognizes how “queer cultural labor,” and “kin work” upholds the social configuration of physical and symbolic homes among members of Black LGBTQ communities in Detroit, the use of money to solidify kin connections is underexplored in the literature on queer kinship. Mothers and daughters were constantly lending each other money as a form of economic and symbolic support. This can be understood as “remittances” as described by Narotzky and Besnier (2014, 4) since these uses of money account for “people in their physical, social, spiritual, affective and intellectual dimensions” and create “structures of provisioning, investments in social relations, and relations of trust and care.” Money, then, takes on social meaning that is greater than its economic value.

Money even solidified kin connections across state-lines, illuminating the expansiveness of trans Latina networks. Those who had recently arrived in Illinois had trans mothers in other states who wired them money. Many interlocutors moved to avoid violent police officers, boyfriends, and clients. Yet their trans mothers kept tabs on them and offered economic support from afar. For example, eighteen-year-old Lexia had moved to Chicago from North Carolina to escape an abusive boyfriend. She chose Chicago because she was accepted into a program that provides free housing to LGBTQ youth. Although her housing was free, she was still responsible for other basic expenses. When we first met, she had not started doing sex work. I asked her how she was getting by. She told me her trans mother, who lived in Seattle and who she met online, was wiring her money. Money, then, was a way to connect to them despite physical distance.

The lending of money between Dora and Mariana, though not trans mother/daughter but close friends, demonstrates how the movement of cash between trans Latina women does

not follow an individualist model of capitalist accumulation but instead upholds a feminist ethics of care that queers boundaries between the moral and the monetary. Dora and Mariana's actions exemplify what anthropologists have called "moral economies," where the circulation of resources is not based on an economic logic but rather social, relational, and reciprocal rationality (Graeber 2001). In trans Latina sexual economies, however, money was still at the center of the moral economies, supporting Zelizer's (2005) point that money does not taint intimate social relations but rather sustains them. Dora owed Mariana \$20. Dora got paid, and Mariana knew. Dora offered to pay Mariana back, but Mariana refused. Mariana, however, needed the money. She needed bus fare home. She then privately asked me to borrow \$11. I suspect that Mariana wanted to keep Dora in debt to her because she was worried about Dora. Some of Dora's clients recently found out she was HIV positive and were violently threatening her. They left disturbing messages on her phone and graffitied on her door: "Get out, f*****, or we will drag you out." If Dora owed Mariana money, Mariana had the right to regularly contact her—they were connected. Moreover, despite Mariana's own financial need, I presume that she wanted to show Dora that she cared about Dora's well-being more than her own in that moment by allowing her to keep the money longer.

The complex circulation of money between Dora and Mariana also illustrates how I participated in monetary exchanges. The lending of money was indicative of my role as researcher and the extent to which I was trusted by the community. Mariana was one of my key interlocutors. We were equally passionate about the project, knew each other well, and trusted one another. She was comfortable asking me for money. I did not have the same relationship with everyone. Katalina and her boyfriend were unexpectedly kicked out of their apartment and had only hours to pack and find another place to live. When I called Katalina on the phone, unaware of what transpired, she explained the situation between sobs. I desperately asked what I could do. She just cried. I then asked, "Do you need to borrow

money?” She did. To secure a new apartment, she would need to pay a deposit and rent. She politely replied, “No, no, I couldn’t possibly do that. I’ll be okay.” Although I was just beginning to understand Chicago’s trans Latina sexual economy, the message was clear: I, a cisgender Latina researcher, was not kin.

A few months later, after spending more time together and bonding over our somewhat similar personal histories, Katalina and I were closer. She had found a room to rent with her boyfriend, but one day, he physically assaulted her. She left him and was out on the streets. This time, when I asked her if she needed to borrow money, she accepted. I interpreted her acceptance as evidence that she trusted me enough to be indebted to me. I would be remiss, however, if I did not recognize that she had just lost a significant part of her social, emotional, and financial support system and was more vulnerable than last time I offered to lend her money. Whether or not it evidences the strength of our friendship at the time, it still exhibits the variety of factors that are considered when deciding to borrow money.

I was repaid by every single interlocutor I lent money to, except for just one of the times Mariana borrowed cash. However, I believe she genuinely forgot to pay me back because she was battling cancer. Even Alexia, one of the youngest interlocutors at eighteen years of age, returned the money I lent her. In fact, I once offered her money as a gift. She proudly insisted on paying me back because, in addition to webcamming, she just got a job at a community center. This challenges the popular misconception that sex workers and trans women of color are desperate mongers who will take money from anyone under any circumstances. Because they operate with a feminist ethics and within a queer moral economy, other priorities, many complex and social in nature, are at play. While many researchers possess greater class privilege than participants, and should remain sensitive to this reality, exchanges of money also suggest that power does not only move in one way.

Queering Biological Kinship

Asking what trans Latina sex workers do with money also draws attention to how they queer relationships with biological kin. Because many queer youth, like Katalina and Layla, are rejected by their families, the literature on queer kinship focuses on communities built outside of the biological (e.g., Bailey 2013; Freeman 2007; Weston 1991). Moreover, there exists a racist belief that Latinx and Black parents are exceptionally transphobic and more commonly disown their trans children. However, many trans Latina women proudly state that the money earned from sex work enables them to support their bio families and thus be viewed as “contributing members of society,” something regularly denied to trans women of color. At the same time, sex work is stigmatizing and their relationships with biological kin are fraught. They echo Evelyn Blackwood’s (2010, 152) ethnographic research in Thailand that seeks to “queer the household context by foregrounding the tensions and accommodations between families and tomboys” (see also Manalansan 2003). Queering familial relationships, like queering money, allows for ambivalence, contradiction, and ambiguity.

Josefina is twenty-nine years old, Indigenous, Mexican, and undocumented. While working in a poultry factory, she was arrested and detained during an ICE raid. She was released but into an unfamiliar town without housing or money. She turned to sex work and never looked back. Josefina proudly points out that because she does sex work, she, unlike her cisgender siblings who work minimum wage jobs, is able to provide continual economic support to her parents in Mexico.

When I asked if their families knew about their involvement in sex work, many replied that their families “kinda know” or “know and don’t know.” For example, as soon as Dora began doing sex work, she helped her parents with bills. Dora speculated they knew

where the money was coming from and were ashamed but didn't say anything because they were appreciative. In her work on queer and gender variant persons in Mexico, Prieur (1998, 243) observed that "there is not necessarily an either/or relationship between money and love" as she characterizes a similarly ambivalent view of youth by their family members once they are able to financially contribute to the home after engaging in sex work. When Layla and I begin talking about her mother, she expressed resentment that her mother kicked her out. She suggested her mother didn't really love her. However, when I brought this up again later, she somewhat defensively said to me, "My mother loves me, of course she does, she's my mother. She also appreciates that I can buy her a nice purse." Regardless of the fraught nature of their relationships with bio kin, they were important and necessary for folks' well-being (see also Acosta 2013; Cantú and Luibhéid 2009; Decena 2011).

Dora's parents' ambivalence was perhaps because they were addicted to drugs. Dora believes they let her continue to live with them despite their shame about her job because she could help finance their addictions. Angela Garcia's (2010) ethnography is useful for understanding the role of drugs in kinship formation. The sharing of drugs between kin, especially mothers and daughters, is a way to maintain familial ties and perform care, especially if one is suffering withdrawal. Although it may be counterintuitive to think of providing drugs as anything other than harmful, Dora's use of the money earned from sex work to support her parents' addictions is similar to the sharing of heroin among mothers and daughters in Garcia's study. Dora's money from sexual labor allowed her to locate herself within the family and care for her parents by helping them afford drugs so they don't get "sick" or experience unbearable withdrawal symptoms.

Latinxs have long "queered" (Rodríguez 2014) American notions of family by existing beyond the nuclear model. The women in the project embody familial queering. Those who live with biological kin often share small spaces with multiple family members,

immediate and distant, across generations. In addition to meaningful relationships with biological kin, they also have various types of relationships with trans kin, challenging a mutually exclusive queer-kin binary for family. Relationships with loved ones can be marked by ambivalence and sustained by stigmatized behaviors, such as supporting drug use. These aspects of their relationships with family members surpass the idealized sentiments required for dominant models of family in the US. Moreover, Latinx conceptualizations of family extend beyond borders, undermining the nation-state, which seeks to confine and exclude them. Tracing the flows of money earned from sex work exposes these subversive, on-going relational networks; recall Josefina's use of money earned from sex work to support her parents in Mexico. That money acquired from sexual labor locates trans Latinas in local social worlds and transnational flows of capital and affection is especially important to note. Queer people have been popularly conceptualized as asocial and outside of "normal" networks of kinship and care and are consequently often symbolically and literally violently rejected from them. Trans Latina sex workers are active members of complex local *and* transnational queer *and* biological kinship networks. Therefore, ethnographic attention to their queer uses of money reveals how they also queer notions of family and nation.

Conclusion

Narotzky and Besnier (2014) invite us to think "economy otherwise." I bring together economic anthropology, feminist anthropology, and queer of color critique to queer money, specifically the money earned from sexual labor performed by transgender Latinas in Chicago. I contend that to think "economy otherwise," we must think it queerly and attend to the feminist ways in which money animates possibilities beyond racist-cisgenderism in sex working trans Latinas' lives. Money earned from sex work enables trans bodies and identities, as well as queer networks of care with biological and chosen kin, in the US and

beyond its borders. At the same time, sex working trans Latinas' uses of money, like their engagements with plastic surgery, sex worker hierarchies, and biological kin, are fraught, sometimes upholding transnormativity and other times opposing it. I invite feminist and queer ethnographic examinations of the economy to honor this messy reality as it more accurately prepares us for work toward a world beyond racist-cisgenderist capitalism, and it allows all of those in the fight to be fully humanized.

Many have described our current moment as a “transgender tipping point,” where increased visibility, typically viewed as positive, is accompanied by increased levels of violence against trans people (Tourmaline et al. 2017). In fact, for many, the recent rise in political attacks against both transgender people and Latinxs seems novel. Anti-Latinx sentiments and policies increased at alarming rates under the Trump administration. For example, the deportation industrial complex has intensified. Attacks against the transgender community have also escalated. For instance, federal protections for transgender students, which simply allowed them to use the bathroom, were rescinded.

Surely, then, life must be worse for transgender Latinas. Before the ascent of Trump, however, my interlocutors were policed in various public spaces, including bathrooms, because of their gender and race. And the majority were pushed out of school because of harassment by peers and even teachers. Further, the undocumented interlocutors have lived in fear of deportation since long before 45. Sex working increases one's chance of encountering the deportation machine, and vice-versa, being deported increases one's likelihood of engaging in sexual labor. In the words of Jesenia, a thirty-six-year-old Puerto Rican trans woman, the current political context and the immediate effects, or lack thereof, on her and her trans Latina sisters' lives, are “just business as usual.”

As we deal with the long-term effects of a fascist regime, where people lost taken-for-granted state protections, many wonder how to “attempt to make life worth living . . . under

conditions of radical uncertainty ('crisis')" (Narotzky and Besnier 2014). We have much to learn from sex working trans Latinas, who have long survived and thrived under multiple systems of oppression.

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Notes

¹ All names of people and organizations are pseudonyms to protect the identities of interlocutors. Identifying details have been obscured in a way that still accurately represents characteristics of the sample on the whole.

² The two key interlocutors, who were respected elders in the community, introduced me to potential interviewees and vouched for me and the importance of the research. From there, I used snowball sampling.

³ I use the concept *racialized sexual economies of labor* to draw attention to 1) the racialization of sexual economies in general and, in this case, where they are built around the figure of the hypersexual transgender Latina; 2) the various forms of labor the women are engaging in, including sexual, physical, and emotional; and 3) the intersection of sexual economies with various other economies, both normative and nonnormative, and related social worlds.

⁴ Trans sex workers also differentiated themselves from cisgender sex workers with ideas about drug use. Trans women claimed that cisgender sex workers are more likely to do sex work to support drug addictions. Trans women, on the other hand, viewed their sex working primarily as the result of employment and having to finance transition. This interestingly alleviates trans sex workers from responsibility or blame for selling sexual services, which is highly stigmatized.