

Monica Jones

An Interview

CHE GOSSETT and EVA HAYWARD

Abstract The following is an interview with activist Monica Jones conducted by Che Gossett and Eva Hayward. In this interview, Jones talks about her activism against the criminalization of sex work, recounting how the program Project ROSE, which was a revealing collaboration between the university and the police, functioned through carceral logics to detain and then according to a carceral economy of innocence, criminally prosecute or “reeducate” sex workers or those profiled as sex workers. Jones shows how the university is part of the carceral continuum and is a site of Black trans and sex worker and prison abolitionist struggle, which has intensified in the current organizing against police on campuses and entanglement of university and the prison-industrial complex and the policing functions of administration and university governance. Jones also shows how this is an HIV/AIDS activist issue given that the criminalization of sex work is bound up with from gentrification, displacement, and how that is exacerbated with COVID-19.

Keywords Monica Jones, criminalization, sex work, Project ROSE

CG and EH: *Your phenomenal work for sex worker decriminalization has extended over years and has been situated in many different places—from Arizona protesting against Project ROSE, to Melbourne, Australia—and has also taken many different forms, including speaking—such as the incredible keynote speech you gave at the Desiree conference in 2016 in New Orleans—but also being visible in the media and in PJ Starr’s documentary about you. How do you navigate media and turn it toward struggles that you are invested in sustaining and growing?*

MJ: When speaking to the media, I always maintain control of the interview, and I always bring the conversation back to my key talking points about why I am giving the speech or interview. This requires preparation and focus. When talking about sex work, I make sure I state that sex work is work, I describe the reasons for ending criminalization, and I always address the conflation of sex work and human trafficking. I am seen as a spokesperson, and I have been public about my activism, but I do not see my voice as one individual because I represent community. As a



Figure 1. Monica Jones holding a red umbrella—a symbol of sex worker rights activism—and smiling. Photograph by PJ Starr.

Black trans woman I always center myself in the struggles of my community and my lived experience as a member of our community. When we are talking about violence against trans women, as a Black trans woman I always highlight that we are more vulnerable to violence due to the social construction of our identity and the historical trauma of our community. Another way this plays out is in the context of conversations about SESTA/FOSTA when activists of greater privilege use street-based sex work as a scare tactic in the media to legitimize their voices as nonstreet-based sex workers. The street is held up as the ultimate danger, and street-based sex workers are seen as lesser than, to be spoken about and for. This approach does not allow us as Black trans women to defend our right to be in public space, and it undermines strategies for economic justice for low-income sex workers of all genders and experiences who are in public space. I am invested in struggles that always raise up the collective voices of Black trans women as leaders in the movement for the rights of all sex workers, that link our struggle to our history as I do via my own organization named for Sharmus Outlaw (the Outlaw Project founded in 2016), and that celebrate our survival, our resilience, and our desire to thrive.

CG and EH: *How do you see the criminalization of sex work as an HIV/AIDS activist issue?*

MJ: In 2014 at the first International AIDS Conference I was able to attend, I learned that with the decriminalization of sex work, HIV transmission rates

decrease by 45 percent globally for everyone. This information came from a special issue of the *Lancet*. Here in the United States, sex workers are seen as vectors of disease and are assumed to be the ones who spread infections to “unsuspecting victims.” This stigma, that is, of course, not based on any science, feeds into laws that penalize individuals who engage in sex work, specifically, those who are living with HIV. These laws against “transmitting HIV” carry stricter punishment and longer jail sentences. The people who are arrested and charged under these HIV-related laws are almost always Black transgender women and sex workers. Policies allow police to use condoms as evidence to arrest women on suspicion of sex work and contribute to an environment where we cannot keep ourselves safe through best-practice harm reduction. Policing and these policies take the autonomy away from us to have safe sex. Because policing and lack of access to adequate health care intersect in low-income communities of color, this leads to more people living with HIV and also having to survive through sex work. This cycle leads to incarceration for people doing what they have to do to survive. Many of these issues are discussed in Sharmus Outlaw’s final report, *Nothing about Us without Us*, which was completed before her passing in 2016 and was the first national report created by sex workers about the issue of HIV and policy.

CG and EH: *How might abolitionist organizing against the prison system make trans life livable in a time of HIV/AIDS?*

MJ: Prison abolitionists can help by sharing the real reasons that prisons are there. They are not there to rehabilitate and help people. They are there to criminalize everyday actions. Just like trans people were criminalized during the 1950s and 1960s for cross-dressing, now trans people are being criminalized for trying to survive in a world and country that does not want them to survive and exist. [The criminalization of cross-dressing also continues in prisons today.] Due to policies and laws that criminalize sex work and criminalize living with HIV, these issues intersect due to sustained attacks on harm reduction and Black lives. The consequence is incarceration. Incarceration can mean death for us. This system must end.

CG and EH: *Can you share more about your life and history of work against criminalization and Project ROSE, for those who have yet to see PJ Starr’s film about your activism?*

MJ: For as long as I can remember, I have been working for change, and I am an organizer for the rights of trans people, low-income people, people of color, and sex workers. Because I am a Black trans woman with a disability, I face oppression on a daily basis, when I am walking on the street, going to a rally, traveling to the United Nations, and seeking education. Even though I am a committed organizer, I am still

a human being who was arrested and harmed by a Phoenix-based sting operation known as Project ROSE. The fight against Project ROSE was a fight that had to happen, but there was an emotional toll. The casualty of Project ROSE was my education. My arrest happened while PJ Starr was filming *No Human Involved*, about the death of Marcia Powell, and it is mentioned in that film. The full story of what happened to me will be in the forthcoming film *Manifesting Monica Jones*, and we want to use the film to speak about the toll that I experienced. As activists we need to heal.

For those who have not seen the films, here is what happened. In 2013 I attended a rally to protest Project ROSE, which was a sting and antitrafficking program carried out by the Phoenix police, Arizona State University (ASU) School of Social Work, and other local service providers. The next day I was arrested under the sting myself as I was walking to a local gay bar in my neighborhood. I was taken to a church where I was told I had to accept diversion services or be charged with “manifesting the intent to prostitute” (which is basically being told that you look like a prostitute). I was taken to court and found guilty. I spent the next two years fighting the charges brought against me and bringing a constitutional challenge against the law. During that time, I was often unable to leave my apartment because police officers would station themselves outside, and I was followed by police constantly on the street. I had to keep attending the social work program at ASU, the same program that had been involved in my arrest, and my education was affected by the stress. Even though my conviction was vacated and Project ROSE was shut down, to this day I live with the knowledge that I could be arrested under the existing laws at any time. Other trans women and low-income women are still being arrested under these laws during COVID-19, and the laws are being used against undocumented people.

While I was fighting in the courts, I got to know Sharmus Outlaw through her research project she was doing at the time. When Sharmus died in 2016, I founded an organization named for her, the Outlaw Project, because I had learned that she was never able to fulfill her lifelong goal of starting her own organization. The Outlaw Project is based on the principles of intersectionality to prioritize the leadership of people of color, transgender women, nonbinary people, and migrants for sex worker rights.

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