



A performer and a professor: two friends and colleagues talk porn ... in college

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FORUM

A performer and a professor: two friends and colleagues talk porn ... in college

For the past few years we have talked about working collaboratively on a class visit, with Cinnamon telling their story about working in the adult industry and Danielle preparing her students for a discussion with Cinnamon. Since her early days as a budding sex-positive feminist academic at the London School of Economics and Political Science, Danielle has been engaged with and committed to teaching sex work histories and sociologies that illuminate the sex industry and offer students a context for thinking about issues such as labour, race, representation, and the body. Cinnamon has been busy working as a Bay Area-based sex worker, performer, activist, and educator.¹ Close friends, it seemed the next logical step was some type of academic collaboration. In what follows we revisit some of the key themes Cinnamon discussed with Danielle's students and consider why collaborations such as this are important.

Cinnamon's story

I started doing sex work out of sheer interest for a job that was not boring. However, when I realized the lack of support for plus-size black women I wanted to be the person who would contribute to discussions about a better, more positive, less discriminatory world for plus-size black women in the sex industry. I could have decided to do this in other ways outside of sex work, but black women are so under-represented and misrepresented in sex work and porn that having these conversations in the context of porn was important to me.

As black women, we are taught from a young age that our bodies and images are not as valued as white women. In sex work, it is pretty blatant. People do not hold back about the fact that they will not work with or shoot women of colour and fat women. I have been turned away from working at clubs because I am too fat – and the managers have flat out told me that. I primarily work with queer porn companies. This is mostly because I cannot get work with mainstream companies; this, again, is because of my body type and skin colour. I am not the 'right' kind of fat; I do not have huge breasts, they tell me, or similar reasons. Queer porn companies are pretty much the only companies that will take me as I am.

When I was doing sex work other than porn, I was often fetishized because I am black. More often than not, I was dismissed. Not just dismissed, but made fun of. People could be cruel. I once worked in a BDSM house. I was 19 and still new to work outside of stripping. I was taken into a session by one of the senior members of the house. She introduced me to the client. She told him I was there to pay him back for everything he had done to my ancestors and me. I was appalled. I did not know what to say but I did not want to walk out of the session. I also needed the money. I was at work. A few days later I told the head of the house about the incident,

and her response was that the other girl was Brazilian and they historically 'have black in them', so it is not really a big deal. I quit shortly after that.

I also cannot talk about my experience with how I am received in the industry without talking about my size. Fatphobia is not the same thing as racism. If I was smaller but still black, people would receive me very differently. People often will not hire me for their big beautiful women (BBW) work because I do not have huge breasts. Again, I am not the 'right' kind of fat. I have a big butt and someone once told me that I could only get hired to do 'ghetto booty' type work, but I want to do less work that stereotypes me and other black bodies. These were some of the things I wanted to talk about with Danielle's class.

Our collaboration

Danielle: You'd been saying for years now, 'Hey Danielle, we need to figure out how I can come to your class and talk to your students about what I do'. I felt inspired by the women's, gender and sexuality studies class I was teaching in spring 2014.² I also felt I could get you on Skype without any major technical difficulties and that my students would be receptive.

Cinnamon: I would've much rather talked to your students in-person, but Skype ultimately appealed to me because students were able to hear from someone like me; and although we couldn't get funding for a campus visit, I was able to have some kind of interaction with students.

Danielle: Students came up with some really good and smart questions for you: Do you see and experience stereotypes in sex work? If so, what? What factor does race play in your work? What kind of sex work interests you the most? If you have daily struggles, what are they? I read through the questions and sent them to you in advance. Some of them felt a little judgmental, so I reminded students to think about whether they'd ask those same questions of a doctor, professor, or lawyer; but most of questions were really great. And while I was completely confident that you were prepared, I wanted to make sure my students were also prepared.

Cinnamon: I liked getting a ton of questions before hand because it allowed me to make sure I had all of the information I wanted in my presentation. My life is my life, so I'm completely normalized to it. The students' questions allowed me to reflect a bit more, and think about what I wanted to include and what was necessary to include. I organized my answers into sections, such as: Cinnamon's pronouns and gender identity; how I started working in the industry; choosing a performer name; working in a BDSM house; how racism plays out in different labor contexts (e.g., in a BDSM house versus porn); race, body size, and performance; my experience in queer and sex worker communities in the San Francisco Bay Area. I also talked about starting my own soft-core porn site and included certain details about my personal life.

- Danielle: You ended up answering all of their questions, and then wrote out other parts in a narrative. I read through it again yesterday and thought, ‘There’s so much here’. In retrospect I wish we had recorded the discussion, because you talked about so much more than what you covered in your written narrative, including your intimate relationship.
- Cinnamon: I think people know that sex workers and porn performers have intimate relationships, but are our intimate relationships with other people in the industry? Are they with our friends? Who are these people that we’re dating and seeing? And my partner, yeah, they do porn sometimes but it’s a thing for income when we need it. It’s not a thing they want to steadily pursue. I think it’s necessary to confront the fact that sex workers have normal relationships.
- Danielle: This makes me think about some of the comments my students had. One student said, ‘Thank you so much for offering up your time. I know so much more now. I just had all kinds of stereotypes about sex workers’. And another said, ‘I only had this [one] particular perspective on the sex industry and now I’ve got a deeper understanding of it’. The way you talked about your relationship and said, ‘This is the person I’m with’, humanized you.
- Cinnamon: I feel like the more I can humanize myself, and sex workers in general, the better. I felt like your students got a real sense of who I am as a person and it really challenged the stereotypes that they hear so often.
- Danielle: Students got to hear from you – an active porn performer – and they got to hear your narrative and experiences in your own words. College students typically read texts, hear lectures, and engage in classroom discussions. Your Skype visit allowed them to combine all of those things with someone who could speak personally to some of the themes and issues we’d already covered in class. Instead of turning you or your experiences into a stereotype, they were challenged to sit and listen to your story, to rethink notions they often attach to sex workers, and connect what they learned to a living, breathing human being.
- Cinnamon: Exactly. And it felt good to share those experiences. It felt like I was exploding a lot of preconceived notions they had about who I am and what I do. I remember saying that I wasn’t speaking for all sex workers; I was speaking from my own experiences. But my own experiences – even if I’m just one person – are valid and they say a lot about the sex industry in general. I wanted to get that point across and I think I did.
- Danielle: I agree. I also wanted, pedagogically, to challenge students to think beyond what they typically hear about sex work and sex workers. Coupling your Skype discussion with texts like *The Feminist Porn Book* (Taormino et al. 2013) contributed to that goal. After your visit, students discussed the sex industry, porn studies, and sexuality

with more clarity and thoughtfulness than I'd ever experienced with a group of students.

Cinnamon: I loved when I said this in particular: 'I have daily struggles with my size and being brown. This is something that won't ever change. I am okay with that. It's part of my experience as a person'. I think that's a nice way to summarize some really important and ongoing struggles I have in the sex industry, while also highlighting how race, body size, and privilege play out in the industry.

Danielle: I don't remember a time in our friendship when those daily struggles weren't significant. As we've seen at conferences, such as the 2014 Feminist Porn Conference in Toronto, it's extremely important for academics to collaborate with and listen to porn performers and other sex workers. My class offered a space for this and showed students that these collaborations are possible, relevant, and necessary. If academics really want to challenge sex worker stereotypes and misrepresentations, these goals need to be reflected in how we structure our classes. Opening up space for multiple and often misunderstood voices is an excellent place to start.

Notes

1. Cinnamon Maxxine has worked with directors Courtney Trouble and Shine Louise Houston, as well as performance artist Penny Arcade. They have performed in numerous films, including *Lesbian Curves 3* (Courtney Trouble, USA, 2014).
2. Danielle teaches at Montana State University, a land-grant university located in Bozeman, Montana, USA. The student body is markedly homogeneous, with white students accounting for 86% of the student population.

References

- Taormino, Tristan, Constance Penley, Celine Parreñas Shimizu, and Mireille Miller-Young, eds. 2013. *The Feminist Porn Book: The Politics of Producing Pleasure*. New York: The Feminist Press.

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