



Porn and labour: the labour of porn studies

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INTRODUCTION

Porn and labour: the labour of porn studies

Why emphasize the ‘work’ in ‘sex work’? Studies of pornography have long trained their focus mostly on the sex side of the equation, concerned with bodies and their pleasures through analyses of consumption, reception, distribution, and audience. Questions of work have tended to be more about industry and technology. Yet the performers themselves often remain elusive, removed from studies of the relations of labour and economic exchange that tend to only involve two stakeholders: audience and industry.

The goal of this special issue is to centre the voices of porn workers, especially those in front of the camera. We treat their work as performance, craft, and even art; but also as necessary economic activity for their survival. Too often, the latter is used as proof of porn’s inherent exploitative and abusive culture. Such vulgar Marxism, as Clarissa Smith notes in her critique of ‘pornographication’, is rooted in a respectability politics of sexuality that suggests it is commercialization alone which causes abuse, conveniently ignoring the fact that all facets of our lives are commercialized to some extent (2010, 107). Yet the corollary to this argument is equally problematic as it tends to rely on claims of ‘empowerment’ and ‘authenticity’ – also rooted in a respectability politics whereby the joy of performing should be its own reward. As porn performer Arabelle Raphael (2014) tweeted, ‘The emphasis on authenticity in feminist porn can be problematic. It erases the fact that performing is labor.’

These competing discourses of authenticity versus commercialization reappear in different forms when analyzing the ways in which pornographic labour is represented on film. The poles of performance/documentary seek to position porn as either fully fantasy or fully real. Increasingly, performers themselves are insisting that their work is both/neither. Yes, the work can be enjoyable, it can also be challenging, and it can even be demeaning – but not because of the sex, or even because of the commercialization of the sex. Like all workers, issues of self-determination, autonomy, dignity, respect, and fair compensation are paramount. The fact that these fundamental human rights are often claimed to not apply to sex workers – either because they are undeserving or because the industry is incapable of meeting those demands – is, we argue, the worst kind of abuse.

Practices of stigmatization that come from those who do not work in pornography perpetuate labour discrimination to suit political or economic gain. We see the effects of stigmatization over and over again whenever the porn industry spills into news headlines. While this special issue was in preparation, numerous events unfolded that raised the spectre of stigma and its effects on worker health and safety. The porn performer, Stoya bravely went public with her experience of relationship abuse by James Deen. The outpouring of support (#IstandwithStoya) and shared stories by former co-workers and girlfriends has resulted in greater dialogue on the way porn production companies seek consent from their performers (Shhhh.com 2016). At the same time, others took to social media to harass Stoya. Even worse, some anti-porn feminists used Stoya’s confession to fuel their own anti-pornography agenda, insisting that sexual violence is inherent to porn and therefore performers should expect and accept it (Corvid 2015). In February 2016, CalOSHA, the Los Angeles County’s workplace safety and health regulatory agency that oversees the largest legalized porn industry in the world, narrowly rejected draconian condom rules for performers that were advocated by the San Francisco-based AIDS Healthcare Foundation. Not one active porn performer spoke in favour of the proposed regulations.

In 2015, porn workers in the United States won two important legal rulings against financial institutions like Visa, JPMorgan, and PayPal who refuse to process payments from adult websites – and in some cases have seized earnings and closed bank accounts (Alptrum 2015; Blue 2015). Meanwhile, in the United Kingdom, a lengthy and arbitrary list of sexual acts was banned at the end of 2014, threatening many domestic workers' livelihoods (watching banned acts produced outside the United Kingdom is still legal, it seems).

When decisions about workers' rights are determined in contexts that exclude the actual affected workers, then workers are placed at high risk. Furthermore, in the specific case of porn, the justification for their exclusion is often made on the basis of the work itself. As the example of Stoya shows, anti-porn advocates claim that anyone engaged in sex work is obviously incapable of articulating their reasons for doing so or advocating for their right to work in safety and with dignity. It is not hyperbole to state categorically that stigma kills. Thus, we felt strongly that an issue on porn and labour must balance academic research with the lived experiences and knowledge of porn workers.

This issue is co-edited by an academic, Rebecca Sullivan, and a performer, Jiz Lee. One of our goals was to encourage and invite industry professionals to contribute. This model of collaboration fits with the 'nothing about us without us' philosophy that insists any kind of research or policy initiatives on sex work include the workers themselves (Jello 2013). However, as we proceeded we recognized a serious ethical challenge to that philosophy. Rebecca is a tenured professor, salaried, with benefits and pensions. The unpaid labour of academic publishing is expected of her as part of her job and compensated through merit increases to her salary, grants and research awards, and other indirect financial means. Jiz, on the other hand, receives very little in the way of financial reward for their time, expertise, and efforts. The other non-academic professionals contributing to this issue face similar conflicts.

Academics who are broadly engaged in activist, intersectional research grapple with this conundrum of how to include research subjects as participating experts. While participatory methodologies have made significant strides in terms of engagement, the question remains: how should these participants be compensated, and by whom? Is Rebecca responsible? Are the editors of the journal? Or perhaps the publisher? What constitutes fair compensation for the work of co-editing an academic journal issue? Obviously, we disagree with anyone who would argue that financial compensation interferes with the 'authenticity' or political sincerity of our collaboration – as the UK editor-in-chief of *Huffington Post* recently claimed (Hewlett 2016). Yet the institutional structure of academic publishing relies heavily on the unpaid labour of scholars – with vague promises of compensation down the road that are often unfulfilled. The problem was exacerbated for us when we realized that many of our best submissions came from individuals who did not have tenured or even tenure-track positions at post-secondary institutions. Where and when will compensation come to them?

Rather than going into the *ad-hoc* personal ways that we tried to address some of the inequities involved in putting together this issue, we would rather use this introduction to raise the issue as one of policy and best practices. As we discuss what constitutes ethical labour practices in porn, perhaps a future issue of this journal could provide space to also discuss ethical labour practices in porn scholarship. We view these conversations as progressive and ongoing, in the sense that we are not looking for the perfect solution as much as the good-enough resolution, with the awareness that ethical practices change as we reflect on where we are at and where we want to go next.

The articles in this issue frame labour from multiple contexts. Alan McKee's article on pornography's kinship to other media and popular culture industries shows how labour practices and hierarchies change very little between pornography and non-adult entertainment industries. What is different is the higher level of bodily and health risk that is made even worse by the stigma

attached to the industry. The rise of standardized consent practices both on-camera and off-camera attempt to mitigate that stigma and demonstrate respect for performer safety as part of the pleasure of porn. Yet, as Karly-Lynne Scott discusses, creating an ethics of porn spectatorship that distinguishes between performer and documentary subjectivity brings its own issues about performer self-determination and how consent itself may be turning into a genre or brand that elides as much as it purports to reveal about labour negotiations in porn performance.

As the industry transforms, the old dreams of get-rich-quick schemes and recession-proof business models fade into history. Porn stardom is an increasingly complex and multi-varied status requiring expert business acumen. Marcel Barriault's examination of Buck Angel, porn performer/entrepreneur/educator, charts some of these transformative moments and the suddenness by which a trailblazing figure can fall from grace as we struggle with the politics of ethical porn and its commitments to gender diversity and inclusivity. At the other end of the performer hierarchy are those working in amateur porn. Bonnie Ruberg examines the hidden costs and profits of so-called free porn, and the lessons that porn hubs and porn piracy hold for scholars of digital labour. Most performers, however, occupy the messy middle of the 'gig economy', what Heather Berg defines as a network of cross-connected sex industries in which porn still occupies a prestigious yet financially precarious position. Is porn becoming the loss leader that directs consumers to workers' other more lucrative gigs as dancers, cammers, or escorts? Looking specifically at the Greek mainstream porn industry, Liza Tsalikis and Despina Chronaki provide insight into how performers define themselves as professionals and combat stigma through the construction of an ethical porn self.

There is no doubt that pornography is becoming more visible and its performers less willing to remain in the shadows of our networked global economy. We have porn to thank for much of our increased knowledge of consent awareness, sex positivity, and gender diversity. Yet, until the stigma associated with sex work is eradicated, these brave, knowledgeable workers remain at risk – especially from special interest groups outside the industry. Thus, this special issue really has one goal in mind: to increase understanding of how porn performers define themselves and their labour so that those of us who derive pleasure from their work can work alongside and behind them in demanding their human rights.

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