

# **Queer Sex Work**

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## 17 Community sex work

A conversation with Nenna Feelmore Joiner

*Mireille Miller-Young*



*Figure 17.1* Nenna Feelmore Joiner  
Source: Courtesy of Urban Shutter Bug

In the heart of downtown Oakland, California, sits The Feelmore Adult Gallery, the 2013 Adult Video News Winner for Best Adult Boutique. It is owned by a talented, ambitious and energetic African American woman named Nenna Joiner. A stunning showcase for the adult novelty products she sells, the boutique is set up like a gallery and gathering space, the black walls covered in erotic artwork and vintage porn collectables, all the products open and available to touch and examine, workshops offer lessons on sexual health. The Las Vegas native wanted to create a space that participated in the revitalisation of Oakland that, like many American cities, has fallen into years of ruin and neglect and suffers from broad racial and class disparities among its inhabitants. Coming from a family and a culture in which self-reliance,

ownership and community outreach matters, Nenna Joiner has carved a unique path in the world of adult entertainment. As a queer woman of colour she had a special link to many of the local people who enter her store, including sex workers, homeless LGBT youth and working-class African Americans. She decided to do outreach to these communities by fostering an open environment where anyone could drop in for information, and by offering classes tailored to the community's needs. Like her work as a queer feminist porn filmmaker – she produced two well-regarded films, *Tight Places: A Drop of Color*, and *Hella Brown* – Joiner works to support the sexual education and expression of her community. I spoke to Joiner about this 'community sex work' and about how I see her as an erotic activist (Miller-Young 2013, 2014). We discussed how the concept of sex work applies to sex educators and academics as well as to those who use sex to make a living or to survive.

MMY: Nenna, so here you are, the owner of your own sex boutique, and you're also really plugged into the community from what I understand. Could you tell me about the kinds of things that you're doing in the community?

NJ: Well first, you have to be involved in the community ... One of the things that I noticed here in Oakland was that there wasn't really this true, inclusive, or diverse LGBT community. If you look at bigger cities such as San Francisco, New York, or Los Angeles, they have a central area [for LGBT people to come together], and we do not have that here in Oakland. Oakland was very conservative when I got here in 1994. My aunt actually worked for UCSF AIDS Health Foundation, and [she] helped me to understand [the value of] diversity. She was married to my uncle, yet she had a pink triangle, and a rainbow flag on her car. From her I got an understanding of the work that needs to be done, the coalitions that you build, and the support work you do for the community, just to make sure it's happy and healthy.

MMY: That's incredible. What kind of coalition work do you do with your store? I've been there, and it is in part of downtown Oakland that's being gentrified but is still 'in process', right?

NJ: Right. Since moving to the Bay Area I've been in downtown Oakland, working, going to school ... so there's a lot of revitalization that I've just [seen] first hand.

The things that we do in this space around sex work ... We partner with the Sex Worker Outreach Project – SWOP of Bay Area. We bring sex workers in so people can get an idea [about what sex work is] ... There were a lot of people that were coming to me and saying, 'Hey, you know, because you're in this space, because you know this information, we're going to assume you know about sex work and – how do we get into it? How can we stay safe? What are the things that we can do?'

I could only tell them so much, and so I wanted to make sure that, just like other professions, that there are professionals who do all this on a

full-time basis, who stand on their platform and say, 'Yes, I do this. Yes, this is who I am, and this is my community that I support'. I wanted to connect with that organization and bring that information.

It wasn't just about people who wanted to become sex workers. It was also people who wanted to find out about sex work, [who had] questions that they really couldn't ask anyone. Let's just say a 'ho' in my community wasn't called a prostitute or a sex worker, you know, [she] was called a ho'.

But if you couldn't ask your auntie – who was the official ho' – how she really made her money and what it really looked like, what can you do? You can only speculate. These are opportunities for people to get through those stereotypes and preconceived notions about what sex work really is, and [learn about] how it supports the community.

MMY: Their labor really does support the community via the survival of their families and other institutions. I remember you had an event at the store called 'Ask a Ho'.

NJ: Uh huh.

MMY: What was it to raise awareness in the community?

NJ: It was mostly people who wanted to hear the information, but I guess because I am African American it makes other [African American] people feel comfortable, you know? I wanted to make sure that this information was in the community, because it's very important. Oakland is one of the hottest prostitution areas in the country. I say hot not in [terms of] statistics or numbers, but just it's always in the news. The city government is always fining motels and hotels [for prostitution-related infractions]. They're talking about youth prostitution ... I'm coming from Vegas – from Nevada, where you can't have a brothel in an area where there is a population over 400.

When I was younger it wasn't [criminalized] that much. The information was still made available to us that there were prostitutes – that women would go up – because there were so many, like, mining towns or, uh, government towns up there [in northern Nevada]. Men would stay up there, you know, for a couple weeks at a time. They wanted the comforts of home. To do that you needed to have *everything*.

I'm in a unique position where [the state is] like, 'Oh prostitution is bad', but I'm like, I grew up with it. It's a way of life, it's the way that some, many, or most people actually make their living or make ends meet.

That's the bad part. Being in the position that I'm in here at the store, I see people [suffering]. I know what it's like to have an unemployment card, where the government puts money on there. I've been unemployed. When someone comes in and they hand me this particular card, I know that they've been unemployed or they're on some type of assistance.

They're having conversations about their sex work. It's: 'Yeah, I'm getting this money [and] now I'm in the system, but I need more to make sure that my family is okay. It's not like I'm rolling in Louboutins, or I'm having this,

you know, this crazy car out there ... I really want to make ends meet and have a comfortable life'.

MMY: Exactly, because the money that you get from government assistance is not adequate to actually support a family.

NJ: Heck no! My mother is disabled. My mother is officially disabled according to the government and she can't even get food stamps. And she has a restrictive diet. Like, what is that?

MMY: If you need to eat special food, or even want nutritious food, there's no way you can afford it, even when you have food stamps.

NJ: No there isn't.

MMY: Other sex positive stores tend to be owned by women, or are sex and queer positive where they want to build spaces for sharing sexual knowledge and educating the community. Yet they don't really include the community that you're talking about and the issues you're talking about.

NJ: Mhm. Right.

MMY: And they often don't make that link between sex positivity and sex work. That's really extraordinary that you do.

NJ: I don't know how I do it but it's just who I am. Just being here in Oakland ... How can someone supplement their income in order to stay around here? Because if you're not able to provide jobs for adults, you're damn sure can't provide it for youth, so what are they to do? You get what I mean? It's just a whole economic domino effect.

MMY: Mhmhm. I think that what makes your store special is you are someone who's aware of the community you're in and engaged in it. Just coming from where you're coming from, being open to sexuality and sex work by lower income people of color, I think that's what makes it so different than any other sex shop that I've ever heard of. When we talked before, I was telling you I think of you as an erotic activist!

NJ: Hahaha!

MMY: - Because you do more than just own a business, Nenna! You're making a social intervention. Have you received feedback from people who come in the store or who you've worked with as a porn director about how you've impacted them?

NJ: Man, all the time! [Prior to our interview] there was an individual here who moved [to Oakland] and they're LGBT homeless. They wanted to find [support] groups, and they said, 'What is this?' and I told them what [my store] was. I said, 'Go ahead and come on in'. And they asked me, 'Are there any support groups out here for homeless LGBT?' I said, 'I don't know right off but what we can do is go ahead and join our Facebook [page], I'll put the question out there so you can have some anonymity and [we'll] just look at the responses'.

You have to support your community right where they are, you know. As a new business, it takes time for people to come in. Of course, the retail value when they come in and make a purchase [needs to be] very high to offset the time between clients for me, but when I'm not doing anything

between [clients], I think, how can I support people? It takes nothing from me to take a couple moments to learn to support somebody, and it costs nothing!

I think it's a value to step outside of yourself and support someone else with the information that they need. You know, as a merchant, you're always like, 'Okay, I need you to buy, I need you to buy', but what are you giving away? I think I give away a fair amount ... I do what I do because I feel comfortable doing it. Someone has to stand up. Just like a sex worker has to go out there and stand up and stand on the corner and walk through society and still have a sense of pride about themselves. You know, that takes a lot of work!

I'm a woman. I'm a black woman. I'm also part of the LGBT community. I need to support everybody as much as possible. In just building these coalitions and doing the outreach, I'm looking to the community like how can I support not just people coming in my store, but how can I support [everyone]?

You know the [car] accidents that are always happening out here on Telegraph Road? I wrote a letter to my [city] councilperson, I hit up the safety commission. The manager came out and he was like, 'Hey, we're going to put additional lighting and signage right here, and hopefully that'll help with cars running the lights and the accidents that are happening'.

Around the [2012] presidential election I petitioned to have [the store] as a voting location because this is a new community and if we want to encourage voters we have to kind of mix up some of the polling places. The city said they'd never had a business [that] wanted to step up and have their space used because they always want money. So how do I support my community? We've had flu shots here. We do HIV testing.

When you're doing outreach, [it means] going out to someone where they are. For people of color, they get to us at the point of infection. How can we get to people *before* the point of infection? How can we make it sexy to find out about this information before a point of infection?

MMY: That is inspiring! Nenna, I'm interested in how you create a transformative space at your store like this with HIV testing. I'm also interested in the films you produce and direct because I think that they're powerful activist interventions into pornography. How did you get started making films? I think the first film you made was *Tight Places: A Drop of Color*, right?

NJ: Yes. I was blessed to have my uncle who owns his own [media production] company ... I became his schlepper, his production assistant on his own shoots. That's how I got the film experience I needed. Yeah, maybe I could've gone to school, but that wasn't my passion. My passion was supporting my family.

MMY: And so how did you get the idea to do an erotic film?

NJ: Well, I looked at a lot as a kid anyway! My grandparents always worked so at one house they had satellite, another house, they had cable TV! They didn't do checks and balances with, like, parental [control] systems

[on the television set]. I was able to watch whatever I wanted, any hour I wanted to. You know, the Playboy channel ... you saw beautiful women in action, in addition to 800 number commercials being shown all the time. So I got my first taste of eroticism, not just visually, but I liked it when I could hear it.

What I noticed as a child was that there weren't any brown women. Like, where are the [brown] women? Here's my grandmother, here's a big woman. Or here's my big mama. Where's she at? And I don't see my dad there. I didn't see anybody in my community. So here we are watching this content in our communities, but having no one from our community [in the content].

MMY: Right! Now a lot of the queer porn that's been coming out, especially out of San Francisco. How did you find the performers in your porn films? Were you a part of that San Francisco-based queer porn community?

NJ: I wasn't in that particular community, no. See, that community wasn't over here in Oakland. That community wasn't brown. I didn't see those people when I go to church, you know?

I put a [casting] call out on Facebook. I said, 'Hey, anybody interested?' I made a couple friends, and they put [the ad] up. It took a long time to cast. I was advertising for the film long before I shot it. I was introducing myself to people. Hey this is who I am. People said, 'Do you know this person? How do they shoot? How are they going to use my content?'

I actually found Brooklyn Skyy in a bar. I saw her in a bar in my community and was like, 'Hey, you interested in this?' And she was like, 'Are you serious?' I was like, 'Yeah, I'm dead serious!'

MMY: Brooklyn Skyy is really gorgeous in that film and was a highlight for me. I was also excited to see a trans male performer of color, Kohen. I was surprised to find the interviews at the end, including with people on the street about what they like to see in porn and what they want to see more of. Where did you get that idea?

NJ: Well, in interviewing [performers] they were like, 'Oh, how much?' When you ask how much money is it in the beginning, you really don't want to do this, you know, because it [involves] more than just the money. You need to be mindful of how your family is going to receive it and how your friends are going to receive it, not [just] the money. So I probably sat with about 50 or so people. Some of the content I lost but I still got a great [amount of material]. I wanted to find out from people what their desire to be in porn was, so I'd talk about their ideas about sex or what they were missing from porn ... I would record that.

MMY: I think it's a cool idea to actually ask performers, or potential performers, during the casting process about what their desires are and to include their voices in the final product. That's not a normal thing in porn!

NJ: No. I actually care!

MMY: In writing *The Feminist Porn Book* [Taormino et al. 2013], we were trying to identify a new movement of people who are thinking more ethically about the production process, about what it means to

performers, and about how more than this is just a simple act than for money. This is something that may impact you. This is something that could also speak to your desires. What do you want?

NJ: Right.

MMY: I think you were over by Lake Merritt talking to random people on the street. You had black lesbians in the community talking about their sexual preferences and desires on camera!

NJ: Mmhm! Right.

MMY: How did you get the idea to do *Hella Brown*, which is an all black cast?

NJ: I wanted to be a little different with the second one. I wanted [it] to be all brown. See, the 'drop of color' [subtitle of the first film] was because we couldn't find any color [in other queer porn]! Many people, with the first film, forget because there's only one brown person in there that all of them are persons of color.

The brown skin kind of, for me, gets lost behind the [image of] bare white skin, if you will. You're like, 'Oh ok, well they're all white'. The film is good, but had there been a black cast, how far would that film have gone?

MMY: What was the impact of *Hella Brown* when it came out? What's the feedback you've gotten from the black queer community?

NJ: Oh, it's perfect! I mean, it's exactly what they asked for. I gave them exactly what they asked for. I'm still having opportunities and challenges because *Tight Places* is a very [racially] diverse film. That particular film [*Tight Places*] can go to a [Toys in] Babeland, which is where it's sold. It's in Good Vibrations. It's in She Bop. It's all around, and not just in the country – [it's] international. But those same communities don't serve high populations of brown people ...

In some stores – they don't dedicate shelf space or media to, 'Hey, this is a new item that's coming in, this is what we want to do for this', because the numbers would be low. I could see you do that for *Tight Places*, but the numbers are low for the *Hella Brown* film. So I just stuck my head out there. I was like 'Look, this is what I'm going to create'. I think it's great, I think it's a really really good film.

MMY: Yeah! So how have you been distributing it if it's hard to get shelf space?

NJ: It's happening. But the point is, I own the content. So regardless if I get the money here, right now, or ten years from now, I own the content.

MMY: Right, and so you can actually digitize it, put it online and sell it any way you want?

NJ: Anywhere I want to!

MMY: That's good. I thought the performers were great in it and the shots were really beautiful. It felt very Oakland to me.

NJ: Uh huh!

MMY: I really love the scene in the kitchen. There's something about thinking about black women in the kitchen. In our culture, we have such a relationship –

NJ: To food.

MMY: – To food as love! The kitchen is the heart space of the home too. Seeing two black lesbians in the kitchen cooking and then having sex, it's kind of really cool. I mean, it takes on a different dimension than like any old porn scene in a kitchen to me. I felt like it was very loving and very colorful. You have an interesting range of people in it. You have the real femmes and the real butches, and everybody can find something that they identify with.

NJ: Yes.

MMY: – How did you feel about the film and what the experience was with working with the cast?

NJ: It was perfect. Everything was good. It was well worth the effort, the energy. Also just doing it again, myself, I'm looking at how I can get this film out there. Because it's gone so slow with *Hella Brown* versus *Tight Places*, I still have the opportunity to get it into film festivals and to different people. It's not content that [many] people have seen. That's a beautiful thing. That scene you saw in the kitchen is more indicative of what the third film will be like. I'm going to take that particular scene, and [add] more scenes to create the third film, which is more masculine-centered. I'm taking that scene because it hasn't been seen as much, and I think it's one of the hotter scenes in there, just because they were so fluid in exchanging fluids. You know, sometimes you'll see the [sex role] reversal, but you won't see that fluid exchange, and that fluid really exchanged in that particular piece! You know they call it stud-on-stud. They say, you know, 'Hey, I want to see this, I want to see that', I'm just listening to people. I actually institute their suggestions. I'm like, all right, well there's a market for it so let me do that. And if I have the power to do that, I can do that at any point I want to.

MMY: What other people making porn today do you find inspirational for your own film work?

NJ: I think Courtney Trouble – I don't watch her content but I think as a person she hustles the hell out of everything. I like Shine Louise Houston's stuff because of her cinematography. I mean everything I kind of draw on [from other queer porn filmmakers] is not so much of their content [as] their shooting [style], the aesthetics, the quality, and the business of it.

MMY: In visiting your store I saw you have an eclectic collection. You have vintage magazines, you have books, novels, and you have artwork. Tell me about the direction that you're going in now in terms of being a filmmaker and a community worker and an entrepreneur, which is a lot!

NJ: I think I just get bored! I don't want to get bored with anything. Sometimes I overexert myself. I think it's all in the same vein and it's part and parcel of how I'm going to, not just get known. I want my business to get known. I want people to start buying on the internet. And all of those things help to add to the brand, the experience. You know, I'm hustling.

I'm making creative ends meet just to survive, and – and when you're forced to survive, you come up with so much, right? In doing that, I figure out who I am, and everything else falls to the wayside. I just become a whole different person, in experiences with people, how I treat myself, handling money. I'm just a whole different person.

MMY: You know we're all, in a way, hustling. Those of us who are working in the sex trade in different ways, including academically, we're really all kind of sex workers.

NJ: We are. I'm a sex worker, I really am! You know, you'll lose friends, and people won't like what you do. They'll wanna be you, but they don't know how to be you. I've had people come up and say, 'I want your life'. I'm like, no you don't! I've done a lot of praying and crying, so are you ready for that?

MMY: Yeah. It's the same here, sis, because even as an academic working on this topic, I've felt the stigma as well as the kind of cheap fascination on the part of others. But I'm motivated by the people who are doing the work and who are making it possible for me to write about it. It is a hustle! I appreciate that you identify with that too.

NJ: It is what it is, and you have to stand up and say, 'No, we're a world of sex workers'. You know, be it someone who's working in the restaurant, making conversation, you know unbuttoning another button, having your pants up on your butt, having tight [clothes], all of that! You're looking for approval. You're looking for something extra ... people do it because it gets them something extra.

MMY: Yeah. Sex sells.

NJ: Sex sells.

MMY: I think as women of color, selling sexuality and hustling has a lot of meaning for us. It is a dangerous game for us to play because of the way in which we are hyper-criminalized, hyper-marginalized, and hyper-sexualized. We have to fight to be able to even think about, well, what is the sexuality we want, and how is that different from what's been constructed about us? I find it a challenge, as a black woman, because of the tremendous difficulty within the black community in dealing with sexuality, and because of the problems in the mainstream community with how black women are seen.

NJ: Right. We couldn't get *Essence Magazine* to publish this article!

MMY: No!

NJ: You know seriously, this should be pitched over there. Like, this is the black woman's experience, but yet still we don't tell the stories.

MMY: They want to hear the sad story of how black women are abused in the sex industry, but nothing that makes it seem like we're actually surviving in it, can thrive in it, can manage it, or why we want to have agency, freedom, and protections to make it work for us. It's not that thing, that monster over there in the corner of the room. In fact, not only is sexuality infused in all of our economy, but sex workers – the fact that they're so



vulnerable – shows how all workers are vulnerable and how everybody is trying to actually survive under this capitalist system.

NJ: Yeah, I totally agree with that. You know, when I opened up the mail a couple weeks ago and I got a letter from a realtor to buy a brothel, I'm like 'Oh dude!'

MMY: What?!

NJ: Like, how many blacks own brothels right now?

MMY: Probably none! Wow. Well you could be like a Madame on top of all your other titles!

NJ: I know. Do I have time for that?!

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## 18 Queering porn audiences

*Clarissa Smith, Feona Attwood and  
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### Introduction

A small but important niche, queer porn has grown out of initiatives like the Porn Film Festival Berlin in Europe, the Canadian Feminist Porn Awards and productions by American-based filmmakers such as Shine Louise Houston, Courtney Trouble and Madison Young, who have all attempted 'to playfully affirm sexuality and reinvent new representations of desire and pleasure' (Ryberg 2013: 142). Queer pornography is, for many commentators, not just representation but an *expression* of politics struggling against stereotyping and conventional, normative sexual identities and practices (Attwood 2010; Jacobs 2007; Moorman 2010). One of the ways in which queer porn might have particular political valence is in its promotion as a form of collaboration and, as Florian Cramer writes, the 'replace[ment] of the rhetoric of artificiality in mainstream pornography ... with a rhetoric of the authentic: instead of mask-like bodies normalized using make-up, wigs, and implants, the authentic person is exposed' (Cramer 2007: 174). What then do viewers make of these representations?

Hill-Meyer recently suggested that the queer audience 'values diversity over cookie-cutter scenes, pleasure over fluids, and authenticity over façade' (Hill-Meyer 2013: 157). In the virtual absence of systematic research on queer pornographies and their consumers, this chapter draws on a major online survey of porn consumers undertaken at [pornresearch.org](http://pornresearch.org).<sup>1</sup> A wide range of respondents, across all ages, completed the questionnaire. What do these tell us about queer pornographies and about queer orientations, identities, readers and readings?

### Motives and methods

Our project proceeded from interest in the ways in which people might describe pornography as significant and important to their everyday lives and to their sense of themselves, their sexual experiences and relationships; it was not premised on assumptions about harmfulness or morality. Over 5,000 people trusted us sufficiently to tell us their stories, responses, pleasures and preferences, in ways which enabled identification of patterns, distinct groupings, connections and separations.<sup>2</sup> With so many responses we were able to do