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Abstract This article focuses on the labor marginalization of black female performers within the pornography industry. Their representations and experiences as sex workers are shaped by a racialized and gendered sexual commerce where stereotypes, structural inequalities, and social biases are the norm. Black women are devalued as hyperaccessible and superdisposable in an industry that simultaneously invests in and ghettoizes fantasies about black sexuality. In light of feminist arguments against the victimization of women by pornography, I have attempted to show that black sex workers, while facing multiple axes of discrimination and harm, also *employ* hypersexuality and illicit eroticism to achieve mobility, erotic autonomy, and self-care.

Keywords black women, discrimination, pornography, sexuality, sex work

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Putting Hypersexuality to Work: Black Women and Illicit Erotic in Pornography

Walking in to the convention hall, I'm overwhelmed by the sheer immensity and spectacle of AVN's Adult Expo. The five-day event at the Sands Convention Center at the Venetian Hotel and Casino in Las Vegas combines networking and development for adult industry and media industry companies with an exhibition of porn 'talent', and an Oscar-like awards show to celebrate them. More than thirty thousand fans visit this carnivalesque show of sexual commerce every year. It's difficult to get through the long lines of fans waiting to get autographs and photos with featured porn celebrities like Jenna Jameson and Katie Morgan. Towards the back and sides of the exhibition hall I find the booths for the smaller, professional-amateur and amateur adult companies. I spot the companies that sell black and interracial porn, and make my way towards them. The crowds are noticeably smaller here, except when the performers are doing something to attract attention, like flashing their breasts or dancing on a table. At one booth a crowd jostles to position their cameras as two young women in

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string bikinis and six-inch 'stripper heels' do splits, and bends in a fast-paced, booty-shaking dance. The company seems to be an amateur start-up specializing in black gonzo¹ with a hip-hop theme. As I push through the shouting throng to get a better view, one young woman lies back on the display table, spreads her legs wide, and, rhythmically, works her shapely legs, thighs, and butt to the music while stroking her pussy. A dozen men with cameras push forward to get a close-up of her genitals. 'She's obviously a professional exotic dancer', I think to myself as I watch her move. Her expression appears bored or tired, and I see the beads of sweat across her brow and her hair weave sticking, damply to her shoulders. Behind me I hear a man's voice say, 'These black chicks are fucking skanks!' I turn to see him – a well-known white director of all-white, 'extreme hardcore' – laughing with an associate towards the back of the crowd.
Field Notes, AVN Adult Expo, Las Vegas, Nevada, 2004²

During seven years of ethnographic forays into adult industry worksites – including film sets, production offices, business conventions, awards ceremonies, and industry events – I observed many instances of blatant disregard for black women. Like their locations in the back and on the margins of the most important adult entertainment business convention in the world, Adult Video News' Adult Expo, black women's place in the commercial hardcore industry is peripheral and precarious. Black women are systemically positioned in spaces and roles of lesser importance to white women, who are valued as the most prized commodities in the sexual marketplace of hardcore. Women of color generally occupy a diminished space in comparison to idealized white adult performers, yet black women seem to be most disparaged, and as a consequence, vulnerable to the kinds of verbal and symbolic violence that I witnessed at the Adult Expo. In an industry that values and trades in the sexuality of women, one would think that black women's presumed hypersexuality would give them an advantage. In fact, paradoxically, it is just the opposite. Like the cruel comments of the director I overheard, rather than being valued for their erotic skills, black women are devalued as 'skanks'. If black women are so derided in the adult entertainment industry, why do they enter it, and what do they make of entrenched racism and heterosexism within the business? Considering the devaluing of their representations and labor in pornography, I investigate how black women put their hypersexuality to work for their own interests in survival, success and erotic autonomy (Alexander, 2005).

Hierarchies of value organize the production, distribution, and consumption of pornography media, in addition to structuring work and labor relations in the adult entertainment industry. According to this logic of sexual economy (Davis, 2002), some bodies are worth more than others; yet all are *evaluated and commodified* through the lens of race, gender, class, and, sexuality. Although these valuation regimes are present

in most social and economic institutions and relations in our society, they are iterated in explicit detail in hardcore pornography, where erotic desires and fantasies are commercialized in a \$12–14 billion dollar per year US industry that spans the globe (Johnston, 2007). While the diversification of the sex industries – including people, products, services, and technologies – has transformed and expanded both productive and consumptive practices, the hegemony of whiteness in defining human capital (including erotic value) disadvantages people of color. The black female body is, in relation to other racialized and gendered bodies in the flourishing sex industries, devalued and marginalized in pornography's hierarchical, sexual marketplace. While many scholars have theorized about how gender informs pornography's sexual representations and labor relations, there is a paucity of research on how race forms a matrix of power that shapes the practices and principles of the adult entertainment industry in its visual representation as well as its structural and social relations (see Bernardi, 2006; Shimizu, 2007; Williams, 2004b).

In this article I examine the structural inequalities and social biases black women face in the adult industry. Through the oral testimonies of these workers, this study reveals that black women in adult entertainment sustain incisive critiques about how hegemonic whiteness impacts their conditions of labor, including earnings, employment opportunities, and erotic embodiment. Responding to these intersecting racial and gender hierarchies of valuation, black women sex workers (Leigh, 1997) grapple with the devaluation of their bodies and sexual labor, sometimes through the creation of pornography that represents their own desires. What can we learn from black sex workers' utilization of hypersexuality and self-commodification as they live and labor within advanced capitalism? Given feminists' entrenched battles over sexual representation and commerce, I consider the key challenges and concerns about elucidating black sex workers' supposedly deviant or counternormative behaviors. I illuminate black women's intimate labor in hardcore and their struggles for survival, success, and sexual agency.

In my research methodology, which combines feminist methods of ethnography, oral history, archival and textual analysis, I situate black sex workers as critical knowledge producers and cultural workers actively laboring to create space in the sexual marketplace for a self-defined black female sexuality. Engaging black women working day to day in the sex industry, looking specifically at their needs, experiences, challenges, and desires, I argue that it is precisely through women's own discussions of their representations and labor in the sexual economy that we can analyze the complexities and ambiguities of black women's experiences of pleasure and danger, exploitation and disenchantment. Our methodologies should consider how black women's labor in the sexual economy indicates their

attempts at survival, mobility, self-authorship, and self-care (Cohen, 2004; Foucault, 1990 [1978]).

Black Women, Pornography and Feminism

For over 30 years western feminists have had powerful and deeply divisive debates about the roles of pornographic media and sexual commerce in promoting heterosexist institutions and social relations. These debates, which became known as the 'Sex Wars', exacerbated many bitter philosophical divisions between feminists (Duggan and Hunter, 1995). Touting Robin Morgan's catchphrase, 'Porn is the theory, rape is the practice', (Morgan, 1980) radical, anti-pornography feminists defined pornography as the 'graphic and sexually explicit subordination of women through pictures and/or words' (Dworkin and MacKinnon, 1988: 36). According to their argument, pornography represents the 'subordination of women perfectly achieved', (Dworkin, 1993: 523) as it commodifies rape, and endorses and encourages men's abusive sexual desires and behaviors towards women (Russell, 2000: 50). Alternatively, anti-censorship, liberal, and sex-positive feminists identified pornography as a convenient but hazardous scapegoat for attacks on sexual dissent, and as a complex discourse 'full of multiple, contradictory, layered, and highly contextual meanings' (Duggan and Hunter, 1995: 7). Even within a heterosexist system of domination, they argued, oppressed groups, such as women and sexual minorities, view pornography in a multiplicity of ways, often counter-appropriating seemingly exploitative material and positively transforming their meaning. Although largely a heteronormative capitalist mode of production, pornography nevertheless offers women and men, consumers and participants, spaces and possibilities for counter-appropriation, self-expression, pleasure, and labor (Kipnis, 1997; Weitzer, 2000).

On the margins of the Sex Wars, African American feminist scholars have written a great deal about the issue of sexual representation, focusing on the exploitation of black women's bodies within patriarchal, racial capitalism in the USA. They have examined how African American women's sexualities are inherently informed by the objectification of their bodies necessitated by the sexual economy of slavery, and black women's own historical efforts to reclaim their bodies and define their womanhood. These writers explain how black women have challenged dominant imaginings of black sexuality as pathological, explaining also their attempts to achieve sexual autonomy in the face of the widespread discourse of black sexual deviancy (Hobson, 2005; Rose, 2003; Sharpely-Whiting, 2007). Yet, for black women, defining sexual autonomy has not been an easy task. First, what Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham (1993) terms

a 'politics of respectability' has historically discouraged black women from creating a framework for sexual subjectivity outside of heteronormative, domestic, and bourgeois family relations (White, 2001). Many black queer scholars (Johnson and Henderson, 2005; McBride, 1998; Stallings, 2007) have noted the difficulty in addressing issues of sexual subjectivity, due to what Matt Richardson notes as the 'erasure of a broad array of black sexuality and gendered being, in favor of a static heterosexual narrative' (Richardson, 2003: 63).

In addition to the politics of respectability, historian Darlene Clark Hine (1989) proposes black women possess a 'culture of dissemblance', a culture of masking, silence, secrecy, and disavowal of sexuality in black women's lives, employed as a method to protect them from sexual injury. Unfortunately, these twin cultural traditions frame sexual deviance as dangerous and marginalize women who deviate from respectability and dissemblance by participating in non-normative sexualities, including queer, contractual, or public sexuality (Hammonds, 1997; Stallings, 2007). According to Evelyn Hammonds (1997), 'The restrictive, repressive and dangerous aspects of black female sexuality has been emphasized by black feminist writers while pleasure, exploration, and agency have gone under-analyzed' (1997: 385). Those black feminist scholars who have written about pornography tend to find affinity with radical feminists, deeming the form inherently dangerous for women – especially black women. For example, Patricia Hill Collins (2000), Alice Walker (1980, 1981), Tracy Gardener (1980), Luisah Teish (1980), and Aminatta Forna (2001 [1992]) contend that sexual violence is 'typically or implicitly a theme of pornography' (Collins, 2000: 135). Though violence and misogyny towards black women in pornography, sex work and elsewhere is a critical and extremely painful concern, the theoretical equivalence made by scholars between pornography and violence remains troubling. Pornography is framed as a monolithic cultural production and industry and is blamed for the degradation and violation of black women, rather than situated as a historically complex, dynamic media genre. As Linda Williams (2004a: 12) notes, pornography is a 'genre for the production of sexual viewing pleasure' – including, potentially, black women's own pleasure.

While some hardcore images are misogynistic, violent and racist, not all pornography is such. If we look, for example, at pornography created by black women such as Vanessa Blue, Diana Devoe, Venus Hottentot, or Shine Louise-Houston, we see erotic expression that is much more creative and pleasurable than many critics might suspect.³ As producers and consumers, women participate in pornography's sexual economy in ways that suggest that its consubstantiation with violence and subordination should be re-evaluated (Chapkis, 1997; Duggan and Hunter, 1995; Juffer,

1998). We should also interrogate how pornography addresses the sexual desires, fantasies, fetishes and expressions of black sexual subjects as well the presumed white male voyeuristic consumer. It is crucial to take account of the deeply problematic issues of racialized sexism in pornography as a media genre and industry, while at the same time uncovering the voices and experiences of black erotic laborers as they mobilize their sexualities for pleasure and profit.

Illicit Eroticism in a Global Economy of Sex Work

In a globalizing economy where media industries and sexual commerce offer avenues for mobility and profit (Bernstein, 2007; Ehrenreich and Hochschild, 2002), black women are finding new ways to employ erotic embodiment by putting sexuality to work in often informal, illicit economies of sex (Achebe, 2004; Collins, 2006; Kempadoo, 1999, 2005). Noting their complex eroticization in transnational racial economies of desire, Kemala Kempadoo asserts that, 'the sale of sexual labor is an integral part of many working Third World women's lives and strategies' (Kempadoo, 1998: 124). Through my research on black women in the US porn industry, I developed the paradigm of 'illicit erotic economy' as a way to theorize: (1) the historical representation of black bodies as sites for a vast array of forbidden sexual desires, fantasies, and practices, and (2) how black subjects symbolically and strategically labor within the prohibited terrain of sex. Taking the lead from the work of Sharon Harley (2002) on African American women's use of underground economies during the early 20th century, I consider *illicit eroticism* as a framework to understand how black subjects labor in the sexual economy. Reflective of African Americans' historical engagement in informal, underground, illegal, and quasi-legal income generating activities – from prostitution to pimping, drug dealing, music and movie pirating, street performance, and childcare – illicit eroticism offers black women who are marginalized in the formal labor market ways to survive and prosper. Encompassing a range of informal and intimate labors, illicit erotic workers employ their sexual capital, talents, and knowledges to perform sexual service work on 'the margins' of an economy increasingly focused on the commodification of intimacy (Agustin, 2007: 21; Zelizer, 2005).

More than survival skills, illicit eroticism eschews the logics of sexual respectability, dissemblance, and normativity. Black women in pornography transgress multiple moral, cultural, and social boundaries as they mobilize their outlaw, racialized sexuality for work. They use the demand for their mythic hypersexuality as a vehicle to, as Luise White suggests in her research on prostitution in colonial Nairobi, to 'reproduce themselves and their dependents' (1990: 12). One performer underscores this

point – black women in pornography labor for their families: ‘I have always had a family to take care of, in some fashion or another. I have no idea what it is like to earn all my money and keep it all’. Historian Robin D.G. Kelley (1997) argues that this selective appropriation of self-commodification is both strategic and creative in its engagement with capitalism: African Americans have mobilized self-commodification through the transformation of leisure, pleasure, and creative expression into labor. Black sex workers transform what Kelley defines as ‘labor not associated with wage work – sexual play and intercourse – into income’ (1997: 73). This ‘play-labor’ (1997: 45–6) is not necessarily resistant to hegemonic institutions of power, nor is it meant to be. It is one strategy by which young people, women, minorities, Third World subjects, the working-class, and others navigate the capitalist political economy by using their corporeal resources – resources that may be the only ones they can control.

Participating in a continuum of sexual labor – from dating to erotic massage, streetwalking, escorting, modeling, exotic dance, phone sex, internet porn, S/M domination, or performing in sex films – black women strategically maneuver the illicit erotic economy to promote their survival, autonomy, and well-being. According to my research, women are motivated by what is considered relatively flexible and high-income work offering increased opportunities for self-care, and a sense of recognition for their erotic embodiment and sexual talents. Some enter the industry on a casual basis, to pay for rent, childcare, school fees, family bills, or a car, while others seek careers in the sex-obsessed entertainment industry and see adult entertainment as a stepping-stone to something else. For many women, fame vis-à-vis the adult industry is seen as a viable, if defiant, aspiration – one that reflects what cultural critics have noted as the ‘pornification’ of popular culture during the last 15 to 20 years (Paasonen et al., 2007). This kind of sexual visibility could reflect a desire by young black women to harness the subjective power of eroticism made popular by black actresses, entertainers, and sexual outlaws like Pam Grier, Lil’ Kim, or Josephine Baker.

My informants cite ‘fast money’, flexible hours, fame, glamour, independence, mobility, and the possibility of sexual pleasure and exploration as key motivations for them to take up pornography as a field of labor. The apparent advantages of sex work, however, are compromised by the dangers: criminalization, social stigma, violence, harassment, disease, and exploitation.⁴ Yet these concerns are not unique to sex work: black women in the formal economy regularly confront systemic inequality, prejudice, violence, and occupational health risks. Many scholars have noted African American women workers’ experiences of racial bias in employment, and their traditional concentration in the

dirtiest, most dangerous, and vulnerable jobs (Brewer, 1999; Enobang, 2007; Harley, 2002; Hunter, 1997; James, 1999; Jones, 1986; Terborg-Penn, 1985). Black women workers have been exploited in legitimate labor arenas, subjected to occupational segregation, limited mobility, debilitating health risks, and major inequities during the restructuring of the US economy in the last 40 years. Concentrated in lower-level 'reproductive' service work, from McDonald's to Walmart and from nursing homes to domestic work and childcare (Boris, 1994), black women, Evelyn Nakano Glenn suggests, have been deemed 'particularly suited for service' (Glenn, 1992: 14). Sex work can be seen as an extension of reproductive service work, where black women actively participate as a result of the simultaneous and repressive forces of race, gender, and class on their labor and life choices (Agustin, 2007; Chapkis, 1997). Unfortunately, sexual laborers are usually ignored, not regarded as workers, and disparaged for agreeing to immoral vices and sexist exploitations of the sex industry. Yet, we might ask, where are black women workers *not* exploited by advanced capitalism? Since black women in the formal economy are also subject to dangers of exploitation, why are illicit erotic laborers unfairly scorned?

Unequal Terrains: Challenges to Erotic Autonomy

What do black women sex workers have to say about the kinds of challenges to erotic autonomy they confront as they carve out space within a deeply racialized and gendered sexual economy? In my study, black professional adult actresses have been vocal about issues of wage inequality, employment marginalization, and interpersonal bias, even as they assert their autonomy in choosing to work in the pornography industry. In an industry that treats most sex workers as disposable, black women are the most devalued; they are hyper-disposable. The perceived easy accessibility of black women's sexuality organizes how hardcore media produces and markets black female bodies as well as how it treats black women workers at worksites. I want to foreground the voices of black women professional sex workers to understand the function of gendered, racialized, sexuality in the political economy of adult entertainment with regards to black female bodies.

Black female bodies are devalued in a sexual marketplace that reifies whiteness, especially white femininity (Nagle, 1997). The young, blonde, lithe, busty, white woman is constructed as the most valuable sexual commodity. As seen at the AVN Adult Expo, white women's bodies are the primary currency of the multi-billion dollar adult entertainment business. They are the focus of companies like Vivid, Hustler, and Wicked, and they are the 'cash cows' for an industry that is immensely lucrative for

major US corporations such as AT&T, TimeWarner, and DirectTV that profit from selling hardcore over pay-per-view cable channels, video on demand, the internet, and in millions of hotel rooms each year (PBS Frontline, 2001a; PBS Frontline, 2001b). Although they are fetishized for their difference, the bodies of women of color hold much less currency for these corporations because they receive significantly less demand compared to white female bodies. The devalued status of black female bodies is significantly evident in wage inequalities, and this is one of the sorest issues for black women sex workers in the business. Concentrated in the bastardized niche genres of black and interracial porn, black actresses have largely been both hired less and paid half to three quarters of what white female actresses earn. Black women contractors for professional companies are currently paid \$400–\$900 for one ‘boy/girl’ sex scene, depending on their notoriety and the company’s film budget, while white actresses tend to be paid \$1000–\$2000. (Vanessa Blue, 13 August 2008).

Black professional adult actresses identify the problems of pay inequality as part of a wide-ranging, exploitative, and racist devaluation of their labor. Actress Lola Lane pointed to the inequality and pay: ‘I think I am still not getting equal to what the other girls are getting’ (Lola Lane, 10 January 2003). After years in the porn industry, Lola Lane succeeded in demanding a higher rate from producers than when she started, but she still felt that it was not equal to white women’s pay rates. Sierra, another professional adult actress and exotic dancer described the ways that workers lack the knowledge of wage rates that intensifies racial inequality:

The thing is salaries aren’t discussed and [producers] try to get you right then and there. You have to negotiate your own salary . . . I’ve talked to [black] girls who’ve gotten \$300–400 to do a scene. I’m like \$300 is all you got? I won’t even leave my house for \$300. You must be crazy! I’ve known a lot of white girls that come into the business and get started with regular straight scenes and get \$1000 . . . Unfortunately, most of us entering this business don’t know what we’re worth (Sierra, personal interview, 28 April 2003).

Vulnerable to exploitation by pornographers looking for the next new talent at the cheapest cost, young women entering the sex industry are hurt by a culture of silence about wages, exacerbated by a stigmatized and complex field of work.⁵ While their age and lack of knowledge about industry standards for actresses sometimes places them at a disadvantage, full-time, professional actresses also battle to maintain their careers in a climate that favors younger women (Diana Devoc, personal interview, 11 January 2003). As indicated by one African American adult industry executive, the inequality in pay is the ‘primary issue’ for black actresses, and ‘knowing that you could have gotten more, is really disappointing’ (Anonymous, personal interview, 5 December 2002).

Beyond the issue of wages, these contract workers feel an extreme pressure to conform to high standards of whiteness in order to win opportunities such as film roles, marketing and PR agreements, and long-term contracts. The rule tends to be: live up to the requirements of white sexual embodiment, in other words, assimilate to white beauty standards, or risk being ghettoized in the most undervalued sectors of the business, such as the low-end genre of 'ghetto porn' (Sinnamon Love, personal interview, 5 December 2002). For Lola Lane the obvious racism embedded in the privileging of white femininity was painful:

You know I've been booked for shoots and they think I'm white over the phone, (because there's another Lola) and they say 'Oh you're the black girl. We can't shoot you', or 'Your butt is too big'. So it can hurt your feelings (Lola Lane, personal interview, 10 January 2003).

This construction of beauty and desirability is inherently defined by what it is not – the deviant and repulsive black woman's body – has very real, economic implications for women of color sex workers. As Lola's testimony shows, the preference for white actresses and the stratification of opportunities along the color line creates a tremendous sense of disappointment, frustration and injustice among black actresses as they are left out of potentially lucrative opportunities to work.

You have to get that tough skin or you're not going to make it, otherwise you get low self-esteem. You are like 'Hey, what's wrong with me?' I go to these casting calls . . . and they are only looking at the white girls. It's like, 'Why am I here?' You find it humiliating (Lola Lane, personal interview, 10 January 2003).

Lola's feeling of constantly feeling measured against an unattainable and cruel standard of beauty and femininity is something many black women in America face everyday (Craig, 2002). A deeply emotional process of confrontation, pain, and self-hatred – and sometimes counter-hegemonic resistance and healing – black women must negotiate their unalterable difference and the overriding stigma of being a racial Other in an industry that funnels the cultural capital of white beauty as the primary economic capital of its workers.

According to Angel Kelly (personal interview, 20 April 2003), 'Black women are always feeling measured by white beauty standards, and increasingly the skinny and plastic'. Indeed, many of the professional adult actresses I interviewed had responded to the pressure to look like ideal porn stars by having some form of plastic surgery. The increasing employment of black women that look like, as black adult actor Byron Long (personal interview, 10 January 2003) puts it, 'chocolate Barbie dolls', has meant that black women with more voluptuous and natural bodies tend to be seen as less attractive, more disposable and are marginalized in niche markets like ghetto porn, BBW (Big Beautiful Women), and fat porn.

They do not appear in higher status hardcore feature films produced by the top companies and directors. Those women who defy the politics of disposability and fight for a longer career in the industry attempt to project what one production executive calls 'crossover appeal'. According to professional adult actress Sinnamon Love (personal interview, 5 December 2002), 'the farther away they are from the natural, voluptuous figure of a black woman, the better it is, and the more likely they are to get the jobs'. The process of demanding black women appear white while they are still represented as exotic Others sustains the fantasy of difference for presumably white male consumers without disrupting the racial order.

This systemic hierarchy of valuation shapes working conditions and challenges the legitimacy of black women sex workers. They must work within limited categories defined and regulated by a racial economy of desire; those that do not fit within the categories are kept out with evasive excuses: 'We can't shoot you right now, but as soon as we're shooting something, we'll call you'. This was what an employer told performer Stacy Cash (personal interview, 10 January 2004) when she called to inquire about bookings. 'But if you send in a picture of a girl that is lighter than you', she added, 'then they'll shoot her. It depends on what their preferences are . . . you have to work within the category that you are in'. Stacy is not alone in experiencing the pain of rejection due to racism and colorism – in fact she is part of a global economy of desire that uses, but also discriminates against, black and brown women. Kemala Kempadoo proposes we acknowledge that, 'even with the heightened exoticization of the sexuality of Third World women and men, they are positioned in the global sex industry second to white women' (Kempadoo and Doezema, 1998: 11). Whiteness is the hegemonic ideal of attractiveness and desirability, Kempadoo argues, 'and white sexual labor is most valued within the global sex industry' (1998: 11).

Black professional adult actresses' critiques of institutional discrimination and prejudice in adult entertainment resemble a 'moral economy',⁶ a system of belief or ethics about how interpersonal relations of exchange should operate. Black sex workers' illicit erotic moral economy critiques white privilege and the hegemony of everyday racism and sexism in their lives. Many of these women feel that, despite the outlaw nature of their work and the demands of racialized consumer markets, all performers should receive fair pay for their work and unbiased treatment from professional companies. 'We are all the same', asserts Lola Lane, 'I'm black and you're white, but we are still women' (Lola Lane, personal interview, 10 January 2003). She criticizes how racial discrimination structures the adult industry and functions to undermine women's potential alliances across race towards a labor agenda for all sex workers. According to my

informants, pornography has enough space under its umbrella to respect diversity and every worker's erotic value. This moral economy reflects aspirations for fairer working conditions and increased legitimacy. It represents the desires of women workers for labor rights, even though fulfilling those aspirations is a challenge.

Self-Authorship: Black Women as Pornographers

Black women struggle to employ tactics of everyday survival and labor within the parameters of a racialized sexual economy, focusing on gaining opportunities, mobility, and power by working within the system. There are some entrepreneurial actresses that are also actively reforming black women's traditional roles as sex workers by becoming hardcore directors, producers, agents, and webmistresses. Using hardcore as a space for self-fashioning and self-promotion, these cultural workers create their own pornographies. Vanessa Blue, who learned filmmaking and built an editing studio in her home by reading 'how-to' books, has directed 20 hardcore videos and dozens of digital short films. Vanessa is part of a new emergence of black women professional performers becoming directors, including Diana Devoe, Sinnamon Love, and Marie Luv. In feature adult films like *Dark Confessions*, *Taking Memphis*, and *Black Reign*, Vanessa creates representations that attempt to highlight the erotic power and beauty of the women in the images, while sustaining an ethical working environment for sex workers, especially women. As a director, Vanessa is adamant about paying her performers the rates they request and never pressuring them to take on sex acts or situations they are uncomfortable with. By authoring illicit erotic texts that represent and reimagine the desires and fantasies of black sexual subjects, Vanessa produces a space for black eroticism beyond the framework of stereotyped black sexuality dominant in traditional porn, such as in *My Baby Got Back*, *South Central Hookers* and *Ghetto Gaggers*. Vanessa (personal interview, 13 August 2008) asserts: 'I always loved porn and I always wanted to make it and to be a part of it. I liked watching people be free and enjoy themselves, and I liked shooting it. I always wanted to be behind the camera . . . [I thought to myself] "Let me see if I can become the director!"' Vanessa Blue represents how black women may take up pornography, and all its challenges, in fascinating and transformative new ways for work, identity formation, and sexual expression.

Conclusion

This essay focuses on black professional adult entertainment actresses, but has implications for other sex workers, especially those marginalized and

disciplined by pornography's racial economy of desire. Because pornography's hierarchies of value privilege a very narrow definition of white femininity as the object of the gaze, women of color work in peripheral and precarious locations. Their representations and experiences as sex workers are shaped by a racialized and gendered sexual commerce where stereotypes, structural inequalities, and social biases are the norm. As I described in my field notes of the AVN Adult Expo and my research into discrimination and bias in their work, black women are devalued as hyper-accessible and superdisposable in an industry that simultaneously invests in and marginalizes fantasies about black sexuality. As black women labor to make the presentation of their presumed hypersexuality work for them, they face a myriad painful choices and challenges. In light of feminist arguments that these women are victimized by an alienating and exploitative sex industry, I have attempted to show that black illicit erotic workers, while victimized by multiple axes of discrimination and harm, also employ an outlaw sexuality to achieve mobility, erotic autonomy, and self-care.

We should do more to shape our studies so that they engage not just with the images that the hardcore industry sells, but the women that are working hard to be seen and heard. The informants in this study feel further alienated by feminist scholars that talk about them, but not to them, and who see them as colluding with misogynists rather than carving out a vital space for black women to see themselves as desirable and desiring subjects. These women's narratives about and critiques of racism and sexism in the sex industry are valuable to understanding their interventions as performers and laborers to lay claim to legitimacy for all sex workers. Taking on new roles as directors and producers, black women are agents in a transforming sex industry. By embracing the counternormative work of deviance, hypersexuality, and self-commodification in order to survive under capitalism, they seek pleasure, recognition, and respect.

Notes

1. Gonzo refers to a style of pornography where the viewer becomes part of the scene through the insertion of the camera in the hardcore sex scene. Influenced by the reality TV boom in the 1990s, gonzo pornography is known for its realism and the absence of a plot, as in feature adult videos.
2. These field notes were edited for publication.
3. See, for example Diana Devoe's *Desperate Blackwives* (2004), Venus Hottentot's *AfroDite Superstar* (2007), Vanessa Blue's *Black Reign* (2003), and Shine Louise-Houston's *The Crash Pad* (2006).
4. As porn actors, which is legal work in the USA, black women do not face criminalization as in other aspects of the sex industry, but the problems of stigma, exploitation, and discrimination are concerns. Emphasizing these dangers are many critics of sex work, such as Carter and Giobbe (2006).

5. The temporary or casual workers in the adult industry are harder to track since they rarely stay long, do not network with established performers, and do not attend the adult industry conventions as much as professionalized workers or those who are seeking to become professionalized. As a result, I have interviewed casual sex workers less than the more active sex workers.
6. I draw the conceptualization of moral economy from the work of Ara Wilson to discuss the ways in which these subjects possess intimate worlds and belief systems of their own, which they bring to their work to reproduce themselves in a globalizing sexual economy (see Wilson, 2004).

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