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BRIAN POWELL

HARDCORE DESIRE

**Black women laboring
in porn—is it just
another job?**

By Mireille Miller-Young

Turn on MTV or BET and you will see beautiful, young Black women dancing in various states of undress. Nelly's "Tip Drill" video took the hypercommodification of Black women's bodies to another level, when he slid a credit card down one model's booty and redefined the meaning of *bling*. Indeed, hip-hop music videos, being dominated by these images, have been at the forefront of the global-

ization of Black women's bodies as currencies of desire and disgust, economy and resistance.

Yet these videos are only a softcore taste of the types of representations found in the hardcore adult entertainment industry. Not surprisingly, powerful silences about Black sexuality extend to Black women in the multi-billion dollar American pornography industry. How do young Black women entering

the adult entertainment industry understand their motivations and places in a culture that for the most part foregoes eroticism and reproduces two-dimensional stereotypes of Black women in hardcore as tasty brown sugar and nasty ghetto hos? How do their stories force us to rethink the line between exploitation and empowerment?

More than other women in hardcore, Black women get fewer work opportunities and fewer high-paying contracts, and they experience prejudicial and even hostile treatment. They tend to be marginalized in the low-budget videos that seek to authenticate Black sexuality by situating them in 'da hood with films such as *South Central Hookers*, *Ghetto Booty*, and *Pimpformation*. The mainly white male producers, directors, publishers and distributors who run the industry rationalize paying Black women generally half to three quarters of what white actresses earn—arguing that Black women are less desirable in the sexual marketplace than white women.

Interviews with veteran and new Black porn actresses indicate that popular conceptions about their victimization do not illuminate the complexities of their choices and experiences. Although they work in a business that markets them as a specialty fetish, Black women in hardcore argue that this work affords them opportunities for financial and personal advancement. With the marginalization of Black women in low-level service sector jobs, and the feminization of work and poverty in the late 20th century, young Black women's labor in the sexual economy represents a strategy for survival and mobility. As they negotiate labor within the taboo world of hardcore pornography, these Black women sex workers also pursue their desires toward visibility, independence and sexual pleasure.

Working It

It is vital to recognize that sex work is generally a manifestation of women's economic marginalization and that as Black women participate in the sex industry, they do so out of a position of severe socioeconomic and

political disadvantage in American society. Because Black men have tended to dominate alternative sites of productive labor and upward mobility for Blacks, such as sports, music and entertainment—sex may be one of the few realms of economic opportunity and agency for Black women.

Using sex as labor is one way that some Black women, working-and middle-class, have been able to survive economically and attain mobility while engaging in work not

If the massive popularity of the new hip-hop pornography of Snoop Dogg, Digital Underground, G-Unit, Lil' John and Luke Campbell is any indication, Black women are gaining a new hyper-visibility in hardcore.

traditionally associated with wage labor. With the limited range of work opportunities for Black working class women in particular, and the particularly high levels of unemployment among young Black women, sex work, like doing hair or childcare, offers a labor option outside of the formal service economy.

Although there is a long history of Black women laboring in the sex industries, including erotica, work in the modern pornography industry only became a tenable option for Black women in the 1980s and 1990s. The increased production of Black and interracial hardcore videos provided greater prospects for Black women to gain employment in one of the higher status jobs in the sex industry.

These ethnic and interracial videos, in which the vast majority of Black women have been featured, have been produced, distributed and marketed to a primarily white male—but also an increasingly Black and Latino urban male—audience. It is difficult to gauge how many thousands of Black women have participated in this genre of videos during the past 25 years, but their impact on the economy is undeniable: ethnic and interracial porn makes up at least ten percent of the \$10 billion dollars that the adult entertainment industry generates annually. And if the massive popular-

ity of the new Hip Hop pornography of Snoop Dogg, Digital Underground, G-Unit, Lil' John and Luke Campbell is any indication, Black women are gaining a new hyper-visibility in hardcore.

Women like Jeannie Pepper, Angel Kelly, Ebony Ayes, Heather Hunter, Janet Jacme and Midori became well known porn stars during this period. By fighting the institutional sexism and racism of the adult entertainment business, which ghettoizes Black

sexuality and Black workers, they helped open doors for young Black women to claim space in front of the camera.

Jeannie Pepper, who came to the industry in 1982 and holds the record for the longest career of a Black actress in porn, chose to enter pornography because she felt that Black sexuality was under-represented in hardcore. "I just wanted to show the world, look, I'm Black and I'm beautiful!" she said. "We are always seeing white people have sex. We wanted to see some Black people having sex... I wanted to be part of history."

Now a gorgeous woman in her 40s, Pepper was part of a small group of sex radicals in porn that worked on films like *Hot Chocolate* and *Black Taboo* when it was still illegal to shoot in California. Then, the work was less about making money than it was about staking a claim in the sexual culture, but with the increased corporatization of the adult entertainment business, the politics of race, sexuality and labor has taken on new significance.

Today, the overwhelming majority of Black female performers are casual workers, laboring an average of six to 18 months in the business as a way to supplement and advance their work in other areas of the sex industry,

particularly exotic dancing and escorting, or as a way to earn quick money for school, a car or an apartment. Others choose to work in the industry full-time in hopes of accessing opportunities in mainstream entertainment such as acting or music, or they want to become a genuine porn star. Whether their interest is to pay the bills for the short-term, or to make a long-term career for themselves, the fact that sex work is perceived as fast money is a key factor in their decision.

"I'm doing this because I need to go to school, get a car and a house," said Crystal, a pretty girl who began making porn videos just after her 18th birthday. "I really want to be a nurse."

According to Angel Eyes, a stunning brown-skinned woman who entered the industry three years ago, porn is one way to make very good pay while saving up for school. "I want to either go into the fiber optics field or go back to school for accounting to be a CPA," she said. "Right now I'm just doing this to have fun and make money."

Many performers describe the pay rates of \$400 to \$1200 per sex scene as "rent money." They could make a week's salary in a previous job in the service sector and pay their rent by working in only one hardcore sex scene. Some performers, initially intending to work in the industry to pay their bills for school, soon changed plans as they became accustomed to the lucrative work.

Twelve-year veteran porn actress Sinnamon Love had been attending nursing school while raising two children as a single mother when she started performing in adult films. She was behind on her bills even though she was working full time at a children's clothing store. Love was stressed that she spent most of her day between work and school and did not have enough time with her children.

While going through the *LA Weekly*, Love saw an ad for nude modeling. After inquiring about it, the agent said she could make much more if she did a pornographic film. She could make the rent in one day's work, so she did it. After a while she began to film regularly. Love liked the idea of doing adult



COURTESY VANESSA BLUE

Vanessa Blue is a veteran porn actress and producer and runs two websites (www.vanessablue.com and www.femdomx.com).

film work because it allowed her to make enough money to take care of her children and be able to spend more time with them as well as live a more comfortable lifestyle.

Eventually Love gave up her plans for nursing school because she realized she could make even more than a nurse if she focused on building a career as a porn actress, and since she only worked two to four days a week she would have more time with her family and to herself.

Love, who grew up in a middle-class two-parent household that encouraged her ambi-

tions in education, now owns and runs her own Internet porn company and a performer management business. She has directed and produced several hardcore videos and is a valued mentor for many of the young women new to the industry. Rare in the adult industry for her entrepreneurial savvy and creative talent, Love denies victimization arguments and makes no apologies for her labor choices. "People think you are in this industry because you have to be," she says, "not because you can and choose to do so."

For many women, the freelance nature of

adult performance work is better than working a 9-to-5 job. "It allows me to work two days out the week and have the same amount of money for working the whole week," said porn actress Lola Lane, who made the transition from magazines like *Players* to video more than three years ago. "I have a child. I like staying at home and helping him with his homework. I can go to his games on Saturdays. I was working retail and you never have a Saturday off."

Becoming a Star

The hope of becoming famous is perhaps one of the most significant aspects of the American culture of celebrity adoration. U.S. media institutions thrive on exposés of the rich and famous, because they market the hope that anyone can in fact become a "star." Now, with the mainstreaming of pornography, young women are growing up viewing hardcore as one potential path to stardom. Many Black women entering the adult industry desire fame, not only because it is seen as a path to greater wealth and access to resources that lie outside of their communities, but also because they seek greater visibility.

In light of the historical invisibility of Black women's lives, these women's desire for visibility may be read as a potentially empowering move. For them, the power to buy a lifestyle of access and excess is crucial. Although this goal does not challenge capitalist consumption and exploitation, the choice to work to be seen, known and desired, and to define an aspect of consumer culture such as pornography, symbolizes a profound aspiration on the part of some Black women to utilize an embodied commodity fetishism for the purposes of self-advancement.

Black women in pornography are keenly aware of how their sexuality is fetishized and marketed in films that are distributed and seen all over the United States and elsewhere in the world. Jeannie Pepper often traveled to Europe during the height of her career in the 1980s. "That was the best part of my career," she recalled. "Going [to Europe]

and making it... It changed my world. I have fans all over the world. I get letters from all over the world... [I felt] like I was a superstar. Like I was Josephine Baker or Billie Holiday. [European fans] embraced me overnight. All of a sudden I was famous there. They let you do what you want, they gave you freedom, they paid you more, put you in first class hotels."

The key to becoming a porn star is making a name in the world of hardcore, and to an extent the mainstream, and many women interviewed were hungry for the power, mobility and independence that such recognition brings. Beyond starring roles, invitations to travel abroad for shoots, video box covers, magazine layouts and lucrative pay rates, such fame, for them, means visibility—and, to an extent, legitimacy, even in the mainstream entertainment world.

Performers speak of the pleasure they derive from being coveted by thousands of fans. At adult trade conventions—a vividly dense landscape in the American hyper-capitalist sexual marketplace—many actresses are hired to sign autographs at company booths. During one day of convention signing, an actress may greet up to one hundred fans from within the industry as well as the general public.

"I love my fans, I really do," porn actress India said at the annual Adult Video News convention in Las Vegas, where she was signing for Video Team, one of the leading production companies for interracial and Black video and creator of the popular *My Baby Got Back* video series. Companies like Video Team benefit from having their starlets sign autographs at booths while executives make deals with distributors, retailers and technology producers behind the scenes. Although it is exhausting to stand in stiletto heels for several hours signing, chatting, flirting and taking pictures with fans, sex workers like India realize that conventions are a major opportunity to gain visibility amid both the consumers of pornography and



COURTESY OF SINNAMON LOVE

Porn actress Sinnamon Love runs an Internet porn company, directing and producing hardcore videos.

its corporate executives. Because of the ease with which companies use a performer to sell thousands of videos and then drop her like old news when they think she is no longer going to make the production company money, maintaining and increasing one's fan base is a necessary professional strategy of survival for porn workers.

For India, fame is not only a means to survive in the business, but may potentially lead to recognition and support for her dreams of becoming a rapper and eventually a financially secure mother.

What About Pleasure?

How do sexual exploration and curiosity mobilize women to choose a field of labor that involves the commodification of their sexuality? How do they eke out space in an industry dominated by interests of (white) male desire?

Several performers said that their choice to participate in the sexual marketplace

was made out of an interest in their sexuality and desire to creatively explore sex and their bodies within an exhibitionist milieu. This experimentation and exhibitionism potentially provides a sense of sexual pleasure and empowerment for women involved in sex work.

For Jeannie Pepper, a deep passion for sexuality encouraged her to join the sex industry. "Hurray for sex!" she said. "It made me feel free." She consciously rejected conceptions of sexualized Black women as either deviant or victims. Instead, women like Pepper think that Black women should flip the script about sexual agency. "How come there are not more Black women doing this?" she wondered.

Yet, such an empowered and public stance is fraught with complexities for Black women. Because of the brutal history of racialized sexual coercion and violence, many Black women have inherited what feminist historian Darlene Clark Hine calls Black women's "culture of dissemblance," or self-imposed silence about sexuality, which has functioned as a mechanism to protect a sense of self, womanhood and identity from attack. This damaging silence reinforces the power of patriarchy, heterosexism and sexual racism in the lives of Black women and men, both straight and queer.

"You're not supposed to talk about liking sex, because you are already assumed to be a whore," Pepper argued. Her comment underscores the ways in which this strategy of self-protection limits notions of acceptable sexual behavior within Black communities. Not only do Black women in hardcore have to defend themselves against the stigma of sex work, they are forced to transgress the boundaries of the types of sexual practices and discourses that are sanctioned within the Black community.

"I love sex. I love the sex business," contended Vanessa Blue, another entrepreneurial-minded performer. "I have no intention of leaving. Especially now that I'm an owner. I run my own business. I run several websites. I shoot. I do everything, top to bot-

tom. And I want to do it because I want other girls to see that they can do it too...I love sex, and I love watching porn. So how do you take what you love and make money off of it? You figure it out."

While Blue may be situated in a more privileged vantage point as a successful porn star and producer, her remarks are striking in their implicit indictment of a patriarchal, capitalist rationale that alienates women from the productive aspects of their labor. Moreover, Blue asserts the importance of being a role model for young sex workers to respond to their fetishization with a dynamic politics of self-presentation, autonomy and pleasure.

But what are the limits to sexual pleasure and agency in an industry focused on the production and consumption of a very narrow imaginary of desire?

Because the adult industry seeks to manufacture images of white female sexuality as the ideal of beauty and womanhood that its mainly white male consumer base seeks to access (at least in the realm of fantasy), Black women's sexuality stands at an alienated position to the racialized economy of desire. Although most of the constructions of women's sexuality in hardcore tend to be reductionist images of women as hyper-erotic specimens of tits and ass, Black women feel particularly objectified as the Other.

The simultaneous desire for and disavowal of Black women's sexuality maintains their status as marginal fetishes in relation to white women. According to Lola Lane, being constantly measured against white women has a powerful impact on Black porn workers' sense of self and integrity: "You know 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, and they are only looking at the white girls. It's like, why am I here? You find it humiliating."

As the industry has shifted its focus toward the "barely legal" market in the last decade, more 18-year old women entering the industry have less of a sense of their sexual identity and limits, and are vulnerable to the

manipulative, capitalist interests of older male pornographers. These younger women often lack the maturity, experience and education necessary to be strategic in their choices and their plans to move beyond porn.

One young porn starlet who began in the industry soon after her 18th birthday confessed, "Once you're used to making a certain kind of money you can't go back to making eight or nine dollars an hour or minimum wage because your means are different now, you have a different lifestyle. But without an education or the right credentials you won't get anything. So you're just stuck."

While veteran performers like Vanessa Blue, Sinnamon Love and Jeannie Pepper hope to guide the next generation of adult sex workers towards a creative feminist autonomy, the inherent competition within a business that frames all workers as an amalgam of disposable sexual parts undermines the radical potential of such alliances. Moreover, the taboo nature of pornography within American society functions to further stigmatize and marginalize these women so that their labor concerns and professional desires simply are not heard.

The voices of Black sex workers like India, Vanessa, and Sierra illuminate how their motivations for commodifying their sexuality in pornography are complex and multifaceted. They were not all sexually abused as children and thus thrown unwittingly into a victimizing adult entertainment industry, as is often assumed.

Nor do all these women come to the business from similar backgrounds and represent a common type that can be identified as "at risk" of challenging public morality. Yet most agree that pornography, for them at least, is about work, and although it may also sometimes be erotic, pleasurable and stimulating, as young actress Stacy Cash puts it: "It's definitely a job. It feels like a job. It's fun, but it's work." ■

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