This article was downloaded by: [189.122.57.117]
On: 13 April 2014, At: 10:38
Publisher: Routledge
Informa Ltd Registered in England and Wales Registered Number: 1072954 Registered office: Mortimer House, 37-41 Mortimer Street, London W1T 3JH, UK

Porn Studies
Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:
http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/rprn20

Labouring porn studies

Heather Berg[a]
[a] Department of Feminist Studies, University of California Santa Barbara, USA
Published online: 21 Mar 2014.

To cite this article: Heather Berg (2014) Labouring porn studies, Porn Studies, 1:1-2, 75-79, DOI: 10.1080/23268743.2013.874621

To link to this article: http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/23268743.2013.874621

PLEASE SCROLL DOWN FOR ARTICLE

Taylor & Francis makes every effort to ensure the accuracy of all the information (the "Content") contained in the publications on our platform. However, Taylor & Francis, our agents, and our licensors make no representations or warranties whatsoever as to the accuracy, completeness, or suitability for any purpose of the Content. Any opinions and views expressed in this publication are the opinions and views of the authors, and are not the views of or endorsed by Taylor & Francis. The accuracy of the Content should not be relied upon and should be independently verified with primary sources of information. Taylor and Francis shall not be liable for any losses, actions, claims, proceedings, demands, costs, expenses, damages, and other liabilities whatsoever or howsoever caused arising directly or indirectly in connection with, in relation to or arising out of the use of the Content.

This article may be used for research, teaching, and private study purposes. Any substantial or systematic reproduction, redistribution, reselling, loan, sub-licensing, systematic supply, or distribution in any form to anyone is expressly forbidden. Terms & Conditions of access and use can be found at http://www.tandfonline.com/page/terms-and-conditions

Porn Studies, 2014
Vol. 1, Nos. 1–2, 75–79, http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/23268743.2013.874621

Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group

Labouring porn studies

Heather Berg*

Department of Feminist Studies, University of California Santa Barbara, USA

(*Received 18 August 2013; accepted 12 September 2013*)

This essay explores the political economy of both doing and studying pornography. The article suggests that a critical labour studies lens can enrich porn scholarship, but also that porn work can tell us volumes about the nature of labour under late capitalism. Resisting the suggestion popular among anti-porn feminists that anti-capitalist and anti-pornography critique are mutually constitutive, I suggest that a political economic analysis of porn based in Marxist principles requires that we take porn seriously as work, recognize that workers both know their own conditions and are best equipped to address them, and attend to the laboured dynamics of the interview process itself.

Keywords: labour; research ethics; sex work; adult film; feminism

Downloaded by [189.122.57.117] at 10:38 13 April 2014

I would like to use this essay to begin what I hope will be an ongoing discussion regarding the political economy of both doing and studying porn. I am interested in the work of porn production and the research encounter itself as a site of work. In my own work I seek to un-exceptionalize the porn industry as a site of labour in the academic and political imagination, drawing on critical labour studies. My research focuses on wage and hour issues, worker organizing, and labour policy as they impact the work of porn performance. As sex work scholars have noted with regard to sexual labour in general (Sanders 2005; Brents and Hausbeck 2010; Wolkowitz et al. 2013), un-exceptionalizing the porn industry allows us to interpret it with more nuance and sense of context. A critical labour studies lens can enrich porn scholarship, taking porn work seriously as *work* can tell us volumes about the nature of work under late capitalism. I am concerned by the monopoly on anti-capitalist critique anti-porn feminists have tried to claim, and I want to make plain that exceptionalizing and pathologizing workers does not a class analysis make. A political economy analysis of porn necessarily brings us to questions about the classed ethics of the research encounter, and I will explore this through a discussion of the labour of the interview.

I come to the research process as both a worker (academic and otherwise) and a student of labour seeking to understand and confront work dynamics. I am being deliberately vague regarding what this 'otherwise' means, as I am wary of the tendency in much feminist research to privilege 'insider status' and the incitement to the labour of self-disclosure this compels. As a number of feminist researchers have noted, academics interested in social change must place special emphasis on

*Email: heatherberg@umail.ucsb.edu

© 2014 Taylor & Francis

conducting and disseminating research ethically (Oakley 1988; DeVault 1996; Letherby 2003). The Marxist feminist labour scholarship I am trying to do carries with it an additional set of concerns because I understand the interview process as not only a space in which I seek to learn about how porn performers experience their labour in the industry, but also one in which I am asking performers to do labour of another sort.

Scholars have discussed the role of identity work on the part of researchers (Cassell 2005) and the emotional labour interviewing requires of feminist researchers (Carroll 2012). They have also addressed the importance of 'giving back' to communities within which one does research (DeVault 1996, 38). My point differs in that I am pushing for an understanding of the interview process as labour in the Marxist sense, which is to say that it is a site of struggle and value extraction. Unlike the work of porn performance, the work of giving an interview is often unpaid. Even when interview subjects are in some way compensated, their time is remunerated at lower rates than it would be if they were doing porn work. Interviewing is also a form of labour that may be more taxing – many of the performers with whom I have spoken describe various negative (and *laboured*) interview encounters they have had. Condescension, interviewers' sense of entitlement to intimate and seemingly unrelated information (such as that regarding histories of abuse), and generally poor social skills are some of the items that performers with whom I have spoken have identified as frustrating features of many academic and journalistic interviews. Performer interviewees also find their words twisted and appropriated toward ends they do not support; Mighel Picker and Chyng's Sun's 2008 documentary *The Price of Pleasure* is a particularly striking example (Picker and Sun 2008; see also a critique of the film in Hartley 2005).

As with all exploited workers (and all workers are), this does not mean that those who consent to being interviewed do so mindlessly. Quite the opposite, interviewee workers calculate the availability of their time and energy, the possibility that their words might help to shift a discourse that overwhelmingly silences them, and the extent to which they might wish to do a kindness for (in my case) a young worker who is, like them, trying to get by. They also, as Laura Agustín (2004) has pointed out, fashion the narratives they share in ways geared both toward self-protection and giving researchers the story (product) they imagine we want to hear.

I appreciate the work of porn scholars who focus on issues of representation, and I understand that this emerges as a much-needed response to anti-pornography rhetoric that is also representation focused. I am, however, much more interested in what happens behind the scenes, at the point of production. As with all work, a focus on products alone can obscure the process by which they are produced. I organize interview questions with this in view, but sometimes find that workers are more interested in discussing representation than wage and hour issues. I may begin with an inquiry about occupational health on set and find the interviewee keener to address how consumers view condom use in porn, for instance. I continue to struggle with how I might at once honour what emerges as interviewees' priorities and focus my writing on the issues such as wages and worker safety that receive far less attention and are vital to the political project with which I engage. I also work to convey critiques of the porn industry that are not appropriable by those who wish to use the spectre of exploited workers to support sweeping claims about the industry as an exceptional site of depravity and violence and, ironically, workers' inability to know their own

Downloaded by [189.122.57.117] at 10:38 13 April 2014

conditions. Anti-porn feminists' preference for citing one another in circular fashion perhaps mitigates this risk, but I remain concerned with the task of writing about porn in such an over-determined discursive atmosphere.[1]

Anti-pornography feminists have vocally resisted both the language of 'sex work' and filmic and popular culture treatments of porn performance and its products. Citing anti-sex work feminist Sheila Jeffreys' critiques of the sex work position (Jeffreys 2009), sex work scholar Prabha Kotiswaran notes that, 'perplexingly … any economic understanding of the sex industry tends to be mischaracterized as a neoliberal move' that normalizes exploitation (2011, 186). This familiar argument among anti-sex work feminists is perplexing indeed, but I contend that it can be understood as a reflection of these feminists' uncritical positions on the world of work more generally. When Jeffreys suggests, for example, that the 'language and concepts of the [sex work] position are precisely those that most suit the present economic ideology of neo-liberalism' (2009, 18), she betrays a fundamentally conservative (and pro-capitalist) approach to what 'work' is taken to mean; namely that calling something 'work' euphemistically erases its connections to violence and exploitation. Likewise, Gail Dines and Robert Jensen reject the term 'sex worker' because:

> women in the sex industry do not perform work as it is typically understood. Most radical feminists are anti-capitalist and supportive of labour organizing, but see pornography as a practice central to the subordination of women and as a form of violence. (Dines & Jensen 2009)

This seems to me to be more a problem of 'how work is typically understood' than the idea of sex work as *work*, and yet the 'typical understanding' of work appears to be a non-issue. Those critical labour scholars whose anti-capitalism is more capacious understand work itself to be a form of violence and exploitation (see Weeks 2011). I mean 'exploitation' in the Marxist sense, in that all work under capitalism involves the expropriation of surplus labour, and I take as a given that – for academics, porn performers, and retail workers alike – this is a violent process. As the work of Dines, Jensen and Jeffreys makes clear, the atmosphere in which anything porn scholars write is overdetermined to such an extent that any attention to power imbalance in the porn industry is likely to be read as one more piece of evidence for porn's exceptional depravity, rather than a comment on the realities of work under capitalism. Un-exceptionalizing porn as work can help to protect us against this. For example, approaching condom use in porn production not as a special question of porn or even sex work but as part of a constellation of occupational health issues impacting on waged workers allows us to explore the issue more soberly and to connect it to the larger story of how work impacts on our bodies.

I endeavour to convey the struggles that porn performers, as waged workers, articulate to me without feeding into a discourse that others and silences them. As long as these stories are read as evidence of the special problematics of pornography, they can only feed that Othering. The best that workers might hope for within this discourse is status among those few reformed performers that anti-pornography feminists have celebrated as no longer marked by the false consciousness crippling active workers.[2] One of the most generative things, then, about not only studying

Downloaded by [189.122.57.117] at 10:38 13 April 2014

pornography, but interrogating how it has been and is rendered in academic discourse, is the possibility that this will illuminate what gets lost in exceptionalizing narratives of porn. This calls for a different sort of reflexivity and asks researchers to consider not only how our raced, gendered, classed, sexed, and other identities shape the research encounter, but also where research positions academic and porn workers (and where the two blend) in the labour relation.

In closing, I will pose some questions to the porn studies community: how might approaching the interview encounter as one worker to another, rather than as expert to subject, shift the relation of the interview itself, as well as whatever writing might come from it? How can scholars of porn as labour illuminate the struggles of workers within the industry while making plain that these emerge not as a peculiar result of the filming of live sex acts, but rather as part of the story of waged work? How might those scholars interested in issues of representation address representational politics without enabling the reification of labour that is particularly pervasive in creative fields? And, finally, what does porn tell us about work at this political economic moment?

Downloaded by [189.122.57.117] at 10:38 13 April 2014

Notes

1. See Smith and Attwood (2013) for a critique of anti-porn feminist approaches to research and rhetoric.
2. This pool is so selective, in fact, that Linda Lovelace (re-imagined as exploited by porn and not the abusive partner she describes) is overwhelmingly the only actual worker evoked by anti-porn feminists. See MacKinnon (1988, 128), Dworkin (1989, xvi), and Jeffreys (2009, 69).

References

Agustín, Laura M. 2004. 'Alternate Ethics, or: Telling Lies to Researchers.' *Research for Sex Work* 7: 6–7. Accessed June 20, 2013. http://www.lauraagustin.com/wp-content/uploads/2009/05/LAgustin_AlternateEthics.pdf

Brents, Barbara G., and Kate Hausbeck. 2010. 'Sex Work Now: What the Blurring of Boundaries Around the Sex Industry Means for Sex Work, Research, and Activism.' In *Sex Work Matters: Exploring Money, Power, and Intimacy in the Sex Industry*, edited by Melissa Hope Ditmore, Antonia Levy, and Alys Willman, 9–22. London: Zed Books.

Carroll, Katherine. 2012. 'Infertile? The Emotional Labour of Sensitive and Feminist Research Methodologies.' *Qualitative Research* 13 (5): 546–561. doi:10.1177/1468794112455039.

Cassell, Catherine. 2005. 'Creating the Interviewer: Identity Work in the Management Research Process.' *Qualitative Research* 5(2): 167–179. doi:10.1177/1468794105050833.

DeVault, Marjorie. 1996. 'Talking Back to Sociology: Distinctive Contributions of Feminist Methodology.' *Annual Review of Sociology* 22: 29–50. doi:10.1146/annurev.soc.22.1.29.

Dines, Gail, and Robert Jensen. 2009. 'Pornography, Feminist Debates On.' Accessed June 20, 2013. http://gaildines.com/2009/09/pornography-feminist-debates-on/

Dworkin, Andrea. 1989. *Pornography: Men Possessing Women*. New York: Plume.

Hartley, Nina. 2005. 'Feminist for Porn: Thus I Refute Chyng Sun.' *CounterPunch*, February 2. Accessed June 21, 2013. http://www.counterpunch.org/2005/02/02/feminists-for-porn/

Jeffreys, Sheila. 2009. *The Industrial Vagina: The Political Economy of the Global Sex Trade*. London: Routledge.

Kotiswaran, Prabha. 2011. *Dangerous Sex, Invisible Labour: Sex Work and the Law in India*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

Letherby, Gayle. 2003. *Feminist Research in Theory and Practice*. Buckingham: Open University Press.

MacKinnon, Catharine. 1988. *Feminism Unmodified: Discourses on Life and Law*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Oakley, Ann. 1988. 'Interviewing Women: A Contradiction in Terms.' In *Doing Feminist Research*, edited by Helen Roberts, 30–61. London: Routledge.

Picker, Miguel, and Chyng Sun. 2008. *The Price of Pleasure: Pornography, Sexuality, and Relationships*. Northampton, MA: Media Education Foundation.

Sanders, Teela. 2005. "'It's Just Acting": Sex Workers' Strategies for Capitalizing on Sexuality.' *Gender, Work and Organization* 12 (4): 319–342. doi:10.1111/j.1468-0432.2005.00276.x.

Smith, Clarissa, and Feona Attwood. 2013. 'Emotional Truths and Thrilling Slide Shows: The Resurgence of Antiporn Feminism.' In *The Feminist Porn Book*, edited by Tristan Taormino, Constance Penley, Celine Parreñas Shimizu, and Mirielle Miller-Young, 41–57. New York: The Feminist Press.

Weeks, Kathi. 2011. *The Problem With Work: Feminism, Marxism, Antiwork Politics, and Postwork Imaginaries*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

Wolkowitz, Carol, Rachel Lara Cohen, Teela Sanders, and Kate Hardy, eds. 2013. *Body/Sex/Work: Intimate, Embodied and Sexualized Labour*. Houndmills: Palgrave Macmillan.

Downloaded by [189.122.57.117] at 10:38 13 April 2014