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Commentary And Criticism

INTRODUCTION

Sex Workers in the News

Kaitlynn Mendes and **Kumarini Silva**

In our last call for papers, we asked contributors to respond to the complex relationship between sex workers and the media, paying particular attention to issues of representation, voice, and activism. Gone are the days when sex work and pornography were hidden from society. In fact, scholars and other cultural commentators have recently noted their increasing presence in mainstream media culture (Arthurs 2004; Boyle 2008; Gunter 2002; Negra 2009). And as former adult film star Traci Lords noted: "When I was in porn, it was like a back-alley thing. Now it's everywhere" (cited in Negra 2009, p. 5). Strip clubs and sex shops are increasingly visible, and representations of sex work is commonly found in Hollywood films (*The Girl Next Door* 2004; *Taken* 2008; *Zack and Miri Make a Porno* 2008), television programmes (*The Girls Next Door* 2005–2009; *Private Stars* 2006; *Secret Diary of a Call Girl* 2007–present), syndicated blogs, books (*Secret Diary of a Call Girl* [De Jour 2008]; *A Stripper's Tail: Confessions of a Las Vegas Stripper* [Diamond 2005]), and docuporn (*Inside Deep Throat* 2005; *Sex and Shopping* 1998–2001).

Perhaps as a response to this growth in the sociocultural representations of sex work, our call for papers generated an unprecedented number of responses. As a result, we are devoting two issues to the topic. In this issue, we will focus on the relationship between the news media and sex workers, and in the next issue we will examine how sex workers are represented in documentaries and television programmes.

These days, news about sex, sex workers, and sex scandals are prolific, particularly when involving important political figures or officials (Arthurs 2004; Gunter 2002). Though sex scandals are nothing new, particularly in the tabloid press, they are increasingly part of the mainstream media diet. Former US President Bill Clinton's sexual relationship with intern Monica Lewinsky dominated news coverage in 1998, while 10 years later, then New York governor Elliot Spitzer's use of a prostitution service fuelled national headlines. More recently, Italian Prime Minister Silvio Berlesconi has been the focus of media attention over his relationships with young women, escorts, and sex workers.

While it is common for the news media to sensationalize sex and sex work, another common construction of the industry is that of victimization. Sex workers have recently grabbed the media spotlight in regards to two high profile trials. The first involved Robert Pickton, of Port Coquitlam, Canada. Pickton was charged with the death of over twenty sex workers in Vancouver, and was finally convicted in 2008 of murdering six. The second

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involved the murder of five sex workers in Ipswich, England, in 2006, and led to the eventual conviction of Steve Wright for the crimes. Both stories received international media coverage, indicating that sex workers have become particularly newsworthy when either embroiled in a high profile scandal, or when they are being murdered *en masse* (individual murders of sex workers are rarely ever newsworthy). Addressing this almost exclusive media focus on high profile or particularly gruesome aspects, in this issue, we have three contributors who not only address the limited representations of sex workers, but call for better training and education for the media and those who wish to speak about or on behalf of the sex industry.

The first article by Lynn Comella, Assistant Professor at the University of Nevada, Las Vegas, discusses the contradictions of Nevada's news media, which focus heavily on sex work, but reproduce a limited range of discourses surrounding sex workers—either as victims or as social outcasts. Comella is critical of what she calls the news media's "uneven" and "one-dimensional" coverage, which sensationalizes their work while ignoring issues of power, control, and the role the industry plays in Nevada's economy. Though Comella is critical of current media coverage, she also writes that the sex industry's visibility in the news media offers sex workers, activists, and academics an opportunity to intervene, reframing the discussion around issues concerning them, and allowing for more nuanced perspectives about their work.

Our second contributor, Audacia Ray, a former sex worker, sexual rights activist, and Adjunct Professor at Rutgers University, picks up on some of the issues Comella raises—particularly the importance of giving sex workers a voice in defining issues concerning them and their industry. Ray documents how after the 2008 Elliot Spitzer scandal, sex workers used the Internet and other sex-based advocacy groups to respond to media queries and support one another. In addition to successfully challenging mainstream media reports of the scandal, sex workers used blogs and social networking sites to provide their own accounts of events and successfully raised issues affecting them. Through this experience, Ray contends that sex workers learnt that "speaking out loudly and often in a variety of mediums is powerful." She also argues that being prepared is an important step for sex workers, so that even if they are unable to set the media's agenda, they are ready to comment on issues that affect them, while refusing to allow the media to eroticize them.

Our third contributors, Daniel Baldwin and Treena Orchard, examine how two former sex workers, Trisha Baptie and Pauline Van Koll, reported the 2007 Robert Pickton trial. While generally noting that the news media tend to represent sex workers in terms of their addictions, poverty, and "debase sexuality," the authors found notable differences in Baptie and Van Koll's coverage. To begin, while most news reports tend to frame addiction as a matter of choice, Baptie and Van Koll reported it in a more nuanced way, rather than reducing it to a simple cause. They also address the systematic discrimination towards Aboriginal women (of whom many are sex workers), and highlight the damage Canada's colonialist and racist policies have on their lives. Finally, Baldwin and Orchard address how Baptie and Van Koll's experiences have been discredited in the mainstream press, highlighting the wider issue already addressed by Comella and Ray of how sex worker's voices are so often marginalized.

The issue concludes with a contribution by Elke Weissmann of Edge Hill University, England, Helen Thornham of City University, England, and Julia Long of London South Bank University. These scholars summarize major themes that emerged in two British

conferences in the past year, particularly noting the ways that academics are trying to mend splits in varying forms of feminism. A large part of this work is being done by young feminist scholars, who are re-engaging with feminist scholarship, but doing so in a way that reflects their voices, issues and concerns. Though Weissman, Thornham and Long admit that not all attempts at bridging this divide are successful, they argue that there are still valuable lessons to be learnt.

Collectively, these commentaries provide a thought provoking start to our two-part issue on sex workers and the media.

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REPRESENTING SEX WORK IN SIN CITY

Lynn Comella, University of Nevada, Las Vegas

In September 2007, *New York Times* Op-Ed columnist Bob Herbert wrote a series of op-ed pieces about prostitution and sexual trafficking in Las Vegas (Herbert 2007a, 2007b, 2007c). In the first column, provocatively titled "City as Predator," Herbert argued that there "is probably no city in America where women are treated worse than in Las Vegas" (2007a, p. 19A). Vegas, he wrote, is a "place where women and girls by the tens of thousands are chewed up by the vast and astonishingly open sex trade." For Herbert, the problem of prostitution in Las Vegas implicated not only pimps and johns, but the entire city.

Herbert was drawn to the story of the sex trade in Sin City after reading an advanced copy of psychologist and independent researcher Farley's self-published book, *Prostitution and Trafficking in Nevada: Making the Connections* (2007). According to Bob Herbert, the report explores the

> horrendous toll that prostitution, legal or illegal, takes on the women and girls involved. If you peel back the thin, supposedly sexy veneer of the commercial sex trade you'll quickly see the rotten inside, where females are bought, sold, raped, beaten, shamed and in many, many cases, physically and emotionally wrecked. (2007a, p. 19A)

Women, he concluded, are exploited in every possible way by all aspects of the sex trade—especially, it would seem, in the den of sin and sleaze known as Vegas.

If Herbert's intent was to grab the attention of readers, he likely succeeded. His language was powerful and the picture he painted of the commercial sex trade in Vegas was bleak. This is not a world where women have sexual agency and choice; nor is it a world where sexual labor is considered a legitimate form of work within the larger service and tourism industries that form the bedrock of Vegas' economy. Indeed, if one takes Herbert's account at face value, women working as prostitutes, as well as those working in local strip clubs and massage parlors, are universally coerced, exploited, raped, imprisoned, trafficked, and controlled by pimps—all while callous and unfeeling city officials and residents turn a blind eye.

Many of the same images deployed by Herbert reappeared several months later in an article published in the *Las Vegas Review-Journal* about the Adult Video News' Adult Entertainment Expo, an annual adult industry trade event that takes place every January in Las Vegas (Spillman 2008). Reporter Spillman's coverage of the show offered up for readers a dose, in his words, of the "tawdry" and "bizarre"; it was an account filled with images of "porn peddlers," "lustful fans," and life-size "love dolls"—the latter of which reinforced the idea that the sex industry dehumanizes women, offering, in this case, silicone stand-ins: "real dolls" instead of "real women."

Spillman's coverage of the Adult Entertainment Expo was not limited to the most clichéd versions of the sex industry. His account was also buttressed by the "expert voice" of Farley, who drew upon her previous research on prostitution in order to draw links between Expo culture and themes of gendered trauma, sexual exploitation, and money-grubbing pimps. Ignored by both Spillman and Farley, and thus by the *Review-Journal*, were facets of the expo that did not fit neatly into the bifurcated narrative of sex as titillation and/or victimization, two of the dominant—and I would argue most acceptable—modes of writing about sex work and sexual commerce. What readers got instead was a formulaic example of journalistic reportage that was sensationalistic at best and overly simplistic at worst.

Las Vegas is a fascinating location from which to observe how sex work is portrayed in the news media. As the city's "What happens here, stays here," ad campaign suggests, sex and sexualized forms of commerce have long been synonymous with the image of Sin City as a place of excess and vice. Here, sex is not tucked away and hidden from view; rather, it is a highly visible part of the everyday cultural iconography of the city. From images of leggy showgirls, busty cocktail waitresses, and scantily clad women on billboards to the local phone book, which includes over eighty pages devoted to outcall "entertainment," Vegas is an unrepentantly sexual place. And for many visitors, this is precisely its appeal. Add to this, the fact that prostitution is legal in many of Nevada's rural counties (although it is illegal in Clark County, where Las Vegas is located), that several adult entertainment trade shows pass through town each year, and that convention business not only brings much needed tourism dollars to the city, but also draws sex workers hoping to capitalize on the desires and disposable income of conventioneers, and you have a perfect storm of sex and

commerce. What this means is that discussions about prostitution, pornography, topless clubs, the brothel industry, and the politics of sex work are not only part of Vegas' cultural identity but staples of the local media—in large part because these sexualized services are so central to both the local and state economies.

This point was recently made by Smith (2009a) in a column about the ongoing "cash-for-customers war" between local topless businesses, some of which are now tipping cab drivers $100 for each customer they drop off at their clubs. "Why should you care what goes on in the topless racket and the underground Las Vegas economy?" Smith asked. He offered this response:

> It's simple. The local economy depends heavily on the success of the adult nightlife business. Cabarets rake in millions, and the cash circulates constantly throughout the valley. Strippers, cabbies, and limo drivers pay a lot of bills in Southern Nevada. (John L. Smith 2009a, p. 1B)

A recent study by researchers at the Kinsey Institute for Research in Sex, Gender, and Reproduction and the School of Journalism at Indiana University examined issues related to the dissemination of sex research through the news media (McBride, Sanders, Jansen, Grabe, Bass, Sparks, Brown & Heiman 2007). They surveyed ninety-four people involved in sexuality research to gain a better understanding of the types of issues researchers face when dealing with the media. Respondents expressed the following concerns: the tendency on the part of media to sensationalize sex research or use it to create controversy; inaccurately represent results; inadequately contextualize findings; and forgo any discussion about how research is conducted. The question of context was of particular concern. According to the report, there was apprehension that "sex research and its findings are often taken out of context, either being sensationalized, over-simplified, or presented as definitive" (McBride et al. 2007, p. 353).

Although the Kinsey study was primarily concerned with how sex research is portrayed in the media, its findings are instructive for thinking about the challenges and pitfalls that confront both journalists and media outlets when it comes to writing about sex in general and sex work in particular. As I have already mentioned, two of the dominant modes of representing sex work in the news media are to cast women as sexual victims or to play up—often to an absurd degree—the most sensational and titillating aspects of the sex industry. There is, however, a third theme that frequently appears in media reports about sex work: the depiction of sex workers as social outcasts and dirty whores.

This theme appeared most recently in a front page story in the *Las Vegas Review-Journal* about the "unprecedented steps" that Las Vegas police were taking to crackdown on prostitution in Strip casinos. To this end, the Las Vegas Vice Squad had compiled a list of Clark County's "50 most prolific prostitutes," otherwise known as the Vice Enforcement Top Offender List or VETO list. The VETO list included the names of fifty women with the longest prostitution-related criminal charges in Clark County. As part of the VETO program, prosecutors planned to offer plea agreements to defendants including possible jail time, 100 hours of community service, mandatory attendance of an AIDS awareness class, and a "stay-out order" making it a crime for the defendant to enter certain areas of Clark County, including, especially, the "resort corridor." "If you are a prostitute out there," District Attorney Christopher Lalli was quoted as saying, "the message is, 'Don't commit your act of prostitution around here'" (cited in Maimon 2009, p. 1A).

Overall, this story was exceptionally nuanced and well balanced. The reporter, Maimon, had clearly done his legwork, raising a number of important issues about how the VETO list would be used and the wisdom of allocating scarce police resources to this effort. Gary Peck, the Executive Director of the American Civil Liberties Union of Nevada expressed concern in the article about whether the VETO list would be used to circumvent probable cause, resulting in the arrests of women for no other reason than having their name on a list. University of Nevada, Las Vegas (UNLV) Professor Barb Brents questioned whether it was hypocritical to "have an economy based on sexualizing women and then to come down on the women when police want to make it seem like they're enforcing the law" (cited in Maimon 2009, p. 1A).

All of this, however, was overshadowed by the decision of the *Review-Journal*'s editorial staff to publish the mug shots—in color and on the front page—of twenty-four women whose names appear on the VETO list and who were recently arrested on prostitution-related charges, including, in the majority of cases, for trespassing. It was an exercise in public shaming that followed closely on the heels of Mayor Oscar Goodman's call to renew public discussions about legalizing prostitution in Las Vegas, a move, he argued, that would help generate much needed tax revenue for the city. The story and the accompanying photos served to remind readers—in the event they had forgotten—that prostitution remains a very real social problem, one that needs to be vigorously combated not legalized.

The public response to the story and photos, as signaled by the several hundred online comments left by readers, was swift and by no means unanimous. Some argued that the police department's efforts were misguided: they were a waste of taxpayer money and yet another example of why prostitution should be legalized. Others angrily chided the editors of the *Review-Journal* for publishing the women's photos, claiming that it served no other purpose than to shame and humiliate the women, embarrass their families, and potentially endanger them. A number of people also wondered why the photos were only of prostitutes—and only female prostitutes at that—and not of pimps and johns.

The photos also prompted a torrent of sexist and classist commentary. Some referred to the women as "bottom feeders," "hos," "street trash," and "crack heads"; they were described as "ugly" and "disgusting," undeserving of the public's sympathy or support. "Somebody would pay for these pooches?" one person asked. "They look like they belong in the dog pound, not on the Strip." "Woof," wrote another. Such responses prompted *Review-Journal* columnist Smith to write on his blog: "Don't come to Las Vegas: Our whores are ugly!" (2009b). Smith seemed to find the comments from readers more "hilarious" than offensive and joked that maybe "a few million in federal 'stimulus' dollars can be obtained to spend on Las Vegas prostitute makeovers" (2009b).

Although many people questioned what, if any, journalistic purpose the photos served, the paper was well within its First Amendment rights to publish them. Editor Tom Mitchell, appearing on a local National Public Radio (NPR) program several days after the photos ran, claimed that the mug shots were a "dramatic way of letting people know what the issue is . . . we were illustrating a story [and] telling people that this is what Metro is doing." Later in the interview he offered a much different, and perhaps more honest, rationale. Growing increasingly impatient with the host's questions, he said: "You've got to sell newspapers, [so] you've got to catch people's attention" (*Metro Prostitution Crackdown* 2009).

The ensuing public discussion and debate about the VETO list and the paper's decision to publish the photos—which I participated in by appearing on the same local NPR program as *Review-Journal* editor Tom Mitchell—raised a number of issues, from First Amendment Rights and the constitutionality of the VETO list to misogyny, hypocrisy, and the kind of media content editors think will sell newspapers in an age of shrinking circulation. The story and the photos, and the subsequent attention they generated, also pointed to the complicated politics of sex work that exist in Las Vegas. For example, the Vice Squad seemed less concerned about prostitution *per se* and more concerned with "unsanctioned" forms of prostitution taking place at Strip casinos, especially incidents involving women who were robbing customers in what is commonly referred to as "trick rolls." That the VETO list consisted only of the names of women arrested for solicitation and prostitution in the "resort corridor," as opposed to street prostitutes working in downtown Las Vegas, underscored the geographic specificity of the crackdown, the class hierarchy among sex workers, and the power of the casinos to influence public policy. For it goes without saying that prostitution *is* part of casino culture in Las Vegas; but it is also something that casinos—especially upscale, boutique casinos—clearly want to regulate in order to ensure discretion, the safety of their hotel guests, and, importantly, their reputations. "Trick rolls" and "ugly whores" are not only bad for casino business, they are bad for Las Vegas tourism. And it is tourism, more than anything else, that drives the Las Vegas economy and, by extension, local and state politics, including the politics of sex work.

Although Sin City's sexualized culture and economy is the frequent focus of media attention, this coverage, as I have suggested, is uneven and one-dimensional at best. Sex workers are frequently portrayed as victims and social outcasts, and the adult industry is routinely presented in the most outrageous, sensationalistic terms. While this may help sell papers and boost television ratings, it does little to further the public's understanding about the social organization of commercial sex and the role it plays in Nevada's economy. Instead, this type of coverage sustains a myriad of myths and misconceptions about the sex industry and those working within it.

At the same time, the visibility of the commercial sex industry in Vegas, and the ongoing media attention it receives, present a unique opportunity for sex positive feminist academics and activists to intervene in public discussions and policy debates about sex work. It is not enough to sit back and offer armchair critiques. Reporters rely on the input of self-anointed "expert voices," like that of antiprostitution activist Farley, to shape their stories. Furthermore, they often assume that the feminist position on pornography and prostitution is seamless and uniform. Thus, if they've talked to one feminist, they've talked to them all. There is a pressing need then, for sex positive feminists, particularly those who conduct research on the sex industry, to position themselves as expert voices within the media. Most reporters, I have found, are enormously receptive to writing about commercial sex in more complicated ways if—and this is a big if—they have access to sources who can provide them with different ways of conceptualizing sex work and the industry at large.

An example of this is the recent media blitz surrounding Natalie Dylan. Dylan is the 22-year-old California woman allegedly auctioning her virginity through the Moonlite Bunny Ranch in Nevada. Dylan announced her intention on the *Howard Stern Show* and subsequently appeared as a guest on the *Tyra Banks Show*. When the bidding reportedly surpassed $1,000,000, the story received both national and international attention. At the

height of it, I was contacted by Lake, a reporter from the *Las Vegas Review-Journal*, and asked to comment. At my request, he sent me a list of questions in advance: Is what Dylan doing empowering to women or degrading? Has the brothel/porn/sex culture become normal? Is her story real or simply a well-orchestrated publicity stunt? Is there a limit to what we will accept or even champion?

I didn't find any of these questions to be especially compelling, and I certainly didn't want to rehash the overdrawn debates about sexual empowerment versus degradation. So what did I do? I didn't give the reporter the chance to ask me any of these questions. Instead, I told him what I thought was the most interesting aspect about the story of Natalie Dylan: the fact that it was a media story in the first place. Real or contrived, I told the reporter, it almost didn't matter, because Dylan and her handlers had done such a good job spinning the story for public consumption and generating widespread interest (Lake 2009).

In the end, Lake's story was not about female sexual empowerment or objectification, but contemporary media and celebrity culture, where anybody can achieve their fifteen minutes of fame if they have a good hook and the wherewithal to play the media-marketing game. But it is precisely this game—having a good hook and knowing how to enter the media discourse—that sex positive feminist academics and activists need to do more of if we want to reframe the kinds of cultural discourses and policy debates that surround the world of commercial sex.

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THE ELIOT SPITZER SCANDAL AND SEX WORKERS IN THE MEDIA

Audacia Ray, Rutgers University

Personal Experience of the Eliot Spitzer Scandal and Sex Workers in the Media

On March 10, 2008, Eliot Spitzer, the then New York governor, was revealed as "Client 9" of a high dollar escort agency. For the next week, my phone rang off the hook. I fielded calls from *MSNC*, *CNN*, *NBC*, *Fox News*, *WNYC*, *The New York Times*, the *New York Post*, and many more. I granted interviews to some of these media outlets, and I denied interviews to others. I wrote a flurry of blog posts as a means of fighting back against the mainstream media—and it kind of worked, though I didn't expect it to.

As a former sex worker, highly public activist, and easily Googled blogger, I have frequently been a source for media inquiries whenever sex (and especially sex work) is in the news. During the Spitzer news cycle, I blogged about media inquiries that I thought were abusive or ignorant; I discovered that talking back worked. After the first two days, I started to get calls from producers and reporters who would lead with, "I've read your blog and I know your concerns." However, on the first day of the scandal, I got a call from an *MSNBC* producer for the *Dan Abrams* show, and then I blogged about it, because he asked me the question, "Have you been a whore?" (Ray 2008a). This is a fairly extreme example of an offensive question, but it cuts to the chase of what most media outlets are interested in. Throughout the Spitzer ordeal and in the vast majority of other media inquiries I've received over the five or so years that I've been out as a sex worker, reporters turn to sex workers for information about the experience of doing sex work, but then quickly move on to "real" experts for information about the political, health, legal, and socioeconomic issues affecting people in the sex industry. Along with other sex worker activists, I have been working to reposition out sex workers as experts that can complement academics, legal experts, and aid workers to give perspective on not just the lived experiences of sex workers but also the political and legal realities faced by people working in disparate parts of the sex industry.

On March 11, day two of the Spitzer scandal, I sat down and wrote a blog post titled "Why Sex Workers Aren't Represented by the Media" (Ray 2008b) to air my grievances with the way the mainstream media approaches sex workers. Here's a snippet from the end of the post:

> We exist. In growing numbers, there are sex workers and allies of sex workers who have a critical and political take on how our bodies and our labor are legislated. Not to mention, we are well aware of and constantly struggling with the ways our stories and our work are grossly exploited by the mainstream media in an attempt to get a juicy story. You want to talk about exploitation of women, media? Look at your own goddamn questions, the exposure you ask us to engage in, the personal questions you want us to answer. Look at the sexy container you put us in, all sultry bad girl secret story, no room for brains with the boobs. We don't want to tell you our naughty secrets. What's in it for

> us? You won't give us the space and air time to talk about issues that matter to us, we won't give you the dirt.
>
> Sex workers aren't represented in the media because the media does not create space for us to talk intelligently about the issues that face us. Like I said in my post last night, we are being cast into roles, roles that are nearly impossible to break. We're afraid of being abused and manhandled by a media that has no interest in our well being, only in our cunts and the details of how we got to be so bad.
>
> Mainstream media, if you're so concerned about the exploitation of sex workers—stop perpetuating the exploitation with your own tools. (Audacia Ray 2008b)

After writing that blog post, the tenor of my media inquiries shifted a bit. The majority of reporters who were calling me had at least browsed through the pages of my website and were taking my words into consideration in their approaches. Though of course they were very focused on getting their story, I felt that I had a little bit more room to negotiate a story that expanded beyond my personal experiences of being a sex worker. On March 13, I got a great call from *CNN Headline News*. The booker was respectful and answered my questions. Though it was clear that she was rushed and needed me to be at the studio for a live appearance within a couple of hours, she also gave me space to make a decision about it. The booker did her job well and prepped me with the questions I would be asked in the interview itself, so once I was in the booth with my earpiece I wasn't taken by surprise by the content of the questions. The anchor did, however, ask her questions with a slightly different tone than the booker had. My status as a former sex worker was not the central point of the interview, so when it was useful to the argument, I brought it into the dialogue on my own (CNN 2007).

The week of the Spitzer scandal was the first time that I actually felt empowered in my dealings with the mainstream media. This is largely because I finally learned the trick, especially with television and radio: just keep talking, repeat my messaging points, push my agenda, be inflammatory enough to keep them listening, but stand my ground and be firm. In the midst of the Spitzer scandal, I tapped into my voice in a new, ferocious way. I also loved the chance to educate reporters and consumers of mainstream media about sex work issues, and I learned to stand my ground and get what I wanted (a space to talk about politics and labor issues of sex work) in exchange for what they wanted (juicy stories of prostitution).

Sex Worker Activists and Coordinated Media Response

One of the extraordinary and spontaneous things that happened during the Spitzer scandal is that sex worker activists, especially contingents from New York and San Francisco along with some folks from Las Vegas and Chicago, banded together to respond to the media inquiries and support one another. As soon as the story broke, sex worker activists utilized already active email lists run by the national Sex Workers Outreach project (SWOP) and the Desiree Alliance (DA) conference media team.[1] On the email lists, we shared information about the media inquiries we were getting, checked in with each other about the tactics and background of reporters we were being approached by, and worked together to create a unified response to the news. Everyone on the lists had worked together on previous projects such as the Desiree Alliance conference and the International Day to End Violence Against Sex Workers, an annual

event that has been taking place on December 17 since 2003.[2] Virtually all the people on the list are current or former sex workers, and most belong to a sex worker support or activism group, including but not limited to SWOP regional chapters (especially SWOP NYC, San Francisco SWOP, SWOP East, SWOP Chicago), Sex Worker Action New York (SWANK), Prostitutes of New York (PONY), and sex worker rights magazine *$pread*. A few people on the list, myself included, don't affiliate themselves with a specific organization.

The group produced two documents that we circulated to the press and to which we got some press responses. Both releases were produced by the group, using email and especially Google Docs, where all users could see, comment on, and edit the document as it evolved. The first release, circulated to media on March 11, was titled "What About Kristen? New York Sex Worker Organizations Respond to the Spitzer Scandal" (2008). The second release, published on March 13 and titled "Sex Workers Blow Spitzer a Farewell Kiss" (2008), stirred up much more disagreement within the community of activists than the first one had. While writing the first piece, it seemed imperative that sex workers make a statement and make ourselves available for comment on the scandal. A burst of responses to the first media release added to the rapid outing of Ashley Dupree as "Kristen" and kept many activists very busy on the phone and setting up interviews with reporters for newspapers, websites, radio, and television. The group fragmented under the stress of writing the second release because reaching consensus for a second time was very challenging. Further, there was disagreement about whether or not it was important to create a release in our own words or respond to media requests that were already coming in more quickly than we could handle. I made the choice to separate myself from the group writing the second release and instead invested my time in talking to the press.

Many internet savvy sex workers and allies disseminated the release via blogs and social networking sites like *Facebook*, *Tumblr*, and *Twitter*, among others. The group blog *Bound, Not Gagged* became a hub for information about the Spitzer scandal in the media. All told, the contributors to *Bound, Not Gagged* wrote fifty-six posts about the scandal. These posts remain accessible on the site under the "Spitzer" category.[3] Though the bigger media hits we got were in traditional "old" media, the web was an important tool for organizing amongst ourselves and for responding when the mainstream media parsed our messages down to sound bites that weren't always accurate.

For example, two of the women who participated in the email lists and editing of the two releases were interviewed for a *New York Times* piece entitled "The Double Life of a High Priced Call Girl" (Buckley & Jacobs 2008). Published on March 16, the piece evoked an immediate reaction within the sex worker rights community. Both of the women among our ranks who had been interviewed met with one of the two reporters working on the story; in the article their names were changed to protect their identities but their appearances were described in detail so that both were recognized and identified by clients who read *The New York Times*. The women were infuriated at the betrayal, and activists began a letter writing campaign to the reporters and the editors of the New York Region section in which the piece appeared. One of the women wrote a post for *Bound, Not Gagged*, "How the *NYT* Got an Interview Wrong" (Brooks 2008), which was an expanded version of a letter to the editor that she sent to the *New York Times*. As a result, the online version of the article was drastically edited and a lengthy editor's note was appended to the piece (Buckley & Jacobs 2008).

Lessons Learned

The most important thing that sex worker activists learned from the Spitzer scandal was that speaking out loudly and often in a variety of media is powerful. In a media landscape that is increasingly responsive to online conversations, communities, and complaints, posting in a variety of online spaces about the lived and political experiences of sex workers acts as a lightning rod for press seeking comment during a scandal. Sex workers' do-it-yourself media builds up the cultural capital of people working in the sex industry and allows us to tell stories that are not always eroticized. Not all such writings are superior in form and content to that which is produced by mainstream media outlets; much of it is intended for other people in the sex industry and creates more of an insular support system than a public service. However, even when that is the case, sex worker-made media is a resource for other people in the sex industry.

Although the Spitzer scandal pushed sex worker activists forward in terms of our ability to organize and respond cohesively to a scandal in the media, it also underscored one of the challenges of promoting sex worker issues through the mainstream media. Many stories about the sex industry are reactive ones that result from scandals, pending legislation, violence against sex workers, and legal troubles. It remains difficult to get earned media and human interest story coverage about issues affecting sex workers. Being prepared to face media in the event of a scandal is a useful skill for out sex workers. The next step for sex worker activists is to develop the ability to successfully pitch pieces about issues that exist within the sex industry.

NOTES

1. For more information see Sex Workers Outreach Project (n.d.) and Desiree Alliance (n.d.).
2. More information available at the website (International Day to End Violence Against Sex Workers, n.d.).
3. For a collection of the posts see *Bound, Not Gagged* (2008).

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WORKING WORDS: REPRESENTATION AND REFLECTIONS OF TWO FORMER SEX TRADE WORKERS COVERING THE PICKTON TRIAL IN VANCOUVER, BRITISH COLUMBIA

Daniel Baldwin, University of Western Ontario, and **Treena Orchard, University of Western Ontario** and **British Columbia Centre for Excellence in HIV/AIDS**

Introduction

Beneath the Malebolge lies Hastings Street
The province of the pimp . . .
Where chancres blossom like the rose . . .
And mountains gaze in absolute contempt . . .
This is Canada. (Malcolm Lowry 1947, p. 29)

This description by British writer Lowry is remarkably similar to contemporary representations of Vancouver's Downtown Eastside (DTES) or Skid Row, as it was called until the late 70s. In Italian "Malebolge" roughly translates as "evil ditches or pouches" and in Dante's *Inferno* it constitutes the eighth circle of Hell. A newspaper article from December of 2006 describes the neighbourhood as "Vancouver's Four Blocks of Hell" (Steffenhagen 2006, p. 6), and in 1997 a public health emergency was declared in response to reports that HIV infection rates in the DTES exceeded those anywhere else in the "developed" world. The area is also cited as Canada's poorest neighbourhood, with most of the community's 16,000 residents subsisting on an annual income of approximately $10,000 (Robertson & Culhane 2005). Beyond the sensational images of sin, disease, and urban decay, this is a place deeply scarred from historical processes of colonization, political neglect, and systemic poverty that leaves most people with few choices but to take part in the thriving illicit drug and sex trades. Tragically, it is the same area where over sixty-five women, most of whom were sex

workers and Aboriginal women, have disappeared and are now part of Canada's largest serial murder investigation.

Following a television segment on *America's Most Wanted* in 1999 and subsequent police investigations, Robert William Pickton was arrested in 2002 and charged with twenty-six counts of first degree murder (although he has admitted to taking the lives of forty-nine women). In December of 2007 he was convicted of second-degree murder of six women, who were the focus of the first trial (Cameron 2007). Justice for the remaining twenty women may not transpire because of the possible cancellation of the second trial for reasons of economic cost. In the media the women who were murdered have been represented through tropes of addictions, poverty, debased sexuality, and individual blame. Such representations tell us nothing about their lives, and it seems that is precisely the reason for their use because they render these women invisible and their inhumanity permits most people not to care about them. Oakley (2007, p. 9) refers to this as "titillation without incrimination" and argues that since this is the kind of story that people want to hear it is the one that keeps getting told, when anything gets told at all.

Against these dominant representations, this paper features the writings of two former street-based sex trade workers who covered the Pickton trial. *Orato*, an international news site comprised mainly of contributions from the public, hired VanKoll and Baptie as "citizen journalists." Their daily writings evoke considerable pain, wisdom, compassion, and human dignity that are rarely seen in "other" people's presentations of sex workers. Honouring and listening to these women's words is critical to destabilizing the power relations in much sex work research, which is still written up largely by academics, not those in the trade (Delacoste & Alexander 1987; Nagle 1997; see also *$pread Magazine* 2005–), particularly women who are street-entrenched. VanKoll and Baptie's stories and experiences reveal their lives as women, often disadvantaged politically, socially, and economically, and put a real face on the mythologized and stigmatized images that circulate and are reproduced in the media (Oakley 2007). The three themes discussed below represent the ideas and experiences that surfaced most often across the women's writings.

Drug Addiction: Not a Simple Choice

Sex workers in the DTES are often perceived as vectors of disease by the public, which can largely be attributed to the sensationalized coverage of drug addiction within the media. Mainstream discourse surrounding addiction often relies on simplistic and reductionist perspectives, which produce the dangerous and misinformed idea that addiction is a matter of choice. The contributions from VanKoll and Baptie work to expose the multidimensional nature of drug addiction, which is crucial to provide an environment of understanding.

The vast majority of sex workers have experienced lives of abuse, racism, poverty, and social stigma that have contributed to their marginalization. Upon entering the sex trade, the women often identify with other sex workers who have experienced similar forms of suffering. As VanKoll states, "misery likes company" and it is in this context that the women find drugs to be an escape from reality (2007d). This escape becomes a mode of survival as the women seek to "numb out" from their sexual exploitation, the violence they endure, and the shame and humiliation associated with the sex trade. Feeling shame and disgust after encounters with clients is something that both women spoke about as being particularly strong motivators for their drug use. Baptie recalls the smell of clients' genitals when

performing sexual services as something that could only be eradicated by a fix (Baptie 2007a), which allowed her to "drown out that smell" and mentally disconnect from selling sex.

The women's chemical dependencies shaped their lives as they "lived to use and used to live" (VanKoll 2007a). However, "living" does not really capture their lives. Rather, it is more like "existing or surviving" in a 10 × 10 block radius, which VanKoll describes as being plagued with violence, drug addiction, and sexual exploitation (2007a). Drug use and addiction are infinitely more than a matter of choice, as evidenced in VanKoll and Baptie's writings, they provided a much needed disconnect and a way to survive.

The Intergenerational Transmission of Disadvantage

The socio-sexual capital of most sex workers often decreases with age and the attendant issues of addictions and mental health, which make it difficult to earn the same amount of money they did previously. Young women enter the trade for a myriad of reasons, but drug addiction is often presented as the main motivation for their participation in the sex trade. Addiction is one of the many compounding factors that structure these women's vulnerabilities, along with social marginalization and colonization (Robertson & Culhane 2005). The over-representation of Aboriginal women living in the DTES and participating in the sex trade speaks to the power of the colonial process, which continues to displace these women and discredit their citizenship. VanKoll and Baptie discuss one of the most devastating outcomes of this situation, the transmission of sex and drug trade participation trade across generations of Aboriginal women who find themselves living in the DTES.

In our "multicultural" Canadian society the systemic discrimination and everyday abuses Aboriginal men and women face cannot be dismissed as mere remnants of past events, as they often are within mainstream media and societal discourse. The effects of such forces are often hidden from the experiences of most Canadians, yet they are also at work in pushing marginalized groups within our society into the sex trade. VanKoll recalls having trouble finding employment as she was told "they don't hire 'them' because they can't be trusted," which she points to as being a contributing factor behind her move into the DTES (2007b). She describes how being Aboriginal and from the "streets" of Vancouver, were used to justify state intervention of her children. The "white government" displaced her children and sent them to foster care, an environment she describes as being laced with corruption, inadequate educational services, and woefully inadequate social supports (VanKroll 2007c). As VanKoll states, "they weren't taught anything about how to handle money, how to buy groceries, what bills were . . . they were forgotten" and upon ageing out of the system (at 19 years of age) they were left to fight for themselves (2007a).

Such writings highlight the intergenerational transmission of disadvantage that is fuelled by colonial policies, racism, and discrimination, which typically position Aboriginal Canadians as children of the state in need of government regulation. These interventions are often deeply imbued with ignorance about and blanket dismissals of the historical treatment of Aboriginal people, which only contributes to their continued marginalization and dispossession. As VanKoll and Baptie share, too often this results in Aboriginal women and their children being left with few options but to piece together their identities and very survival in Vancouver's Downtown Eastside.

Discredited Identities

VanKoll and Baptie's representations of and reflections on the sex trade speak to the significant value of "citizen journalism," which can be used to humanize sex workers through compassionate stories rooted in real experiences (Wallace 2007). However, the stigma associated with the sex trade continues to devalue their contributions in the media and in the eyes of the public. Instead of recognizing the immense importance of their words, their contributions in *Orato* evolved into a story for the mainstream media to cover. One former *Toronto Star* reporter discredited their work in an article entitled "Citizen Journalism is Not News," which stated:

> It is a fascinating experiment, but it is not news. The two writers have focused almost entirely on themselves, their own emotional reaction to the trial, and how their own lives echoed the lives of the victims. (Kelly Toughill 2007, p. 19)

VanKoll and Baptie's writings are not an "experiment." They represent a rare opportunity for the public to look past sensational coverage of sex workers and acknowledge some of the key issues that contribute to the pathos, but also survival and power that characterizes people's lives in the DTES. It must be noted that both women never claimed to be a part of the media. Rather, as Baptie explains, they were the missing women's friends first (Wallace 2007). VanKoll and Baptie's stories must be heard to humanize those who are missing, have been murdered, and those who still work the streets of Vancouver's Downtown Eastside. As Baptie says, "my friends did not leave this world without screaming their story at us. It is so loud one must be completely silent to hear it," the missing women "have left their DNA to tell us their story" (Baptie 2007b). Their discredited identities prevented them from telling us their stories while they were still mothers, daughters, sisters, and friends on this earth, but this can change. By using the words of women who worked, lived with, and knew those who are no longer with us, this paper is a step towards that direction.

Conclusion

Developing culturally meaningful and socially representative accounts of daily life among women in the sex trade is crucial to sex work research and activism and, more importantly, to changing how they are understood and treated in society. Peer-based, action-oriented initiatives and, more recently, oral histories, narratives, and stories, are some of the approaches adopted to document the lives of women in the sex industry (Mosack, Abbott, Singer, Weeks & Rohena 2005; Rickard 2003; Robertson & Culhane 2005; Roche, Neaigus & Miller 2005; Rubenson, Hanh, Hojer & Johansson 2005; Wahab 2004). While critical to acknowledging their power, humanity, and insight, many of these projects are authored by researchers or sex workers in the higher echelons of the trade, that is, stripping and escort services. Those living and working in more marginal conditions, namely those who are street-based, remain on the fringes of this move towards more self-representative mediums of expression and identity among sex workers. Discussing the issues of addiction, the intergenerational transmission of disadvantage, and discredited identities from the perspectives of former sex trade workers, this paper contributes to the larger political task of the (re)presentation of sex workers who, for too long, have suffered from the humiliation, neglect, and complete disregard associated with dominant forms of

representation, especially in the media. Their words and experiences belie and contest these hegemonic frameworks and reveal observant, interesting, and thoughtful women, whose complicated and significant stories must be told in their own words.

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BRIDGING THE DIVIDES: THE CROSS-GENERATIONAL DISCOURSES AT "THE POINT OF FEMINISM," "FEMINIST TRANSITIONS" AND "PORN CULTURES"

Elke Weissmann, Edge Hill University, Helen Thornham, City University, and **Julia Long, London South Bank University**

A remarkable dialogue is becoming gradually more noticeable in feminist media studies across the UK. A number of conferences during the last academic year have deliberately tried to address the apparent splits between different feminisms; and in particular those so often propagated by the media and far too often accepted in the academy, as books such as McRobbie's *The Aftermath of Feminism* (2009) indicate, between second and third wave feminists. Whilst this "split" is in many ways an exaggeration, if not a construction, by the media, we see the current efforts to bridge generational divides as an indication of a real desire on the part of younger scholars to (re)engage with feminisms and to claim the scholarship of the second wave as their own tradition with which they see their own work as in dialogue. In turn, this not only demonstrates the continued validity and imperative of feminism *per se*, it also suggests a wider visibility or resurgence of claims to, and of, feminist research at personal and political levels. Nevertheless, not all of these attempts at cross-generational debate are successful, and the lack of success in one area seems to draw attention to the problems of the wider resurgence.

As feminists of different ages and with different backgrounds both in relation to our activism, our national and regional experiences,[1] and our participation in the academy, our views of these developments are not unified; but we nevertheless feel there are lessons to be learned that we can agree on. It is these lessons and wider implications of the three conferences discussed here that will be at the forefront of this review, which inevitably means that the review will only cover certain aspects of the conferences, rather than provide detailed discussions of them.

The trend first became apparent with "The Point of Feminism," a one-day conference co-organised by two of the writers and Heather Sutherland (University of Reading) in September 2008. The day was born out of a frustration with the continued emphasis on the "posting" of feminism which had led to a series of papers and publications emphasising representations of women as (post-)feminists in the media (Arthurs 2003; Braithwaite 2002; Gill 2007; Negra 2008; Tasker & Negra 2007), and sometimes arguing that although the debates of post-feminism were not overly convincing, there remained an unease around condemning what has been seen as individual pleasure in and of such texts (see Tasker & Negra 2007). Such arguments, it was felt, neither addressed what the conference organisers saw as (overt or covert) alignments of young feminist academics to second wave feminism, nor accounted for the lived feminist politics of these scholars in engagements not only with media images, but research processes and methods on a wider scale. The day was constructed therefore in order to showcase early career researchers' feminist work and

provide a platform to engage explicitly in dialogue with second wave feminism. Firstly, it was hoped that this would demonstrate alignments, differences, and negotiations with second wave feminism, and consequently reinforce the necessity of a continued engagement with such work. The second aim was to highlight the nuances, complexities, and different histories of the movement. Indeed, Geraghty's closing keynote detailed the personal and political work behind her *Women and Soap Opera* (1991) book. She highlighted that the second wave was not one unified movement but consisted of larger and smaller groups who struggled to understand how their (in this case academic) feminism might be operationalised, even if the motivation and purpose was never under question, and have an impact on the lives of real women. This experience of often searching for the right language and topics to engage with suggests that a level of uncertainty, as perhaps experienced by younger generations of feminists, might just be normal in the struggle that is feminism, even if the discovery of feminism itself is experienced as empowering. These feelings were and are, undoubtedly, also fuelled by the resistance, particularly from popular culture, against feminism.

The relatively short papers given on the day presented a range of discussion points which opened up an animated debate in relation to the teaching of feminist media studies and feminism in media studies, research methodologies, media practice, discourses, definitions, and institutions. It highlighted the increased sense of urgency felt by young feminists to (re-engage with all aspects of feminist media studies and understand their work as part of a larger resurgence in activism. Feminism was understood as a practice which has real consequences for the lives of women and men, and did not need a form of "rebranding" in the shape of a *Marie Claire* campaign, but was still able to highlight the discourses of inequality that affected women's access to power in academic and media institutions, as Sue Thornham's keynote address made clear.

Whilst this suggests a return to the more grassroots activism with which the academy wants to engage, an activism that in itself has often been inspired by the academy, the conference also brought something else to light which in its own way is just as important, namely the impact feminism has had, despite constant disavowals, on social, political, pedagogic and cultural structures. Maureen McNeil's opening plenary, set against the background of Sarah Palin's political campaign, detailed the overemphasis on what she termed, "choice biographies" to the detriment of feminist-inflected social and political structures which, she argued, had made possible such biographies in the first place. This, she suggested, was due to the conflation of the personal with the discourse of neo-liberalism and an overt failure to acknowledge feminism *per se*. However, she argued that these choice biographies were not only the preserve of the individual—they could also be found in social, political, pedagogic and cultural "histories" of which media and cultural studies were included. McNeil's (prophetic) opening plenary offered the social and political foundations for a more personal account of searching for feminism which the delegates expressed, and the notion of an overt (re)avowal or (re)integration of feminisms into such structures became a central theme of the conference.

A similarly conducive and welcoming atmosphere marked the 2009 annual Feminist and Women's Studies Association conference, "Feminist Transitions," held in Liverpool in June 2008. Unlike the conference organisers of "The Point of Feminism," organisers Ben Brabon and Stéphanie Genz have indicated in their work that they are more willing to accept the "posting" of feminism as a means to reinvigorate feminism and open it up to different concerns which includes (New Labour) politics (Genz 2006). Thus, here

"transitions" and hence the "posting" of feminism was understood along the more positive lines, put forward as one of three interpretations of "postfeminism" by Projanski (2001), as a furthering rather than a rejection of feminism. Nevertheless, it was noticeable that some feminists had understood the emphasis on "transition" in a less positive light, leading to an absence of some of the more grassroots voices. Moreover, several papers emphasised the performativity of gender as a subversive strategy, which suggested a closer relationship to queer theory than feminist structural analysis. In general the conference often focused on issues of representation and women's (dis)pleasure in and their negotiation of different media forms in order to facilitate enjoyment. Thus, Diane Negra's keynote drew attention to the limited discourses available in current Hollywood "chick flicks" whilst Sue Jackson and Tiina Vares indicated how teenage girls negotiated and reappropriated the language of certain songs in order to facilitate enjoyment. Though these papers gave insights into the limited spaces for female pleasures, they could not address some of the more central topics of the renewed activism—and in particular the issue of violence which, according to research by Kristin Aune who also presented at "Feminist Transitions," is top of the priority list in young British activism.

That said, several papers presented research on or the need for such activism. Michelle Kempson discussed the riot grrrl movement and the zines that have sprung from it. She indicated that although the zines highlight a renewed engagement with feminist issues, they also suggest a decentralisation of feminist ideologies and a fragmentation of the movement which seems to lack leaders. In the light of Christine Geraghty's keynote address at "The Point of Feminism," this is perhaps less unusual to feminist activism than she presented. Jessica Baily interrogated the involvement of men in contemporary feminist activism and stressed that within the activism, key themes such as "the personal is political" have re-emerged. The Lakehead Ripples Collective presented developments in Canadian politics which must be understood not just as anti-feminist but anti-women with its lack of interest in the perpetual violence against Native women and abortion laws that mean women have to carry their baby to term if the baby dies in the womb after a certain time into the pregnancy. Their presentations were a call to arms for a grassroots feminist network which could gain strength through internationalisation.

The emphasis on common ground was problematised in Vicky Canning's paper, which highlighted the need to take into account cultural differences in order to understand the specific nature of oppression, and in particular, oppression through sexual violence. It was perhaps noticeable that the emphasis on difference was foregrounded in a paper on violence, a topic that was in general underrepresented at this and "The Point of Feminism" conference. In one other paper on sexual violence, Elisabetta Bertolino presented a theoretical and philosophical challenge to current discourses on violence, suggesting that there is a need for "forgiveness" by the victims of sexual violence, but one that would undermine the current neo-liberal climate in which individualism rather than collectivism is key. Thus, "forgiveness" was here understood as a means of transforming a culture which facilitates sexual violence. Whilst the ideas were complex, they nevertheless suggested that change could only be enabled by women, both essentialising femininity and putting the burden of change and criticism on women. As a theoretical paper, it also did not fully take into account the material reality of rape, or indeed women's lack of social, political and economic power within this system. Whilst her paper met with criticism, it was striking that such a provocative argument did not generate a more vigorously contested debate.

The absence of a focus on violence, particularly sexual violence also in its mediated forms as pornography, is striking in both conferences considering their particular interest in feminist *media* studies, particularly given that the American porn industry is now significantly bigger than Hollywood itself. And it becomes a glaring absence in light of the third conference, "Porn Cultures," which took place also in June 2009 in Leeds. Co-organised by, amongst others, the Institute of Communication Studies at the University of Leeds and the Faculty of Media at the University of Athens, the conference was part of a larger project which considers the impact of sexually explicit images in a global context. Its aim is to bring together activists, policymakers, and academics to further the debate on pornography.

In light of the "sex wars" of the 1980s in which pornography played a key part, and the continued controversies that different publications on pornography cause, it was clear that pornography is a divisive topic and was likely to cause tensions. Criticisms on both sides of the pornography debate persist. Under these considerations it was a brave effort to bring the different sides together, often by deliberately placing them in the same panel as in the case of Alan McKee and Karen Boyle who argued distinctly against each other. Whilst this allowed delegates to compare and contrast the different sides, it caused a rather acrimonious atmosphere which involved all delegates as they were likely to take sides in the debate.

Key to the divisions were two very different perspectives on pornography which seemed to align themselves to different periods in feminism: on the one hand was an emphasis on the real production contexts in which pornography was produced, and on the harm pornography produces also in its consumption, which positioned itself very much in the lineage of second wave activism. This perspective was also represented by a number of delegates from different activist groups including Object and the Scottish Women's Support Network. Sheila Jeffreys's presentation highlighted the connections between organised crime, the sex industry and particularly strip clubs, trafficking, and pornography and urged for a careful consideration of these interrelated issues when discussing pornography. Gail Dines discussed the centrality of violence within pornography, on the levels of production, representation, and consumption. She drew attention to a website on which consumers discuss pornography to emphasise that key to their enjoyment was the realisation that a porn star experienced actual pain in an environment in which she was meant to perform pleasure.

On the other side was an emphasis on pleasure, multiple readings and meanings of pornographic texts and representations of alternative forms of sexuality, which at points explicitly moved away from second wave feminism. Whilst papers presented here emphasised key ideas that are useful for media studies at large—in particular the relationship between an emphasis on the body and notions of authenticity, issues of pleasure and the search for definitions of female desire, and issues of representation and class—it was noticeable that they were unable to fully address power relations and the continued emphasis on traditional structures of representation particularly in relation to women as objects of the gaze. Some papers did touch on issues of power: most noticeably Pedro Pixto, who presented a categorisation of different forms of pornography and how they are marked by intersections of different power structures; Jessica Ringrose, who discussed social networking sites and the embracing of the "slut" terminology and imagery as a means of defence by young girls; and Sara Bragg, who conducted research into children's understanding of pornography. However, they lacked the sense of urgency that

was presented in more radical papers. Whilst Ringrose in particular expressed a sense of unease with the use of the word "slut" by young women, these papers perhaps required a more thorough understanding of the limitations imposed on young consumers by the highly commercialised nature of the internet and other media.

The division between the two sides gave most of the conference a highly charged and sometimes slightly surreal atmosphere. This was perhaps particularly noticeable with Marcus Breen's highly contentious paper where pornography was presented as part of working-class culture which now easily transgressed class boundaries to enter the middle-class home, and therefore presented a democratisation of culture in general. Strikingly absent in his account was any consideration of what this meant for the women involved or any other woman for that matter; and instead he seemed to suggest an accepted normalcy of masculine dominance in cultural production. His paper also raised questions regarding the conceptualisation of the working class as key consumers and producers of pornography. The atmosphere eventually led to two rather heated exchanges during the discussions, where both sides questioned the legitimacy of the other's analyses. These tensions could unfortunately not be resolved, perhaps also due to somewhat limited discussion times, and seemed to increase as the conference went on.

What the "Porn Cultures" conference seemed to suggest, therefore, was the futility of an attempt to bridge the divide between debates, which was perhaps exaggerated by the rather enthusiastic bringing together of different sides in the same panels by the organisers. Nevertheless, it does raise questions regarding the larger project of cross-generational debates. Firstly, it made visible the lack of engagement with issues of violence and particularly sexual violence at the other conferences. Considering both were interested in media, the lack of investigation of pornography or sexually explicit images was surprising. Secondly, it drew attention to the fact that the other conferences were surprisingly "nice": although individual papers expressed outrage or frustration, a real, deep-seated sense of anger, so central to the second wave and to activism more generally, was missing. It suggests that the new academic feminisms are perhaps currently willing to engage primarily with second wave traditions that are less contentious and do not radically challenge traditional forms of feminine behaviour. And thirdly, "Porn Cultures" drew attention to the challenge of violence and the potential for the continuation of deep rifts in the movement, a challenge which has so far been blind-spotted by the other conferences, but that needs to be addressed if the movement wants to move forward in the tradition of the second wave.

NOTE

1. Although we all currently live in England, two of us have spent considerable time abroad, and although all have connections to the South East, two of us have strong connections to the North and Scotland.

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