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From Amateur Aesthetics to Intelligible Orgasms: Pornographic Authenticity and Precarious Labour in the Gig Economy

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Abstract

Authenticity has been described as a hallmark of alternative pornographies, reframing porn producers as documentarians and professing an increased investment in 'real' bodies, unscripted sex and genuine pleasures. In this article I examine what authenticity means to pornography producers and performers via autoethnography and 20 qualitative interviews. Fantasies of authenticity among producers often reflected particular iterations of white, middle class femininity and conventionalised signifiers of 'naturalness' that were presumed intelligible to audiences. Authenticity was often staged, imagined and projected by producers, who in some cases assessed the authenticity of their performers'

orgasms. In contrast, performers, who worked across genres, strategically navigated producer requirements and were more concerned with transparency, expectation management and contractual obligations. I argue that authenticity narratives form part of a wider cultural imperative for sex workers to describe their work as personal identity or sexual expression. They also manifest in a context of income precarity and job insecurity where performers need to maintain open avenues of potential work. Where authenticity becomes an aesthetic regime of its own, it produces new hierarchies of representation. Instead of undoing binaries between "fake" versus "real" sex, authenticity narratives can serve to construct and repudiate narratives of artifice as a means to displace stigma and obscure the gendered, aspirational and relational labour of porn performers.

Keywords: authenticity, feminist pornography, labour, gig economy, sex work.

1. Introduction

Alternative pornographies seek to make interventions into the production and representational practices of sex on screen. Over the last ten years, a vibrant movement has flourished across Australia, the United Kingdom, the United States and Western Europe, pioneering pornography that has been labelled as Do-It-Yourself, indie, feminist, ethical, queer, fair trade, artisanal, cruelty-free and even organic. Dissatisfied with mass-produced pornography and prescriptive formulas for sexual representation, a distinct focus on 'authenticity' emerged during the 2000$_s$ in the narratives of queer and feminist performers and producers in these countries, becoming what Dylan Ryan has called the 'the Holy Grail' in feminist pornographies (2013, 121). Indeed, authenticity has became a hallmark of alternative pornographies. In alternative pornographies, Feona Attwood writes, the pornographic body is reconfigured «through retro glamour, alternative style and a contemporary ideal of sexual authenticity» (2012, 42). Performers emphasise their genuine pleasure, real orgasms and love of sex and share intimate and personal moments with audiences, both on film and social media, while producers refer to one another as sex documentarians and collaborators. It is a powerful idea, one that Madison Young argues is about the «facilitation of creating space for the expression of authentic self in relation

to our sexual desires has the ability to radically change pornography» (Young 2014a, 186).

Research has demonstrated the value of alternative pornographies, especially for queer audiences, in providing «affirmation, recognition and validation» (Ryberg 2015, 171) and making visible bodies and identities that are «marginalised by more mainstream representations» (Smith, Attwood and Barker 2015, 186). However, literature on alternative and amateur pornographies has also approached authenticity with caution. In a key anthology, *Porn After Porn: Contemporary Alternative Pornographies*, Enrico Biasin, Giovanna Maina and Federico Zecca argue that the use of 'alternative' as an oppositional status to the mainstream «brings some problematic issues to the fore» (Biasin, Maina and Zecca 2014, 15). The claimed opposition to 'mainstream pornographies' – whether in aesthetics, identities or practices – can obscure the substantial overlap and entanglement between these categories. Similarly, scholar Susanna Paasonen reminds us that «the commercial and the non-commercial, the mainstream and the alternative, continue to function as tools of categorization and evaluation in discussions on porn at the very moment when their boundaries are increasingly elastic» (Paasonen 2010, 1300). With performers and producers moving across genres and industries, working in both independent and corporate productions, divides between mainstream and alternative can be ambiguous at best.

In this article I explore what authenticity means to performers and producers of alternative pornographies in Australia by examining their accounts of production. Authenticity meant something different to producers and performers because of their different investments in the production process and media product. In my interviews, performers reported that producer expectations of what authenticity looked like (often premised on an imaginary naturalness shaped by class and gender) could be misaligned with their own desires and aesthetics. Bodies and pleasures that were not intelligible as authentic – to either directors or consumers – risked incoherence and often were not represented. While producers were concerned with sexual representation, for performers, pornography remained insecure work. Because performers needed to maintain relationships with both audiences and potential employers to ensure future work opportunities, they described ways in which they strategically navigated expectations for authenticity in order to find work in a precarious 'gig economy', where work was temporary, contractual or short-

term. I link these interview accounts to literature on new forms of affective, emotional or relational labour (Baym 2018; Duffy 2017). While a focus on 'authenticity' can offer affordances to performers to explore their personal desires and offer greater diversity of content for pornography consumers, this article explores how authenticity narratives can also be deployed to justify new forms of labour extraction and naturalise gendered representations of the body.

2. Methodology

This research is part of a broader project examining the regulation of alternative pornographies in Australia, which employed 35 semi-structured qualitative interviews with porn stakeholders, legal and archival review of the regulatory framework, and what I called 'auto-pornographic ethnography' (Stardust, 2019). My primary data for this article is from 20 interviews with porn performers and producers. Producers were eligible to participate in the interviews if they (a) produced pornography (explicit sexual material) in any format (film, photography, print or other); and (b) their material was for sale; and (c) their content is Australian (run from Australia, by an Australian resident, or using Australian models); and (d) if they identified themselves and/or their work as queer, feminist, ethical, alternative or kinky. Authenticity was a recurring theme in interviews. It emerged in data from producers in their discussion of the meaning of 'alternative pornographies' and in data from performers in their discussion of tensions within the movement.

In this article I use 'alternative pornographies' as an overarching category to describe a collection of movements, actors and projects. Under this umbrella I include feminist pornographies that foreground women's agentic desires and subjectivity (Liberman 2015, 174), queer pornographies that are «unbounded by gender binaries and sexual essentialism» (Lipton 2012, 205), ethical pornographies which emphasise fair payment and workplace conditions (Mondin 2014) and DIY/ indie pornographies which encourage decentralised and independent production using new technologies (Coopersmith 2008). When they sit within these political and ethical approaches, I also include kink pornographies, which are rendered marginal primarily because of their criminalised status in Australia, where classification laws prohibit (and pathologise) the representation of any fetish in

X18+ content (Stardust 2014). I also consider how some of these projects fall within particular iterations of the movement for 'post-pornography', including projects to contest regimes of sexual representation altogether (Stűttgen 2013).

This research is an example of insider research, building upon the burgeoning contribution sex workers are making to peer-led studies in academic literature. In the tradition of standpoint feminism, I foreground the experiential and situated knowledge (Haraway, 2003) of porn performers as the point of departure from which to understand broader trends in pornography production. I offer this in the spirit of Jill Nagle's book *Whores and Other Feminists,* in which she argues that «incorporating sex worker feminisms results in richer analyses of gender oppression» (Nagle 1997, 1). While alternative porn producers may consider authenticity within the context of responsible representation, sex educaton and media consumption, this article inserts the experiences of sex workers into these debates to consider how the performance of authenticity manifests within a labour context.

3. Documentary Realness

In aspiring to be read as authentic, alternative pornographies have begun using many of the codes and conventions of documentary cinema: interviews, voiceover, behind-the-scenes and raw, unscripted footage. Performers describe their work in pornography as documentary projects through which they can charter their sexual journeys. For example, Angela White described pornography as having a documentary function in which she could trace her sexual experiences over the course of her career. She recounted experiencing "firsts" on set (such as her first anal scene, first squirting or first threesome) and valued capturing these live on camera. Sensate Films even created new genre of 'docu-porn', producing what they called a 'docu-portrait' about Bdsm and intimacy. These investments were not isolated to Australia. American performer and director Madison Young, for example, has spoken about navigating her romantic relationships on camera and collecting visual evidence across the span of a decade, tracing her pregnancy and sexual experiences as a first-time mother (Young 2014b). The very act of filming provides a vehicle for performers not only to capture but cultivate their selves.

Documentary cinema itself, however, is not an objective account of reality. Documentary theorists have illustrated the enmeshment of fiction and nonfiction through the use of particular editing techniques to shape material into something that can be «named and promoted as 'a documentary'» (Bonner 2013, 64). Michael Renov writes that "nonfiction" actually involves elements of "creative intervention", including the construction of a character, the use of narrative, musical accompaniment and camera angles to create meaning, sustain rhythm, and heighten emotional impact (Renov 2012, 2). At the same time, Bill Nichols argues that the use of certain techniques (e.g., voiceover commentary, the use of non-actors, shooting daily life) can «give the *impression* of authenticity to what has actually been fabricated or constructed» (Nichols 2017, xii). Nichols suggests that the documentary tradition «encourage[s] us to believe in a tight, if not perfect, correspondence between image and reality» regardless of whether viewers ought to trust that representation (Ivi, xii).

Documentary techniques are used to market authenticity to pornography audiences. In a session at the 2015 Feminist Porn Conference in Toronto, Canada, academic Amy Jamgochian and Pink Label producer Shine Louise Houston discussed the use of the word 'real' as a «valuable term for search engine optimization» (2015, n.p.). They argued that narratives of authenticity emerged in a context where «a strong demand has arisen for a distinction between 'gay for pay' performers of queer sex and performers whose sex on screen more closely represents their non-screen sex». Although these distinctions between on-screen and off-screen sex are often blurred, realness and authenticity still operate as effective "key words" and "efficient codes" for specific genres and preferences (Jamgochian and Houston 2015). And yet, Julie Levin Russo reminds us that even the genre of 'real' porn is mediated (2007, 240).

Investments in realness sit in direct contrast to the ways in which discourses of 'naturalness' have been mobilized throughout history. Queer sexual practices, for example, have been literally labelled as 'crimes against nature'. This drive to capture 'real' expressions of sexuality can be seen as a legacy of pornography's quest for maximum visibility, the impetus to show the 'truth' of sex (Williams 1999). This drive to discover the 'truth' is one of the hallmarks of 'scientia sexualis', which Foucault describes as the modern Western approach to sex. But further, a commitment to authenticity responds to readings

of pornography as fake, plastic and "hijacked" (Dines, 2010) and assumes that by inserting 'realness' back in, we can come closer to the truth of sex. Producer investments in documentation can reflect an investment in the camera as a vehicle for truth, despite «ample evidence of the ways in which both SLR and now digital photography can be manipulated and faked» (Dennis 2009, 5).

4. Constructing the Mainstream

The paradigm of authenticity constructs both an imaginary of naturalness but also of artifice. Authenticity is positioned as a radical avant-garde in direct opposition to an imagined, homogenous 'mainstream pornography', which is constructed as brash, performative and fake. For example, one interviewee, Howard, set up an alternative erotica website because, "We reasoned that the problem with mainstream porn is that it's all faked and that makes it really of limited interest to a lot of people and we were very sceptical about its ability to actually turn people on". Alternative pornography thus emerges as an intervention into the gendered representations of 'mainstream pornography'.

Interestingly, pornography producers' readings of 'mainstream porn' here are similar to anti-pornography feminists who position it as something monolithic and unified, behind which is some nostalgic notion of an authentic sexual self (see Dines 2010). The goal is different (e.g., the abolition of pornography compared to the proliferation of alternative pornographic interventions) but there is both a shared investment in the existence of an authentic sexuality coupled with an active devaluing of femininity (Stardust 2015, 69-70). In critiquing pornographic cultures, many popular 'anti-porn' feminists refer to 'excessive' femininity – acrylic nails, high-heeled shoes, breast size, and degree of make-up, for example – as evidence of gender conformity: «polyester underplants and implants» (Levy 2010, 198), or the «bleached, waxed, tinted look of a Bratz or Barbie Doll» (Walter 2011, 2). Even in the discourses of some porn producers, androgynous embodiment is often positioned as 'real', neutral or natural, and expressions of femininity (from lipstick to fingernails to glitter and heels) are represented as superficial, trite and fake. When performing for one alternative porn site, I was told to stop wearing frills and to "tone down the eye makeup".

‘Mainstream’ porn is here positioned as the antithesis to ‘natural’, ‘real’ gendered bodies and sex acts, but also reflects particular aesthetic conventions. Howard described how he «looked for ways of filming tastefully so that it didn’t look like mainstream porn, the way that that’s usually produced… on cheap sets with the crew and in hotel rooms, and where the performers are dressed and styled in a certain way to meet a certain stereotype». Feona Attwood (2007, 449-450) writes that during this process of repudiation from the mainstream, alternative pornographies establish their own aesthetic conventions:

> New sex taste cultures attempt to define themselves through a variety of oppositions to mainstream culture – and especially mainstream porn – as creative, vibrant, classy, intelligent, glamorous, erotic, radical, varied, original, unique, exceptional and sincere compared to the unimaginative, dull, tasteless, stupid, sleazy, ugly, hackneyed, standardized, commonplace, trite, mediocre, superficial and artificial. In the process, a system of aesthetics is evoked as a form of ethics.

The active construction of the ‘mainstream’ allows producers to differentiate their product in opposition to it and to position their work as distinct, exceptional and transgressive. Citing a world of Viagra, acrylic nails, silicone breasts, hair extensions and embellished moans, Madison Young argues that in the context of this formula of “fast food” style sex, and «[i]n an industry built on filming the glamorous performance of sex, the concept of authenticity is an anomaly» (Young 2014a, 186-188). In some cases, the authenticity narrative holds an economic and moral function that allows producers to situate their content as outside ‘pornography’ – as ‘erotica’. Cindy Gallop’s site *Make Love Not Porn*, for example, is marketable and approachable because it does not define itself as ‘porn’. Performer Vex Ashley writes that the title itself «demonstrates a wider misconception that ‘real’ sex is not and cannot be performative» (Ashley 2016, 187), as if sex itself does not already draw from social scripts and cultural conventions. Gloria Steinem’s original conceptual distinction between erotica and pornography – the former as ‘sensuality and touch and warmth’ and the latter as ‘power and sex-as-weapon’– (Steinem 1980) has been critiqued by former sex worker and porn performer Annie Sprinkle, who posited that the distinction was an aesthetic one: the difference «is all in the lighting!» (2002,

n.p.) Authenticity, in this sense, becomes commercially useful, setting up alternative pornographies as 'tasteful', boutique and artistic and thus renouncing the stigma of 'mainstream pornography'.

Performers who work in the mainstream industry – whether in porn or other kinds of sex work – felt strongly about being able to advocate for better working conditions without further stigmatising porn more generally, or as Lucie Bee put it, «throw[ing] mainstream porn under the bus». For example, Angela White reported seeing more similarities than differences between ethical, feminist and mainstream producers. Similarly, Helen Betty Corday commented, «I think it can be very problematic to do the distancing of this is good porn and that is bad porn». White suggested that the way forward may be for mainstream and alternative producers to share strategies and processes with one another: «I think a challenge is to try and produce different visions without shaming the mainstream industry [and] without Othering other parts of the industry».

5. Staging Authenticity

The emphasis on 'amateur' porn epitomised by realness and authenticity risks reifying a particular iteration of naturalness that is actually highly constructed. Porn sites that purport to depict 'real', 'alternative' or 'redefined beauty', are often just as conventionalised as the mainstream genres they criticise. For example, while the website *Suicide Girls* pitches itself as an online alternative community, they give calculated instructions about the kinds of aesthetic photo sets they accept: "tasteful", "picture perfect" shoots with "a little bit of face powder and mascara and freshly dyed hair", but specifically *not* "cheap wig[s]", "top hats", "stripper shoes", "food" or things that look "cheesy", "gross" or "creepy" (Suicide Girls 2010). In producing measurable indicators of acceptable gendered presentation, these sites also produce bodies of a particular class, size and appropriate femininity, which are marketed as 'real', but which are equally constructed and similarly clichéd, albeit with a different set of aesthetics. 'Authenticity', therefore, becomes, as Giovanna Maina writes, «a quality that also has to be achieved through particular aesthetic techniques» (2014, 183). Bill Osgerby argues that such sites mobilise a feeling of community that can obscure the commercial imperatives central to operation.

In 2005, for example, nearly 40 models left *Suicide Girls* citing poor pay and restrictive contracts (Osgerby 2014, 50-52).

In the interviews I conducted, performers spoke about the ways in which they were expected to reproduce established conventions that would be intelligible to audiences as 'authentic'. It was not enough to replicate a performer's real-life desires and activities; their performances had to look and be understood as authentic to both the viewer and the producer. Producers urged performers to do what they would do at home, but then often proceeded to give detailed instructions that reflected the iconography of their brand or producer fantasies. In her paper at the 2014 Feminist Porn Conference, *Manufacturing Realness*, filmmaker and performer Gala Vanting outlined what she thinks are "the more common characteristics of the 'real girl'" in Australian porn. According to Vanting, she:

- Wears button-down dresses, striped socks, cotton full-brief underwear, little or no makeup, rejects 'glamour'.
- Self-pleasures without accessories, unless she is appropriating household items; does not use sex toys; has multiple orgasms in a single session; has orgasms which are not 'too loud' or 'performed'; is 'observed' or 'documented' in states of arousal.
- Is white or exoticised [O]ther, is a size 8-14, is between 18 & 30 years of age.
- Is not a sex worker; and if she is, she trades in her sexual performativity for the welcome chance to have a 'real' experience and be 'herself'; is not motivated solely by money.
- Does not have or effectively disguises bruises, shaving rash, ingrown hairs, tattoos, piercings; prefers to keep her pubic hair 'natural'.
- Is heterosexual or bi-curious and cis-gendered.
- Prefers domestic settings, fields of long grass, or scenes of urban decay in which to engage in sexual activity.

In my interview with him, CEO Garion Hall echoes the idea of 'manufactured realness' in relation to Abby Winters, a site that represents an alternative to glamour photography, featuring make-up-less, 'amateur' adult models. Rather than being an expression of their

authentic selves, model applications are assessed based on brand qualities, such as "wholesomeness and personality and enthusiasm", on a scale of one to five. Camera staff and post-producers, moreover, are required to watch a 22-minute corporate branding video about "wholesomeness", and models undergo two full days of training before they can shoot. According to Garion:

> [The video] refers to 10 or 12 traits that our customers like to believe our models engender, things like having family values and that she's a homebody, that she likes to do things like cook and have a nice home. That she's not so much about going out to nightclubs as often as she can and getting pissed and falling over; she's more, you know, go out and have a good time with her friends but she wouldn't go to a night-club to find a new boyfriend, for example.

Rather than depicting women's authentic pleasures, these aspects are tailored to a palatable 'girl-next-door' paradigm in every step from recruitment, training, shooting and marketing. Performers who strategically navigate this path and answer the questions correctly, receive financial reward in the form of work; however, if they describe hobbies that do not fit with this image, they are edited out. As Garion noted, «If they start talking about their drug-taking habits, you know, we'd say, 'Yeah, look, we're not that interested' and we'd certainly edit it out; it's just not what our customers want to pay us for». Thus, the major impetus for the "wholesome" paradigm is not about authentic selves, really, but about what the customers want, filtered through the fantasies of producers, who selectively curate a version of the self that makes it online.

Despite professing to celebrate the diversity of all women, some sites are particularly exclusionary about which women are permitted to participate. In our interview, Howard described how he decided to exclude trans women from his site because he perceived them as presenting a market risk:

The issue of queer and transgender [individuals] and so on didn't come up until we had some people wanting to participate, and at some point I had to, at one point I did have to make a business decision. Once we had some level of participation from transgender people then we were starting to get flooded with other, with their friends, they put the

word out and we were starting to get quite inundated with people wanting to be involved and I could see that the nature of the website was going to take a turn where it wouldn't be financially sustainable, so that's one of those decisions that was made really based on the sustainability of the website…

Instead of representing women in all their diversity, Howard decided that trans women and non-binary people presented a risk to profit. His initial solution was to create a separate and distinct website featuring trans and gender diverse models – literally segregating them to their own area – but, according to him, «I looked at what else was around on the market and I didn't think that it was a safe enough bet to put a lot of money and resources into». Although such companies like to see themselves as committed to diversity, their investment is limited by whether those queer bodies will be marketable, financially viable, and provide a monetary return.

6. Amateur Aesthetics

Despite the commercial context in which alternative pornographies are produced, an aesthetic of authenticity can require performers to perform a sense of amateurism and ordinariness, denoted by shooting in natural light and every-day clothes. The construction of an ordinary aesthetic is not unique to film. Ruth Barcan documents how this same 'staged authenticity' appears in popular Australian adult magazines *The Picture* and *People* where readers send in raw, untouched, naked photographs of themselves. These magazines produce an aesthetic of 'ordinariness' that is in fact highly crafted (2000, 150):

Of course, the magazine does not simply reproduce 'ordinariness'; it *produces* 'the ordinary' as a category. Many photos are in fact taken in the home – and thus the floral curtains and textured carpet of the living room, the cotton-print sheets, the rock posters on the bedroom wall and so on are important features of the genre.

Barcan situates this phenomenon within an Australian «legacy of anti-authoritarianism and anti-elitism» that celebrates and *mobilises* ordinariness and demonstrates «a deep ambivalence to celebrity and glamour culture» (Ivi, 150). That same ambivalence emerged in my interviews with alternative pornographers in Australia. For example, Howard set

up his alternative erotica website because, «We reasoned that the problem with mainstream porn is that it's all faked». In some cases, producers were reluctant to hire women who had plastic surgeries or were professional porn performers, because they were seen to have internalised the aesthetic and gendered conventions of mainstream production. In their Mission Statement, one company specifically aspires to «value the beauty of natural mind and body above glamour and cosmetic enhancement». While this aspiration may seek to capture 'real' women, in practice performers strategically navigate the criteria for realness. Performers who have breast implants, who wear lingerie, who squirt or who orgasm too loudly (in ways that appear too dramatised or, as Howard called it, "Americanised") – who are *real* in the sense that they *exist* in the world – do not always embody the right *kind* of realness. As Madison Missina reflected in our interview about her work with one producer:

> [W]henever I work with them they want me in particular daggy [scruffy] cotton underwear that I don't own, because that's not my sexuality. They talk to me about how they want to produce this authentic porn, but they don't want me to wear makeup, and they don't want me to do my hair, and I've got to actually go out and buy [cotton] underwear because I'm a lingerie person and that's how I feel sexy. And then when it comes to having sex, because I've got implants, they want me to do all these things to conceal my boobs, because 'real women' don't have implants. And I've even been told, because I do female ejaculation, one feminist porn producer told me that that's not something that anyone would be interested in so we're not going to show that. She'd rather just a normal orgasm but no ejaculation.

In this environment, porn performers learn the language of authenticity and strategically manifest it in order to earn money. Thus, as Barcan writes, «ordinariness becomes something to be imitated by professionals» (Ivi, 151). Websites, bios and interviews, in which performers provide information about their hobbies and interests, are less likely to be honest declarations, but rather, as Hugo Liu calls them, "taste performances" (Liu 2007). Teela Sanders' research indicates that sex workers can «create a manufactured identity» as business strategy and a «calculated response… to manipulate the erotic expectations and the cultural ideals of the male client» (Sanders 2005, 319). Similarly,

online and onscreen personalities are curated to enhance activities performers already enjoy, based on what will be most popular or profitable, whilst being emotionally sustainable with least risk of burn out. Here, authenticity does not refer to visible evidence of truth. Rather, we can understand authenticity as Heather Berg does, as «a type of emotional and communicative labor and a marketed commodity» – «a performance of being oneself and wanting to be there -- and, emphatically, being there not just for the money» (Berg 2017, 671).

One sex worker who shot for an Australian porn company blogged about how the required aesthetic standard meant looking effortlessly beautiful in a way that also erased the labour not only of sex work but of gender performance. In their article on sex work site *Tits and Sass*, called 'Fuck Your Feminist Porn', Mikey Way writes (2015, n.p.):

> Their insistence on natural, "alternative" beauty excludes those who cannot attain white beauty ideals or at least have to work to reach them. At these porn companies, makeup is frowned upon, plastic surgery is a hell no, and fatness is as shunned as ever. While the image isn't one of people actively working to meet fashion industry perfection, it instead enters around only those who can achieve it without effort. Ultimately, their "feminist" message is: "don't work to be beautiful, but fuck you if you're not *effortlessly* beautiful".

The movements towards amateurism, authenticity and lovemaking ultimately risks undoing a lot of advocacy sex workers have done in illuminating the labour involved in gendered performance and sexual interactions.

7. Intelligible Orgasms

The focus upon authenticity also impacts which sexual practices and expressions are encouraged and depicted. The female orgasm has become the elusive yet representationally important moment producers seek to illustrate the 'truth' of female sexual pleasure. In pornography, orgasms become commodified. Paul Preciado argues that late capitalism seeks to take «orgasmic force» and transform it into private property, «into abstraction

and digital data – into capital» (2013, 46). Despite calls from Madison Young and others for a greater variety of orgasms on screen – bodies that – «shake, tremble, contort», with –«guttural screams or deep belly moans, or primal animal-like sounds» or a «flushed face and warm smile» (Ivi, 187), many of my interviewees reported that producers still expected a certain type of orgasmic performance. Some producers were wary of orgasms that appeared embellished or exaggerated. Howard, for example, described the perceived difference between the orgasms of a mainstream performer when she performed on his site compared to a U.S. site as evidence of the way his site provided a platform for a more genuine unveiling of her true unmediated self:

> She came to us and she made very mainstream porn, very stylised American-style porn, and when I explained what we were all about she listened and she said I understand and I like those values. And when you look at what… when you look at her masturbating to orgasm on our website and then look at her performing in American porn or other mainstream sites in Australia it's completely different, and so I think that's… that really underscores the difference.

Although Howard sees this as an indication that the performance on his site is more 'real' or 'truthful', this could also be an instance of professionalism: a performer being versatile, identifying what is needed to complete the job, and executing it convincingly. Producer expectations of how an orgasm might look has led to some interesting experiences for performers in which their orgasms were disbelieved. Angela White recalls having an orgasm that a company did not believe was real, because it did not have the requisite audio levels:

> I had an incident where I had an orgasm, and I was told that I 'needed to have an orgasm now' and I said that I had. Obviously, it didn't conform to what they believed an orgasm should look like, so there can be those awkward moments. I mean, it's not just an issue in pornography, but even how orgasm is represented in mainstream film. It's always the head thrown back and loud orgasms, and many people have – myself included – varied orgasms. Sometimes my orgasms are silent, and other times they're screaming. There's not just one way to have an orgasm.

Authenticity, here, is dependent on what Gala Vanting has described as the basic circumstance in which «the performer embodies 'realness' which is aesthetically, aurally, and sexually consistent with the realness currently valued by those in control of the means of production, or is able to reproduce it based on cues given by the producer» (Vanting 2014, n.p.). This practice of identification and verification of orgasms is, in some cases, the responsibility of company staff. In one particularly stark example, Vanting recalls being tasked with the job of identifying whether an orgasm was 'real':

> Most performers created their submissions at home using cameras they loaned from the company. When they returned their work, it was my job to review their films for technical specifics (e.g., exposure, framing) and authenticity of performance. This required me to maintain that I could tell the difference between a 'real' orgasm and a 'performed' one by reading the cues of facial expression. Whether I actually could, or whether I just learned to internalise the cues of the company's brand of 'realness' for the sake of functioning in my role, I remain uncertain. It is a fine art to confront another person on your evaluation of their sexual authenticity based on a few minutes' footage taken in what is unlikely to be a habitual situation for them.

Here, it is a particular arrangement of expressions that are deemed recognisable, or "intelligible" in the sense that Judith Butler describes it, «produced as a consequence of recognition according to prevailing social norms» (Butler 2004, 3). Writing about visual representations of orgasm, Hannah Frith (2015, 387) argues that this process of viewers recognising an orgasm relies on shared understandings of sexual conventions:

> To recognise a bodily experience as an orgasm… requires considerable interpretative work as we draw on cultural scripts to interpret the bodily sensations provided by our senses. Orgasm does not just happen; it must be learned by developing an understanding of cultural conventions and symbolic systems.

Indeed, consumers themselves make their own determinations. In her focus groups, Emily E. Crutcher found that viewers paid attention to vocal expression in combination

with pace, timing and type of activity to assess the authenticity of a performance (Crutcher 2015, 325-328). But these interpretations still assume that pleasure is evoked from specific alignments of sensation and desire that might not be universal. Trans women, for example, have spoken about their orgasms being unintelligible to producers who are expecting scenes that include an erection and ejaculation. Producer and consumer expectations about how 'come shots' will appear do not necessarily reflect the realities for trans women who may be taking estrogen and androgen blockers (Hill-Meyer 2013, 155-156). The art of orgasm intelligibility ultimately depends on assumptions about people's physiological and emotional relationships with their bodies. Queers in particular often seek out non-orgasmic pleasures. Practices such as fisting and its focus on "intensity and duration of feeling, not climax" have been heralded as political (Halperin 1995, 101). In her book *Orgasmology*, Annamarie Jagose suggests that the practice of faking orgasms «is consistent with a queer theoretical approach that testifies to the potential of the unintelligible, the unproductive, and the wasteful» (2013, xv). In this sense, every orgasm that goes unrecognized, is rendered useless to capitalism, or disrupts what we think we know about the truth of sex, may be performing a queer function of 'undoing' authenticity.

8. Resistance and Reinscription

The porn performers I interviewed spoke about authenticity quite differently way than producers. Some performers expressed a sense of resentment towards the pretense of authenticity and felt that at least 'mainstream porn' was honest or *genuine* in its commercialisation. Madision Missina, for example, questioned why performers should have to experience real orgasms on set at all, noting that sexual pleasure exists beyond clitoral stimulation. She said that performers often found pleasure in what she called "stunt sex": the non-orgasmic pleasures of exhibitionism, performativity and acrobatic displays, in colour coordination, set composition and costuming, in the elements of stagecraft, sexual excessiveness and theatricality. Kim said something similar:

> [T]he same way with my personal life, I might not always get off every single time, right? But it's still a job that I enjoy doing and I think there's authenticity in that.

> There's different types of pleasure that I think we should be able to recognise within the porn community.

Rather than holding onto a stable sense of their sexuality, performing gave them opportunities to try a variety of activities, scenarios, sensations, dynamics and aesthetics. What was important to them was having choice over their bodies and how they were represented. From a performer's perspective, they may have represented themselves 'authentically' not because they revealed their innate sexuality but because their performance reflected whatever they genuinely desired to do on set on that particular day. Instead, they took issue with what they saw as hypocrisy on the part of producers. Kim noted:

> I don't actually have an issue with when I'm on a set and it's less authentic to my own sexuality. I have an issue when that conflicts with how the company sells itself to performers…I don't mind going onto the set and saying, "Hey, I'm here as a performer and as an actor and as a professional, and I'm happy to pretend that I like this thing if that is your company's shooting style and you're upfront about the fact that that's your company's shooting style and that's the type of stuff that you like to do". But if you come to me as a company, and say, "Hey performers, we want you to be your authentic self" and then you come back and say, "Don't do any of the things that you actually like because what we actually want is for your authentic sexuality to fit into our niche of what our consumers think female authentic sexuality looks like". And so that's an issue that I have.

Performers who use narratives of authenticity conceptualise it as being something that involves transparency about the commercial context, consumer expectations and technical requirements, as well as agency for performers to articulate their own desires and fantasies. Gala Vanting writes that producers need to be prepared for what performers can offer and be willing to hold space for that (Vanting 2014, n.p.):

> When we invite performers to be real, we need to be prepared for whatever form that realness may take, lest we fail to create a leak-proof container for their performance and whatever emotions and analyses may result from it. As producers, we gravitate

> towards the creation of representations of the real which are legible to us. Because we're often working within our own communities, representing the folks we know or the desires that make sense to us, we may be less likely to come into contact with 'realnesses' that don't. This is what happens, though, when you open up the possibility of representation to the general populous, which is what the 'real amateur' producers have to do in order to find their non-sex worker, non-porn performer subjects.

In these iterations, performers use authenticity to mean something that is not fixed or universal, but individualized, culturally-specific and elastic.

9. Labours of love

The emergence of the authenticity narrative in pornography is situated among a wider cultural imperative for sex workers to describe their work as a kind of personal identity or form of self-expression: a gratifying, rewarding, fulfilling experience or an altruistic endeavour with worthwhile social benefit (Mac and Smith 2018). In part, this is a response to pornography being positioned as a stigmatised industry (Voss 2015). In an effort to counter claims that pornography is violent, exploitative and abusive, performers have in turn emphasised their positive experiences and the social and educative value of their content. This strategy has not always been a wise one. These shifts have prompted a rearranging of stigma and power. The process of constant justification, defensive rebuttals and incessant celebration has been mistaken by some as a statement that pornography is always empowering and rarely ever work (Hester and Stardust 2019). The more that anti-porn advocates speak about porn's misogynistic and capitalistic tendencies, the greater the push among producers to position alternative pornography as existing *outside* the context of work: as documentary, as archive, as reality, as natural, as love.

This fantasy of genuine sexuality and the expectation that performers act out of love and not money is driven by an entitled consumer demand for personalised intimacy – for free access to not only performer's bodies but their intimate and authentic pleasures. In our interview, performer Kim discussed the lack of recognition among consumers about the administrative and financial investment involved in porn production. As a performer,

consumers expected her to be a natural exhibitionist who loved sex and desired to share it freely with strangers for fun. Although many performers, including Kim, did find pleasure in exhibitionism, they also put boundaries (and prices) on where, when and how it could be accessed. According to her:

> People ask for free content all the time – like "toss me a free video or something?" and I'm like "No". It takes so much time to produce any of these things, no you just can't have one for free. No way! Like, it's a business… There's an expectation of "Oh you should be doing it because you enjoy it" or something which is a very social media-induced response to porn – that people expect it to be done for free and just done out of your own personal enjoyment.

For solo-producers like Kim, production involves the emotional labour of convincing consumers that one enjoys the work but also a process of managing consumer access to it. As sociologist Arlie Russell Hochschild writes, «Being friendly or enjoying your work is one thing, but having your enjoyment advertised, promised – in essence, sold – is quite another» (Hochschild 2012, 331). Hochschild contextualises these new forms of labour exploitation in light of the shift from an industrial to a service economy. Capitalist, post-industrial forms of labour exploitation rely upon the «commercial logic of the managed heart» (Hochschild 2012, 333). Airline hostesses are required to smile and porn performers are expected to profess love for their work, and yet neither are explicitly remunerated for this labour.

Feminist labour scholar Heather Berg has argued that expectations for sex workers to profess their genuine love for work serves the double purpose of obscuring and extracting more labour power (2015a, 24). In her article *Business as Usual*, Berg analyses the advice from Los Angeles producers on casting. Their key advice was to "hire for attitude". Producers describe mining potential performer's social media accounts to ascertain «[h]ow eager they are to do it». How motivated by money they are to do it, as opposed to the fun aspect. The takeaway message is that companies do not want performers who are there just «for the money» (Berg 2015b, n.p.). The work of porn performance goes beyond the

life of the scene they are paid for: performers are hired for their commitment to the work, brand or company and their capacity to promote their own scenes on social media.

Like other artists expected to work for free or for exposure, this particular model of labour increases competition among performers, instils a culture in which performers are expected to be grateful for the opportunities, and outsources the labour of marketing to performers themselves. Berg argues that requiring performers to do their own hair, make-up and wardrobe, or even their own filming and lighting, or acting as scriptwriters, directors and editors – practices that all increase performers control over their own representation – are also cost-cutting measures for producers. Performers are only paid for their performance, and yet making social media posts or updating one's status are also forms of labour in the sense that Brooke Erin Duffy describes: they have a «productive, purposeful, task-oriented, and value-generating function» (2017, 8). Sex worker Mikey Way explains it this way (2015, n.p.):

> Let's stop and do the math: I spent about two hours shaving, waxing, washing, and getting made up for the shoot. I spent about an hour on the setup, getting the lighting right, and cleaning the area I wanted to photograph in. Three hours in front of the camera. Another hour going through the footage, editing and color grading it. For about seven hours work in total, that's less than $30 an hour. Which is decent pay and all. Until you remember, this is porn. In the meantime, this company and others like it have effectively cornered a market based on political paranoia and deeply internalized negativity towards porn, making bucket loads of money at the expense of workers who are genuinely trying to make a living on this shit. That isn't feminist. That is exploitative, and it distracts from real solutions to issues in the industry, steering us away from discussions about labor rights and conditional consent and working conditions. That's right, working conditions – because this is work, not a hobby.

By making pornographic performance visible *as labour* and emphasising their status as workers, performers problematise the idea of their real selves being captured by a documentary project, denaturalise the performance of gender and sexuality, and instead illuminate their role in creating a product that is used to generate capital. The very existence

of a transactional fee to compensate the performer for their labour separates this financial exchange from being an instinctive 'labour of love'. This is not to say that performers do not find pleasure or meaning in the work. Rather, in their unwillingness to recognise this as capital-generating labour, discourses of authenticity can act to reinforce performances of sex and gender in similar ways to the naturalisation of much domestic, feminised, caring and reproductive labour that makes it possible for others to profit.

Investments in authenticity have emerged from a broader cultural impetus for individuals to earn a living by doing what they love. The idea that anyone can build a career that is both income-generating and personally meaningful is a projection of privilege that ignores the fundamentally unequal division of labour. In her book *(Not) Getting Paid to Do What You Love,* Brooke Erin Duffy interviews social media producers involved in passion projects and finds that for most, writes Duffy, «*getting paid to do what you love* remains an unfilled promise» (Ivi, 6, emphasis in original). Building on Gina Neff's concept of venture labour and Kathleen Kuehn and Thomas F. Corrigan's concept of hope labour, Duffy calls these workers "aspirational labourers" because their work is mostly uncompensated in the expectation that «they will *one day* be compensated for their productivity» (Ivi, 5-6, emphasis in original). The seductive promise of future compensation effectively keeps these workers in a state of perpetual productivity; and yet, at the same time, they operate in an increasingly precarious international gig economy, one in which paid work is sporadic, labourers are mobile, competition is high and protections are lacking.

Porn performers are under similar expectations to foster relationships with consumers, to recruit and maintain membership bases for their websites, to attract clicks that can be converted into royalties, and to gain followers on social media in the hope of building an identifiable brand that can be easily searchable and booked for upcoming gigs. In doing so, porn performers exemplify a set of key contradiction, as Duffy describes, «between amateurism and expertise, between authenticity and strategic self-branding, and between internal drivers and external demands» (Ivi, xii). There are similarities here between the labour performed by porn performers and musicians. Nancy K. Baym (2018) argues that with economic and industry shifts in the ways that music is bought, shared and experienced, musicians are now increasingly «under pressure to build connections with listeners» (Ivi, 1). Like porn performers, musicians had previously been distant to fans, but are

now expected to be relentlessly accessible. In addition, they engage in what Baym calls *relational labour* (Ivi, 19), the communicative work of creating structures that support continued work: building diverse income streams and relationships to survive in the context of major system upheavals in production and distribution.

In a pertinent example, one Australian porn company offers performers royalties from their scenes depending on how many people click on them. However, a contractual clause states that a performer forfeits all future royalties if they speak out publicly against the company. Performers must then maintain an ongoing positive relationship with the brand, even outside the confines of the scene, or they face financial sanctions. If this is the financial context in which authenticity and realness are being sold, it casts serious doubt over the authenticity of expressions of the self. In the gig economy, Baym writes, «[t]he threat of poverty is ever-present. This is the context in which forming and maintaining friendlike relationships in which artists share their "authentic" selves with audiences, online and off, comes to be seen as a potential means of maintaining their careers» (2018, 8). Alan McKee describes pornography as a form of creative and "nomadic labour", involving on the one hand flexible hours and good money, and on the other hand precarious employment, periods of overwork, hustling for contract labour and lack of creative control (McKee 2016). Performers' language of realness and their cultivations of intimacy should be understood in the context of fostering relationships with both consumers and producers to keep potential work opportunities alive.

10. Conclusion

Some Australian porn projects reflected more complex understandings of sexuality and its relationship to representation, deliberately contesting the binary between artifice and reality. Australian queer feminist porn and culture publication *Slit Magazine* themed its final issue 'simulacra' to explore how we understand our lives through the medium of representation. The magazine used French philosopher Jean Baudrillard's concept of 'simulacra', a term that describes the ways in which we experience the world through signs and symbols, which circulate and take on meaning and reference each other, but do

not reflect reality. Simulacra, according to Baudrillard, is “an uninterrupted circuit without reference or circumference”, whereby “artifice is at the very heart of reality” (Baudrillard 1994). In his conceptualisation, artifice and reality are inseparable.

In contrast to the iterations of authenticity described above, and their over-investment in authenticity as a truth, not a tactic, the final issue of *Slit* is replete with sexual representations featuring repetition, mirror images, disruption and media mash-ups as means to explore how queer communities understand their lives and selves via symbols and signs. This approach reflects the post-pornographic philosophy described by the late Tim Stűttgen, which uses “performative excessiveness” and camp in order to contest the regimes of sexual representation. Post-pornography employs both “critical denaturalizing performance and glamorous affirmation” so that everything can be «profaned or appropriated, deconstructed and queered, reworked and genderfucked» (Stűttgen 2013, 10). This understanding of sexuality reflects a broader queer and post-pornographic project that plays with performativity to disrupt the codes and conventions of what constitutes authenticity and exposes it as an imitation with no original.

There is clearly value in diversifying hegemonic representations of gender and sexuality on-screen. Many of these projects have emerged specifically to address the narrow repertoire of sexual scripts available for porn audiences. However, as authenticity becomes a recognisable aesthetic in itself, with certain signifiers that consumers come to expect and performers learn to mimic, the risk is that these commercial, prescriptive and formulaic iterations could be mistaken for authenticity itself. Performers show us that bodies and sexualities risk *incoherence* when they do not meet these thresholds, and when they are not intelligible to consumers or managers, and thus cannot be easily consumed into the circuits of capital. Listening to their accounts allows us to see how porn production resembles new forms of labour extraction. Rather than exposing their authentic selves, performers are, in fact, engaged in a constant hustle, creating and monetising new forms of identity. As Berg writes, «[t]roubling authenticity asks us to take seriously the possibility that ideas posited as radical alternatives can themselves become disciplining» (2017, 689).

Pornography does not need documentary features in order for it to be a valuable medium. As Dean argues, pornography is *already* documentary, by virtue of the fact that it

provides an enormous repository from which to trace human desires, cultural preoccupations, fashion trends, gender politics and sexual cultures (Dean, Ruszczycky and Squires 2014, 5). Porn performers are complicating readings of authenticity by exposing the kinds of gendered and invisible labour involved in porn production. Queer and post-pornographic projects such as *Slit* are not claiming any fixed notion of what sex is or what authenticity looks like, but are instead complicating binary readings of pornography as fake *or* real, and taking pleasure in their undoing.

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