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Paradoxes of Porn

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Paradoxes of Porn

Abstract

So I have a confession: I'm kind of obsessed with porn. Which is weird considering that I have never actually seen any. [*excerpt*]

Keywords

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Disciplines

Developmental Psychology | Feminist, Gender, and Sexuality Studies | Women's Studies

Comments

Surge is a student blog at [Gettysburg College](#) where systemic issues of justice matter. Posts are originally published at [surgegettysburg.wordpress.com](#) Through stories and reflection, these blog entries relate personal experiences to larger issues of equity, demonstrating that –isms are structural problems, not actions defined by individual prejudice. We intend to popularize justice, helping each other to recognize our biases and unlearn the untruths.

SURGE

[VERB] : to move suddenly or powerfully forward or upward

PARADOXES OF PORN

March 24, 2014

So I have a confession: I'm kind of obsessed with porn. Which is weird considering that I have never actually seen any.

I was first acquainted with porn via my high-school boyfriend, who was, shall we say, an enthusiast. When I found out that he watched porn, I felt instantly and violently repulsed by the idea. I pleaded for him to stop, and eventually he made a dramatic declaration of repentance—followed by months of indulgence without my knowledge. When I finally found out that he was still watching porn, I was absolutely crushed by the betrayal. We didn't break up because of it, but the whole situation had severe effects on me: I became depressed; I developed an eating disorder; I was fixated on the fact that I wasn't enough, couldn't be enough. How could I be enough? How could one girl possibly compare to the thousands of naked women on the Internet willing to let my boyfriend project his filthiest fantasies onto them for free?

At the time, I was reacting based on visceral instinct, but I have since done a great deal of research on the theories and realities of porn. Like I said, obsessed.

This obsession was recently reignited when I heard about Belle Knox, or "The Duke Porn Star," as she is more widely known on the Internet.

Here's what happened: Knox made the decision to enter the porn industry in order to finance her education at Duke. At the end of winter break, she returned to school to find that she had been outed as a porn actress on her campus. Her outing was immediately followed by an aggressive barrage of hateful and degrading messages from fellow students, both online and offline: "I feel angry. I feel victimized. I feel harassed. I feel hated. I feel discriminated against," She said. "At Duke, I can't be who I want to be." After being interviewed for the [Duke Chronicle](#) and feeling that she was portrayed unfairly, Knox decided to write [two articles](#) herself in order to clarify her story, one of which officially reveals her porn actress name.



Since Belle's article appeared in The Chronicle, I've been following the development of her story pretty obsessively. I've perused the [blogosphere](#), I've waded through the [anonymous forums](#) and [BroBible comments](#), I've read the entire violently misogynistic entry about her on [Encyclopedia Dramatica](#). I find the story fascinating, primarily because it exposes so many of the hypocrisies, paradoxes, and contradictions inherent in the way society views porn. I mean—the way society thinks about and acts toward porn. Not physically views porn. Well, actually, that too.

First—hypocrisy. The most glaring hypocrisy associated with pornography is the way its participants are treated by its viewers. There is a tendency to glorify the viewing of pornography while condemning the actors and actresses who created it. Porn stars are humiliated, commodified, and dehumanized by the consumers of their work, held accountable to a code of sexual morality that porn viewers conveniently excuse themselves from. Knox, for example, has been referred to as a “pornslut,” a “butthurt bitch,” and a “cokewhore,” as well having her real name repeatedly and deliberately exposed. The mental acrobatics required of the entertained to so brutally punish their entertainers is astounding, alarming, and unforgivable. If someone treated Jennifer Lawrence like that, there would be a backlash, right? So why is it okay to do it to porn stars?

Furthermore, it is difficult for adult performers to successfully secure and keep a career outside the industry when their identity is known. One porn actress whose stage name is Gauge has [recently spoken out](#) about her struggles against workplace discrimination. Following her exit from the industry, she went to school for a certification as a surgical tech, reaching the top of her class, logging double hours, and receiving positive recognition from her superiors. When her previous alter-ego was discovered by an anesthesiology student, however, the prevailing attitude toward her tail-spinned into full-on ostracization. She was unable to graduate because no one would sign off on her required hours. “I’m thinking, why isn’t anybody asking [the anesthesia tech] how he recognized me?” she said. “OK, so what – I’m the provider, you’re the freaking consumer. Why is what I did so much more wrong than what you did?” She then sought a degree in criminal justice, and then another in makeup artistry—neither of which resulted in employment. Consequently, she eventually returned to the porn industry. Anonymous forum users have ridiculed Belle Knox for seeking an undergraduate degree and expressing her aspiration to be a lawyer. As cruel as these jokes may be, they are unfortunately probably right.

If discrimination against porn actresses is so harsh, why do women enter the industry in the first place? Many actresses, including both Belle Knox and Gauge, view pornography as a mechanism for sexual empowerment. “Feminism to me means advancing my personal liberty, my opportunity in the world, while also championing my body and my right to choose what to do with my body,” Knox said. “For people who say that porn is inherently degrading, that’s wrong.” From a theoretical standpoint, I am inclined to agree with Knox: from [school dress codes](#) to [contraception](#), there is a general consensus among feminists that women’s bodies and sexuality should belong solely to, you know, the individual women they belong to. In other words, telling women what they can and cannot do with their bodies is a no-no. If this line of thought is followed, it’s easy to see why many porn actresses view their work as empowering at an individual level. However, pornography does not take place in a social vacuum—it takes place instead within a system of production, distribution, and consumption that is strongly male-dominated, patriarchal, and misogynistic.

This presents a difficult impasse: theoretically, any woman should be individually empowered by participation in any sexual act in any capacity they choose—including porn—provided that it is consensual. Realistically, women who choose to participate in such theoretically empowering sexual acts are faced with systemic disempowerment in the form of slut-shaming, abuse, and discrimination. Is it possible, then, for women’s participation in pornography to be both individually and systemically empowering, given the pervasively disempowering atmosphere in which it is produced, distributed, and consumed? Currently, tragically, I believe the answer is no—but that is in no way the fault of porn actresses themselves. There is no reason that Knox, Gauge, or any other woman who desires to seek individual empowerment via participation in adult film should not receive it. It is a heinous injustice that their individual empowerment is rewarded with systemic disempowerment. Belle Knox expressed her exasperation with this double standard: “I really wish I could just do porn and pay for my college and not get shit from people and just be respected as a human being, but clearly that’s not going to happen.” Hopefully, someday soon, it will.

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<http://surgegettysburg.wordpress.com/2014/03/24/paradoxes-of-porn/>