

# Porn Empowerment: Negotiating Sex Work and Third Wave Feminism

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Nina K. Martin, Emory University, Georgia, has written on the relationship between hard-core pornography, comedy, and feminism for Peter Lehman's edited volume *Pornography: Film and Culture*, and her book *Sexy Thrills: Undressing the Erotic Thriller*, which examines the relationship between soft-core pornography, sex work, and feminism, is forthcoming.

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## Abstract

This article examines the ubiquitousness of sexy female bodies in popular culture, and assesses what impact the mainstreaming of porn and sex work has on feminism and female empowerment, exploring the ironic tension between the feminist struggle to freely express oneself sexually through sex work and its co-optation and selling by pop culture to young women as a sexy, empowered lifestyle choice.

## Résumé

Cet article examine l'omniprésence des corps de femmes sexy dans la culture populaire, et évalue l'impact qu'ont l'intégration de la porno et de l'industrie du sexe sur le féminisme et l'émancipation de la femme, en explorant la tension ironique entre la lutte féministe pour pouvoir s'exprimer sexuellement librement par l'entremise de l'industrie du sexe et sa cooptation, et sa vente par la culture populaire aux jeunes femmes comme étant un choix de style de vie sexy, émancipé.

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A hot key-light shines down on Kate Moss's golden hair as she flings it away from her face, tossing a coy look over her shoulder. She rises from her sprawled position on a hard gray cube, dressed only in a dark bikini and four and a half inch platform heels, and then slowly struts to another part of the set, equipped with a platform and a stripper pole. The scene is filmed in stunning black and white; the lighting periodically catches a curve of her leg or the shadow of her shoulder. In one shot her body is silhouetted against a light gray background, in another, only a white streak of light outlines her form. She leans up against the pole, sliding down into a squatting position, looking at the camera through lowered eyelids. In the background, a plaintive male voice moans, "I just don't know what to do with myself." As the lead guitar starts to scream, she spins around the pole, faster and faster, flinging her legs around its phallic hardness, and sliding slowly, slowly down into a kneeling position. She then shimmies back up for another swing, throwing her head back in abandon. As the last guitar chord fades, she takes one last leap, sliding down with legs stretched until she sprawls at its base in an erotic heap.

This image of Kate Moss, supermodel, dancing seductively around a stripper pole, would appear to appeal to a Maxim crowd of typically male voyeurs, perhaps as an ad to sell some luxury product to discriminating men. Instead, the image is from a White Stripes music video for "I Just Don't Know What to Do with Myself," their cover of an old Burt Bacharach tune once sung by Dusty Springfield. This retro video was conceived and directed by budding female film auteur Sophia Coppola shortly before her film, *Lost in Translation* (2003), became a hit. No longer stigmatized, stripping was now cool, very cool - Sophia Coppola, Kate Moss, and the White Stripes kind of cool.

Shortly after the White Stripes video's release in 2003, the western world exploded with Stripper Chic. Exposed thongs, undergarments straight out of stripper history, became fashionably popular.

Crunch gyms in New York and Los Angeles regularly packed their Cardio Striptease classes; in fact, stripping and pole-dancing sparked a new fitness craze, with pole-dancing classes offered all over the United States (US), Canada, and the United Kingdom (Copeland 2003, D01). Then Spike TV, ostensibly a guy-oriented cable channel, started showing comic book giant Stan Lee's *Stripperella*, an animated series starring the voice of Pamela Anderson as *Erotica Jones*, "a stripper by night, and a superhero by later night." *Erotica's* superpowers consist of nipples that can cut glass, a "hair-a-chute" that allows her to leap from tall buildings, lie-detecting breasts, and an under-the-tongue scanner on which she can capture digital pictures by licking them (Brioux 2003). The series is undeniably tongue-in-cheek, and yet, in rather silly ways, does comment on sexual mores. In an interview, Anderson describes one of *Stripperella's* arch villains, *Queen Clitoris*: "She's so elusive, men don't even know she exists" (Brioux 2003). Wearing a tight cropped top, little black skirt, gun holsters on her thighs, over the knee boots, and a mask, *Stripperella* is not styled much differently from a *Lara Croft/Catwoman/Charlie's Angels* action archetype. These are action heroines who blur "the line between going off and taking it off," and point to a connection between pop action heroines and the now more celebrated representation of sex workers (Vognar 2003).

This turn as representing as empowering sexual practices that were formerly seen as exploitative is epitomized in the formation of *CAKE* - a New York city organization focused on female sexual entertainment, created to "promote female sexual pleasure and redefine the current boundaries around female sexuality" ([www.cakenyc.com](http://www.cakenyc.com)). Men were allowed to attend *CAKE* parties if invited by a woman, and *CAKE* parties had certain themes: stripping and lapdancing, vibrators and sex toys, watching porn. Naomi Wolf sharply describes porn's new-found popularity: "The porn loop is de rigueur, no longer outside the pale; starlets in tabloids boast of learning to strip from professionals; the 'cool girls' go with guys to strip clubs and even ask for lap dances; college girls are expected to tease guys at keg parties with lesbian kisses a la Britney and Madonna" (Wolf 2003).

Since the mid-to-late-eighties, with the advent of videotape, porn moved into the home (and out of the porn theatre), where it became more culturally accessible to men and women; likewise, attitudes toward sex and sex work also began to evolve. Many women have lucratively embraced a more sex-friendly atmosphere, as the sprouting of women-run sex toy shops and *CAKE* parties attests. Inevitably, changes within the business of sex have mirrored changes in feminist attitudes towards sex work and pornography. Such changes are captured in the remarks of one female sex worker who claims, "it is downright refreshing to encounter a peep show dancer who is not a women's studies major" (Quan 2003, R10). Still, has the fight for women's sexual expression and exploration created an atmosphere of tolerance towards sex work and women's bodies? Does the ubiquitousness of sexually powerful women in pop culture promote sex - the industry and the act - as the place where female power ultimately resides? This article is an attempt to think through these changes in popular cultural forms, and to assess what impact the mainstreaming of porn and sex work has on feminism - a sexy feminism - and on issues of female empowerment.

#### Jenna Jameson and "porn empowerment"

Around the time that it was becoming unquestionably hip to strip, *Porn Queen* (and former stripper) Jenna Jameson was featured in October 2003 in both *New York Magazine* and *Entertainment Weekly*. Both articles mention her unparalleled porn stardom, her numerous endorsements for companies such as *Pony sneakers* and *Abercrombie and Fitch*, her work with the "E" network, her appearances on *Entertainment Tonight* and her recent "E True Hollywood Story" (Amsden 2003; Valby 2003, 70). She had turned down other offers: to star in a reality series about her, and to host an *American Idol* rip-off entitled "Who Wants to Be a Porn Star." Soon after, a fifty foot billboard of Jenna Jameson was erected in the newly sanitized Times Square in New York, and she was featured in a special on porn for *Sixty Minutes* (Kroft 2003). In August 2004, when interviewed by Anderson Cooper for his "360" show on CNN, she revealed her new position as CEO of *clubjenna.com* and its subsidiaries, raking in multiple millions of dollars and literally controlling the

production and distribution of her own image - ostensibly a shrewd feminist move similar to Madonna's business-sense (Cooper 2004). Jameson points out that "if women wanted respect - especially in an industry built on their objectification - they needed to be more than just a pretty face on a box cover...I could be not just a porn star, but a porn CEO" (Jameson 2004, 542).

All of these media events were preparation for the release of Jenna Jameson's autobiography *How to Make Love Like A Porn Star: A Cautionary Tale*, which landed at #9 on the New York Times bestseller list. The book is a fascinating mix of self-help, confessional, and one-handed read, and epitomizes some of the contradictions Jenna Jameson presents as a force in popular culture, especially in relation to femininity and feminist empowerment. As a practical guide to sex work, the book supplies "how to" tips on stripping, nude modeling, and porn films, exposing some of the inner workings of the sex industry to tough scrutiny. Simultaneously, the book is also filled with pin-up photos and explicitly detailed scenes from Jameson's sex life - including some lesbian scenes that sound as if they are from Penthouse forum, emphasizing the "sexiness" that is a part of Jameson's successful image.

Nevertheless, Jameson vacillates between enjoying the power that sex work has given her, and resenting the work that she must do to achieve her level of success - work that hinges on her sexual attractiveness. For instance, she describes the following scene at a strip club in Las Vegas:

I walked onstage as if I owned it, like I was at a dance competition, and ran through one of my old pageant routines. I worked the men like I had worked the old pageant judges, looking directly into their eyes as if to say that this dance was for them. I was in control - of myself, and the men around me. And I loved it: I love the attention and the confidence it gave me.

(Jameson 2004, 39)

A mere nine pages later, her celebratory tone takes on a degree of bitterness as she recounts her experiences with these same customers. Still, she sees herself as in control and empowered when stripping:

It was a high to get the upper hand over a customer. They were dumb, they were drunk, and they deserved it. At least that's what I thought at the time. Strippers can be vicious. The mentality is that if these guys are going to victimize us, we're going to totally victimize them right back. It seemed like a fair exchange. And it was character building: I was finally learning to take control of people instead of being passive in social situations.

(Jameson 2004, 48)

Jameson is proud of her career and meteoric rise in the industry, and takes great pains to reveal the level of control she wielded in regards to her professional life and choices. She accentuates the need to set strict boundaries on what one will or will not do, and points out that being in porn films entails making a great deal of money doing very little work (Jameson 2004, 325). Jameson explains, "Though watching porn may seem degrading to some women, the fact is that it's one of the few jobs for women where you can get to a certain level, look around, and feel so powerful, not just in the work environment but as a sexual being," emphasizing the importance sexual power has for her as a worker and a woman (2004, 325). Ostensibly, Jameson is addressing readers who do not find porn degrading, and are interested in sex work as a possible vocation. She gives advice on "How to Make It as a Female Porn Star" and "As a Male Porn Star," and includes a sample adult film contract to give readers a sense of the workings of the porn industry (Jameson 2004, 324-87). She stresses the opportunities available in the industry - a way of being "in complete control of your destiny" (334).

Nevertheless, the book is a cautionary tale: Jameson recounts her addiction to crystal methamphetamine, two brutal rapes she experienced in her teen years, her numerous relationships with abusive boyfriends and some of the horrors of the industry in which she succeeded. As she explains early in the book,

Most girls get their first experience in gonzo films - in which they're taken to a crappy studio apartment in Mission Hills and

penetrate in every hole possible by some abusive asshole who thinks her name is Bitch. And these girls, some of whom have the potential to become major stars in the industry, go home afterward and pledge never to do it again because it was such a terrible experience. But, unfortunately, they can't take that experience back, so they live the rest of their days in fear that their relatives, their co-workers, or their children will find out, which they inevitably do.

(Jameson 2004, 132)

Importantly, Jameson's tale of success is not one that "most girls" experience, and her embodiment of stereotypical beauty ideals as a blonde-haired white woman is connected to the level of empowerment she achieves. While she may have control over her image in a professional sense, her position within the sex industry does not change the lack of control she has over how her image is perceived or consumed. Nor does her role fundamentally change the porn industry's standards, even if popular culture has destigmatized her labor and branded her as cool. Nevertheless, she has been championed by many, including some of my feminist students, as a smart and astute businesswoman worthy of both admiration and emulation.

#### Some Thoughts on Third-Wave Feminism

As a feminist professor and scholar, I feel profoundly connected to students who are willing to claim the "feminist" title while asking challenging questions about sexual representations and power, for they are performing a courageous undertaking in the face of a constant social and cultural backlash. Most of these students, some ten to twenty years younger than me, align themselves with what is known as third-wave feminism; this group's most distinguishing characteristics clearly separate them from some of the thinking often attributed to feminism's second wave. As Astrid Henry explains, quoting Kathy Bail:

Many women have embraced the "new" feminism because they "don't want to identify with something that sounds dowdy, asexual, or shows them to be at a disadvantage. They don't want to be seen

as victims." One way, then, that the supposed anti-sex bias of feminism can be countered is by presenting an image of feminism as sexy, attractive and fun: a "do-me-feminist" who desires men rather than a castrating man-hater.

(Henry 2004, 110-11)

Third-wave feminism's generational placement situates this group as post sexual revolution and '70s women's movement young women who have grown up with opportunities opened up by past feminist activism. Yet they are often mistakenly aligned with "postfeminism," an unfair connection that speaks to generational hostility on both sides. For instance Anna Quindlen labels this group's movement "babe feminism - we're young, we're fun, we do what we want in bed - and it has a shorter shelf life than the feminism of sisterhood. I've been a babe, and I've been a sister. Sister lasts longer" (Quindlen 1996, 4).

Third-wave feminists have tried to correct some of the perceived problems of the second-wave, advocating for greater sensitivity and inclusion towards women of color and queer sexualities. This inclusion is highlighted by a very focused interest on issues of sexual freedom and pleasure, and the simultaneous questioning and celebration of pop culture - a position some older feminists have criticized as frivolous. Third-wave feminists are often comfortable with contradictions, considering the climate in which many of them grew up and discovered feminism. They experienced "the conservative backlash and the AIDS epidemic, the queer movement and genderfuck...divorced parents and 'family values,' 'homophobia and lesbian chic, 'Just Say No' and 'Ten Ways to Drive Him Wild'" (Henry 2004, quoting Lee Damsky 89).

Current feminist movements have often defined themselves against prior feminist activism in order to present new ideas and signify change. Contemporary feminism (whether or not aligned with a wave) is a site of contradiction, a place where binaries such as active/passive, good/bad, and masculine/feminine are troubled and torn apart. Leslie Heywood and Shari Dworkin, in their discussion of third-wave feminism and female athletes, also point to

changes in the sexualization and commodification of bodies in popular culture. They claim,

The 1990s saw the normalization of the commodification of bodies of both genders, the development of the body as the hottest fashion accessory, the most valued personal asset, and the normalization of porn that occurred with the internet, Calvin Klein and Victoria's Secret ads, among other factors...Furthermore, posing for sexualized images no longer carries the social stigma it once did. For much of the younger demographic, exhibiting a hot body is an intense sign of valuation and does not signify devaluation.

(Heywood and Dworkin 2003, 88-89)

Heywood and Dworkin indicate the importance of acknowledging the changes brought about by the increased mainstreaming of sex work and porn aesthetics; in this "equal opportunity exploitation culture" they describe, young feminists are both scrutinized and scrutinizing, rendering the focused engagement these women have with sexual identity and sexual pleasure vital and profound (Heywood and Dworkin 2003, 112). Within this context, for some young feminists, sex work has become celebrated rather than contested ground.

### Negotiating Sex Work

A recent film that tries to address issues of feminism, sex work, and empowerment head-on is Julia Query and Vicky Funari's *Live Nude Girls Unite*, a documentary filmed in the late 90s and released in 2000. The film follows Julia, a queer stand-up comic and peep show worker, as she attempts to help organize the first Erotic Dancers Union at the Lusty Lady peepshow theater in San Francisco. She is also simultaneously attempting to "come out" to her feminist mother - a woman who works for prostitutes' rights - as a sex worker. Not only does the film highlight the generational differences between these two women, but it also underlines the ways in which sex workers can find their job empowering. Told mostly in "talking head" interviews combined with behind-the-scenes and peep show video footage, the filmmaker and her co-workers take a largely defensive

stance, emphasizing that sex work is work, and women choose this type of work mostly for financial reasons. Nevertheless, many of these women do explicitly link the work they do with feminist notions of empowerment. Kristina, whose stage name is "Decadence," explains that she enjoys using her "sexuality, my feminine power, in a way that made me feel good." Another co-worker, Ellen ("Tara"), feels that sex work is "a sacred act" and that she is "providing a sexual spiritual service." Several women discuss the pleasures of wearing make-up, like a mask or disguise. When one woman places a long, blond-haired wig over her short locks, a co-worker responds, "Suddenly she's a heterosexual!" The film highlights women of different races, from a variety of backgrounds, all invested in making the Lusty Lady a fair, and comfortable, place to work.

Julia Query is well aware of the struggles that occur within feminism in relation to the issue of sex work. She places title cards in the film that express opposing positions: "'Pornography turns a woman into a thing to be acquired and used' - Catherine MacKinnon, Feminist scholar"; and "'A woman can choose a job in the sex industry and not be a victim. She may become stronger, more self-actualized' - Nina Hartley, Feminist porn star." She follows these two title cards with her own opinion, intoning on the soundtrack that after doing this work day after day, seeing men come and go, she just finds it "Boring." In some ways, Julia does not feel the same divisiveness that these women, ostensibly second-wave feminists like her mother, might feel; she is comfortable with the contradictions that sex work entails, and is far more concerned with fair labor practices. Nevertheless, when her mother announces that she is staying with her for five days (while attending a conference in San Francisco), Julia immediately strips her apartment of all sex work paraphernalia, and hides her employment from her mother. She is not unaffected by the stigma attached to sex work - and is concerned about what her mother might think. Unfortunately, her mother is outraged once she is told, and the film ends without the tensions between the two women being fully resolved.

In light of this remarkable documentary, I would like to re-examine sex work - its popularity and its contradictions - as seen through a third-wave

feminist lens which actively engages with issues of sexual empowerment. Due to the tensions circulating around sexual power and women's bodies, for every empowering aspect of sexual labor, there exists an equally negative consequence that constrains the possibility of feminist support. For instance, sex work is frequently seen as a highly performative act, especially stripping and exotic dancing. Both rely on a costume or mask for assistance in performing femininity, with sex workers often having different stage names - these accoutrements highlight the constructedness of gender roles. As feminist scholar (and former stripper) Katharine Frank makes clear, "Naked? No. I am a performer, as fully clothed as anyone here, even without my bikini, if only through my painstaking ministrations to the 'costume' of my bare body" (Frank 2002, 173). Frank explains the difference between "being girl" and "doing" or performing girl, for "...stripping involves a conscious, creative, and sometimes pleasurable kind of reflexive masquerade, a form of doing and sometimes subverting 'girl'" (179). She believes that since stripping involves the transgression of female virtue, then the "inevitable stigma of dancing cancels out the option simply to be girl" (179).

Still, Frank astutely points out that what she perceives as a transgressive performance is not always recognized as such by the client:

The hard truth is that I cannot predict or prescribe how my performances will be interpreted: while a woman who knowingly dresses herself in the fetishistic garb of stilettos, stockings, and suspenders may claim she is making a postfeminist statement about her ability to choose to masquerade as a sex object, a man may still see her as a sex object. His interpretation does not cancel out her experience of agency, but the power of men to appropriate and redefine my own performances sobers me. If I am consciously performing a role, yet it is taken as truth - the truth about "women," the truth about "whores," the truth about "me" - is anything really transformed or subverted when I dance? (2002, 200-01)

This issue also raises the question of what precisely the transgressive quality of sex work is and what happens once it loses some of its stigma, such as when porn stars appear on popular television shows, and lapdancing becomes part of your weekly workout at the gym. Has sex work, especially stripping and acting in porn films, become as de-stigmatized and "gender neutral" as Heywood and Dworkin suggest? Jenna Jameson's ubiquitousness and her bestselling book might indicate that times and attitudes toward sex work have indeed changed. Or does the stigma depend upon the context? As Frank explains, "any woman who chooses to display her nude or seminude body for money will be viewed in certain circles as 'trash'" (2002, 198). Lily Burana, author of *Strip City: A Stripper's Farewell Journey Across America*, agrees that strippers may not yet be publicly embraced: "I'll believe it when a soccer mom turns to me and says, 'Tiffany decided to turn down Yale and go to work at Scores [a popular Manhattan strip club]'" (Yancey 2003).

Sex work's transgressive force is connected to its status as "work" or "labor" for monetary profit; dancers make patriarchy "pay" for their services. Eva Pendleton claims in "Love for Sale: Queering Heterosexuality," that sexual labor of any sort is fundamentally queer. She states,

...sex work...represents a performance of heterosexuality, regardless of the sexual self-identity of the performer. Its defining characteristic is the exchange of money for a sexual service, which is, I would argue, a queer act. Selling sex is quite outside of the normative codes of sexual conduct, whereby sex is privileged as something you do for love or, in a more liberal world view, for fun or, if it is in a Hollywood film like *Pretty Woman* or *Indecent Proposal*, for a whole lot of money. (Pendleton 1997, 76)

Again, this argument relies upon the maintenance of the stigma of sex work, and situates transgression as possible only when there is an exchange of money. While Pendleton emphasizes the "selling of sex" as outside of normal sexual conduct, something that highlights the unnaturalness of sex roles, she still focuses on female sex workers. Vicki

Funari, co-director of Live Nude Girls Unite and a Lusty Lady peep show performer remarks:

There is no standard customer. The row of windows is a diverse and constantly shifting spectrum of men. All colors, all ages, all economic brackets, all attitudes. It's easily the most integrated social environment I've ever experienced. Except for one little detail: women are on the paid side of the glass, men on the paying side.

(emphasis mine; Funari 1997, 24-25)

This "little detail" of the gendered voyeurism perpetuated by these sexual performances can become overshadowed by an emphasis on women's ability to "choose" to "freely" express their sexual desires through consumer choices. The playful appropriation of sex work style as personal expression is not synonymous with sex work's political and economic realities. Putting a stripper pole in your bedroom, living room, or basement suggests that money will not come into play. Furthermore, the loss of porn's resonance as a "degraded industry" might fundamentally change the act of stripping from a transgressive performance to one that appears to perpetuate femininity's status quo. Moving the sex club into the privacy of the home, or bringing "porn style" to the streets by wearing underwear as outerwear, may remove some of sex work's stigma, but also helps align women performing "sexiness" with "being" a girl. The dichotomy of men watching and women being watched still stands.

The sex workers who align themselves with feminism's third-wave, and write for academic anthologies such as *Jane Sexes It Up: True Confessions of Feminist Desire* or *Whores and Other Feminists*, are very conscious of their stake within feminist discourses; they feel that their work allows for the creative expression of sexuality, an exploration of a multitude of sexual practices, and the blurring and dismantling of sexual boundaries. These feminists emphasize the agency that they enact in choosing sex work, purposefully pulling away from the representations of sex workers as victims of coercion and sexual exploitation. As Astrid Henry points out, "Third-wave feminists see their sexual freedom as a fundamental right, much like their right to vote"

(Henry 2004, 90). The sex workers in Live Nude Girls Unite explicitly articulate their engagement with feminism and their claims to sexual agency in a scene in which they meet with their hired female labor organizer, a woman who sees herself as part of feminism's second wave. She tells the women that her fellow female labor activists do not understand why they choose this type of work, yet she admires their courage, seeing them as pioneers in both labor activism and sex work. She says, "It saddens me, because these are women I've known for years...and on this issue, we're on very different paths," pointing to a clear generational divide. The peep show workers understandably bristle, and one woman points out, "It seems like a very simple issue to me. This is my body and these are my reproductive organs, and I'm going to do with them as I please." Siobahn reiterates these concerns, and states, "It was always my understanding that [feminism's] perspective was about enabling women to have a choice." She also claims that the peep show workers are not exploited "just because their job is selling pussy." These women are being exploited by being denied fair labor conditions.

Whereas these young women are frustrated and annoyed at being categorized as exploited sexual objects rather than active sexual agents, sex workers are always simultaneously agents and victims. While sex work can be an active and individual choice, this choice is constrained by often rigid standards of beauty supported by the maintenance of racial and class-based hierarchies. As Katharine Frank admits, "social class clearly enables and limits one's ability to 'do' gender convincingly," and "the women who enjoy the most options in choosing where they work, what kind of services they will perform, and when to retire from the sex industry are usually those who are able and willing to conform to middle-class standards" (Frank 2002, 198). Jill Nagle also clarifies her position: "My racial and economic privilege afforded me the opportunity to choose participation in the sex industry from among many other options. This is not true for perhaps the vast majority of sex workers worldwide" (Nagle 1997, 5). Furthermore, one of the chief grievances of the dancers in Live Nude Girls Unite is the managers' unfair scheduling practices towards women of color, whereas blond haired, busty, white women have no problem finding work. These distinctions are crucial considerations in terms of a

feminist politics of stripping, for "if one can exist, [it] needs to be aware that the power of beauty remains deeply intertwined with class, age, and race hierarchies, and as a result, what is playful to one woman may be painful or impossible for another" (Frank 2002, 199). While choosing sex work may have lost some of its stigma, especially when informed and filtered through a critical feminist lens, is choosing stripping necessarily a progressive move, especially if standards of beauty and sexiness remain unchanged?

#### Feminism, Choice, and the Tyranny of Sexiness

The irony of the Lusty Lady dancers claiming their individual right to use their bodies as they wish, while collectively organizing for better labor practices, highlights some of the fundamental tensions between a reliance on liberal individualism and the need for feminist community. Much of this tension is tied to the rhetoric of individual "choice" that has become intimately tied to contemporary feminism. As Summer Wood explains in the spring 2004 issue of *Bitch* magazine:

The word's primacy in the arena of reproductive rights has slowly caused the phrase "It's my choice" to become synonymous with "It's a feminist thing to do" - or more precisely, "It is antifeminist to criticize my decision." The result has been a rapid depoliticizing of the term and an often misguided application of feminist ideology to consumer imperatives, invoked not only for the right to decide whether to terminate a pregnancy, but also for the right to buy all manner of products marketed to women, from cigarettes to antidepressants to diet frozen pizzas.

(Wood 2004, 22)

At times, the criticism of sex work and porn can seem like a pointed dismissal of a woman's conscious choice to creatively express her sexuality for profit, and hints that the practice of sex work is just another example of "false consciousness." At the same time, as Audrey Braschich sarcastically points out in terms of her visit to a CAKE party, "if I'm not in touch with a culturally suppressed desire to pole

dance, it means I'm anti-sex and maybe even a bad feminist" (Braschich 2002, 91).

Furthermore, where does one draw the line between the clichéd representation of the humorless feminist who does not get the joke, and the recently coined "Female Chauvinist Pig" (FCP) who celebrates all "jiggy" representations of women, whether they are jumping high into the air on a trampoline (with panties exposed) on *The Man Show*, or willingly flashing the camera during an episode of "Girls Gone Wild?" Ariel Levy, the woman who invented the term, describes the FCP as:

...not a Lesbian. But she couldn't have existed before Lesbian chic magically reconfigured the American conception of lesbian from bull dyke with crew cut to Sharon Stone with ice pick and made it okay - sexy! racy! - for women to ogle strippers or porn stars or Alyssa Milano on the cover of *Maxim*. The female chauvinist Pig doesn't want men to disappear, far from it. She wants to sleep with them and be like them. (Levy 2001)

While certainly not all women who champion sex work or porn as valid lifestyle choices are FCPs, what I want to emphasize here is the selling of sexy female imagery - conveniently supportive of heterosexual male desires - to women through the rhetoric of female empowerment. The danger lies in sexing up feminism as a response to what some may think of as feminism's puritanical or anti-sex work past. As Levy elaborates, "nobody wants to be the frump at the back of the room anymore, the ghost of women past - it's just not cool. What is cool is for women to take a guy's-eye view of pop culture in general and naked ladies in particular" (Levy 2001).

Likewise, the use of retro Vargas-type pin-up girls to sell Altoids or underwear may seem cool, but as Judith Williamson explains in her discussion of "retro-sexism," just because sexist representations are couched in period retro-style or wink-wink irony, they are not necessarily funny or any less sexist (Williamson 2003). While postmodernism has given us the ability to parody and laugh at ourselves, an over-emphasis on irony has stripped from feminist cultural analysis some of its



critical strength. In embracing sexual images and practices formerly criticized by feminism, women do not want to slip into a trap where sexism is some "kind of 60s or 70s phenomenon, to be enjoyed as kitsch, rather than as a contemporary problem to be addressed as unjust" (Williamson 2003). We may now be able to put sex in feminism, but still not yet be able to take the sexism out of sex work and porn.

Ultimately, the mainstreaming and destigmatizing of porn and sex work has created what I like to describe as "The Tyranny of Sexiness," which seems to have infiltrated every aspect of women's lives and every representation of femininity within popular culture. The ramifications of equating sexual power with feminist empowerment reach far beyond the issue of choice. Sexiness is not an option - it is a requirement! Mothers need to be sexy like Gwyneth Paltrow or Uma Thurman, housewives are "Desperately" sexy, and action heroines have to be tough (using weapons, experts in marital arts) and sexy - Angelina Jolie, Charlie's Angels, Pamela Anderson and Jennifer Garner all fit the type (Douglas and Michaels 2004, 1; Jervis 2004). Even lesbian representations aimed towards lesbian viewers (rather than straight men) are not immune if we consider "The "L" Word" - they are a group of very femme, sexy lesbians! Furthermore, the characteristics that constitute "sexiness" are rigidly limited, and serve to often perpetuate racist and sexist stereotypes rather than undermine them.

While the representation of male bodies as sexual commodities is certainly increasing, we still do not live in the "equal opportunity exploitation culture" that Leslie Heywood suggests. Instead, we live within a culture that has a long history of objectifying and sexualizing women's bodies - a history that cannot be easily reversed. The socio-historical inequalities of sexual representation produce a weighty problem for contemporary feminists, third-wave or otherwise. Jill Nagle perfectly articulates this point of conflict: "A central problem for feminists of all stripes, including feminist whores, is opposing the nonconsensual treatment of women as only sexual bodies while simultaneously challenging the cultural hierarchies that devalue and stigmatize sexual bodies. To come at it from the other side, how do we value our sexuality when 'to be valued for our

sexuality' is a primary instrument of our oppression" (1997, 6).

While the frequently valorizing representations of sex work in popular culture may feel empowering, and feminist women are increasingly drawn to the lure of the stripper pole, linking sex work with feminist empowerment is not an easy fit. If, as Merri Lisa Johnson asserts, "Feminism...is a name we want to reclaim for the intersection of smart and sexy within each of us," then that link should continue to be discussed and debated, questioned and probed (Johnson 2002, 4). With this in mind, third-wave feminism must continue to simultaneously confront and embrace contradiction in its focus on sexual liberation and agency. Under these conditions, I feel that all feminists must urgently ask, "Who really benefits from more women spinning around the stripper pole?"

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